Knight

by Tyranidlord

Summary

After months of traveling, Kaius and Viconia's successes against the forces of the Prince of Destruction have resulted in Knighthoods in the Order of the White Stallion. However, in the background of the approaching war against Oblivion, Umaril the Unfeathered is returning and while they may be Knights, they are certainly not holy enough to wield the relics of the Crusader...

**Due to life, changing jobs and family issues I have been on Hiatus since April 19. I intend to post the next chapter(s) of Knight and Sos do Dov towards the end of Sep 19**
Notes

Part 2 of my Bloodtide Rising Trilogy.

Chapters are going to be generally bigger than Deserter as the characters start getting involved with "Major Quests" rather than "Side Quests" and single "Quests" as such may now extend over multiple Chapters. The story overall is going to be much more fleshed out, and will contain the entirety of the Knights of the Nine Story and questlines. It will also contain my alternate take on the minor in-game quests of "Mazoga the Orc" and "Knights of the White Stallion", as well as several chapters "inspired by" the Glenvar Castle Mod and a (much older) version of the Oscuro's Oblivion Overhaul Quest "Shadows in a Struggle for Power".

Enjoy, and please provide comments and kudos so I can keep trying to improve my writing! :-D
Knights of the White Stallion

Sir Desin, and Madame DeVir; even days after receiving our Knighthoods our new titles felt strange and unusual, like new boots or an ill-fitting breastplate. We were no longer just simple adventurers or mercenaries now, we had been elevated in the social circles of the Empire and received with it all of the benefits and disadvantages. Where our fame was increasing with every day, now we would be known for more than just our feats of combat and killing. We were Knights, members of a surprisingly small number of individuals throughout the Empire and in a lot of way were could now be considered members of the nobility.

There had been the usual feasting and celebrations in the hours after the ceremony. The Count, Countess and all of the assorted bluebloods of Leyawiin County all toasting us and revelling in the event. Viconia and I took the praise and the attention as best we could, both of us feeling out of place and suffocated by the press of the powerful and wealthy. The feast itself lasted until the early hours of that evening, alcohol flowing freely and despite our best efforts when Viconia and I managed to pry ourselves away from the nobility we were somewhat inebriated. For the most part we had been the centres of attention, constantly being called upon to regale tales of our adventures and deeds and it wasn’t long before Viconia and I had gravitated closer together. Not as a result of our companionship and affections for one another, but to attempt to stave off the attentions of several of the unwed bachelors and bachelorettes that were mixed through ranks of the nobility. Receiving Knighthoods had ensured that not only did we have to contend with the reactions of our increased fame and titles, but we were now eligible ourselves for marriage into noble houses.

By the time we managed to extricate ourselves from the festivities and return to the Fighters Guild we found ourselves centre of yet another series of celebrations. The guildsmen, like most of the city had heard of the Knighthoods and with not much else to do with the house arrest they had thrown themselves into drinking and feasting themselves until several were sprawled out over tables and the floors before midnight even arrived. As for Viconia and I we retired to our room as soon as the opportunity presented itself, crawling into the bed and falling asleep in each other’s arms within minutes.

The house arrest of the Guild and the Blackwood Company ended the next day by the Count’s decree. Our elevation to Knights meant that we were no longer just members of the guild and it wouldn’t have been just if the Count left the rest of the Guild locked up for our actions. It would be the last day within the guild however, as a handful of Men-at-Arms from the Order of the White Stallion arrived shortly before mid-day to escort us to the Stallion Lodge. We were yet to be fully inducted into the Order, and so we bid our farewells to the Guild, packing our equipment and leaving the Chapterhouse. Before we left we received several more congratulatory slaps across our shoulders, a few inebriated embraces from some of the more drunk members of the guild and a firm handshake from Brodas as I handed him a bottle that I had managed to acquire from the castle. His eyes lit up when he saw the vintage and knowing that it was a far superior bottle worth hundreds of septims he seemed somewhat embarrassed at the way I had managed to settle our debt from the archery competition. Not that it stopped him from popping the cork and taking a mouthful from the bottle with the utmost satisfaction.

Leaving the city, and walking to the home of the Order of the White Stallion we were once again struck dumb at the sight of such a place. Built like the spawn of a castle and a cathedral the central structure was enormous, eight stories tall and covering an area several hundred square metres it had been built on reclaimed marshland and firmly planted into the stone bedrock. What had taken years for a horde of masons and builders to fully construct it was everything the Knightly Order would need to live, train and fight against the enemies of the Empire. Its authority was carved into the
region by the eight-metre-tall crenulated walls surrounding it and overall the grounds of the lodge covered over forty acres without a centimetre of space being wasted. Training yards, jousting lists, smithies, farriers, corrals and stables filled the interior of the walls, and as we entered the gates I was struck by how clean and professional everything appeared. The Order may have been founded as a hobby by the Count, but those who wore the white stallion heraldry took their roles and oaths seriously. Even in my time in the Legion I would have been hard pressed to think of a group of soldiers who were more dedicated and professional than the Knights of the White Stallion.

Sir Gailer Ramauld made his way down the short steps leading into the lodge and the enormous double doors, opening his arms in greeting. No longer wearing the enormous metal plate armour that he had the day previous he was now dressed in little more than a simple surcoat of the purest white silk, emblazoned with the rearing stallion and crossed swords of the Order and leaving his arms bare. The more traditional clothing and attires for Knightly Orders may have been suitable for far away Highrock, but in the deep south of Cyrodiil heat could kill even more surely than a blade.

“Sir Desin, Madame DeVir.” He rumbled, smiling and nodding his head towards us. “Welcome to the Stallion Lodge.”

“Thank you Sir.” I replied, seeing out of the corner of my eye the way that Viconia nodded to him briefly as well while looking around at the sight before us.

With quick gestures and a handful of words he mentioned a handful of squires to step forward, the teenagers gathering up the handful of our belongings and quickly disappearing into the enormous stone construction before us.

“Consider this to be your home as much as it is for the rest of us.” there was a smile on his face as he looked over the two of us while gesturing around us. “It has come a long way since the tiny two-bedroom shack in a rice paddy when I was knighted.”

“That it has.” Viconia laughed, her eyes alight with awe and a smile on her face.

Sir Ramauld turned and motioned for the trio of individuals following him to step forward, looking between them and ourselves. “May I present my Knight-Captains; Madame Sininia B’ivin, Sir Alexi Vanevius and Sir Bun-Ze Niseus.”

Each bowed briefly to us as Sir Ramauld said their names and we respectively returned them. Each were extremely capable fighters and I glanced over the three of them carefully. Madame B’ivin hailed from the depths of Hammerfell, her Yokundian heritage evident in a skin almost as coal black as Viconia’s, and Sir Niseus was a heavily muscled Argonian who looked strong enough to wrestle a horse to the ground. Sir Vanevius however was an Imperial, a grin seemingly permanently engrained into his face and hair a fiery red. At the first glance and unlike the other two he didn’t seem to be as heavily muscled or appearing as though someone used to wearing dozens of kilograms of armour but there was no denying the energy that filled his body or the way he held himself.

“These three are the highest ranking Knights in the Order and each command one of the three Lances. You will be members’ of Alexi’s Lance,” the red headed Imperial’s smile grew even larger. “and he will be responsible for inducting you into the order.”

“Thank you Sir.” Sir Vanevius looked highly amused, almost at the detriment of the other two Knight Commanders. There was no mistaking the way that he handled himself or moved with all the grace of a dancer as he stepped forward.

As Sir Ramauld turned and made his apologies for not being able to stay for long, Sir Vanevius looked over us both with an appraising eye and clapped his hands together. “Excellent. I was hoping
to get you two under my command.”

“Not just for the wager money then?” Sir Niseus hissed with amusement.

Sir Vanevius gave a short bark of laughter. “Don’t worry Bun-Ze, I won’t forget the septims you owe me. But here’s hoping that these two won’t need too much training.”

“Training Sir?” Viconia asked simply.

“Yes. Training.” The smile was as disarming as a sword and I couldn’t help but wonder how many broken hearts had been left throughout the lands by this Knight standing before us. “We can’t be giving away horses and equipment to someone who isn’t going to be able to look after them. And for the first bit of training, you can both just call me Alexi.”

“Bun-Ze.” Added the Argonian.

“Sininia.” Growled the Redguard Knight Captain with a grim smile.

Stopping the question with a raised hand Alexi looked at me. “Outside of these walls you can worry about saying all the Sir’s and Madame’s until your heart bursts as that is expected. But here within the lodge we can relax and be at ease. Especially around each other.”

I knew that I was going to like Alexi, but the sliver of recognition of his name suddenly came to me and I felt myself gape openly. “Wait… You’re the Alexi Vanevius…”

“Great. Another one.” Muttered Bun-Ze with obvious amusement.

Another smile erupted from Alexi’s face and he nodded. “Unless there’s another running around here then I guess I am.” Quickly and in one smooth motion he bowed theatrically before rising to his full height again. “I feel all warm and fuzzy that a Hero of Kvatch knows my name.”

“It’s hard not to know of the greatest swordsman in Cyrodiil.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t know about that.” He said simply. “Alix Lencolia is apparently somewhere between Chorrol and Skingrad.”

“Yeah, but didn’t you beat him in a tournament a year or two ago?”

His eyes twinkled. “Maybe… Maybe not…”

I couldn’t help but grin at the swordsman. Belisarius had told me stories of a few individuals scattered throughout the Empire who he believed to be his equal with a sword. Some were scattered about the provinces and Belisarius had managed to fight a handful of them but the one man that he believed to be his better was standing before me. Within a second I had decided that before Viconia and I left we would have to test ourselves against this red headed Knight Captain.

Only a few years older than me at the most, there was not much about him other than the way he carried himself to show the growing legend of his ability. Unlike most who trained or learned to wield a sword, there were few scars up his arms from the hundreds of hours of sparring and practicing. There were also few scars on his face either, from battle or from duelling which only seemed to make the white scar under his eye stand out even more on his tanned flesh. The blood crusted gashes on our faces may have been fresh but unlike Viconia’s and mine his was long since healed.

“Well then.” He continued. “We might as well get you both settled in and give you a tour.”
The enormous lodge was a structure of incredible engineering. The central belltower rose eight stories into the air, spearing into the sky above the four story height of the lodge itself and commanding thousands of metres of rice paddies and plantations in all directions. Inside was a massive open expanse that ran from the front doors to the rear of the structure where an altar to the Nine had been carved from the purest of marble. The home of the Order was a cathedral, a barracks and a home in equal parts. Stained glass windows depicting the Nine in their mortal forms curled around the rear of the Lodge, each several metres tall and gazing down on the central altar in kaleidoscope of colours. The smells of incense and polishing oils filled the entire lodge and was strangely calming despite the martial nature of the scent.

To the right of the doors lay the dining hall, a great expanse of tables and chairs and rows of cooking spits for feeding the entire order. There was space for several hundred to eat at the same time, which included every Knight, Man-at-Arms and Squire and would have provided no end to the work for the dozens of serfs and servants that we saw scurrying about everywhere we looked.

“You will be provided rooms on the second level within the Knights accommodation.” Alexi said as he guided us through the lodge. “I’m guessing though that you won’t be needing separate rooms?”

The smile never seemed to remove itself from his face and he must’ve seen my slight embarrassment. “You don’t have to worry about too much with the Order.” He continued without pause. “We might not be as large or established as the Order of Stendarr or the Order of the Flame but we’re also not as tradition bound as they are. We don’t have to swear any vows of celibacy or shun alcohol and other than ensuring that you do the right thing and protect people we are pretty relaxed all things considered.”

“I’m guessing it would be difficult to try to enforce any such vows.” I said simply.

Alexi nodded. “Exactly. The other Knightly Orders usually only recruit new members who are the sons and daughters of current Knights or select squires from those of extremely young ages and raise them into their ranks. Here, we recruit from all over and from all professions. We have adventurers, sellswords, city guards, ex-legionaries, and a representation of nearly every walk of life. By Talos, Sininia used to be a privateer in the navy. Getting everyone to learn how to ride and fight together in formation and used to wearing heavy plate is one thing. But if you try telling a group of people like this that they can no longer have sex or drink? The Order would be nothing more than a shack and maybe have two members to its name.”

“What will our responsibilities be then?” Viconia asked carefully as we made our way through the dining hall at the heels of Alexi.

“Overall not much. When you stay at the lodge you report to me or to one of the other Knight-Captains if I’m not available. Otherwise I assume that Gailer has already told you that you are not beholden to remain here?”

I replied with a nod, watching his expression as he pushed through one of the side doors that lead out into the rear courtyards and training areas.

“But you’ll stay for a few days at least?” he asked, seeing us both nod without any change to his customary smile. “Excellent. In that case we will be able to get you prepared, give you a few things and make you both look the part at least.”

As we stepped into the rear of the lodge grounds we both watched as dozens of Knights and Men-at-Arms went about their daily routines. Most seemed to consist of training either as individuals or as groups, sparring and practicing and appearing no different to legionaries in their professionalism. Some of the Knights cared for or rode their enormous steeds, taking them for brief rides through the
handful of corrals or stood in the stables arrayed down the northern walls. Hundreds of individual stables opened into the courtyard, some sitting vacant but for the most part each had a horse within them. Farriers and other specialists moved among the stables, checking and caring and assisting the Knights in caring for their steeds.

Nearby the sounds of hammering metal echoed from the collection of forges and smithies where a dozen or more metalworkers plied their trade by reforging horseshoes and repairing or building new blades and armour. Everywhere there was a bustling activity but it was somehow obvious that the recent victory over the daedra had buoyed the mood. Everyone walked with a spring in their step that was no longer wholly from their station in life and their abilities as warriors. They had proven to everyone that the Order was not to be taken for granted and I knew that there would be some form of banner or trophy that would find itself hanging from the interior of Castle Leyawiin.

Nearby at the jousting lists we could see several knights practicing, fully dressed in their armour and mounted astride their enormous chargers. With lances over four metres in length they charged across the training fields, some training by the simple method of plucking loops from where they dangled from arms of wood or ripping looped tent pegs from the ground. Each loop was only a few centimetres in diameter and purposely designed to only be a margin larger than the lance tips themselves. The thunder of the hooves of the enormous animals shook the earth as they galloped past. Shuddering like an earthquake they slammed into the ground with each strike, rumbling into the sky as over a tonne of flesh and metal moved with all the force and fury of a storm.

A pair of knights at the nearby list slammed together with the sound of the ending of the world, wooden tournament lances shattering in an explosion of wood splinters that pattered off the cobblestones. Both knights, writhing in their saddles and armour obviously battered from several tilts already did not fall, almost out of nothing more than pure determination. The sheer impact of the two coming together was enough to strike us all in the guts and Alexi looked at the way Viconia and I paled.

“Fancy saddling up and giving it a go?” he said, and I found myself staring at the sight of how the two knights reined in their steeds, wheeling them around while snapping open their visors.

“God’s breath no.” I answered honestly. “I’m an infantryman.”

“Ha! You’re a knight now Sir Desin. Better start getting used to it.”

Grasping their fresh lances, we watched again as they thundered together, this time one of them being knocked from his saddle in another explosion of wood and the sound as though someone threw an armful of pots down stairs.

“How many are in the Order?” Viconia asked as we moved through the training fields with Alexi guiding us and pointing out the main sections of the lodge grounds.

“Only Sir Ramauld would truly know. But there are at least three hundred knights, and about half as many again dismounted Men-at-Arms.” Shrugging, he waved a greeting to one of the many individuals roaming through the training yards. “With you two I now have ninety-three Knights under my command in my Lance. Most of which are here in Leyawiin but a dozen or so are scattered throughout Tamriel.”

“I can see why you were so effective against the daedra.” Motioning towards the tilts I saw him follow my gesture and nod.

“It was one of the most glorious things I have ever taken part in.” There was honesty in his words and for a moment he stopped and remembered the sensation of the charge. “When the gate opened
all of us armoured as quickly as we could and rode out towards the city. By the time we had formed up there were easily hundreds of the creatures trying to breach the city gates. Sir Ramauld formed us up into three ranks and we simply charged them.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.” he chuckled darkly. “Never thought I would see a daedra before, let alone one looking surprised before it died. A large number of them even went to flee as we lowered our lances and started the charge.”

Moving over to the side of the opened stables he motioned for us to follow him, seeing the building amusement in his eyes as we began walking over the straw and smelling the enormous beasts inside. “Well, that concludes the tour. Now it’s onto business.”

“Business?” Viconia inquired, looked about at the sight of so many warhorses in their individual stalls.

“Oh yes.” The grin on his face grew massive and I couldn’t help but think of the way I smiled when I was fully consumed by the vampire. “For what use is a Knight without a horse?”

His name was Trygve; an ancient Nordic name meaning trustworthy and other than the Minotaur Titan Viconia and I had slain he was the largest animal I had even encountered. Eighteen hands high at the shoulder, and over three quarters of a tonne of muscle he was strong and in the prime of his life. Bred from the best Breton chargers, and Clydesdales from the frozen north of Skyrim he had been trained from birth for war. Powerful, quick and capable of breaking into a sprint that few others could match he was also nimble despite his overwhelming size and able to turn quickly and manoeuvre in the press of battle. A creamy white coat and a mane as white as Viconia’s hair flowed from his shoulders and not a single strand seemed to be out of place. At seven years old he was fully matured and had already served another knight faithfully but the recent fight against the daedra had left both him and his brother Ultrin bereft of their riders. As the only two Knights who had fallen in the charge against the Oblivion portal it seemed somewhat fitting to the other members of the Order that their steeds were passed onto the newest members in their ranks. Especially a pair of individuals who had also experienced entering Oblivion on two occasions.

Both Trygve and Ultrin were monsters of horses. Seeing the rippling muscles under their silken hides and the way they seemed to sit like coiled springs I could easily believe that they both had helped grind daedra into a bloody pulp beneath their hooves. The more I looked over them the more that I believed that they could have outmatched a minotaur in strength, and would have very easily kicked them to death with their massive legs.

Bred for size and power, the mingling of the bloodlines from Skyrim also ensured that they could survive in the harshest conditions. Despite their bulk they did not require specialised diets or to remain where the ground provided massive amounts of grass. They could travel for weeks at a time on minimal grazing land for animals their size, live off nearly any plant in the bounds of Tamriel and still have sufficient strength to break enemy formations with a single powerful charge at the end.

As promised the Order provided us with much. Ultrin and Trygve were both ours, as was a
significant amount of equipment such as specifically tailored saddles that were required to ride such animals. Both horses were worth more than Rosethorn hall several times over, and their equipment alone would have left our pouches significantly lighter. The Order seemed to have more money than what it knew what to do with, as not only receiving funding directly from the county coffers and from the Count himself but they also made a huge amount of money breeding horses. their thoroughbreds and unique breeds could be found as far away as Wayrest and Highrock as well as the breeding rights for many of their studs. Our horses had both successfully passed on their genetic heritage in several young foals, some of which already had been purchased by some of the richest of nobles in the Empire.

The first two days were spent not only getting us and our new steeds used to us and learning how to ride them, but also how to care for them properly. Rather than giving away such prized animals; we needed to know how to look after them. Much to my chagrin I could only watch as two days later Viconia was riding about on the dark brown form of Ultrin as though she had been born into his saddle. The two of them seemed to bond exceptionally quickly, whereas Trygve seemed to detect my trepidation and unease of riding in the saddle and would either purposely be stubborn or cause mischief. It would be weeks before I could properly ride him but within the first few days I knew that it would be something that both of us would have to get used to.

After the first two days I could no longer hold onto some of the unease that I was feeling and while Viconia busied herself in the stables learning how to care for the saddle and other equipment I sought out Sir Ramauld. As the Knight-Commander he was a very busy individual, not only responsible for every man and woman under his command but also monitoring the Order’s finances, supplies, equipment and hundreds of other minor tasks and details that was required for running such an organisation. Within his tiny office in the upper levels of the Lodge he seemed restrained behind the desk, as though his muscled body yearned for combat on an hourly basis. He was still a common sight in the training yards but most days if he wasn’t meeting with people of importance he was in his room, accompanied only by a serf or squire or two and enacting a campaign against the ever encroaching paperwork.

Entering the room where he sat behind his desk I felt rather than saw his eyes upon me for a moment before they returned to the stack of parchments in front of him. “Sir Desin. I hear you are settling in well.”

“Yes Sir.” I replied, moving over and watching how he finished signing his name in short quick strokes as though the quill was nothing more than a broadsword. Delicately he placed the quill down, pouring a small measure of wax onto the parchment before pressing his enormous signet ring into it.

Handing the parchment to the young squire standing by his side it was added to a pile that appeared to have been growing for most of the morning. “I hear that Sir Alexi has been running you through your paces.” There was a smile on his broad face that was only just hidden behind the trimmed beard.

“He has Sir.” Returning the smile, I remembered how Viconia and I had sparred Alexi and a handful of the other members of the Order that morning. Alexi had beaten us both with an ease that made us appear little more than newborns and even when we both sparred him at the same time he was barely even sweating after putting us both on our backs.

Some of the sheets were placed to one side in a perfectly arranged pile on the side of his desk, and he looked over me and noticed the tension coursing through my body. “You look edgy lad. For someone who has faced vampires and daedra I don’t expect you to feel nervous around me.”

Chuckling to himself deep in his chest he relaxed and I glanced between him and the young squire.
“Sir, I was wondering if I could talk to you about a few things.”

He nodded, recognising the serious tone of my voice. With a curt gesture he sent the squire out and waited for the door to fully close behind the young man before leaning back slightly. “What can I do for you?”

“Viconia and I are Blades.” I said simply, seeing the bemused expression change to something significantly darker for a heartbeat.

“Well… That certainty explains your skill at arms. Alexi told me earlier that you two are a pair of the finest swordsmen that he has seen in years.”

The surge of pride that went through me made me smile for a moment as I watched Sir Ramauld look increasingly curious. “I’ll have to thank him for that when I see him this evening.”

“That you will.” The curious expression remained and I watched as he drummed his fingers into the top of his desk thoughtfully. “You are both individuals of many responsibilities. Between the Blades, the Fighters Guild and now us, I can understand how you might have concerns for fulfilling your duties with any of the groups. How many know that you are Blades?”

“No many outside of the Blades themselves.” I replied, shrugging and doing a quick mental check. “Other than yourself, only a few of the higher ranking members of the Guild such as Vilena Donton and Modryn Oreyn know. There’s the high chance that a significant portion of the Cheydinhal Guild knows as well but that was out of our hands.”

“So why tell me?” the fingers continued their steady tattoo into the wood. “And why would two members of the Blades with such illustrious fame be travelling from city to city with the Fighter’s Guild?”

Nodding to his rank and gesturing around us I replied carefully, feeling my mouth go dry with nervousness. “Our mission at this time is to gain the assistance of the Fighter’s Guild against a daedric cult.”

“This Cult… It wouldn’t have anything to do with opening the portals to Oblivion at all?”

“They are the ones directly responsible and are also responsible for the assassination of the Emperor and his sons.” The expression of Sir Ramauld’s face seemed to turn into granite and I could see the dozens of scars twist and pucker in the scowl. “Viconia and I are gaining assistance from the Guild to utilise their manpower to hunt down and destroy any covens that the rest of the Blades discover. With the death of the Emperor, the Blades’ authority has been reduced so we can’t use the Legion or the Imperial Watch to stop the cultists.”

“So I expect that the two of you will be moving on again to continue this mission in the coming days?”

Nodding I listened to the beat of his fingers as he continued deep in thought. “Easily before the end of the week.”

The steady beat stopped suddenly and the grin that consumed the scowl was somehow even more terrible to behold. “Well, we certainly won’t stand in your way. In fact, the Blades can count on the Order of the White Stallion in such endeavours.”

My jaw dropped slightly and he laughed. “What? We have faced this terrible enemy that threatens Tamriel and seen full well what horrors it intends for our world. The Blades can count on our swords and lances wherever or however they are needed.”
“The end of the world is coming.” I said simply. “Our mission is unfortunately only buying us time while the rest of the Order tries to find a way to stop it.”

“I guess we better start preparing then. I’ll gather the Order and do what we can, but you can tell your ‘other’ master that wherever the Knights of the White Stallion are needed we will be there.”

“It could be anywhere in Tamriel.”

The smile grew even wider, splitting the white flecked beard with a gash of a mouth. “We can be anywhere in the Empire in three weeks. Two if we force march and sleep in the saddle.”

Blowing out a breath of amazement and the last of my nerves I returned the smile. “You have my thanks Sir.”

“The Order supports each other, and supports the Empire. In these dark days we will all be called upon in some way.” there was a moment of hesitation from the veteran Knight. “Let us pray to the Nine that we all live to see it through.”

In the remaining days at the lodge, there was a new energy course through the ranks of the Order. One evening Sir Ramauld had announced that every member of the Order otherwise not questing or otherwise engaged in the Empire would be recalled and their ranks made whole once more. Viconia and I would be exempt of this as would be a handful of the others with other duties outside of County Leyawiin. All of those who had fought the daedra knew of what danger awaited Tamriel and the Empire and there wasn’t a single man or women in the ranks who didn’t know what the proclamation meant. The Order of the White Stallion was now preparing for war.

My promise that Viconia and I would soon be leaving the Lodge and County Leyawiin was soon fulfilled. Four days after receiving our knighthoods, a messenger arrived after being directed to the lodge from the Fighters Guild in the City. Azzan, and the Anvil Guild had sent out word for us, asking for us to return to the port city to help. Unrest had been building throughout the Empire but with the daedric assault on the city and the desecration of the Cathedral of Dibella, Anvil was groaning under the strain. We had heard reports that in the month since the attack by the daedra, armed gangs were now prowling the countryside, attacking travellers and caravans, raiding farms and the handful of villages within the county. Anvil had been attacked from within and without, and the neighbouring county had been almost utterly destroyed. Over a week’s worth of travel between Skingrad and Anvil was now a bandit infested wasteland of death and fire, but surprisingly Anvil was now playing host to larger than normal numbers of travellers.

The site of one of the few victories against the daedra had drawn in many of those seeking protection in the growing darkness, the numbers growing every day. What seemed surprising was the way that large numbers of pilgrims and travellers were converging onto the city because of the desecration of the Cathedral. From all corners of the Empire, hundreds of people were making their way there in a pilgrimage of the faith, braving the unrest of the roads and the threat of Oblivion to receive and give their blessings. Doomsayers and prophets were also converging onto the city and this as well as the increased banditry was ensuring that the local Guilds, militia and Legion was hard pressed keeping the peace. Into this boiling cauldron we had been asked to return, as not only our sword arms but our mere presences as the City’s champions would go a long way towards assisting the County.
Sir Ramauld and the others bid us farewell, Alexi promising further rematches whenever we returned to Leyawiin. Alexi and I were travelling quickly down the road to becoming friends. His indefatigable optimism, sense of humour and companionship during those first few days ensuring that when Viconia and I mounted our new warhorses and made our way out the gates that there was the sense of loss that I couldn’t shake.

Once onto the open road we made our way swiftly on our new steeds, their enormous bulks and power ensuring that the distances that we travelled on hired packhorses were crossed in fractions of the time. Trygvr may have been stubborn and still trying to gain a measure of me but there were few horses in the Empire like him. On the open road Viconia and I found ourselves riding hard and letting both steeds have their heads. The pounding of their hooves echoed around us like a bow wave of a ship, and travellers moved out of the way at the sight of such enormous horses galloping along as though exhaustion was something lesser creatures suffered. After steady gains of distance for the first days of riding all of us, riders and horses alike settled into a rhythm that steadily ate through the kilometres and even left Bravil fading in the distance behind us.

A week after leaving Leyawiin we found ourselves at the border where County Bravil met County Glenvar, feeling the deepening chill in the air as marshlands and mangroves gave way to forests of pines and ferns. Snow may not have been too uncommon now the grip of winter held firm to the land, but other than the deep frosts that covered the ground in the morning there was nothing during the day.

Wrapped in our cloaks and wearing every scrap of our clothing the winter’s chill did little against us, but we were uncomfortably reminded of the fact that in the days previous we were sweating wearing very little at all. It wouldn’t take much for either of us to catch illnesses in the sudden change in climate and as we began setting camp for the evening I ensured that before I did anything else the campfire was blazing.

“Another day, another mile.” Viconia muttered as she dragged across a collection of saddlebags from our enormous steeds.

“I believe that it might have been a few more than just a single mile today.” I replied, feeling the warmth of the fire begin to grow ever more fiercely.

The pile of saddlebags grew and Viconia placed herself down onto the cold ground with her back against her saddle. Mine had been placed nearby and while she seemed content on using hers as a pillow I still preferred my pack or rolled up cloak than the solid leather. Humming to herself she began rummaging through some of the pouches, pulling out a small collection of dried fruits that she had grown into a habit of eating.

“Can you pass me a dagger mrimmd'ssinss?” I asked, dragging over the pair of young rabbits that I had managed to shoot earlier in the day.

Glancing up, she looked between me, the campfire and the small furred bodies sitting in front of me. Shrugging, she returned to the pouches, opening a couple before stopping in mid motion and becoming tense.

“Vith!” She spat, suddenly rummaging through my saddlebags and pack with a sudden tense energy. “Vel'klar l’vith ph’mind?”

“What’s wrong?”

She turned and glared at me. “We’ve been robbed. That’s what’s wrong.”
Crushing my unease, I shook my head. “No we haven’t.”

“How can you say that?” gesturing to my saddlebags I could feel the burning anger infusing her limbs with a dangerous energy. “It’s your gems that are missing.”

“Not all of them.” The gaze of anger focussed on me and I struggled not to quail at the gleaming darkness that dwelled behind her yellow eyes. “Only a handful, and they weren’t stolen.”

“Then where are they? I can’t see anything new in our equipment that could be worth such an enormous amount and unless you have a necklace or some rings hidden in your pockets I’d say that it wasn’t worth it.”

Breathing heavily, I struggled to remain calm as her gaze burned into my soul. “I gave some of the gems away.”

“You did what?” The threat in the hissed words was evident and I couldn’t help but glance up at her.

“You remember the guard that I had fed on in Leyawiin?”

There was a moment of silence and I could feel her rage suddenly reached boiling point, her lips drawing back into a snarl that could match a daedroth’s in intensity.

“Dos k’leril yeunn sjaad’ur d’natha nest!” she spat, ripping the dagger from where it had been sitting and hurling in my direction with such force that the blade sunk to the hilt in the soil between my legs. Despite her anger there was nothing wrong with her accuracy, as there was only a hand’s span between me and my future as a eunuch. “So I don’t satisfy you enough so you have to pay a ssins d’aerth for an additional pound of flesh?”

“I didn’t have sex with her,” The knife’s scabbard smacked me in the face and was followed by a full waterskin that bounced off a shoulder. “I only fed on her.”

Pausing in mid throw with a fist filled with a whetstone she stared at me, silently studying my face for any sign of falsehood. After a moment the fire in her eyes dimmed slightly. “And that bandit in Anvil County? Did you ‘only’ feed on her too?”

I looked down and away from her, the guilt hammering into my mind and I could feel the writhing bones of my skull tingling and shifting slightly under my skin with every wave of emotion. She could see the slight changes that coursed through me but there was no fear, only anger that burned ferociously.

“That… That was different.”

“Because you claimed the flesh of a defeated and broken enemy? You imposed your will on her as you did with that elg’caress back in Leyawiin.”

“I imposed my will on her yes, but not the same way as I did with the guard.”

“Rape is rape no matter how you try to identify it.”

“As a vampire I can control other people.”

The silence dragged on for several minutes and Viconia continued to stare at me. “What?”

Gesturing emptily with my hands I struggle to find the words. “When I change or if I really concentrate I somehow control others. I can stare into their eyes and I can feel their mind and exert
some measure of control over them. When I do it to feed I can make them not only accept it but want it, and sometimes like that fat bastard at the stocks I can make it easier for them to do my bidding.”

Viconia sat in silence, staring, watching and deep in thought. “You sound like a mind flayer.”

“An illithid? From what little you have told of me I guess there is a resemblance. I don’t know how to describe it otherwise.”

She chewed on her lip carefully, hunching down and sitting cross legged as she wrapped her cloak tightening around herself with the growing chill of the evening. “How often have you used this ability?”

“Several times over the past months. The first time was on the journey from Cheydnhal.”

“Have you ever tried to use it on me?”

I shook my head. “Never even considered it.”

“Good. While I doubt that you would find it as easy with me I would hate to have to feed you our own kidneys.” Part of the anger had diminished in her eyes but there was still a significant amount roiling behind them. “So why did you do it?”

“Which part?”

“All of it.” her own dagger had found itself in her hand and she gestured with it at my heart. “The bandit, the guard, the gems. All of it.”

“With the bandit I lost full control over the vampire. She had hurt me with her spells and some instinct in me decided to return to favour. With the guard, it has always seemed easier to feed on someone when they are compliant and I’m not wanting to leave a trail of bloodless corpses in our wake. For both of our sakes if I killed everywhere we went not only will it make it too obvious and I don’t really want to needlessly kill.”

“And the gems?”

Shrugging, I looked down at the tiny furred forms of the rabbits in my lap, drawing to dagger from its earthen embrace and wiping the blade on the fabric of my trousers. “I felt guilty and I needed to repent in some way.”

Viconia snorted and slid her own dagger back into its sheath. “Oh spare me your incessant drivel and self-righteousness.” The scowl that she had habitually worn slid over her features with well-practiced ease. “I doubt I have ever encountered a being who is so torn between their nature and the pathetic laws of the surface. We do what we need to do to survive, and if that means that you satisfy your desire for flesh at the same time as your desire for blood than do it. All this self-pity is merely infuriating.”

“It’s the only thing that’s keeping me human.” I replied. “Or sane. If all this self-pity infuriates you then why did you stay with me all this time?”

She paused at that, the scowl giving hints of a crease of a smile. “Because you intrigued me.”

“Is that it?”

There was a nod that shook loose some strands of hair and she ran her fingers through them and tucked them back under the headband. “If I’m truly honest I intended cutting your throat and leaving
your carcass to the wolves those first few nights after leaving Bruma, but your antics with trying to brand yourself made me curious.”

“I had expected several times to wake up dead.”

“Good.” The smile broke through the shadow of the scowl. “It shows that you have some sense and wisdom in that surfer skull of yours. But that night when you let me scar you and hide the Legion brand showed to me that you had surprisingly strength of will under that dull exterior. The fact that you would willingly do something of such extremes without hesitation showed to me that you may have had more use than showing me to the nearest city that wasn’t Bruma.”

“Good to know I guess.”

The snort from her made me smile and before either of us realised we were both grinning at each other. “These past months I have seen you go out of your way to help others and as much as I hate your reasons I can somehow understand them. All your notions of chivalry and honour and whatever else you so fondly believe in is completely at odds to what you are. That will kill you in the end.”

“With what I am?”

“You are a vampire *wael*. Rolling her eyes, she watched as I begun to skin and gut the rabbits in an attempt to take my mind off everything. "You need to drink blood to survive which means that unless you value the alternative and take your own life you will need to hurt others and take from them what you need. In this world or in my previous one, we all need to take and take and take if we are to survive.”

“I know you don’t have any qualms with doing so, but I was never brought up like that.”

“It doesn’t matter how you were brought up or what you used to believe. You are what you are now and sooner or later you will have to come to terms with that.”

Throwing the rabbits onto the crackling flames I watched as a small storm of embers and sparks rise up into the darkening sky as the sun dipped below the horizon. “No wonder you sleep so well of a night with no concerns of morality.”

“Er’griiff l’gareth dro’xun.” She replied, watching as I rolled the words over my tongue in an attempt to translate what little I knew of her tongue. “*Only the strong survive*. You are strong; ridiculously so, but until you come to terms with what you are you will continue to be weakened.”

“You have never seen me lose control though Viconia. It isn’t pleasant.”

“I heard enough of the carnage that you left those caverns in, and have seen you in battle before. There is no denying your efficacy, but back to what I asked earlier; what did you do with those handful of gems?”

“One of the nights we stayed at the Stallion lodge I snuck out and went to the guard’s home in the city. Brodas had given me her address after the healers had finished with her and I left the purse of gems on her table.”

There was a long, drawn out sigh from Viconia and she glared at me. “Next time you think of doing something so monumentally idiotic I will rip your tongue and balls out. Just don’t give away a quarter of our fortune next time.”

“It was only a tenth. We still have more than enough.”
“Not if you keep giving it out to every harlot and beggar on the surface there isn’t.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Carefully, I used the tip of Sunchild to turn over the rabbits in the coals and watched as the fat dribbled and spat in the flames.

“You have a darkness in you that is worthy of the Underdark.”

“I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or not Viconia.”

White teeth flashed in the darkness. “You’d do anything to survive, except for maybe betraying someone close to you. In that regards I am certainly thankful at least.”

“We’ve survived a lot these past months.”

“With much more to follow. It is the end of the world we’re facing after all.”

I grimaced. “At least we’re not doing it alone.”

“Do you mean that as having each other? Or being Blades, guildsmen and Knights?”

“All of the above?” I laughed, standing up briefly to drag over my saddlebags. “I know why you chose to receive a knighthood.”

“Oh?” amusement entered her voice and a shapely eyebrow raised. “Why is that?”

I raised my left hand, palm facing me and showing the signet ring of the Knights of the White Stallion while gesturing to the saddles, horses, spare swords and the various other trinkets we had received from the Order. “All the free stuff.”

The laugh was honest and musical and for a moment there was no hint of the rage that had consumed her earlier. “There was that and the ‘moving up in the world’ side of becoming Madame DeVir. I was not expecting to be considered royalty on the surface during these past months here.”

“Noility you mean.”

“I don’t know about you but I think I could easy find myself married to a Count or King in this land.”

“And if I know you in the slightest they would suffer an untimely, possibly ‘accidental’ death.”

My sarcasm left her smile on her face but I knew all too well that there was truth in my words with the expression she tried to hide. “You know me all too well, mrannd’sslins.”

Both of us laughed again, and while there was still a tension between us she moved over closer as I continued preparing our meals. The shadows had begun consuming the world around us and despite the growing lateness of the hour there was still some movement and travellers on the road as they sought out accommodation or simply chose to press on through the night. Viconia and I fell silent in our conversation as we began eating our meals but it wasn’t long before we were interrupted by the sounds of a considerable number of people approaching from the west.

Poorly greased axles ground together, the echoes rippling through the forests now that the relative silence of the evening began to cling to the land. The sounds of voices could be heard as a bubbling wave of noise that grew as the group approached, and Viconia and I found ourselves staring at over a dozen flatbed wagons crammed full of people. Each wagon contained several people each, and those who couldn’t ride walked alongside. Every single one of them carried what appeared to be all
of their worldly possessions, trudging through the kilometres and appearing incredibly bone tired and road weary. Children cried and babbled amongst themselves, adults muttered softly but all of them wore expressions of sorrow and suffering that Viconia and I had seen far too often the past months.

Rising to my feet and dropping the remnants of my meal into the coals, I moved closer to the road, giving Trygve a quick pat on the neck as I moved past his enormous bulk. In comparison the horses puffing into the chill appeared to be tiny nags and moth-eaten saddle horses rather than the powerfully muscled draught horses they were. Trygve and Ultrin were without equal and I could see many sets of eyes turn and look over Viconia and I and our steeds at our camp off the side of the road.

Expecting desperation and exhaustion, the sudden wave of anger and frustration that came from the group stopped me in my tracks momentarily. So used to our reputations and fame leaving us as the toasts of the town, the hate filled cries of “It’s them!” left me bewildered and shocked even as a significant portion of the convoy began converging on us.

“What in Shar’s name is going on?” muttered Viconia by my side as the group advanced, several of the adults dropping from the sides of their wagons in tiny huddles. The way they carried themselves and gripped various objects made my heart start pumping adrenaline into my veins and I could feel my face tightening.

“No idea.” The looks we were receiving were obvious in their hostile intent, and I could see several of the men tensing themselves for a confrontation. Though we were both heavily outnumbered, I didn’t have too much concern facing down over fifty unarmed and ill equipped individuals while Viconia and I were still dressed in our armour. Especially with the night now holding sway over the lands.

“Murdering bastards!” someone from the press of people shouted amidst a chorus of similar cries.

“-brought death to our-

“-blood is on your hands-

“Enough!” I roared, feeling the stirrings of the vampire rising to the surface and infusing my voice with its unnatural power. “What in the name of Oblivion is going on?!?”

The silence that fell was as shocking as was the sudden fear in their expressions. There was something about my expression and the malevolent presence in my eyes that seemed to quieten them into submission. Concerned mutterings continued in the group from those hidden behind their friends and companions and as a group they all seemed to glance between their fellows to see who would speak.

“Who are you and where are you all from?” I asked, projecting my voice over the growing murmurs.

“Glenvar.” One of the men said, shrinking back as I turned and gazed on him. “We’re from Glenvar Village.”

Looking over the group I struggled to see anyone that I might have recognised from our brief stay. The village may have been small, but it had still been home to a dozens of families and hundreds of individuals. There were a few faces I vaguely recognised but none that I was certain of.

“And what happened? Daedra?”

Almost as a single entity they shook their heads collectively. Several signs begging the protection of
the Nine fluttered about in the mass by the increasingly nervous crowd but I could feel their anger diminishing rapidly.

“Vampires?”

Again the huddled group shook their heads and continued muttering and I found myself stepping forward looking as many of them in the eye as I could. “Is there anyone here that can tell us what in all the hells is going on?”

After a few seconds of confusion and consternation one of the villagers stepped forward. Dressed in a thick leather coat and appearing to be one of the wagon drivers he visibly gulped as he felt my gaze upon him. “The village has been suffering attacks these past weeks. The disappearances started again a week or so after you both left, but then people started dying.”

The surge of excited fear rose again and the group began muttering and calling out again, their cries drowning out each other’s and struggling to be heard.

“-the miller-”

“-Leoltierus and his family-”

“-my daughter-”

“-Aedile Philevus and his wife-”

“Quiet!” I roared again and the group fell silent once more. Turning I locked eyes with the drover and saw him wilt under my attentions. “What plagues the county so if not vampires?”

The fear emanating from the man was almost as potent as brandy to the rising instincts of the vampire and I could almost bathe in it. “We… We don’t know…”

“So you and the entire village decided to simply pack up and leave without even knowing why?” Viconia spat from behind me and the crowd hushed even further until the haunting calls of owls in the forest could be heard.

“People have been dying.” He replied simply, looking between myself and Viconia. “Those who don’t simply disappear during the night have been found the next morning. Most of the time we have been unable to identify what little remains.”

“When did all this start?” I asked carefully and simply and I saw him quickly count off on his fingers.

“Eleven days ago.”

The day after Viconia and I received our knighthoods and almost a full month since killing Lord Volmyr and the rest of his coven. I was almost entirely sure that I had not left any vampires alive in Normalhorst and there was something about the way that the villagers were describing the more recent deaths that didn’t sit well with me. It didn’t sound like the work of vampires and even those standing before Viconia and I didn’t believe so either.

“And are you all that is left?”

The drover shook his head. “Another group headed to the north to Pell’s Gate and a few left to seek assistance from the Legion at Fort Homestead. We’re heading to Bravil.”
Viconia snorted behind me and rolled her eyes. “You’d be better off staying in your homes than seeking refuge in that cesspit.”

Ignoring Viconia and the looks of astonishment from some in the group I mentioned for him to continue. “What about the castle? Why didn’t your liege assist you?”

I saw the looks and felt the tingle of unease steadily crawling its way up my spine. “The castle is closed. It has been since the first disappearances. We haven’t seen or heard from Count Albric or anyone else from the castle in over a fortnight, and even the portcullis had been closed. It hasn’t been closed in years, maybe even a decade or more.”

“Anyone left in the village?”

He shrugged noncommittally. “Only a handful, maybe two dozen or more. There were those who didn’t wish to leave their homes and a few others who decided to fortify the town hall and wait for assistance.”

Viconia watched as I breathed out heavily and ran my fingers through my hair. “Your thoughts?” I said to her simply.

“There’s no other way to bypass this misbegotten County and head to Anvil by chance?”

I shook my head, seeing the looks of hatred and horror returning as they heard the two of us considering not going to the source of their troubles. “Not without heading back to Bravil and finding a ship heading to the Imperial City.”

She swore loudly and forcibly. “Vith’nindel. Even Trygve and Ultrin couldn’t drag me back to that shithole.” Tilting her head at me and pointedly ignoring the people standing around us she raised an eyebrow. “I guess that we aren’t even going to get paid for this either?”

“Not in the slightest.” I looked over the group standing before us. They all seemed to be torn between their anger at their belief of us bringing such death and horror into their lives and the weight of expectation at us saving their homes and lives.

“Well…” She muttered bitterly. “Looks like we get to go all noble…”
After a hard mornings ride we arrived before the collection of stone-brick buildings that was Glenvar Village. Since rising before dawn we had mounted Ultrin and Trygvr and dug in our spurs, making the distance between the makeshift camp the refugees had erected and the village in record time. Both of our steeds were panting heavily by the time we came within sight of the town, their sides heaving and mouths’ white with foam. Neither Viconia and I wished to arrive or find ourselves within the bounds of the County without the sun upon us, and by driving our horses on we had ensured that there were several more hours of daylight left by the time we arrived.

Between our campsite and the village, the feeling of unease had grown steadily with every pounding fall of a hoof. For several kilometres the forests surrounding the tiny hamlet had grown increasingly quiet and sinister, the chill of the morning and the white frost that blanketed the lands keeping hold even as the sun reached its zenith. There was a darkness that infused the land, every leaf and blade of grass seemed foreboding as it swayed uneasily in the breeze. Barely any birds could be seen flitting between trees or taking flight into the open skies, and for a considerable distance even my own vampiric senses could not detect the sound or movement of other woodland creatures. Nothing seemed to live in the entire region, no animal gracing the forest floor and the skies were clear of all but the overwhelming sense of danger.

“Well… this is unnatural.” Viconia muttered as she looked about, swinging a leg out of the stirrups and lightly dropping the considerable height between the saddle and the road.

“That’s putting it mildly.” I too alighted from the saddle, patting Trygve on his massive flanks as he sucked in breaths of air. I could feel the stallion trembling from more than just exertions, some deep seated instinct alerting the massive destrier to the danger in the region. With his ears pressed flat to his skull he whinnied lightly and I knew that whatever made a fully trained warhorse that had recently fought daedra uneasy wasn’t something to take lightly.

Something in the back of my mind was bubbling to the surface, a deep seated instinct that was not wholly my own. The vampire rose, tightening my face as it too fed on the unnatural state of the region and found it not to its liking.

“We’ll walk from here.” I said simply, buckling Sunchild to my hip and pulling my coif and hood over my head. “We’ll lead them in on foot to keep them in sight and allow us to get out of here quickly if need be.”

Making similar preparations, Viconia tightened a handful of straps keeping her armour secured and Dragonbane tight to her hip. “First sign of trouble I suggest we leave.” She said simply, watching as I withdrew my bow from its leather travelling case and strung it. “This place reeks of death.”

“And fear.” I added, pulling my mask up over my nose until all that could be seen was my eyes in
the shadows of the hood.

Other than the unnatural pall of terror that clung to everything in the region there appeared to be nothing else in the area. My vampiric nature could not detect anything larger than a rabbit for kilometres around and although I could sense the handful of traces of life within the village itself I could not pinpoint them. The village was deserted, but not of a result of a bandit raid or a daedric attack. There was no burning devastation, no remains of bodies run down in the street and other than the fact that it was completely deserted nothing appeared amiss.

Remembering the village when we had briefly stayed a month previously, I couldn’t help but remember how the streets had been full of life and laughter. At this time of day, the inhabitants would be walking the streets, undertaking their various duties and chores and chatting and enjoying the company of their friends and neighbours. The few stockyards and chicken coops would have provided the background noise of clucking of hens and bleating of sheep and cattle to the cries and shouts of children running in the streets but now there was nothing.

The soft pines and ferns in the village outskirts swished lightly in the breeze and we approached the nearest buildings on the village outskirts. Leading on our massive chargers by the reins we moved as carefully and as quietly as nearly two tonnes of steel-shod horseflesh could manage while stopping and listening every few dozen metres. Both our horses twitched and panted from the run and their instincts and I patted Trygve reassuringly every few paces that seemed to calm me as much as it did him. Like my massive warhorse I was preparing myself for some form of confrontation; the fear that coated the town almost like a visible layer of filth that I could feel crawling across my skin. As the aura of the seemingly abandoned town rose the hairs on the back of my neck I could easily hear the creaking of my minotaur leather gloves as I gripped Sunchild sheathed form by its carved pommel.

Doors creaked threateningly in the breeze, the handful of signs and window shutters being the only movement within the town as we began making our way through the first buildings lining the road. Each seemed deserted, their doors closed in places, hanging open in others. Some appeared to have received attempts at being boarded up by their inhabitants before their owners had simply fled, and in one house I stepped inside the rotting remains of meals had been left where they had been placed on the dining table.

With the wind blowing the wrong direction it was only when we rounded a corner where a dirt track led between two houses that the stench of death made itself felt. Even with my enhanced senses I had failed to detect the smell of rot in the paddock behind the home, and now we were no longer being shielded from the smell by the building there was no mistaking the stink. Hacking and choking I pressed my hand to my mask in a vain attempt to keep it at bay, while the other keeping a stronger grip to the reins of an increasingly edgy stallion.

“Looks like those peasants weren’t lying about the carnage happening here.” Vionicia said at my shoulder, patting Ultrin gently and staring at the sight before us.

“Or overestimating.” I replied. What had once been a small herd of sheep with their winter’s coats thick and fluffy were now nothing more than butchered chunks of meat scattered over the better part of an acre. I guessed that there had been a dozen at least, but identifying exactly how many was impossible as it there were barely enough bits to identify the species, let alone number. Whatever had attacked the herd as it had cowered in the tiny pasture had ripped every animal into shreds of meat and sprays of gore. Limbs, organs and a chunks of blood soaked wool covered everything in sight and such was the devastation that I felt my gorge rise at the sudden rush of smells.

The sheep had been killed at least three or four days previously and what little was left had been left to the elements to rot. The rank aura of death felt like a layer of grease wafting in the air, and as I
moved closer the silence of the village was broken by the drumming of hundreds of flies as they lifted in a cloud of pestilence from the rotting remains. Even the deepening chill of winter had not managed to keep the buzzing insects at bay from such a bountiful harvest and everywhere the flesh squirmed with unnatural life with hundreds of bloated maggots.

As Viconia looked on with a slight look of disgust covering her features I moved closer to the shredded remains, crushing the urge to vomit and breathing shallowly through my leather mask in a vain attempt to ignore the smell. As quickly as I could I tried to read the remains and the land around the paddock for any trace of what might've been responsible, but the trail had gone cold days before.

“Minotaurs?” Viconia asked as she looked about the area, holding a hand to her face and trying to brush away the handful of blue-black flies as they flitted around her.

Shaking my head, I returned to where she stood with the horses. “I don’t think so. There would be more tracks, and this doesn’t seem to be the same type of devastation at Titan’s End.”

Carefully we made our way through the streets, hearing the clopping of hooves on the cobblestones echoing painfully through the abandoned buildings. Together we entered each house or building as we passed them, quickly checking and finding most to be utterly empty except for the traces of their inhabitants hurriedly packing and leaving quickly. Some had been locked and barred, and we choose to move on from them as forcing entry would have been too loud and obvious in the deathly silence.

Half cooked remains of food had been left where it had fallen, in another the evening meal had long since bubbled and burned into a congealed mass after being left on the cooking fire. Fireplaces had grown cold and I felt the lack of warmth in the ash and coals as I shifted through them with my fingerless gloves. Every building in the area hadn’t felt the embrace of a fire in a couple of days at least, and had been abandoned when the refugees had left.

Towards the centre of the town we found ourselves looking up at the double storied inn where we had stayed during our previous visit. The faded sign with the carved words Faregyl Inn still hung from the walls on an ancient chain, creaking faintly as it shifted in the wind. Unlike the rest of the buildings we had uncovered so far the inn was far from untouched, and with great unease we both noticed how the doors had been ripped and splintered apart.

Looking over to Viconia I could see the building with witchlight in her eyes as she drew magicka into herself, writing archaic runes with her fingertips that sparked into existence in the very air itself. Carefully lowering my bow to the ground I dragged Sunchild from its sheath, nodding to her simply and moving quickly and silently over to the door.

Unlike most of the other buildings, the Inn was little more than a ruin. Creeping around the outside to the front entrance I saw how someone had been going to great lengths attempting to barricade and fortify the two story building. It had done them little good judging by the way that the doors lay shattered and strewn over several metres of cobblestones and what little remained were splintered and hung limply from twisted hinges. Every window had also been destroyed; the thick oaken shutters having been peeled away or wrenched from their frames and not a single pane of glass remained intact. The remains of the windows crunched softly under my boots as I ground the shards into dust under my tread and I couldn’t help but notice the way something of great strength had gone to a great amount of effort to get inside.

Death clung from the building, billowing out of the opened doorway and seeping from the shattered windows. Great hunks of wood lay ripped and splintered where something had clawed and rent thick wooden posts as though they were clay. Carefully looking over every centimetre of the Inn’s exterior I could see where something had scrabbled its way up the walls, digging its claws into the stonework and wooden support beams to rip an enormous hole in the roof shingles and tiles to gain entry.
“What in the name of Shar did this?” Viconia muttered as she carefully followed me, a spell seeping between her clenched fingers as they twisted and weaved the magicka in the palm of her hand.

“Not minotaurs.” I murmured, looking over the jagged rents in the doorframe and knowing that only something with claws longer than daggers had turned the thick oak into little more than kindling.

More glass crunched underfoot as I carefully set foot inside of the Inn itself, the smell and taste of blood on the air tightening my face and leaving me salivating. The thirst was still some days away from needed to be satiated but with the sheer quantity of the stuff coating the Inn’s dining room was impossible to ignore.

Almost unimaginable in scale, the Inn’s interior resembled nothing like the room where we had dinner only a month previous. More akin to a slaughterhouse, several bodies were scattered about, most dismembered and little more than offal seeping into the foundations. Almost every piece of furniture had been broken and cups, flagons, plates, cutlery and all manner of items were strewn everywhere. Making my way inside I stepped over the severed arm laying in the doorway, the blood that had gushed from its torn bicep having soaked into the sand from the shattered hourglass knocked from the doorframe.

Crude barricades had been set up inside, the tables and chairs being overturned in a semicircle around the entrance, and whatever furniture that could be spared had been piled up against the door in a fruitless attempt to keep it closed. Something had smashed its way through the stacked tables, chairs, cupboards and even a bedframe with incredible force, ripping its way through the stacked furniture before turning the dining room into the site of a massacre. Whatever had breached the door had strength matching a minotaur, and I could see where one of the hapless victims had been crushed by the entire weight of a wrought iron safe that had been thrown several metres across the room. Even emptied it would have weighed in excess of a hundred and fifty kilograms but it had someone been launched with enough force to leave a body little more than a stain on the broken and shattered floor.

“We’re in trouble.” I said simply, feeling the strange creeping fear building within me and trailing its deathly fingers up my spine. An uncomfortable memory began worming its way to the forefront of my mind as I remembered white snows soiled with similar carnage several years before.

“Oh? Really?” Viconia responded, nudging the limp arm of one of the bodies with the toe of her boot. The limb had only just begun settling into rigor mortis but there was no mistaking the way that the corpse’s ribcage had been peeled open like a fruit. “What was your first clue?”

I could feel her gaze on me as I stepped over corpses and gore. Limbs had been ripped from torsos, necks bitten away and guts strewn about in great sweeping arcs of crimson and ruined bowels. Several of the bodies had been eaten, their bones splintered and chests opened where something had consumed them with an insatiable hunger. One body that I knelt over still had an expression of abject terror plastered into his pale features, one hand outstretched as though even in death he attempted to ward off his killer. His gloves were shredded, one hand missing fingers where they and a sizable portion of his hand had been bitten away. Enormous slices and gouges had ripped fabric and flesh to the bone up his arms and I prodded them lightly with the tip of my dagger, noting with some concern that the ten centimetre blade would have struggled to make such large and deep cuts. The injuries had been caused by claws and teeth that would have matched any number of breeds of wolves or even mountain lions within Cyrodiil; if it wasn’t for their sheer size.

He had died painfully, but not quickly and I knew with almost absolute certainty as I closed his eyes with my palm that he was far from dead when his attacker had started eating him. Moving through the room I looked over each body in turn, seeing Viconia watching silently near the door as I picked
my way through the detritus. Most of the dead had suffered or died from similar injuries, but there were a few that were so thoroughly dismembered that there wasn’t enough to identify whether they were men, mer or even beastfolk.

With each corpse and every second studying the devastation the old memory continued to build in my mind and I found myself wishing and hoping I was wrong. Minotaurs had the strength but they were herbivores. Vampires were definitely capable of ripping people apart like this but this was by far too animalistic and feral; even for those horrors in Normalhorst. One of the victims I studied had been dressed in a thick leather brigandine with metal plates interwoven throughout the torso. It had been of considerable quality and should have protected against most blades but whatever had gored him had claws that made a mockery of its supposed protection. A series of parallel gashes ran from down his face and across his chest, shredding the armour like it had been nothing more than parchment and leaving his face a bloody ruin. Curiously I spread the fingers of my hand out into a claw of sorts and compared it to the wounds, noting how although somewhat smaller, the size of my hand almost matched spread of the creature's claws that had killed the villager.

“So?” Viconia hissed from behind me as she moved closer and studied my expression “What happened here?”

“I have my suspicions.” I replied, and I knew that she could hear the tremble of uncertainty and fear that was building in my voice.

“Well I doubt that they include daedra.”

Moving away from the eviscerated corpse I moved over towards the destroyed bar. “Daedra would have burned the entire village to the ground, not broken inside and killed and eaten everyone in here.”

Almost tripping over its heavy form, I reached down and plucked a mace from where it had skittered across from its owner’s hand. Heavy and weighted with a lead core, it was a brutal weapon with a star shape of flanges designed for penetrating thick armour and pulping bones. From the blood and mush coating it, its owner had been somewhat successful with its use.

“Someone gave a good account of himself.” Holding the weighted weapon by the haft I turned and lightly tossed it to Viconia. “What do you make of this?”

Despite its heavy and unbalanced shape she caught it neatly, looking over the blood and gore mashed into its head. She scraped a finger down the deep grooves before picking at a congealed chuck and inspecting it carefully.

“They all found themselves caught in here like rats in a trap.” Even standing knee deep in gore and death there was no fear or hesitation in her voice as she glanced about at the carnage. “At least two attackers, one through the door and one through the roof. Both strong enough to rip through solid oak and kill everyone.”

With a segment of gore between thumb and forefinger she held it out in front of her curiously. Taken from the grooved head of the mace, it was a small chunk of flesh and blood about the size of a Septim. “Whatever surfacer used this weapon managed to get one of them in the head at least.” She said carefully, placing the mace down and pulling strands out of the gory chunk between her fingers. “This is hair.”

“Actually it isn't.” I replied, hauling back the broken remains of a table from where it had been thrown at the bar. “It's fur.”
“Fur?” There was level of confusion in her voice as she wiped the matted chunk away on a hunk of wood. “Just what kind of animal could do this? A minotaur has the strength but this looks nothing like the farm at Titan’s End. Ogres are flesh-eaters, but these wounds are more from a wolf or bear than anything else.”

The memory, repressed for the better part of a decade returned in full force and I shuddered slightly while looking over the remains of Abhuki. She had been shredded and what little was left only consisted of everything above the waist. “There was at least three of them that did this, maybe more. But they weren’t men, mer, beastfolk or animal but rather a combination of both.”

“Now you’re just talking in riddles Mrannd’ssiss. Just what did this?”

Chewing my lip for a moment I closed my eyes and forced the word out from my constricting throat. “Werewolves.”

“Werewolves?” The sudden edginess in her own voice was not lost to me and although I knew that she was still learning much of the surface world she had already heard her fair share of tavern stories of the horrors of the night. “Are you sure?”

“Unfortunately, almost without a doubt.”

The expression on my face and the tone of my voice was obvious to her. “You’ve seen something like this before…”

I nodded. “Just over six years ago. In a farmhouse outside of Ald Velothi.”

“When you were in the Legion?”

“Yeah. I was one of the foresters assigned to a squad of Legionaries tasked with hunting down a murderer from Khuul. Before becoming a fugitive he had been some merchant or parchment-shuffler with the East Empire Trading Company. A few days after he returned from a journey to Solstheim and Fort Frostmoth, the Khuul guards investigated a disturbance at his house. From what we were told they had found him covered in the blood of his wife, eating the remains of his six-month old daughter and utterly insane. Somehow he managed to fight his way free, killing one of them and wounding another before fleeing into the wilderness. So, the next day the town petitioned Fort Ironhand for the Legion’s assistance in tracking him down.”

Leaning against the ruined bar I felt the memory of the frozen north creep down my spine with icy fingers of fear. Even the vampiric side of my soul could not hold the feeling at bay and Viconia watched as I clenched my hands into fists, listening intently.

“We finally managed to track him down a few days later. Prefect Saedaere might have been an Altmer bastard, but he knew his job well. The group of us; the full squad of Legionaries and us three foresters waited until dark when we thought the bastard would be sleeping and kicked the front door.”

For a moment the memory made me shake and I grimaced with the concentration of crushing the fear aside. “Even before the door had fully opened all we could hear was howling. It was like a wolf, but infinitely more monstrous. In the years since I have heard tales how Solstheim had something of a werewolf plague and the local tribes had some prophecy or another but that night we found ourselves facing one of Hircine’s minions.”

“Hircine?” Viconia asked, looking confused.

“Hircine is a daedric prince; the Lord of beasts and the hunt. It is he who created the diseases that
turn men and mer into hybrids. During the day they can be like any normal person that you see in your travels, but during the night they transform into something infinitely more terrible. Somehow during his stay in Fort Frostmoth, this poor bastard had been infected and by the time he had returned it had eaten away at his sanity and left him nothing more than a lunatic.”

“Can the infected control it?”

I shook my head and shrugged at the same time. “I never heard of anyone or anything surviving the disease with their mind intact. Those who are infected are driven insane by the changes and the desire to consume flesh. Somewhat similar to vampirism but imagine being completely lost to their animalistic nature. No control, only hunger and fury.”

“But you killed it?” she whispered.

The smile that I gave her was grim and regretful. “I didn’t even loose a single arrow. Thirteen of us went to that farm in the snow, and eight of us were buried there. What remained of those who died at least. Legionaries Rinas and Do’Ajjirra were ripped apart in seconds of entering the hut. Saedaere was ripped in half. Uverdran, Monentia, Bjenson, Alrahriksson and J’Ram-Ei were torn to pieces as they tried to kill it with their swords. It moved faster than anything I have seen, and even Legion plate was little more protection than cobwebs. It sliced through armour like it was nothing, tore limbs from bodies and the only way it was finally killed was where it was too busy trying to eat Monentia’s corpse and one of the other rangers managed to hack its head off.”

“It killed eight Legionaries?” Viconia’s eyes narrowed and I nodded.

“In less than two minutes.”

“You survived though. That counts for something.”

My laugh was bitter and I clenched my fists even tighter. “Only because I was the one instructed to watch the back door in case he tried to run. I didn’t even fire my bow or do anything. As soon as I heard the howls I froze up.”

There was a terrible smile on her face and she lightly ran her fingers down my arm in an extremely awkward sign of affection that was at odds with the slaughterhouse around us. “Somehow I doubt that you will freeze up a second time.”

“Vampire or not, I’m not sure if I will be able to face down a werewolf. Let alone more than one.”

“Do they usually hunt in packs?” she asked carefully.

Turning I looked about the carnage and blew out a deep breath. “I… I don’t know. Everything I have ever heard or been told about them is always about lone individuals and nearly every time they are always insane bloodthirsty creatures bent on destruction. They don’t hunt or prowl like normal wolves, they simply kill everything and anything in their path.”

“Well, they seem to be living up to your expectations.” She said simply, kneeling down over Abhuki’s ruined torso. “Good news is that we know that there’s room available here, and this time it’s cheap.”

I smiled at her grim humour and tried to ignore the soft squelch of some organ being crushed under her boots. With a short sharp jerk, she snapped the necklace from around the deceased publican’s throat and admired the tiny sapphire the size of a quill tip attached to the chain.

Some form of niggling thought pressed into my mind as I looked over the torso of the innkeeper,
and I found myself glancing over the other bodies trying to understand what I was sensing. There was something wrong about the remains that I couldn’t put my finger on until Viconia began patting down the pockets in search for coins or other valuables.

“What in all the hells?” I muttered, moving closer and leaning over Viconia’s shoulder.

“What?” there was a steel like edge to her voice as she glanced back to me. “She’s not going to need her money in Oblivion.”

Shaking my head, I looked around the ruined bar and the floor under the corpse. “It’s not that. There’s no blood.”

Viconia laughed, standing and putting the handful of silver coins and the necklace into a pouch. “Are you kidding? There’s blood everywhere.”

“From them yes.” I said simply, gesturing to the dozen or more bodies scattered about the room. “But there’s no blood here.”

She looked down at where I was pointing and looked suspiciously at what I had noticed. The body had been ripped in two, and eaten from the waist down but for such a massive injury there was very little blood. Only the tiniest amount stained the floor and there was even the lack of a spray from the creature tearing the Khajiit innkeeper apart.

“Vel’bol wun Shar kaas?” she muttered, taking a step away from the body even as I moved closer. “How is that possible?”

Without answering her I hunched down over the body, running my hands through the soft fur of her skull and neck. It was obvious that her spine and neck were broken and for a few moments I hoped that my suspicions were false.

“Shit.” I spat, patting the fur apart where the throat met the shoulder and looking back at Viconia with my unease obvious.

“Vel’bol?” She hesitated for a second before reverting back to common. “What is it?”

Nodding to my hands she leaned down as saw what I had found; a pair of punctures, deep into Abhuki’s jugular and matching the scars on my throat.

“Fangs...” Viconia stated simply. “There’s fang marks on the throat.”

“Which doesn’t make any sense at all.” Wiping my hands on my cloak and feeling the nervous shake of my hands I looked about. “A vampire drained her dry, and the werewolves fed on what remained.”

She watched as I rubbed my temples with my fingers, glancing about and chewing my lip. “Surely the beasts killed the Vampire as well?”

“No ash, no bones. The only bodies here are those of flesh and blood. If it died, it certainly didn’t die in here.”

“So where is it?”

“No idea.” For a few moments I walked about, taking another careful look at everything in the building. “To have killed her, the beasts would have to have been smashing their way inside otherwise one of these lot would have done something about it. It doesn’t make any sense though.
Even with my abilities it would have been impossible to feed on her, drain her dry and then escape. The wounds these people have are from fighting werewolves, not a vampire.”

“Maybe the Vampire was one of them, and as the Werewolves attacked it decided to strike?” Viconia suggested, looking uncomfortable as I thought for a moment and shrugged.

“If that's the case then it definitely chose one hell of a time to feed.” I licked my lips carefully. “I know from personal experience that the time it would take to drain someone is a minute or more at least. She has barely a drop left in her veins.”

“What if the Vampire was with the werewolves or controlling them?”

The thought had entered my mind, but it sounded so ridiculous and far-fetched that I could barely even give it voice. “Werewolves cannot be controlled.” I said to her. “They are nothing more than rampaging, bloodthirsty beasts hell-bent on slaughter.”

“This is coming from a Vampire who can walk in sunlight, and transform himself into mist and a flock of bats on a whim.” She replied with a grin.

I grimaced, and turned back towards the door. “Whatever happened here I think we are now stuck in the middle of it.”

“Crealo whol udossa…” She sighed, stepping and following me as I made our way back into the street to where our steeds waited patiently. The two enormous warhorses had remained where we had left them, watching us as we emerged from the ruined inn.

Giving Trygve a quick rub along the jaw I felt him stiffen at the faint noise echoing through the deserted village. It was quiet, faint and almost hidden in the deathly silence but as I concentrated I could hear it ever so slightly.

Seeing the way I stood silent and listening Viconia frowned, looking about and not seeing or hearing anything amiss. “What is it?”

Turning my head about I could feel the bones of my skull tingle and my incisors slide from my gums as I used my vampiric senses. There was a dull thumping, quiet and faint but audible. “There’s a noise.”

Carefully gathering up the reins we led our warhorses through the streets, looking about and it wasn’t long before both of us were able to hear the noise a little more effectively. The deadened bangs of metal on wood occurred at random, the sounds of a mallet or hammer of some description striking wood and somehow having its sound dampened by more than just the streets and buildings around us. For a short time we moved through the village, listening and following the sounds until we entered the heart of the town and the open expanse of the market square.

The tiny marketplace was a simple affair, barely even deserving of the name but still one of the few places that the majority of the village inhabitants could gather for celebrations and trade. Fifty metres wide and just as long, it opened up a great expanse of smoothed cobblestones before the towering height of the town hall. As the tallest building in the village the hall loomed over the square in a solid, squat construction of stone. Once home to the village Aedile and his family and the central administrative hub of Glenvar, it had been transformed into something more militaristic. Like other similar buildings found throughout Colovia it had been built not only as an administrative centre but with defence in mind. In times of disaster, raids or severe storms the town hall would be a refuge that only a determined enemy could hope to breech. While not designed with a lengthy siege in mind it would be enough to keep those inside safe for a handful of days. Any longer than that and they
would have been better off within the Castle and the keep on the hill to the north.

It had since been fortified, further defences built and hammered within and without until it appeared significantly more impregnable. The sounds that had caught my attention was from a handful of individuals on ladders on the outside walls, or working on the pair of massive doors that opened into the centre of the market place. Only a handful of people could be seen, and as we rounded the corner leading our enormous horses I quickly counted over fifteen before our presence was noted. With surprising speed, the whole group of them dropped their tools and hefted a motley assortment of weapons, a collection that I noted uneasily consisted of a handful of crossbows and bows that were soon pointing at us.

“Halt!” Called out one of their number and Viconia and I shared a glance. “Identify yourselves.”

Keeping my hands away from my weapons and holding them up while still grasping Trygve’s reins tightly I licked my lips and called out. “Kaius Desin. Warder of the Fighters Guild and Knight of the White Stallion.”

“Viconia DeVir.” Added Viconia with a voice filled with annoyance. “The one going to be responsible for jamming your bows down your throats if you don’t point them elsewhere.”

I winced at the tone and saw how despite the fear that the group had holding them tight their weapons didn’t waver. It was only when a well-built individual stepped out from the dark depths of the town hall with a massive forester’s axe over a shoulder and called out a few commands that bowstrings were released of their tension.

The sound of hoofs on stone echoed as we moved closer to the group and found ourselves facing a rag-tag group of individuals clad in various pieces of armour and whatever weapons they could get their hands on. Cobbled together armours were mixed with collections of well-maintained chainmail and plate steel, and weapons ranging from cane knives and pitchforks to steel broadswords and arbalests were gripped in nervous hands.

With the axe over the shoulder the broad chested individual moved over to us, giving us and our giant destriers a once over with his remaining eye. At some point over the previous weeks he had lost an eye to a terrible slice of claws that had left his face a mask of pain and infection hidden away under a collection of stained bandages. He would have the terrible injury marring his forehead, cheek and nose for the rest of his life but for the meantime even the inflamed flesh seemed to do little more than annoy him.

“So you have returned…” He merely stated with his deep gravelly voice. “Hope you aren’t looking for any form of appreciation for what you have brought down on us.”

Solidly built, and clad in a set of ash-blackened armour several sizes too small for his girth he would have appeared comical if not for the seriousness of the situation. A beard covered his face from view, rough and wiry from years of occasional trimming. The axe on the shoulder and the body tempered from years in the elements showed his profession as one of the village woodcutters, but despite the natural strength he was not a trained fighter.

In ones and twos, the others moved forward and Viconia and I looked over the assorted individuals who had chosen to remain within the town. Most appeared to be locals, their clothing rough and poor but I was not surprised to see most wore some form of armour of varying descriptions. There were members of every race, men and women ,and were of every age from their mid-teens to late sixties. The only thing that they had in common was the fact that they were all armed and all had the looks of desperation and terror plastering their features.
“Are you in charge?” I asked simply, looking over the wounded woodcutter and seeing him shrug.

“Suppose so.” There was a moment of hesitation before he reached forward with a grubby hand, rough and calloused from years of felling trees. “Name’s Ylfgar. You two didn’t meet me the last time you were in town but I remember seeing you coming back with those bloodsucker skulls and that fancy sword of yours.”

Wincing slightly, I felt the power in his crushing grip before we finished shaking hands. “We ran into some of the others heading to Bravil last night and we made it here as fast as we could.”

“Trying to redeem yourselves are we?” Spat one of the militia. There was a murmured chorus of anger until Ylfgar turned and stared at the individual responsible with his remaining eye.

“I won’t turn down a pair of warm bodies.” He said simply. “Even if there are suicidally stupid at coming here. We’ve lost count how many people have vanished or died this past week alone, and that’s only those that we know of.”

Looking about the small group and seeing the damage that had been done to the steel-reinforced doors of the town hall. Similar rips to what destroyed the doors to the inn marred the hall, but those huddling within had only been saved from the far superior construction of the building.

“The others had told us that people had been going missing or had been turning up dead in the morning.”

“Aye, that was true. At least until last night at least when we got attacked.”

I swallowed and clenched my fist in such a way that it would be unseen in the folds of my cloak. “Werewolves?”

The silence that followed from the entire group was shocking and they all looked at Viconia and I with a mixture of surprise and suspicion. The bloodshot eye of Ylfgar peered out from where it had sunken into his skull. “You know?”

“I guessed.” I threw a thumb over my shoulder in the direction of the Faregyl Inn. “I saw what happened to the inn and those in it. It reminded me of something similar that I experienced a few years ago in Morrowind.”

“Then you know how deep in the shit we really are.” There was fear, exhaustion and determination battling for control in the aging woodsman. “We thought we would be able to ride it out until help arrived but most of us aren’t expecting to live through the night.”

“You look like you did pretty well for yourselves though.” with a wave of a hand Viconia gestured at the hall.

“Yeh? That was from only one of the damnable things as far as any of us can tell, and its heart wasn’t in it. We could hear them ripping apart the inn for the better part of the night before the screams started. I think they were just testing our defences which means they’ll be back to finish the job when the moon’s out.”

“How many are there?”

There was another shrug that rocked the massive axe off his shoulder and he placed it in front of him like a nobleman’s walking stick. “Half a dozen at least. We haven’t done a proper tally as no one is willing to stick their heads out to do a headcount.”
I sighed and looked over to Viconia and the look in her eyes told me everything I needed to know. She was considering jumping into Ultrin’s saddle and riding him as hard as she could until the County was lost in the dust behind her. The only thing stopping her was the distance to safety.

“Well, you have us here now and we’ll help as best we can.”

There was grim smile on his face as he nodded. “I think I better tell you both more about what has been going on. Night is a few hours away and for the moment at least we don’t need any more bodies hammering nails into wood.”

Motioning for us to follow him the small group around us dispersed back to their duties. Some were gathering supplies from the nearby *Inn of Ill Omen* further up the street and the various houses scattered around us. Others were busy with hammers, mallets, planks and pouches full of nails as they went about reinforcing every window larger than a mouse hole in the town hall. Others bundled up quivers of arrows and crossbow bolts, some built wooden spikes out of stakes and fence posts and other simply sat and sharpened swords, axes and other various bladed items. Ylfgar led us into the town hall itself, through the thick doors with the deep gouges where talons had clawed and splintered the wood, talking most of the way and explaining as we went.

“After you both left it was quiet for a while. Just over a week in fact.” He had a few quiet words with one of the militia hammering together a massive T out of a pair of planks for bracing the doors before continuing on into the main hall. “Then people started going missing again. First it was the miller and his entire family vanishing from their beds in the middle of the night, and then one of the nightwatchmen vanished on his patrol. All they found of him was his lantern.”

“When did people start dying?” I asked carefully, looking about the interior of the town hall. The main entry was a combination of meeting hall and courthouse, the collections of pews and tables and the tall stands where the village Aedile would have been seen conducting trials and negotiations vacant and empty. Most had already been broken down or piled into makeshift barricades in a semicircle around the only entry into the building.

“In the village?” for a moment he thought to himself. “About four or five days ago, but depending on who you talk to here, there have been deaths occurring for a few weeks now.”

Viconia looked about at the activity around us and raised an eyebrow. “Such as who?”

Ylfgar grinned to her and looked about for a moment before calling out to one of the people in the building. “M’jadhi! Come over ‘ere.”

The skinny, ragged form of a Khajiit rose from where he had been checking over a collection of arrows and wandered over to us. He had obviously been living rough for quite some time but he still wore a collection of leather armour that hung loosely to his gaunt frame. The leather seemed brittle and faded from the sun and most of the metal components were heavily rusted.

“M’jadhi and his friends were once one of the biggest bandit gangs in the region.” Ylfgar explained while motioning to the mangy Khajiit standing in front of us. “Very popular group they were; each were worth thirty septims a head.”

“Forty.” Hissed the cat, and for a moment I saw the same cold, calculating look in Viconia’s eyes that usually heralded bloodshed. He too must’ve seen the expression and grinned with a mouthful of fangs. “But such a bounty is no longer collectable.”

“Why is that?” Viconia asked, almost innocently.
“Because this one is all that is left of his pack. There used to be eighteen Khajiit on the road to King’s Walk, but no longer.”

Ylfgar motioned to M’jadhi and the two seemed to share some mutual amusement. “He’s given up his life of crime and has agreed to stay and help until this is all over or until we are all dead.” The look of despondency on their faces told me that the expected the latter, and soon. “He told me when he arrived that on the fourth of Morning Star that he and his friends were attacked in the night.”

“The beasts slaughtered this one’s kin like newborn kittens.” Mjadhi hissed sadly.

“How did you survive?” My voice was soft at the obvious heartache he was suffering despite what he used to be only a few weeks before.

The lips pulled back in a smile that was all too much like a mountain lion’s but it was hollow and void of emotion. “This one survived by running faster than the other seventeen…”

“Most of the other strays were have picked up have similar stories.” The bearded woodsman nodded his thanks to the Khajiit as he went back to his collection of feathered shafts. A massive hand pointed out another individual rubbing a layer of tallow and grease into the leather jerkin in preparation of shrugging on his chainmail. “Faeelorn Mosslock over there was a caravan guard for a group of Bosmer merchants who were slaughtered in the night. He and only one other of his kinsmen made it to town but the other died of his wounds. There was nothing we could do for him except make him comfortable while he slowly bled to death.”

At his name the tattooed features of the Wood Elf looked up from his maintenance and shrugged. “I thank the Nine every day that I had crawled into the cart to sleep that night. As soon as everyone started screaming I pulled one of the carpets over me and waited for the noise to stop.”

“It sounds like that people are being attacked all over the county.” I said simply, looking over the odd collection of individuals. Faeelorn was a caravan hand, but there were others in the group that were obviously caravan guards and a handful of other various travellers who had found themselves in the middle of a nightmare.

“Yep, and every day it seems to be getting worse.” We followed him as he made his way up the short flight of stairs at the back of the hall where it led to the upper level. Two stories tall with a heavily fortified roof made of sloped timbers as thick as trebuchet arms, there would be no easy way to breach the hall like the Faregyl Inn. The entire building had been designed as a refuge from a bandit raid or an incursion of soldiers during the rare occasions that counties went to war. While not unconquerable, even werewolves would find it a more difficult nut to crack.

The upper level consisted of a long hallway that ran down the spine of the hall, a window framing each end that had been heavily boarded and barricaded despite the height off the ground. Every few metres doors led into individual rooms, some were offices for the various village officials, such as the Aedile for their day-to-day administration and governance. Others were the accommodation for visiting dignitaries who while important, weren’t important enough for a stay in the castle.

Making our way through to the very end of the hall Ylfgar beckoned us inside of the Aedile’s office where something akin to a war-room had been prepared. A map of the entire county had been nailed into the wall; a massive tapestry two metres wide and almost just as high. Every town, village, fort, road and track had been marked with a cartographer’s care and Ylfgar stood in front of it, looking between it and us with his remaining eye.

“As far as any of us can tell, people have been going missing all over the County for over a month, maybe even two. For the most case they just simply vanished but for the past weeks at least it has
turned darker. Glenvar has been suffering attacks but so has other places nearby.”

With a finger he pointed out the messenger posts on the roads north to Lake Rumare and Skingrad and south west to Elswyr. “Both these messenger posts are deserted of men and horses. When I sent a few men to the south they found that one filled with enough blood for a slaughterhouse, but without any remains.”

“What about the other villages in the area?” I moved closer, looking at the names and places scattered about. “Pell’s Gate and Sweetwater?”

“Nothing that we know of.” There was a moment of silence between us all. “Some of the others went to Pell’s Gate for safety but with the sudden lack of travellers arriving here were are starved of information. There are fewer people on the roads of late with daedra raiding the lands but now there are almost none at all. Everyone in every villages nearby could be dead as far as we know. Or, they could be perfectly fine and not having the slightest clue about what’s happening here.”

“And the Legion Forts?”

“Same problem. The two nearest are Fort Homestead to the northwest and Fort Alessia to the northeast. I don’t know if they have been suffering attacks but we know that the Legionaries at Fort Homestead have suspicions at least.”

“How is that?” Viconia asked this time, moving closer to the map and tracing over roads and landmarks with a finger.

“Yesterday morning one of them arrived here. He hasn’t said much and as best I can tell he’s in shock. Said something about his squad vanishing at the northern messenger post but hasn’t said much else since.”

“A Legionary?” my interest piqued and I looked at Ylfgar. “Where is he?”

He nodded to the door set in the opposite wall to the way we came in. like the front doors it was massive and reinforced with strips and bands of metal. A thick oaken plank was set against the doorframe where it could be used to further barricade it closed and I could see from the hinges that it was designed to open outwards only. “He’s on the balcony. I put him out there to stop scaring the others.”

“Is he deranged or something?”

Ylfgar shook his head. “No, but he’s not doing well around people at the moment. Poor bastard was terrified and ran into town before collapsing from exhaustion. If I was to guess I would say that he ran the entire way from the messenger post to us, in full armour too. Since he woke up he’s done nothing more than just sit there, staring into nothing and sharpening his sword.”

I gave Viconia a glance and she nodded to me before motioning to Ylfgar to start showing more locations on the map. Carefully I walked over to the door, feeling the heavy latch and pushing the door open into the sunlight while Viconia and Ylfgar continued the discussion. The balcony barely even qualified for the term, barely being more than three metres long and a metre and a half wide and only just having enough space for the door to open. Almost devoid of ornamentation there was, little in the way of furniture other than a tiny table and chair allowing someone to sit and look over the town in the direction of the castle.

The lone Legionary was there, and I saw the look of someone who had gone through the worst the world could throw at them and being left scarred and injured as a result. There was not a mark on
He didn’t even look up as I exited the building, his eyes downcast and staring almost without blinking at the wooden boards under his feet. Whetstone in hand he dragged it down the length of his gladius away from him, filling the air with a steady *sschhiieckk... sscchhiieckk... sscchhiieckk...*

“Legionary?” I said simply, looking over at the way he sat hunched in the chair and lost in the depths of his own mind.

There was no answer and I closed the door softly behind me, watching as he continued to scrape the whetstone down his sword. The gleaming silver edge showed me an edge fine enough to lop off an arm with no difficulty, possibly even through boiled leather armour.

Kneeling down in front of him I looked into his white filled eyes, seeing the same look of horror that I had seen on members of the 14th after battles against corpus creatures. It was the same look that I too had worn many years ago after a night of blood and carnage in Vvardenfell snow.

“My name is Kaius Desin, Archer-Prefect of the 8th Casta, 14th Legion.”

At my name and old rank there was a twitch in his expression and the white eyes moved up and met my own. For a moment the whetstone stopped in place and I found myself noticing just how young this soldier of the Empire really was. Little more than a raw recruit, he would have been lucky if he had ever seen his eighteenth birthday.

“Sir.” He said softly, almost as though hesitant to use his voice or make any sound other than the sharpening of his sword. There was a pause as he looked over my unusual armour and cloak, the far-seeing eyes focusing on the signet ring on my left hand before returning to his blade. “You don’t look like a Legionary.”

“I used to be. I’m a Knight now.” My voice was just as quiet as his as the whetstone returned to the blade.

*sschhiieckk... sscchhiieckk... sscchhiieckk...*

“What’s your name?” I asked carefully. For a several moments I thought that he had withdrawn into his own mind again, a sanity frayed and shredded and leaving only the Legion’s training and discipline behind.

“Sir. *Hastatii* Hadrgar Ingrarsson. 3rd Casta, 1st Legion.”

An accent thick from the frozen northern holds of Skyrim, his rank revealed him to be nothing more than a fresh recruit in his second year of service. Less than twelve months ago he would have found himself parading the drill squares and feeling the lash of the Centurion’s drill canes as he was transformed from a teenager into a Legionary. He was barely old enough to shave, and still had most of his Legion service ahead of him. Now instead he had found himself in a nightmare that his conscious mind was trying desperately to remove itself from.

“What happened Hadrgar? Where’s the rest of your squad?”

*sschhiieckk... sscchhiieckk... sscchhiieckk...*

“Hadrgar?”
“They’re gone.”

There was the tiniest of nods but there was no hesitation in the whetstone along the blade. Every dozen or so motions he would turn the blade over, working on the other side and ensuring that there was no rounding of the edge. From the look of the leaf shaped gladius it possibly had an edge superior to Sunchild’s after hours of constant whetting.

“Gone?”

There was a moment of hesitation, a tremble that started deep in his chest and reverberated through his arm until the sword shook. The eyes clenched tight, knuckling whitening and he choked in a breath.

“Gone. Th-they’re all gone.” The sob that he had been struggling to contain finally broke through and the sword began shaking violently. “Ysmir forgive me… I… I abandoned them…”

The sword dropped to the floor with a clatter, followed shortly by the well-used whetstone and he pressed his gloved hands into his face. Tears streamed from between his fingers and trailed down the outer layers of his plated gauntlets as he shuddered and began crying. With little idea what to do or how to properly react I leaned forward, putting my arms around the young soldier and pulling him tight as he babbled and bawled from all the pent up fear and emotions of the previous days.

Tears soaked the outer layer of my armour, rolling down my breastplate and I couldn’t help but think of all the other Legionaries in my time that had succumbed to the horrors of the profession. Those outside of the Legion saw only the faceless guardians, the invincible armoured warriors that crushed all in their path and kept the Empire safe, but for those within we all knew the feelings and emotions that coursed through our breasts and gnawed at our minds. From facing down the afflicted corpus mutants of Red Mountain, the savage blood lusting Orc berserkers, the insidious hit-and-run attacks of the Valenwood insurgents and countless other threats; every Legionary faced a daily struggle. Many would wear the scars on their flesh like a badge of honour but for those who had never felt the kiss of a blade or injury still had to content with tattered and frayed sanities that would leave them awake and sweating in the depths of the night.

For this young Legionary, so far from his home in Skyrim and the only survivor of his squad, there had been nothing left but to fall into the practices and drills engraved into him from months of training. An empty shell had been left behind until my presence had forced his mind to accept what had happened to him.

For several minutes I could do nothing but kneel there holding him and wait until the wracking waves of anguish began to subside and he was left utterly spent. Suddenly and exceedingly embarrassed he pulled away, knuckling his eyes with his gloved fingers and looking into the sky as he breathed out heavily.

“Sorry sir.” He said, trying and failing to gain some measure of control over his breathing.

I patted him on the shoulder, feeling the thick metal plates of his pauldron under my palm. “Don’t be. You’re not the first Legionary to have cried and you definitely won’t be the last.”

The mucus filled snort from the young man was bitter, but there was a hint of a smile on his face as he hawked and spat over the railing. I rose to my feet and felt the twinge in my knees from kneeling in my armour. “Are you able to tell me what happened?”

He fell silent again, staring at the ground while trying to wipe away the moisture from his eyes and nose. It was to be one battle he wouldn’t win for some time yet but after some hesitation he reached
down and dragged his sword from where it had fallen.

“Tribune Gro-Bogakul had been hearing reports of people being attacked or disappearing on the roads so he sent a few squads out to do some patrols. My squad had been sent to check in with the messenger posts between Pell’s Gate and Glenvar and see if they had heard anything.”

Moving over to the opposite side of the tiny balcony I sat down and stretched my legs out. “And had they?”

Hadrgar shrugged. “The first couple hadn’t, at least not what I heard. Dulmerea… I mean Prefect Melsran; she had been the only one who spoke to any of the post guards.” The whetstone found its way into his hands again but after a moment or two he thought better of it, putting it into his pack on the table. “We spent the day marching between the posts and heading south but it was only when we got to the last post that anything seemed wrong.”

“What was everyone dead?” I guessed.

There was a shake of the head and he scratched at the short bristles of hair on his scalp. Like most Legionaries south of the Imperial city they purposely shaved their heads to reduce the chances of parasites and scalp-rot from wearing a helmet and padding in the humidity. “No, but there was no one there. Not a single person, horse or animal. Other than a few knocked over chairs and some broken pottery it was like they had all simply got up and left.”

“So what did you all do?”

He gestured emptily. “The Prefect ordered us to lock the building down and wait. It was late afternoon by that stage and so we settled in for the night, waiting to see if anyone would come along but otherwise preparing to head into town in the morning to find out more. It was the usual routine; we set up sentries, had dinner and retired for the night.”

Breathing heavily, he looked up into the sky again, jaw clenching and unclenching as he tried to force his mouth and throat to release their hold on his words. Moisture returned to his eyes for a moment until he crushed it aside. “It would have been around midnight when I got up. I wasn’t sentry for another couple of hours but I needed to take a shit. I went to the outhouse, did my thing and just as I was finishing I heard a scuffle and someone cry out. I thought that Sidrch had rolled over in his sleep onto someone again like he usually did but then someone started screaming.”

I watched as he closed his eyes and balled his fists up tight in their plate gauntlets. It was obvious that he hadn’t taken his armour off since that night, and like most Legionaries on patrol they would alternate nights sleeping fully equipped. Half of his squad would have been in armour when they were attacked.

“By the time I finished putting my pants and greaves back on it was all over. Everyone was gone. Everyone else but me had been taken and all that was left was whatever gear they weren’t carrying.”

For a moment I looked over the trembling teenager, feeling the vampire coming to the surface slightly and using my enhanced senses to look and listen to him. Leaving someone behind or missing someone didn’t sound like something werewolves would do, let alone be capable of and I knew that they would have senses just as good as mine, if not better. On the surface there appeared to be nothing untoward about the young soldier that would set him apart from the thousands of others serving the Empire, but looking over him and listening to his heart I soon learned of a possible reason why he was missed. Hidden in the outhouse his scent would have been effectively masked, and listening carefully I could hear the steady, but slightly irregular beat of his heart. A birth defect, something minor and not too life threatening had meant that to creatures hunting with their noses and
ears he had been slightly camouflaged in the night. If death in battle didn’t claim him then his heart might as he got older; but that night the irregular bump… bump…a-bump had left him a survivor.

“What did you do then?”

The laugh was hollow and I could see him struggling not to cry again. “I didn’t do anything. I simply sat in the outhouse and counted the minutes until morning came. When dawn broke I grabbed all my gear and ran here as fast as I could.”

We both sat in silence for a few minutes as he looked down at his hands and shook with the force of the emotions churning in his belly and mind. “I’ve failed… I failed my friends. I failed the Legion. And I’ve dishonoured my ancestors.”

“Not from what I can see.”

He looked up at me with eyes wet with tears. “I have. I’m a deserter… A disgrace to the 1st and my family.”

The word deserter was like a punch to the gut but I tried to give him what I considered a reassuring smile. “No. No you’re not.” With the toe of my boot I shifted my leg and tapped it against the metal rimmed tower shield propped up against the wall. Just over a metre in height and wider than my shoulders it was over ten kilograms of layered wood, canvass and steel; a heavy weight for anyone to bear. “Unless you are the most inept deserter in the history of the Empire I doubt you would have decided to flee with your shield. And your armour. And your sword. And your pack.”

The smile that broke through the pain in his mind was more honest than before as I pointed to each piece of his equipment in turn. The first thing that any deserters, especially Legionaries did was to cast off their armour and other items as not only were they recognisable, but 40 kilograms of equipment slowed them down. Heart problem or not, this young Nord was incredibly fit to have run over ten kilometres in his full attire no matter how much adrenaline had been fuelling his limbs.

“Tonight they are going to come.” I said simply and plainly, seeing the fear in his eyes that I hoped weren’t mirrored in my own. The terror that I felt was growing with every minute that I remained in the town but I knew I couldn’t show it. “And every sword will be needed.” Gesturing to his sword and his pack where he had placed his whetstone I grinned fiercely while rising to my feet. “Are you really going to put all those hours you spent sharpening that damned thing to waste?”

His own grin grew bigger and his shook his head, more definitively than before. “No sir.”

“Good. Those few here will feel better knowing the Legion fights with them tonight.” Reaching down I helped him to his feet and lightly bumped my fist in the centre of his breastplate. “Dovah Invicta Hadrgar.”

The slightest hint of confidence entered his eyes and the expression hardened. “Dovah Invicta Sir.”

Carefully, he gathered his few items sitting on the table and around his chair and together we both walked back inside to Viconia and Ylfgar. Both were still deep in conversation and gesturing to the map but they turned and looked at the two of us as we entered.

“Hadrgar, this is Madame DeVir.” I said simply, motioning to my companion as she gave the young Legionary a quick glance from his toes to his eyes. “Viconia; Legionary Ingrarsson.”

Both Viconia and I smiled as the young man found himself not only tongue tied at Viconia’s rank and the realisation of our identities but also at her appearance. Obviously inexperienced with women
and suddenly finding himself face to face with one of overwhelming exotic beauty the look of sheepishness and nervousness overwhelmed the fear at the situation we were in. It was something that Viconia didn’t fail to notice and she merely gave him a grin that left him both embarrassed and flustered.

“What have you learned?” moving over to the map I ran my eyes over the handful of marks they had made with charcoal sticks.

“Other than the fact that we are completely vithus?” She shrugged, ignoring the way that the Legionary was staring at her and myself with a dumbfounded expression on his face. “A lot of people have gone missing or have died in the past month.”

With careful movements she pointed out the dozens of marks that were scattered about. “Nearly every farm, shack and house in the county have either been abandoned or their inhabitants have vanished. I guess that maybe three hundred people have died. That’s assuming that anyone missing is also dead.”

“What’s the furthest place to be attacked?”

Ylfgar shrugged and pointed at the south western watchtower and a symbol marking out an abandoned mine to the south. “Both the messenger post on the Amber road and the old iron mine in the Pothole Caverns have been attacked. The caverns are where M’jadhi says he and his pack were holed up.”

Looking over the map I could see the rough shape forming and felt my guts tighten even further. “Every death or disappearance has occurred within eight to ten hours march from Glenvar.”

“That’s what we agreed on.” Viconia shrugged. “But I don’t understand how Threnodir died against vampires in Normalhorst but his body was found a few hours to the north.”

“I don’t think that the Vampires I killed were the ones responsible.”

All three of them looked at me, and I shrugged. “He was looking for them, and from what we read in his journal he appears to have been captured by them, but I think that it was left on his body on purpose.”

“Why do you think that?” the expression of unease was growing on the bearded woodsman’s face.

“I think that having a vampire hunter arrive in town was a threat that no one could ignore. I think that he managed to escape from Normalhorst, but on the way to get help he was killed by the real threat. Viconia and myself staying in town and actively looking into the disappearances was even more of a threat than a single vampire hunter so they left his body where it would be found and left the journal on him to throw us off the scent.”

Moving closer to the map I took a piece of charcoal from Ylfgar’s fingers and roughly drew around all the marks annotating the extremities of the disappearances. It made a circle covering most of the county but I finished it off with a cross on the Village itself which was right in the centre.

“That’s a hell of a distance for anything or anyone to travel of a night.” Ylfgar muttered as he looked over the furthest marks.

“How long would it take to ride on horseback from the village to the south west post and back?” I asked him.

“Six hours.” There was a shrug. “Give or take.”
“Plenty of time for a pack of lycanthropes to roam about, capture or eat a few people and return.”

Ylfgar rubbed at his beard with both of his calloused hands and I looked at him again. “When was the last time anyone from the castle was seen in town?”

“A month at least…” He replied. “But that is far from uncommon. Those in the village haven’t seen Count Albric in over a year, and most of his servants and Men-at-Arms live in the castle itself. Do you really think that the those in the castle are Werewolves?”

I shook my head while staring at the map and the symbol of the castle. “I wish it was that simple, but whatever we are facing here it isn’t just a handful of cursed beast-men. I’ve never heard of werewolves hunting in packs, and they especially aren’t known for taking prisoners.”

“That’s not including what we found in the Inn mrannd’ssinss.” The wolf yellow eyes narrowed and Viconia made a point of looking directly at me.

Stepping forward and trying to appear useful, Hadrgar looked between the group of us looking pale but slowly regaining his composure. “What did you find in the Inn?”

The look that Ylfgar gave me at the change in the young Legionary was one of respect but he too was interested. “Abhuki was killed by a vampire just before, or even during the attack last night.”

Hadrgar made the mark of Talos across his chest and I noticed how he traced a circle over the pommel of his sheathed gladius for good luck.

“I thought you killed them all.” There was suspicion in Ylfgar’s eye and I nodded.

“I’m fairly certain I did.” Some of my conversation with Volmyr the vampire lord returned to my mind and I frowned at the thought. He had spoken of others of his kind that sounded much like rivals and I gripped Sunchild tightly. “Maybe I killed the wrong ones. Maybe there were others.”

“Vampires working with werewolves?” I wasn’t surprised at the scepticism in Hadrgar’s voice as I still had a healthy dose of it in my mind. “Sounds like something out of a play or a two-septim novel.”

“Maybe not working together, but maybe like using hounds to flush out rabbits and foxes. I don’t think that a werewolf can be controlled but I doubt you’d find better hunters. They are the spawn of Hircine after all.”

The signs of Talos and Stendarr from Hadrgar and Ylfgar respectively were not lost to me as I invoked the name of a daedric Prince. Despite my own corrupted nature, I too couldn’t help but make the sword of Talos over my chest; tapping my fingers against both shoulders, heart and sternum. “The castle has definitely been closed for weeks?”

“Aye, that it has. Some of us have suspected that’s where these bastards are coming from but no one has been willing to wait outside the gatehouse of a night to find out for sure.”

“At this point it’s an extremely safe bet that’s where all this horror is stemming from.” Breathing out heavily I glanced at the door leading to the balcony and thought of the castle sitting on top of the hill. “Is there any way inside?”

There was a gruff laugh and Ylfgar frowned. “Ha! Not without a few hundred more like this one here.”

Hadrgar saw the gesture at his armoured form and shrugged sheepishly even as Ylfgar moved over
and pulled a fresh sheet of parchment from a pile on the desk. What looked to be a ledger of some description of merchant caravans and their tithes was flipped face down before the woodsman began drawing.

“Three sides of the castle are built on sheer cliffs. The walls themselves are nearly ten metres high and the cliffs range from three metres to twenty. There’s a well that taps into the groundwater or an aquifer or something in the courtyard. Through it the entire thing is supplied with enough water for a garrison at least as large as the town. What run off there is comes out the west walls out of a grate barely large enough for a skeever to squeeze through, and that’s ignoring the iron bars blocking it.”

“What about the southern walls? There looked like a plateau or something there.”

“In a way there is. It connects to the eastern portion where the walls butt up against the highway by a tiny strip of land barely wide enough for a horse. But after a few metres it spreads out. There’s a building roughly…. Here.” He stabbed the charcoal roughly three quarters along the walls towards the west. “That’s the Botany. There a few gardens and a greenhouse there that was built back when my granpappy was a boy. The countess had a thing for gardening back then.”

“Any way to scale the walls?”

He gestured emptily about the room. “We’ve got enough to build some ladders but none of us are fighters and besides that, you’ll be hard pressed to find anyone here willing to besiege the castle. Everyone here, myself included are quite happy waiting for the Legion. If we live that long…” There was a heavy sigh from him and he looked at Viconia and I apologetically. “Look, I know what you are thinking and I do appreciate the thought but there’s no way in all the hells you could get me to go into the castle. St Alessia, Reman Cyrodiil and Tiber Septim themselves could walk through the door right now and order me to and I’d tell all three of them to fuck off.”

“Scaling the walls would only work with the correct preparation and success would only be guaranteed if the attackers were experienced or at least trained.” Hadrgar added, the flush of embarrassment colouring his otherwise pale skin as we looked at him. “Fort Homestead has a few dozen engineers posted there and the 3rd Casta would be capable of sieging the castle.”

“But who knows how long it will take for the Legion to learn of what is happening?” I replied. “You and your squad will be missed in the next day at least but it could be a week before anyone else comes. Besides that, we need to confirm that the Castle really is the source of the evil in the county. All the evidence points to it but it isn’t going to help anyone if five hundred Legionaries arrive and assault an empty castle. That’s not even taking into account if it’s full of the Nine-only-knows-what.”

“Ma always used to tell me stories of a hidden entrance in the Botany.” Ylfgar added, tapping his finger against the crude drawing of the castle. “But if there is one then I doubt think that anyone other than the Count knows about it.”

“Nearly every castle and fort built by the Empire has at least one sally point.” Chewing my lip, I looked over the drawing and made a few marks of my own.

“Sally point?” Viconia asked suddenly, listening intently to the conversation.

“A secret entrance, usually only accessible from the inside but most usually rely on deception to remain hidden. During sieges the defenders can use them to conduct ambushes and raids on the attackers. Otherwise they make the perfect place for those within to escape or smuggle in fresh supplies.” I pointed to a few places on the eastern walls around the gatehouse and the main towers, and the walls near the Botany. “These would be the best places for one if it exists, but there’s no
telling how they would be designed or whether they would be accessible from the outside.”

“You’re planning on getting into the castle one way or another aren’t you.”

I nodded to her. “We need to know what is going on here.”

Rolling her eyes, Viconia swore under her breath and ignoring the other two men in the room she pouted. “You’re such a wael. What’s going on here is that tonight we are most likely going to get attacked by a pack of creatures unlike anything we have faced before. Let’s worry about that first. Come morning if we are still breathing then we can entertain your delusional fantasies of singlehandedly taking a castle full of daedric horrors.”

“It’s better than sitting around waiting for the end of the world or for plan B…”

She stared for a moment, looking someone confused. “Plan B?”

Pointing to Hadrgar I smiled. “Plan B is that we wait for the rest of his friends to arrive and turn the castle into rubble.”

With little benefit left from browsing the map, the group of us wandered off to prepare for nightfall. Hadrgar wandered downstairs and within half an hour I saw him gorging himself on an entire leg of smoked ham, washing it down from mugs of water from the dozen or so casks drawn from the town well. My brief chat with him and the mere presence of someone showing some compassion had put him back on the road to recovery but it would remain to be seen whether it would hold up to the horrors the darkness held.

Ylfgar returned to mustering the defenders, ensuring that every inch of the hall was barricaded and fortified as best as it could be and that everyone was armed as heavily as possible. Viconia and I returned downstairs, and with only a little cajoling managed to lead Ultrin and Trygve into the hall itself for their protection. As formidable as they were, neither Viconia or I held any illusions to what would happen to the pair of warhorses if they were left outside of the protection of the townhall. Finding a small room on the ground floor that once used to be some form of meeting room or jury chambers we managed to haul out some of the furniture and make enough space for the pair of destriers.

Knowing that there would be little opportunity for rest, Viconia and I retired to one of the several rooms turned into dormitories for the militia, finding a handful of makeshift beds made from piles of furs and various cloth and linens. Not bothering to remove our armour we both simply threw ourselves into one of the corners, laying down haphazardly and finding ourselves dozing lightly with her pressed into my side. It was a growing habit during our travels on the road that she would sleep pressed into me, one arm thrown over me and head resting on my chest so she could mould her body into mine. It was comfortable and enjoyable, but for the handful of hours that afternoon neither the two of us or any of the militia got much rest with the increasing fear.

“By Shar you aggravate me sometimes.” She muttered as we lay there in the dark. For a while she had been alternating between softly napping and staring into the dim light of the room with her burning eyes.

Her sudden words startled me from my semiconscious state and I blinked repeatedly. “What?”

“Are your ears merely for decoration?” shifting slightly I felt her hook a leg over one of mine and rest her head on the back of a hand on my chest. “I said that you aggravate me.”

“I’m fairly certain I do that regularly, but that sounds like you have a particular grievance.”
“Ha. Ha...” The burning coals of her eyes shifted and she tilted her head up to me. In the gloom there was only the faint suggestion of her features; the high cheekbones, the shape of her jaw and the hints of her pointed ears in amongst the pale hair. “But you are correct. I admire people with standards. It is pleasant even when I can’t comprehend or stand them.”

For a moment I was silent and simply stared at her. After a time, the burning glows rolled in their sockets and she sighed. “It’s your morals at the moment that are digging away at me lately. Like a splinter under a nail.”

“She nodded. “That, and also the we must save those people and the poor and penniless need help too.” She mockingly deepened her voice and pulled her shoulders back to imitate me. All it did for a moment was make me snort and draw my attention to the way it pushed her breasts forward through the daedroth scale armour.

“Helping people is what we are supposed to do in the Guild and as Knights.”

“Lu’oh xunus usstan ragar usstan xuil folt natha wael?” Despite the words in her native tongue it was more sarcastic than bitter. “Yes, but not for free. I can understand throwing ourselves into Oblivion and killing minotaurs and vampires when it is our mission or that we are contracted to do so. But it’s this suicidal nature of yours to stand before every danger that assails the surface on a whim is almost sickening.”

Shifting slightly to meet her gaze properly I ran my fingers through her hair idly. “I know you don’t approve but I can’t simply sit back and watch people suffer needlessly.”

“So you will instead alter the world? Bring about peace and harmony and stop all the wars and give every beggar and cripple his own castle?”

“Of course not.”

“So why would you pay the guild’s cut for contracts out of your own purse? Or give what was all intents and purposes a stipend to that ssindossa you fed on in Leyawiin?”

I brushed some hair from her forehead and thudded my head into the padded cloth under us. “I have no way to describe it to you Viconia. Our worlds are different and I’m not sure if I can simply tell you or explain it all too you.”

“Our worlds are different.” She whispered, her fingernails tapping lightly on my breastplate in a rhythm that matched the beating of my heart. “I am Drow. You are a surface. Those in the Underdark must deal harshness, or otherwise receive it. You surfacers however seem to thrive on charity.”

A finger caressed my cheek. “It is not your job to give to those too weak or pitiful to drag themselves from the shithole of their lives.”

“But it is my job to protect those who can’t protect themselves.” My own fingers traced patterns on the ebony flesh of her face and followed the curve of her jaw. “At least it used to be.”

“Used to be?”

“Being a forester. A Legionary. The Legion exists to protect the Empire. Sure it might be the greatest military in the history of Tamriel and whose purpose is to crush everyone and anything dumb enough to be a threat, but that’s not all of what it is. The Legions protect. They are the shield
for those in the Empire who need it, and the sword that slays what threatens them. The Legion fights and kills and dies so that everyone else outside of its ranks doesn’t have to.”

“You’re not in the Legion anymore mrannd’ssinss.”

“I know.” I felt my thought go dark for a moment and I knew that she felt the shudder course through me. “In my first years in Vvardenfell I watched a group of Ordinators round up a tribe of ashlanders and butcher them. They slaughtered the men, brutalised the women and some of the children and once they had finished having their fun they killed them all. Cut off their heads, threw them into a pile and moved on. Despite the fact that some tribes were technically enemies to the Empire it was the Legion’s policy to step into such situations and stop pointless massacres. We did nothing, the Tribune ordering us to stand down and simply watch. Killing our foes in battle is one thing, but killing entire families right down to the infants and old folks? That’s not the Legion way.”

“Men and Mer alike fear monsters.” She replied. “You kill a village and ten others will surrender when you arrive.”

“I know. But that is not who or what I am.”

“You would be the one standing before the town with sword in hand waiting for the enemy to arrive.”

“Exactly.” Kissing her lightly on the forehead I couldn’t help but feel melancholy. “I know it bothers you but I don’t know whether I can change my nature.”

“It bothers me less than what it did when we first met, and I am slowly getting used to it.” there was tiny shrug from her and she held me tighter for a moment. “I would prefer if you were at least a bit more mercenary in your beliefs. Helping those in need may be noble on the surface but it doesn’t keep clothes on your back or your belly filled.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Digging her fingernails into my jaw she twisted my head down and kissed me, the spark of her desire flickering into existence for a heartbeat. “I’m not the Drow I used to be but I at least understand you. Better than you realise.”

“I’d die for you Viconia.”

She patted me on the cheek before rising. Stretching out her spine and rolling her neck, the coals of her eyes watched me while I too rose into a sitting position. “It always pleases me when a male is willing to die for his betters, although I do not wish to part from your company just yet.”

“Because I get you free things?”

The laugh was musical and sent shivers down my spine. “That, and that the sex is adequate.”

“Only adequate?” despite the darkness of the room I knew she could see the comical look of despondency on my face.

“You have much to learn mrannd’ssinss.” Rising to her feet she buckled Dragonbane to her hip and checked the harness’ tightness. “But I happened to be an excellent teacher...”

We fell silent for a few moments while we finished dressing and arming ourselves for the coming battle. As I finished strapping my pauldrons and tightening my breastplate I once again found myself the centre of her undivided attention.
“You may be pleased to hear that I have come to decision.” She said simply and I found myself staring into the cold, yet burning pits of her eyes.

“A decision?”

“Yes wael; a decision.” She ran her fingers through her hair, bundling it up and preparing to cover her head with her coif and hood. “I have decided that despite my discomfort I will follow you in your attempts of righteousness and morality.”

“Follow me? You are not beholden to me Viconia.”

“It is my choice. I am not some waif in need of protection or one to cower behind a protector arrayed in steel.” Lightly she kissed me on the cheek and pulled her hood tight over the chainmail coif. “I will allow you to perform your good deeds, not because I think that it is right to do so but that it seems to benefit us in the long term.”

There was a smile on her face when she regarded my expression. “It would still pay for you to be a little less selfish all the time, but I have realised that if not for your ‘heroic’ mannerisms we would have never been as successful as we are.”

“So despite your misgivings you’re happy for us to go about helping people.”

She shrugged. “In a way. Everything we have accomplished and the names we have throughout the lands would have been diminished if we had simply done it the way I had believed to be right. We certainly would not have been made knights, we would not have been successful in our mission of the Blades. I doubt that we would have even made it much past Chorrol all those weeks ago.”

“What would you have had us do?” I asked simply.

“I would have gotten every coin out of every contract we could. Intimidate and threaten and take and take until there was no more blood and meat to be had from the bone. It is the Drow way, and we would have failed. Your beliefs have lead us to receive two or three times as many contracts as what we would have in the ways of my kind. In the end we were even gifted with more than we would have been if we took it by force.”

The burning eyes stared into my soul and I smiled slightly at how she stood there, proud despite the somewhat humbled admission of what she believed to be personal weakness. “Tomorrow, if we live through the night I will follow you into the castle and face whatever it may hold. Not out of expectation of glory and riches but because it is what you believe to be right.”

“I don’t want you to blindly follow me wherever we go though.”

“Oh, don’t just misunderstand my acceptance of your beliefs for doting obedience. If you are wrong or being an idiot I will tell you.” the smile grew until I could see the hints of white teeth in the darkness. “And if I think you are being even more monumentally stupid than usual then I will knock you unconscious to spare me from having to pick up the pieces later.”

The shadowed form of Yulfgar appeared in the doorway with the faint burning light of a lantern in his hand, revealing sunken features from fear and the slow creep of infection from his wounds. “Night has fallen.” He stated simply.

“Not long now.” I muttered to myself, rising to my full height and giving Viconia a quick kiss on the forehead again before buckling Sunchild and the Light of Dawn to my person.

“I think we’re ready.” There was not much conviction in his voice but with the situation that we
were in it was not surprising. “The doors and windows are barred, and everyone is armed with everything we could find. I’ve even ensured that as many torches and lanterns we have are lit and scattered through the building.”

“Good.” Sparing a glance to Viconia she grinned slightly before walking out of the room and leaving us to follow. “Whatever happens tonight will not be forgotten.”

Ylfgar chuckled darkly. “No matter how much booze we drink…”

Viconia and I made our way to the barricade near the front doors. Enormous beams and supports of wood had been hammered into them in the previous hours and grooves had been chiselled into the floor for the angled beams to lock into place. Normally it would have filled me with comfort knowing that even a battering ram would have struggled to gain access, but not knowing the supernatural horrors that were coming for us I was filled with dread instead.

Owls could be faintly heard some distance away from the darkening village and the silence that fell over the land with the coming of darkness was somehow worse than the growing expectation. No one spoke, their voices silent as each and every man and women listened with straining ears and gripped weapons of various make and lethality with whitening knuckles. As the minutes dragged on, nerves were frayed to breaking point, cold sweat trickled down spines and soaked padding and armour plating and left hands trembling. It was almost a relief when the far off howl rippled through the silent streets, rolling and flowing from thatched hut to thatched hut before reaching our ears. It was powerful and spoke of endless hunts under the stars, a darkness and depravity that spoke to the bestial side of our souls, and most huddling around us made various signs to call upon the protection of the divines.

Even before the howl had been lost to the night, another joined it in the cry of anticipated slaughter that we could feel deep in our bellies. It was joined by one after another until the silence of the night was ripped away by the blood curdling cries of the bloodthirsty and those damned by a God.

Chapter End Notes

My main focus for Knight is character development, not just for Kaius but (especially) Viconia. As an "Evil" character and the approaching Knights of the Nine story arc I didn't want her changing alignment as it would change who she was and her character too much. In Baldur's Gate her alignment changes to True Neutral, but in this story I want to keep her the same bitter, tough, independent Drow she always has been. She will soften over the course of the following chapters but I needed a way to show that she isn't just blindly following in Kaius' footsteps. Having a more "mercenary" outlook on life and receiving support (both emotional and physical) from Kaius is going to be a big part of what follows.

I definitely don't want her in any way as a damsel in distress. Vicky is way too damn tough. While Kaius has and will help/save her at times she gives as good as she gets.

Overall though she is losing her arrogance and the aloof attitude, but instead she's going to be bitter, sarcastic and have a sense of humour as black as the Underdark. After all, she still believes that the best way to a man's heart is a knife between the ribs... ;-P
Werewolf Siege

Chapter Notes

I get a lot of inspiration from a lot of the books I read and the movies that I watch. This chapter is a perfect example of this.

“Easy lads.” Ylfgar called out to the dozen or so militia huddling in the barricaded hall. He spoke loudly, but not too loud to draw attention to the creatures baying for blood on the village outskirts. “We’ve been expecting these bastards and we’re ready for them.”

Weapons trembled in damp and sweating hands and eyes stung from the salt from their brows despite the winter’s chill. The smell of fear was growing stronger now and as much as I knew that it was coming from me as well as everyone else there was something horrifying how I enjoyed the taste of it on my tongue. The fear was lending strength to the vampire, and even while I listened to the howls I could feel my face tightening involuntarily.

Over two dozen men and women were within the hall, most of which were on the ground floor surrounding the main entrance while the others stood vigil over the very few windows and potential entrances on the second level. There were not many places for the werewolves to gain entry and the roof was far too thick to breach without a significant assault which left the creatures only a few places to force their way inside. Our hopes and plans were to bottleneck the beasts in any entrances they forced, as we all knew that once one or more were inside it was as good as finished.

We all listened as the howls grew in volume and proximity as the creatures moved into the village and began prowling the streets. Snuffling and snorting reached our ears on occasion, as did the sounds of splintering wood and breaking of furniture as one or more of them gained entry to a house or building. Every single one of us remained deathly silent, not even whispering or talking as we couched and curled into balls. Almost to a man we were wishing and hoping with every ounce of our souls that the werewolves would leave or not notice our presence. Some of those around us mouthed prayers to their various gods and deities, calling upon every bit of spiritual protection they could think of in the hope that even the smallest amount would allow them to see the night through.

The snorts and padding of paws on cobbledstones grew and faded as the creatures moved about and at one point I could hear one moving about the marketplace with my enhanced hearing. In the dark the mind conjured all sorts of horrors and the sounds of the beasts in the village made it all too easy to imagine what awaited us if we were to fail.

For the better part of an hour they roamed the streets, and I couldn’t help but hear the way that a group of them returned to the site of the massacre the evening before. Viconia was by my side, sitting next to me on a chair taken from somewhere in the hall and she saw my paled expression as my vampiric senses allowed me to hear them consuming the remains of those left inside the Faregyl Inn.

“What in Mara’s name are they doing?” I heard one of the militia whisper a few metres away from where Viconia and I sat. So far the pack hadn’t come close to the hall and seemed content on roaming the village unhindered.

“They have all night.” Replied another, dressed in thick padded leather and a rough kettle helm pressed into his skull. From the look of the helm it must have been a family heirloom. “They don’t
have to rush anything.”

A scream echoed out through the night, drawn out and horrifying and everyone who heard it flinched and went pale. It was no werewolf howl, but instead a cry of agony and terror.

“What the fuck was that?” exclaimed one of the militia, too loudly for my tastes but we all were now a lot more uneasy than what we were before.

Another scream ripped through the night and the scent of fear and panic became ever more noticeable until I felt as though I was bathing in it. At least one of the militia lost control of their bowels and retreated into a nearby room and we all were now looking amongst ourselves with confusion.

“There are people out there!” Someone called out, and I saw more than one of the militia rise from where they had been waiting and start towards the doors.

“Hold!” I hissed to them, trying to shout but not make a noise at the same time. “Something’s not right about this.”

“Of course there’s something not right!” The militiaman in a suit of rusted chainmail jabbed a finger in my direction. “There are people out there and we aren’t helping.”

“Anyone out there is dead anyway.” Another replied as what could only have been the sound of a child dying horribly echoed into the night.

“Gods help! Someone help my daughter!”

With glances between themselves a handful stepped forward to move to the doors and found themselves facing me. “It’s a trap.” I hissed.

“Mummy!? Mummy, save me!”

“You don’t know that!” one tried to push past and I pressed my fist into his chest and threw him back into the others.

“Talos protect me oh gods I DON’T WANT TO DIE!”

“Listen to the werewolves!” I snapped, and at my tone and expression they stopped and listened for a moment. Despite the calls and the screams there was no change to the howls of the beasts. They continued to move about the village, entering homes and almost casually sniffing about. Everyone realised with a start at exactly what I meant. The screams should have been drawing the creatures like moths to a flame, or at the very least should have been caused by them. Instead there was no change in their behaviour, and they simply continued their snuffling and snorting and panting as they roamed the village.

Another drawn out scream, female this time echoed and cut deep into our souls before breaking down into a horrible fleshy gurgle of the dying.

“What in the hells does that mean then?”

I shrugged at the speaker and motioned for everyone to step back away from the doors as carefully as they could. The screams and calls of terror and pain were growing louder and more frequent and were now entering the village as well. “There is something else out there.”

“Don’t let the monsters eat me daddy! Daddy please!”
Viconia’s eyes were glowing in the flickering shadows of the hall and I could see the white-yellow light building within them as she tasted the scent of magicka on the air. There was a pressure building in my skull and I could sense the growing power in the village that only made me feel even more fearful than I had before. Viconia however seemed to be made of stone, not even twitching or trembling in the slightest as she weaved the magicka out of the air with swirls of her fingertips.

“There’s a mage or purveyor of magicka out there.” She said with a strange echo in her voice that resonated the power. “Something hidden, but monstrously powerful.”

“I’ve never yet met a wizard that can throw spells about with a knife in the guts.” My tone and words brought grim smiles to a handful of the defenders but their courage was hanging on by the merest threads. Almost to an individual they were looking on Viconia and I for strength through our reputations, and knowledge that we were the only experienced fighters in the entire group.

“Ignore the noises of the night.” Her words cut through the group and they were all gazing upon us now. “They are nothing but illusions and conjured apparitions to unman you all; parlour tricks for the weak and feeble.”

Twisted and monstrous in the situation, my laugh was enough to churn stomachs already roiling with terror and they all looked at me as I chuckled in the gloom. Some made signs to various deities as they beheld the way my eyes glinted in the shadows, thinking that the stress and terror had snapped my sanity.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Viconia muttered, the only individual in the building who seemed completely at ease at the whole situation.

“We’re facing an entire pack of werewolves, and yet these bastards fear us.” I laughed. Despite my words I felt a terror that matched all of those in the building with us. The sound of a small child sobbing seemed to suddenly echo from a room within the town hall itself for a few moments that left a group of the militia facing it in a wall of spear-points before the noise moved on. “They fear us that much that they have to use deception and tricks to weaken our resolve instead of being able to rely on the beasts of Hircine.”

“Well… it’s working so far.” Someone muttered in the group.

Sparing a glance to Viconia I saw the way that she returned the look with a quizzical one of her own. “These illusions; are they imitations, or memories?” I whispered to her so the others couldn’t hear the question.

The expression that formed on her face was one that told me that there were questions that I didn’t want answers for.

My fingers tapped on Sunchild’s sheathed hilt for a moment before reaching and drawing an arrow from the quiver at my feet. Enormously powerful, my bow was strung and in my hands even as my vampiric senses could hear the way the wolf howls moving closer to us.

“Here we go.” I murmured and Viconia nodded, the magicka traces in the air before her growing even more powerful as she read the shifting energies. The howls and screams and calls of life-ending horror continued to the increasingly desperate men and women around us, and it was almost a relief when the door shuddered as something large impacted against it.

Rattling and shifting, the group clenched an array of weapons at the heavily fortified entry. Posts and beams had been nailed to the interior of the doors, their bases pressed into rectangular holes carved into the stone foundations for support. All together they braced the doors outward and such
thick planks would ensure that even daedric creatures would have to spend time and effort to break through.

Crossbows rattled and the creak of bows being drawn back to half nock could be heard over the muttered oaths and curses at the way the door had shuddered as it was hit.

“Steady.” I hissed to the group as they levelled their weapons at the door. “They’re just testing us.”

The tiny gap under the sealed doors suddenly blew inwards in a collection of wood shavings and dust as something monstrously large snuffled at the base of the door. The heavy breaths of the creature pressing its nose to the half centimetre gap panted and sprayed saliva and mucous before the scrabbling of claws could be heard. Like a hound digging at a rabbit burrow, the giant creature dug and scraped at the tiny gap, splintering wood and gouging stone but thankfully with little effect. Every few seconds it would stop, snuffle at the door before resuming its scratching.

Everyone held their breaths, watching with a sick horror at the sight of the billowing clouds of dust from the werewolf almost playfully scratching at the exterior. For a minute or two it seemed content to continue on, but without warning the bloodthirsty howl ripped through us all as it bayed into the night sky.

Its hunting howl was returned by the others and we could hear the snorting and roaring as they galloped through the village towards us. being unable to see or watch them we could feel our bowels turn to water as our subconscious minds filled in the gaps using the very worst of our imaginations. My own mind was filled with the memories from that night all those years before and I struggled not to jump as the doors resounded from another solid impact.

Shuddering and rocking back on the numerous bracings and wooden supports the doors began to buckle slightly in places as the lycanthropes continued their assault. Cracks began to appear in places as unnatural claws ripped into the wood or they hit it with their daedric strength, but thankfully the preparations of the day were more than proving themselves.

“My wives! Please spare my wives!”

Kneeling down behind his massive towershield the young Legionary Hadrgar watched impassively at the doors slowly begin to give under the sustained assault of the werewolves. Kneeling down with his knee pressed to the floor, his shield covered him entirely, his narrowing eyes mostly hidden in the thick barbute helmet pressed to his skull. To look at the young man from the front would only show the massive shield with the Imperial Dragon embossed on the front and the top of his steel helm jutting over the lip. All that could be seen of his flesh would be the glints of his eyes in the helmet’s shadow, but the words that he began incanting were clearly heard even over the growing cacophony.

“There do I see my father’s...” He chanted in his thickly accented voice.

“Daddy, stop the monsters hurting me! DADDY!”

“There do I see my mother’s...”
The howl of something bestial and blood-savage ripped through the air as the creature bounded around the exterior of the hall. For a few heart rending moments it sought and failed to find entrance elsewhere and soon returned to the pack battering the doors.

In a mournful funeral dirge, the young Nord continued his death prayer and I could see that he was not the only one speaking what for all intents their own eulogies. “There do I see my brothers and my sisters…”

A wooden panel slowly began pushing inwards as one of the creatures threw its entire strength and bodyweight into the wood. So heavily built and fortified by the militia, the wooden panel only seemed to bend and show the tiniest signs of splintering before the creature was forced to pull back from the exertion.

“There do I see the line of my people, back to the beginning…”

Another screech ripped through the air; a woman of indeterminable age suffering with world ending pain. It was so close that we all could have sworn that she had her face pressed up against the hinges before she began shrieking.

“Shor bids me to take my place among them…”

We were all flinching now at the sounds of the unrelenting assault and for several moments we all trembled in fear at the sound of one of them scrabbling up the walls and onto the roof. The long bass note of its howl could be felt deep into our bellies, but there were some of us that couldn’t help but laugh at the sudden yelp as its footing slipped on the frosty roof and it fell. The moments of desperate scrabbling could be heard over its kin attacking the doors before it fell three stories and slammed solidly into the ground.

“In the halls of Sovngarde…”

“Dead dead dying dying death…” chanted a sick disembodied voice that seemed to move and float around the exterior of the town hall. “All is death, all is rot. Twist and snap, gnaw and rot… Death death death…”

“Where the brave…”

One of the several supporting beams juddered and bounced as one or more of the creatures slammed heavily into the door with their full force. Cracks appeared in some of the wood and I could suddenly taste the green cores of the wooden planks and beams as they began fracturing.

“Live forever…”

The cry of “They’re breaking through!” echoed from the mouth of one of the militia and I drew back hard on my bow. In a sick curiosity I watched one of the braces bend and snap, the thirty-centimetre-thick post bending like a blade of grass before exploding from the forces on the door panel it was holding back. The wooden echo of the broken wood sounded like the hollow tolling of a funeral bell and before our eyes a plank of wood in the centre of the right hand door exploded inwards with uncontrollable fury.

Even before the wood had hit the floor I had released my breath and the hold on the bowstring, feeling it slap the inside of my left wrist as it launched the arrow with all the force of a thunderbolt. I caught the vague suggestion of furred flesh and talons in the rent in the wood before the arrow vanished into the darkness of the night, but the squeal of surprised pain was audible to us all.
“Braces!” Ylfgar roared, all silence and whispering was lost now to the assault and I saw those few without bows or polearms grasp planks and posts from the ready-made stockpile of building materials and step hesitantly towards the door. Moving forward with them I launched another arrow through the gap, seeing movement for a second through the hole barely wide enough to fit my shoulders through.

Using spears and lengths of wood to keep their distance from the doors a handful of the militia pushed a board across the hole and jammed it there with a beam pressed into the floor. They had been preparing for this all day and although their fear was threatening to overwhelm them their instincts pushed aside all their conscious thoughts. Another panel exploded inwards and I suddenly found myself staring into the inky blackness of a hole filled with little more than a pair of burning eyes the colour of a blood moon.

Furred and ghastly, a limb half as long as I was tall groped through tipped with talons longer than daggers that gleamed black like obsidian. Coloured a deep brown like fresh clay it was matted and stank, filling the interior of the hall with the stench of wet hound and the musk of an alpha predator. It slashed and swiped about, knocking down one of the supports with a clatter as all those near the doors suddenly retreated from the sight of their fears clothed in furry flesh.

An arrow lodged deep into a bicep, but appeared as wounding as an insect bite to the creature that owned the limb. Another pair of arrows lodged into the wood of the door to join mine as those with bows released the strings with trembling fingers. Twisting and roaring with bloodlust the werewolf ignored the impacts of the arrows, and the lone crossbow bolt that appeared as though conjured from its forearm from a shot made with luck more than skill.

Sunchild appeared in my hand and unthinkingly I stepped forward while all the others retreated, screaming in fear and desperation while only a few shouted orders to hold firm and shore up the doors. It was reaching for on the various parts of the barricade keeping the doors closed and even as its talons sunk deep into a beam Sunchild flickered through the air and left the night air ringing with a howl of a different timbre.

Flopping to the ground, the severed limb splattered gore in all directions as its owner retracted the gushing stump. The scream of pain and anguish from the lycanthrope almost sounded human despite the bestial rage inherent in the growls. There was almost a moment of silence from beasts and militia alike as all involved realised what had occurred.

“Get the gods-damned doors barricaded!” I roared on the top of my lungs as the creatures outside redoubled their efforts to gain entry. Some sounded like they were digging into the wood on the outside as though it was little more than soil and they were dogs trying to bury bones. The others clawed and ripped at the holes that they had already made, enlarging them in flurries of talons and shattering wood.

The militia moved with surprising speed and without hesitation, and I realised with a start that I had infused some of my vampiric will into my voice. As the adrenaline grew and thundered its way into my veins my face was growing taut until the fear began sliding away. Despite the memories, despite the terror and the sound and sight of such beasts coming to claim our flesh the vampire was smothering all other emotions until all that was left was rage and anger and a fury that matched the accursed beings outside.

Furred and fanged, the face of one of the werewolves pressed into the right hand hole that had been enlarged by the grasping talons of it and its kin. A yellow, bloodshot eye narrowed in the gap at the sight of the dozen or so individuals that dared to defy it, lips pulling back from a maw of fangs and teeth as pointed and tapered as bodkins. Snarling and spitting it roared its unthinking hatred at us for
a second before one of the militia stepped forward and fired a crossbow point blank into the hole.

Mjadhi; bandit and outlaw hissed his own hatred as he pulled the trigger on his crossbow, the weapon’s arms snapping forward with mechanical force and driving the bolt into the face of the wolf. There was a split second of surprise from the creature outside before it realised it was now partially blind and had thirty centimetres of steel tipped wood jutting from a socket.

Another cry of pain from the werewolves rippling through the pack as the newly blinded creature staggered way to the sound of the purring laughter of the Khajiit highwayman. Roaring like a mountain lion he laughed and stepped backwards, pulling another bolt from the quiver on his hip before going through the laborious process of reloading the weapon.

Spurred on from our examples the others moved forward, jamming wood down, pressing beams and posts onto the weakening doors and firing arrows and bolts through the existing holes to the chorus of screams and howls of pain and anger. Furred and talon-tipped paws would snake inside, writhe about grasping and clawing accompanied by the roars of their owners. Another pushed through the left side hole where I stood and I swore constantly and breathlessly as it groped about for flesh to sink its talons into.

“Well… The vih’rellen are consistent to say the least.” I swore and one of the militia hooted at my grim expression as I swung Sunchild once more. Another howl of agony was reward for my efforts and a fresh hand flopped like a dead fish next to its brother, still twitching as nerves struggled to obey the commands from a body it was no longer attached to.

Kicking the hand away and watching my footing on the bloody floor I motioned for a pair of the militia to lever a board across the gap before another of the fiends decided to try its luck against my blade. By now the majority of the defenders were huddling around the doors. Some armed with little more than planks of wood, others firing whatever weapons they had into the holes before stepping aside for their comrades to have clear shots of their own. The whole time the roars and bloodthirsty howls continued unabated, their terrible cries striking us deep in our guts while our minds were assaulted by the insidious taunts and dreadful screams of the soul trapped and the dead.

“Faelorn you fool! Get back!”

Hearing Ylfgar’s shouted command I twisted my head to see the Bosmer caravan hand step forwards with a drawn bow, the arrow wickedly pointed and gleaming with sharpness. Buoyed by their success, those with bows and crossbows had been creeping forward half a pace at a time with each shot into the darkness. Now as the fight was raging in earnest when he released the arrow he was less than an arm’s span from the ragged hole.

Fumbling with his quiver there was nothing he or anyone else could do when an arm as black as ash erupted from the hole, talons as sharp as shortswords punching into the elf’s gut with a shocking savagery. There was enough time for the look of stupefied amazement to appear on his gaunt tattooed face, staring at the way how the werewolf’s fingers vanished to the knuckles in his leather and chainmail. The hairy palm faced to the sky, fingers obviously curling inside of his torso but before anyone could move or even react it ripped him from his feet and wrenched him through the hole.

Far too small to accommodate a body, let alone an upright one the wood elf died in an explosion of gore as he slammed into the wood and was pulled stomach first through the hole. Bones breaking and snapping, the sheer power of the creature ripped him apart, folding his corpse in half at the waist and leaving everyone within five metres misted with his blood.

“Back! Back you fucking idiots!” someone shouted over the sounds of gory feasting and the tearing
of flesh outside. What little remained of the wood elf was nothing more than a boot sitting comically
near the base of the shuddering doors, while his blood dripped everywhere and pooled around the lip
of the hole.

Grey furred and terrible, the snarling face of one of the creatures pressed the advantage and the
momentary lack of arrows and bolts being hurled from hole. Ears flat to its skull and lips pulled back
to reveal a mouth filled with fangs it pushed through the gap, barking and salivating at the huddling
mass of humanity standing before it. Too small to accommodate its entire mass it pushed and heaved,
attempting to drag itself further into the hall with the only arm it had managed to get through. Stuck
in the hole by its impossibly broad shoulders, we could hear its hindquarters scrabbling for purchase
even over its snarls and growls. Faced with such a monstrosity everyone in the room shied away
from the angry lycanthrope, almost tripping over themselves in terror as they swore and screamed in
terror.

Broad, heavy and designed for the utmost protection; the dragon embossed weight of a towershield
smashed the creature hard in the face, shattering fangs and breaking bone with the impact.
Impossibly calm and determined as though entirely detached from the situation, young Hadrgar had
fallen into the routine and drills imparted onto all those in the Legion. There was no shouted battle
cry, no roar of exertion or shouting as there was in other forces and military units within the Empire.
When the Legion went to war it did so in silence, broken only by the screams and cries of the dead
and dying.

There was nothing of the emotion or fear of earlier in the day, no tremble of a limb or palsy of the
hand. He struck quickly and precisely, not overexerting and remaining behind the thick layers of
metal and wood as he jammed the gladius to the hilt in a furred jugular. The creature howled and
swiped at him, blood gushing from the opened smile in its neck but doing little more than dig furrows
through his shield as he twisted his shoulder and glanced it away with a veteran’s skill. Another short
stab and part of its face hung away, its baying maw splattering blood and drool over the impassive
helm of the Nordic soldier.

Fully intending on eviscerating the legionary daring to stand between it and its prey it roared,
ignoring the wounds that would have incapacitated a minotaur. Before our eyes the pulsing spurts of
blood from the stab wound in the throat dribbled away into nothing, not because of death claiming
the beast but because the wound began closing on its own accord. The unnatural healing of the
creature brought the full memories of that night long ago in Vvardenfell to the forefront of my mind
and I reached forward and pulled the young man back before his guts were left slithering across the
ground. He fell heavily onto his rear, the weight of his Legion plate leaving him winded as the
werewolf simply redoubled its efforts to gain entry.

Weighted and hooked, the polished head of a billhook slammed down hard on the creature’s skull,
caving it in with a crack and spraying blood and brains on those who were closest. Designed for
pulling riders from their saddles or cleaving through platemail, even the unnatural regenerative nature
of Hircine’s blessed could survive such an injury. Its scrabbling and howling was cut off in mid
breath, head and body slumping to the floor and tongue lolling in a mouth and jaw broken from the
impact.

“Got the bastard!” shouted the militiaman wielding the enormous polearm as the creature died with
one last ragged breath. The look of triumph was short lived though as he was left desperately
wriggling the bladed staff from where it was lodged in flesh and bone. Even more shockingly than
before the entire corpse of the werewolf was pulled from the hole with terrible force, sending even
more blood spraying the already soaked wood and stone floor and pulling the billman from his feet.
He slammed against the door, his grip on his weapon instinctively loosening and letting it fly out of
the hole with the corpse it was imbedded in. While quick to let go of the wooden staff, he had not
been quick enough to save him from a concussion as he head-butted the thick oak planks; the padded hood he wore proving insufficient to protect him from injury or the pair of grasping hands that quickly appeared in the space above him.

His shrieks were terrible as the claws tasted deeply of his flesh, shredding flesh and ripping bone as though they were little more than twigs. Blood sprayed in all directions and he twisted and writhed in agony, another furred maw appearing in the hole that wasted no time biting him and worrying great chunks of flesh from his shoulder. Some of the militia tried desperately to drag him away from the furred embrace of the creature but within seconds his screams were transformed into gurgles.

With Hadrgar by my side and half a dozen militia behind us we stabbed and hacked at the creature, trying to swipe our way past its flailing limbs while the others tried desperately to pull the hapless militiaman away from the bloodthirsty beast. Hadrgar took a swipe across his shield that left another series of furrows through the Imperial Dragon and I narrowly slashed at a paw as it tried to grasp me as well.

“Get down!” the voice from behind us called out, and I twisted and saw Viconia standing there in the corner of my eye. Without thinking I grabbed Hadrgar and for the second time in just as many minutes left him sprawled on his back as Viconia strode forward with a crescent of energies plucking at the air around her. In the minutes while the rest of us had been fighting she had been calling upon her magical strength and casting a spell that left her throbbing with latent might. The witchlight of her eyes bubbled and coiled like smoke, streaming down her face as though she was crying liquid light and burning brightly until none of her original eyes remained. Whispering and chanting, her fingers danced and weaved the air that shimmered like the surface of a road on a summer’s day and left the taste of metal on our tongues and a migraine in the back of my mind.

With the near-dead man still grasped firmly and half pulled through the hole, the werewolf growled through a mouthful of flesh at the Drow suddenly standing before it. Crackling with power she continued to whisper words of increasing complexity even as she pointed her finger accusingly at the beast-man mauling the near-dead villager.

Spitting out the last of the spell, we all were rocked from the sheer intensity of the magical blast. Similar to those she had used against the minotaur lord of Nonungalo but several times more powerful, the spell cracked from her outstretched hand, pouring the contained energies within her body in one single blast of earthshattering force. The werewolf had enough time to realise the threat that she faced, twisting and trying to move aside even as the bolt of energy struck it between the eyes.

The peal of thunder silenced everything, the howls of the werewolves outside, the shouts of anger, screams of pain and the sounds of fighting. Even the ever present howling and screams of the damned was silenced in the crescendo of energies that Viconia had unleashed. The raw power that she had wielded had left the wood around the hole smouldering and blackened as though transformed into charcoal, and as for the werewolf; it was no longer counted among the living.

Burnt hair, scorched flesh and the smell of wet dog wafted, and there was almost nothing left of the creature. It had been kneeling in the breach, gnawing on the near-dead villager one second and the next it was half an exploded corpse. As though it had been struck by a boulder hurled by a trebuchet, everything above its sternum was now nothing more than steaming giblets covering half the market square in a cone of gore.

Eyes rolling into the back of her skull, Viconia staggered and fell backwards, utterly spent from the discharge of her powers in such a way. The assault on the doors had ceased however; the explosive death of one of the pack and the way the magicka had left the other creatures singed and burned had
forced them to retreat whimpering and yowling. Silhouettes of enormous beasts scampering away on all fours could been seen before they vanished from view between buildings and down darkened streets. For the moment at least they had been beaten off.

“Ysmir’s beard!” Hadrgar swore as he rolled over from where I had pushed him, watching as I leapt forward and caught Viconia before she hit the floor. “I always thought that magicka was for the weak!”

Ignoring him I quickly looked over her. Her heart was racing, eyes fluttering in her skull and I could feel her mind and body struggling to deal with the energies that not only she had contained but had released on the werewolves. I had seen Legion Battlemages and Telvanni Magister’s unable to control such raw power. She was weakened and exhausted but thanks to her efforts she had almost singlehandedly beaten off a lycanthrope assault.

“They’ve run off.” Someone exclaimed to a handful of muted cheers of those unable to believe they weren’t introducing themselves to their ancestors in Aetherius.

“Yeah, and they might come back.” Ylfgar spat, moving forward and gesturing to the door. “The night’s still young, so get this damned thing secured and boarded up.”

The towering shadow of the woodsman loomed over me and I could somehow hear the smile in his tone. “That’s one helluvar thing to witness.”

Before I could reply there was the sound of scraping wood from upstairs, followed by the sound of something heavy impacting on the floorboards. Everyone seemed to freeze in place at the noise, listening and straining as something shattered and a bloodcurdling scream was cut off in mid breath.

“By the Nine…”

“They’ve gotten inside!”

Twisting and stabbing a finger between the young legionary and Viconia’s twitching form I could the whites of his eyes within the shadows of his helm. “Stay here and look after her!” I spat, watching him flinch from my tone.

Without waiting for a response I exploded into activity, adrenaline returning to my veins as my heart hammered like a drum in my chest. Upstairs the sounds of splintering wood were joined and overwhelmed by what could only be a howl of pure triumph. Somehow while we were fighting them off downstairs one of the creatures had made it inside, aided by the distraction of its pack mates and now there was nothing stopping it from enacting the slaughter that its master demanded. I hurdled the stairs three or four at a time, moving faster than the others behind me and before I realised I was on the top floor, alone and with the nearest militiaman twenty metres behind.

I found myself feeling as though my boots were sunk deep in the snow of northern Vvardenfell, bow drooping from trembling fingers and staring into the face of a creature that had haunted my dreams for over half a decade. Faced with a sight of utter carnage and devastation as I had all those years ago, I felt little more than a fresh faced recruit faced with the worst oblivion had to offer in the frozen north of the world. The bodies at the creature’s feet may not have been those of my comrades in arms that cold winter’s night, but there was a terrible similarity between the beast of my nightmares and the one I suddenly faced.

Even hunchbacked from the animalistic nature of its curse it towered a full head over me, looking down with its canine eyes with nothing but a primal hunger driving it on. Rolling grey-black fur covered every inch of flesh, arms lengthened and longer than its lower limbs for greater power to rip
and tear its prey apart. When it walked on two legs its fifteen-centimetre-long talons dragged across
the ground, and if it dropped to all fours it could chase a warhorse and use its impossible strength to
drag it and its rider down.

Three times as broad in the shoulders as a regular human it would have almost appeared comical in
the way that its waist was barely larger than a regular being’s. Instead it was horrifically powerful,
muscles twisting and writhing under its taut flesh and short fur to show a musculature that
professional soldier would kill to have. Its face had nothing of its original humanity; a twisted
amalgamation of a wolf and human that left only feral rage and an all-consuming desire to devour all
it came across. There was no reasoning with such a creature, especially how the remains of several
of the militia were left strewn about the hallway as little more than slaughtered meat.

Appearing at the top of the stairs it greeted me with what could have been surprise had it been any
other creature. Busily gnawing on the shredded torso of one of the militia it had been oblivious to
everything but the desire to feed. Holding up the body with little more than a single hand, the other
was busily assisting the fang filled maw to pull and tear at the fleshly remains of the shoulder and
neck. The sounds of meat splitting and bones cracking made my gorge rise uncontrollably as it
gulped down steaming chucks of human flesh and snapped bone in its jaws. Its loathsome meal was
stopped short as it realised that it wasn’t alone, its eye twisting and rolling in its sockets as it gazed
upon me.

At my appearance the creature dropped its meal, growling in such a way that not only did its chest
reverberate with the sound but so did mine as I could feel it through the soles of my feet and in the
depths of my bowels. All thoughts were pushed from my mind as I gazed upon the thing and the
devastation it had wrought. My guts clenched, fear trembling my arm and Sunchild wavered in front
of me and I suddenly could think of nothing more but the way the snow had risen to mid shin six
years before. The werewolf was so similar to the one that had slaughtered my comrades in arms so
long ago that I almost felt my bladder give way and I knew that it could smell the fear wafting from
me as it sniffed in my direction.

The howl that ripped forth from its throat and chest cut through me like a knife and I struggled not to
turn and flee from the apparition before me. There was something deep and primal in its every
movement and noise it made that stabbed into the primitive part of my mind left over from the time
when men were little more than animals themselves. It spoke to something in me that urged me to
turn, to run and flee from the ultimate predator and attempt to escape from the gory death that
awaited me. The world that the creature existed in consisted of only two types of beings. In a
facsimile of its infernal master and creator, there were only the predators and their prey. For those
heart pounding moments I knew that I was little more than a rabbit to the towering wolf-man.

Unlike most other beings and humans, there was no longer a single set of instincts that fuelled my
mind. The primitive and superstitious core of my being left over from my genetic heritage of
thousands of years of ancestors urged me to flee, but there was a darker layer now infusing my soul.
As it had when I had fallen from the heights of Lake Arrius, the survival instincts of the Vampire
came to the surface. Overwhelming the weak and frail man within my mind and it consumed by very
being with a dark and terrible bloodlust. It too was a predator, but was not beholden to the lord of
beasts. Infused with the darkness of Oblivion there was no way that the dual natures of the vampiric
and the daedric would ever back down or submit to a threat. The man might wish to run and hide
and flee, but to the daedra and the vampire such emotions or options didn’t exist.

Cheekbones rippling under my flesh and snapping with twinges of pain, my face elongated and
fangs peeled my lips apart. The fear, while still making itself felt in the back of my mind was put
aside for the moment as the darkness of my daedra infused vampiric side rose to meet the werewolf’s
challenge head on.
The enormous brute paused, seeing and sensing the changes rippling through me as Sunchild suddenly found itself in a firm grip once more. Chainmail creaked and my shoulders broadened as the vampire consumed my flesh and the werewolf hunched down and growled. Acting even more wolf-like it tilted its head away from me, protecting its throat instinctively as it sniffed the air and my sulphuric taint on the air. Of all emotions from such a creature, confusion and unease was not among those I believed it capable of. Instinctively it knew that I was not like the others it had feasted upon, and there was something akin to caution within its bestial mind. My daedric scent mixed with its wolfish musk as I met its growled challenge with one of my own.

With all the force of a ballista bolt it launched itself at me, roaring on the top of its lungs and spraying bloody spittle in an explosive puff of rank air. Moving faster than any creature had any right to it crossed the distance between us in a heartbeat, slamming heavily into the space that I had been occupying but missing me entirely. With the vampire’s strength and speed filling my limbs and controlling me by instinct alone, it allowed me to meet the creature strength for strength, slashing a deep cut through its flesh and dragging Sunchild’s edge across its ribs. Further blood added to the layers coating the floor as my Ayleid blade tasted the werewolf but even before it had fully landed it had pounced at me again.

Wood splintered and furniture exploded into kindling as it raked its claws millimetres from my body. The force of the creature allowed it to tear a door from its hinges with a casual ease and I felt my clothes and flesh buffered by the force of the wind from its blows. As strong as a minotaur, yet almost as fast as Lord Volmyr I knew all too well that had I not been accursed myself there would have been no chance of survival for any more than a second. Instead it found itself victim to my sword, hunks of flesh being rent from its bones and its life-force spraying the walls as I hacked at it with all the skill of Ylfgar felling a tree. Weeks of practice with the Blades allowed me to dance across the floor as lightly as a mist but my blows were anything but graceful. Against a creature of such brutality there was no place for elegance, and only by smashing my way through it and fighting it head on did I manage to keep myself alive.

Bleeding and gashed in several places it dropped back on all fours like the canine in whose image it had been fashioned. Although the injuries were serious and would have even felled a minotaur it seemed oblivious to them and didn’t seem to feel pain. Every cut only fed the burning fires of its hunger and rage, and I watched with my face taut and hissing as its wounds slowly closed before my eyes.

Crushing the vampire aside slightly a small huddle of militia rounded the top of the stairs and stumbled to a halt at the sight of me facing the creature down alone. My speed at sprinting up the stairs had left me facing the werewolf alone for a handful of seconds, but in doing so I had somehow found myself standing between it and the splintered hole where it had gained entry. It was now trapped between me and the group of militia, just as I was trapped between it and its entrance.

In such confines and facing against inexperienced and wavering villagers there was the potential of a bloodbath greater than that of the Faregyl Inn the night before. Hiding my fangs behind my lips I growled in my throat, trying to keep the creature’s attentions on me as the greater threat. It hunched there in the middle of the hall, blood dripping from the dozens of wounds it had sustained from my sword and appearing as though a coiled spring. It was enrag ed even more now at the hubris of prey daring to act as predators but as I tensed for the attack it suddenly did the unthinkable.

It stopped; pausing in mid breath and mid growl to face me and tilt its head in an all too canine way. From their positions flat against its skull its ears twitched and suddenly rose upright, moving and swivelling around as it stopped and appeared to be listening to something that only it could hear. There was a sensation of pressure in the back of my mind for a handful of seconds as the giant brute convulsed and stared into nothingness but it suddenly and violently faded at the same time as life
returned to the lycanthropes limbs.

The momentary pause over, the creature launched itself in my direction once more but it somehow appeared as though it was no longer intent on ripping me limb from limb. It bounded between the two of us on all fours, shuddering the floor with its weight even as I met its charge head on once more. Sunchild speared out and punched through a rib with a crack of bone but while it seemed intent on leaving the building by the way it had entered its bestial nature still yearned for my death. Biting down hard it latched onto my shoulder with the full force of its maw, its upper limbs digging their claws into my back as it tackled me with its ogre like strength.

Roaring and screaming at the pain and the intense pressure exerted by its powerful jaws I ludicrously found myself amazed at the way that the daedroth scales resisted not only its claws but its crushing teeth. My bones seemed to grind inside of my body but the razored tips of its talons and fangs didn’t sink into my flesh. I was left screaming in agony as it bit down hard and crumpled the steel plates of my armour, feeling as though I was trapped in a vice or a bear trap that was closing millimetre by millimetre.

Slamming me hard into the wall, it shook its head like a terrier with a rat, throwing me about even as its enormous paws scrabbled for purchase on the daedroth scales. Despite the unnatural nature of its form, it could not contend with the daedric substance of my armour. The sheer bite force and the strength of the creature was a different thing entirely and I knew with a horrid certainty in the back of my mind that most of the bones in my torso would have stress fractures.

Sunchild punched into its side again and again as I roared into its face with agony and six years’ worth of repressed fears and nightmares. All the guilt, the self-loathing and the hatred for such creatures flowed out of me through my sword arm as I jammed it again and again to the hilt in the thing’s chest. Ribs shattered, lungs were punctured and bowels opened as I wet my arm to the elbow in its blood. While it battered and slapped at my chest armour with its enormous wolf-hands I stabbed. While it bit down and crumpled my left pauldron and rerebrace I stabbed. Even while its breath turned ragged and frothy with blood I stabbed again and again, ripping Sunchild deep and sawing it back and forth in great rents of furred flesh. Soon the damage was becoming so great that even its unnatural regenerative abilities could not keep up with my frenzied attacks.

Slipping in the spreading pool of gore under us we fell, the weight of the creature pinning me to the floor even as its strength began fading from its limbs. Somehow my left arm, while crushed and semi-nerveless from the beasts clamped jaws managed to pull the dagger from its sheath strapped my chest and it too found itself buried in cursed flesh. Both Sunchild and the dagger continued stabbing and cutting, even as the creature began choking and vomiting gouts of blood and gore all over my shoulder and chest.

Its breath rattled and its hot rank blood coating both arms and the majority of my torso as the enormous stinking carcass of the creature slumped and had the last of its life pump out onto the floor and me. Gurgling, it struggled to rise unsuccessfullly from the sheer amount of damage that I had inflicted on it, whining and whimpering as its hindquarters dragged uselessly on the floor. At some point in my crazed flailing I had somehow managed to jam and twist Sunchild between a pair of vertebrae, leaving it paralysed from the stomach down. While near death it still struggled to end me, its jaws releasing their hold on my shoulder and trying to latch onto my blood soaked head. There was moment where our eyes met, the vampiric staring into the bestial before the point of Sunchild rammed into an eye socket and out of the back of its skull.

The full weight of the beast slumped over my prone body, driving the wind from my lungs and making me feel every single inch of the array of bruised and semi-fractured bones from my waist up. Blood coated me, soaking through my armour and sticking to my bare flesh in steaming layers of
crimson, but I was alive and suddenly aware of the waves of pain now that the vampire returned to its nest in my subconscious.

The soft, cautious footfalls of a handful of militia reached my ears as they moved through the carnage, armour creaking and weapons rattling in nervous hands as the werewolf breathed the last of its hot rank breath over my face. They had seen me tackled and mauled by the brute, and expecting me to be greeting my ancestors in the afterlife I almost laughed as I raised a hand and coughed and spat the blood out of my nose and mouth.

“A little help please?” I called out, hearing their cries of surprise and shock at my waving hand appearing from under the mound of dead flesh.
Infiltrating the Castle

When dawn finally broke it came as a relief to those of us huddling inside the town hall. Our fears of further attacks had not been justified as the creatures didn’t return, but it was still a sleepless night for the majority of us. Viconia and myself somehow managed to find somewhere quiet to collapse, gaining something resembling rest despite the nightmares that plagued me every time I closed my eyes. Physically exhausted and sore from my mauling my mind had allowed me to slip into unconsciousness, and other than some creaking bones and severe bruising under my armour I had come from my encounter with the creature surprisingly well. I may have been physically fine and healthy for the most part, but as I rose in the morning I knew that my dreams for the coming weeks were not going to pleasant. The encounter with the werewolf may have buried a few of the ghosts haunting me for the years past, but almost falling victim to its fangs and claws had provided many more to take their place.

It would not just be the ‘blessed’ of Hircine that would follow me in the months to come. The vampiric taint of my soul was filling my dreams with increasingly violent thoughts and desires for wanton excesses with every day that passed. It was strange how that half-remembered dreams of death and violence in Vvardenfell snow almost seemed to be a relief or a blessing in comparison. No matter how plagued I was from Vermina’s attentions, Viconia seemed to have no such issues. Exhausted from the use of her powers that had left two werewolves dead at the front doors, she had simply fallen asleep even before her head had touched her bundled up cloak. Even as I curled up beside her and felt her unconsciously press into me I could feel how she was rivalling the dead in her slumber. Years spent in a society infinitely darker and blood-soaked than any on the surface allowed to her rest peacefully while the rest of us tossed, turned, and stared into the darkness of the night remembering the horrors we had witnessed.

While normally broken by the cawing of cockerels, the dim light filtering through the trees was met by relief and numerous prayers and offerings to deities. Devoid of wildlife and animals there was little noise in the village as those of us who were awake began the process of dismantling the barricade and staggering into the frosty village. Ylfgar organised the survivors into shifts, ordering some to return inside to rest as best as they could while the rest of us began the slow process of removing the dead and repairing the damage. As Viconia and I had spent most of the morning asleep we busied ourselves hauling the enormous carcasses of the slain beasts with the assistance of a handful of militia. Each werewolf easily weighed over a quarter of a tonne and took anywhere between four and six of us to drag them out, pulling, grunting and swearing the entire time. The dead creatures were left devoid of their heads though, as none of us were willing on taking any chances. The werewolf that I had killed, and the one with the billhook lodged in bone and brain soon found themselves the centres of attention from Ylfgar’s axe.

Thrown into a pile, a pair of the militia manhandled over a barrel of lamp oil, dousing the corpses and even upending the dregs. There would be no healing or even the remotest chance that the creatures could be reanimated or brought back to life once the militia were through with them. As for the bodies of those who died at their claws, they too were brought into the sun. Covered by little more than sheets and furs the remains of the dead made a pitiful row; especially how despite the number of deaths there were several killed in such ways that there was little to identify them, let alone bury.

Ylfgar moved over to us, the woodsman looking as tired as the rest of us felt and looking about with a bloodshot eye. I had made the offer to have a look at the wounds he had suffered the days previous but he had shrugged me off, choosing instead to smear a thick layer of honey under the bandages that slowly dribbled down and matted his beard.
“Well… We’re alive.” He said simply, moving over and looking between Viconia and I. Leaning up against the empty oil barrel I watched as the militia went looking for another one, moving with all the speed and grace of those suffering emotional and physical fatigue.

Viconia squatted down over the severed head of one of the brutes, idly poking at its flesh and eyes with a finger and the tip of her knife. In the daylight they didn’t seem as fearsome as they had several hours before, but there was no denying the overwhelming power they contained. Even severed, tongue lolling loosely in a broken jaw and brains leaking from its crushed skull there seemed hints of the rage that consumed it while it still breathed.

“Most of us are at least.” I answered, grimacing as Viconia began probing the deep cut where the billhook had shattered the beast’s cranium until her finger was lost to the knuckle in its brains. “How many do we have left?”

Ylfgar breathed heavily, looking over to the shrouded bodies and fumbling with the flask on his belt. “Sixteen. Sabian died of his wounds a little while ago.”

The young Imperial farmhand had been found trembling and bleeding out on the second floor. The werewolf that I killed had ripped an arm and a majority of a shoulder away in its frenzy, killing several others in an orgy of killing and it was only through pure luck he had survived as long as he had. While it was distracted eating the others he had managed to crawl inside one of the several rooms on the second floor, hiding and whimpering until he was found shortly after I dispatched his would-be killer. The injury he had sustained was horrendous, and what little restoration magicka I knew hadn’t been enough to do anything more than make him comfortable while shock took him to Aetherius.

“Seven dead.” My reply was sombre but I was able to smile grimly at least. “It could have been far worse, and we managed to kill three of the vith’rellen.”

“And wound at least two.” Viconia added, dragging her finger from the remains of the beast’s skull while holding up one of the severed arms. Despite the grin her expression was sinister as she waved it at us, wriggling the paw in one hand while holding it up with the other.

“How many do you think are left?” The concern in Ylfgar’s voice was obvious. There was no telling whether they could fortify the hall enough to hold off another attack in the coming night.

“Best case scenario; two. And both will be wounded at least.”

“And worst case?”

I shrugged. “Maybe half a dozen.”

“That’s not including the mage or whatever was creating those illusions.” Viconia stood from her grisly studies after wiping a gloved finger on a patch of fur. “We might have hurt them last night but I doubt they’ll hold anything back a second time.”

“You’ll be happy to know at least that you were right.” Throwing his head back, Ylfgar took a swig from his flask before smacking his lips. “I sent Surergus to follow the blood. He told me it leads right up to the castle and through the gatehouse.”

“The portcullis is still closed though isn’t it?”

There was a nod. For a moment the woodsman chewed on his lip before offering me the flask. “We could make ladders but none of us here are going to be any help in taking the castle. After last night I don’t think that anyone here has anything left in them.”
Pressing the head of the flask to my lips I took a draught and immediately felt as though I had been punched in the mouth. The blood and dust that had lined my throat was washed away as effectively as swallowing a mouthful of molten lead and Ylfgar watched amusingly as I hacked and spluttered.

“By the blood of Talos, what is that stuff?”

He grasped the flask from my outstretched arm as I felt my eyes water. “S’jirra’s homebrew.” He said simply, passing the flask to Viconia who took an experimental swig and turned a shade of grey. “S’jirra grows the best and largest potatoes you’ll ever see. They also make a drink with a bit of a pleasant kick.”

“A kick is one way of putting it.” Viconia rasped. “What else do you use it for? Stripping paint and fuelling forges?”

Ylfgar snorted. “There is that. It’s also good at killing cowardice.”

His remaining eye narrowed on me as I managed to get my mild coughing fit under control. “Not that I think that cowardice is an issue with either of you. We’re all thankful you arrived when you did. If not, I don’t think any of us would be here today.”

“Unless we can do something about the castle then I think that it won’t matter come evening. They won’t let last night go unanswered.”

Digging into one of my pouches I pulled out a tiny gem, tossing it underarm to Ylfgar.

“What is this?” rolling it in the palm of his hand he looked at the blue-green gem as it swirled with its own luminescence.

“Neither of us are sure.” Viconia sat down heavily on the decapitated head of the werewolf I had killed and leaned back. “It’s almost like a soul gem but it’s not. The enchantments within that crystal matches the power held within varla stones but it’s of no magic that I have encountered before.”

“I pulled that from the chest of the werewolf that I killed.” Pulling out a second one from the pouch I could feel the resonating energies contained within the tiny trinket as I showed it to him. “This one is from the one that got brained.”

“So what are they?” using his thumb he flipped it back at me like a coin.

“Foci for spells.” Viconia nodded and pushed a cheek out with her tongue. “Something has gone to a great amount of effort to create those things, and implant them into these beasts. I don’t understand how, but they have something to do with controlling them.”

“Just before that thing tackled me last night it stopped as though it was listening to something. I think that if it had really wanted to kill me it would have done so, but I just happened be between it and it getting back to its master.” I idly picked at a congealed patch of blood on my forearm. Even after upending a dozen buckets of water over myself I had failed to wash away all of the werewolf’s blood, or remove the smell of wet dog from my flesh. “The illusions, the gems, the way that several people who have died in the area died by vampires leads me to believe that one of the bloodsuckers are responsible. Either they are highly adept in magicka or have a pet wizard.”

Sighing loudly, I glanced between the two of them and the way the nearby militia were rolling over a fresh barrel. “Not that it matters whichever way. Even if we could face off against werewolves alone there is no way that we can stand against a mage as powerful as the one last night while these things bash in the door.”
“What will you two do?”

Looking over to Viconia I watched her nod almost imperceptibly. “We’re going to go up to the castle and find a way in.”

“Just the two of you…”

“Yep.” Seeing the expression on his face I laughed lightly. “Don’t worry about us. We can handle ourselves. Especially if there is a vampire or two in there. I killed twenty of the damned things by myself and that was before I had Maegalla’s blade.” I tapped the emerald hilt of the Light of Dawn where it sat behind my head.

Shrugging I motioned in the general direction of the castle. “Besides… Lycanthropy is a nocturnal curse which means that if we get in there before sundown we’ll be faced by men, not monsters. Also, if there are any vampires, then with luck they will be asleep. At a minimum we can get in, cause some damage and try to stack the odds more in our favour.”

“But what if you fail?” Another fiery mouthful of raw spirits flowed down his throat but he barely showed it. “What if you don’t come back or you can’t get in?”

“We’ll climb the walls if we have to.” I took the offered flask again and this time the burning liquor didn’t sting quiet as badly. “But no matter the outcome it will be better and improve our chances more than if we simply board up the doors and wait for night.”

“I don’t think I like it, but I can’t think of any alternatives.” The flask stopped, being held by his chest as his fingers tapped against its pewter casing. “I have no doubts about your effectiveness in battle. After last night I don’t think anyone will doubt any of the stories about you two but I still can’t help but think that this is suicidal.”

Viconia’s expression was not lost to me but she shrugged as I looked at her. We had spoken about it before the dawn had come and neither of us had come up with any other ideas. Even if we took both of our horses and rode as fast as we could we doubted that whatever was responsible for all the death and carnage would let us leave the county. Winter held too much sway on the lands, and with it came the fact that there wasn’t enough hours in the day to be able to reach any of the nearest Legion forts. If we tried for one of the nearby settlements we would most likely find ourselves at the site of a massacre or simply cause one by our presences.

“We’re going to check out the Botany first.” I said simply, turning my head and looking at the towering walls rising above the thatched roofs of the village. “I’m hoping that your ma was right.”

“So am I now.” Ylfgar replied bitterly. “I’ll send a couple of us along with you to help you look. That legionary fella will probably be one of them. After last night I think you both have an admirer.”

“Great.” The snorted laugh from Viconia made me smile. “Just what we need...”
invisible eyes followed us every step of the way.

Legionary Hadrgar and Mathis; one of the surviving militia followed Viconia and I as we walked the sloped cobbles. The highway running to the north ran within metres of the towering gatehouse, the steel portcullis secured and jammed closed and appearing as though it had never opened in decades. There were congealed splatters of blood every few dozen metres from the townhall that led through the yawning entrance, fading from sight behind the closed gates.

“A stone nest.” Viconia muttered as she ran her fingers over the welded and riveted bars of the outer portcullis. “Fridj tet.”

“One well known for never being successfully sieged.” Hadrgar added, looking up at the sight of the walls. “Even in the War of the Three Banners; Glenvar was never taken.”

“Good thing that the walls aren’t defended during the day…” I replied, twisting at the waist and shielding my eyes from the sun to stare at the ramparts high above our heads. I knew that I could scale the walls, even without a rope or ladder but doing so would be expected by those dwelling within. There would be guards of some description through the main entrances and our success would hinge on stealth and surprise.

As a small huddle we moved around the south eastern tower, moving in single file around the tiny lip of land that jutted out from its base. Only wide enough for a horse it quickly dropped away, every meter along increasing the drop until the space to our left almost matched the height of the walls to our right. The tiny path was well worn despite the moss and grass that grew between the paving stones leading to the front gate and it wasn’t long until we found ourselves surrounded by neat rows of gardens and flower beds.

“Definitely not for growing supplies.” I remarked, running my fingers through the stems of various flowers that wouldn’t bloom until the spring thaw. The frost that morning had left everything gleaming with wetness and our breaths misting the air in the shadow of the castle, but I couldn’t help but think of what beauty there would be on that stretch of land come spring.

The botany was a tiny stone brick building in the same design as the dozens of others stretching out before us to the south and the entire village could be seen from where we made our way through the tiny paths between the flowerbeds. It was deserted and other than the greasy trail of smoke rising from the village square there wasn’t a soul or any sign of movement to be seen. Built into the side of the castle the botany could have been considered a weak point in the art of siege warfare if not for the tiny strip of land snaking around the walls. No siege tower could be built here, and those carrying ladders would have found it exceedingly difficult to drag them around path at the base of the curved tower. I could see easily how the Castle had remained unconquered for several hundred years, as even a handful of defenders could hold off an army for as long as they wished.

It was not a pleasant prospect for us as we moved over to the botany itself, looking over the glass windows scattered around its walls and the tiled roof that looked undamaged and untouched to the death and destruction in the village below. A tiny chimney rose above the roof but other than the way the building had been set and built onto the base of the walls there was nothing out of the ordinary of the building.

A quick nod to Viconia and she stood to the side of the door, back pressed to the botany’s wall and slowly pushing the door open. Thankfully no squeak or groan of hinges could be heard as she opened the building’s sole entrance, allowing me to move past her without hindrance and enter without the threat of ambush.

The stench of rot reached my nostrils as soon as I entered. The Botany was a tiny one-bedroom
cottage split into three rooms. I found myself in the entry, which also doubled as the kitchen, dining room and the living area, while the southern end was a bedroom barely large enough to warrant the name. Through a door to my right the northern portion took up over three quarters of the entire building, filling the space with rows of tables holding pots and ceramic basins filled with earth and fertilizer. There were no windows in this portion of the building, no skylights and other than the handful of long burnt out lanterns there was no light at all when the doors were closed. All of the basins and pots were filled and growing an impressive assortment of mushrooms and other fungi, ranging from the common Fly Amanita and Wisp Stalks to the rare Bloatspore from Vvardenfell.

My knowledge, while considerable was limited enough that I couldn’t identify most of the collection within the botany, but I didn’t need my horticultural skills to identify the source of the decay.

“Oh gods.” Mathis exclaimed as he stepped through into the building. “That’s old Vanidor.”

From the look of the corpse thrown through one of tables the old caretaker had been dead for a fortnight, possibly even longer. The humidity and the slightly higher temperature within the building had done the rest, allowing the body to bloat and putrefy even as some of the fungi took advantage of a new food source. The bulbous yellowed heads of cairn bolete were growing from his face and ruined tunic that was straining against the bloated flesh within, but despite the decay I could still see the horrible wounds in his throat.

“There’s definitely a vampire roaming about.” Viconia said as she laid eyes on the corpse and the fang marks deep in the jugular vein. Horribly the corpse’s eyes were still open and staring, the look of fear still obvious on the blackened, bloated features slowly being consumed by mushrooms.

“All the more reason to find the bastard and scatter its ashes to the winds.” I replied bitterly, moving about through the building between the rows of tables.

“So what are we looking for exactly?” Hadrgar asked from the doorway, shifting his bulk sideways in order to fit through the door in his Legion plate.

“Anything that looks suspicious.” I replied, moving about in the room and studying the wall closest to the castle. “Like this for example.”

“I don’t get it.” Mathis moved over and looked at the ancient stone blocks making up the north wall.

“The castle was built a thousand or more years ago, and this botany was built in the last hundred.” Running my hands over the far wall I felt the course stones on my fingertips and through the leather of my fingerless gloves. “So I find it interesting they built the botany so close to the castle that they built this directly onto the wall itself.”

The three of them looked at the wall, and all of them realised that what I said was true. Rather than building the botany like a regular building they extended the eastern and western walls off the castle itself. Typically, such a construction would weaken the walls or at the least allow an attacker to get close and have a shield of sorts from the defenders which made it interesting why a castle known for being impregnable would have such a thing. Only Ylfgar’s bedtime stories as a child alluded to a secret entrance and otherwise any attacking force would not have considered the castle having a sally point in such an obvious location.

“If there’s a sally point, then it will be extremely well hidden.” My hands continued their caressing of the ancient stones, feeling the gaps and mortar and their surfaces for anything that felt different. Mathis and Hadrgar soon joined me, while Viconia stood back with an amused expression on her face.
Watching the three of us groping blindly and randomly along the wall I could almost hear the way she rolled her eyes and moved over to us. “You three idiots wouldn’t be able to find your ick’neosen even if you sat on both hands.”

“You have a better idea then?” I replied, looking back over to my shoulder as she strode gracefully over to us.

“Matter of fact I do.” Her eyes flashed with witchlight as she moved over to the wall and held out a hand that shimmered slightly in the gloom. “Each of those stones would weigh nearly half a tonne, which means that if there is an entrance here it would have some form of enchantments. Either illusionary, or mechanical in nature.”

The three of us stepped away from her as she moved along the wall, whispering archaic phrases and words as she studied the wall with eyes burning brightly with magicka. Hadrgar and I moved several of the tables away to clear the space along the wall as she moved, studying each of the metre-tall stones at a time and teasing out the tiniest hints of enchantments.

“Well, the good news is that there is an entrance here.”

Mathis, Hadrgar and myself all started at her proclamation as she stopped two thirds of the way along the wall.

“What’s the bad news?” the young legionary asked, receiving part of a grin as a response.

“The bad news is that it is more of an exit.”

She saw our looks of confusion as she lowered her arm and allowed the magicka she was utilising to scry the wall to fade into nothingness. “Surfacers can be so stupid.” Rolling her eyes, she gestured to the wall and used a tone of voice that one would use when explaining something to an individual with brain damage. “It is designed to only be opened from the inside.”

“That doesn’t help us.” I added.

“\textit{Gi dos d’lotha eluith’orth...}” her grin was savage in the semi darkness of the botany’s interior. “There’s always a way.”

I felt the prickle of my hairs raise as her eyes began burning even more intensely, turning to face the wall once more with a hand wreathed in lightning. The stabbing pain in the back of the mind made itself felt and I could help but wince for multiple reasons as she drew back her glowing fist, and punched it to the elbow in the wall.

A \textit{click} echoed from the wall as she fumbled around in the magically weakened stone, wriggling and moving about before withdrawing her arm and rubbing at knuckles that were now obviously broken and bleeding. Her magicka had allowed her to punch over a metre into solid granite with little injury, but as we watched portions of the wall slid back into itself before rolling backward into an opening.

“You didn’t need to be so dramatic.” I said to her simply, moving over and cradling her hand in mine. At least two of the knuckles were broken despite her magic and I carefully moved them together while massaging restoration magicka between my palms.

“But it worked.” The look of triumph was impossible to ignore on her face, especially how we stood together with less than half an arms span between us.

“So what now?” Hadrgar asked, looking between us and the darkened tunnel while fumbling to light a lantern that had lost most of its oil days ago.
“Now?” Running my fingers over Viconia’s hand I affectionately I checked to ensure that there wouldn’t be any lasting damage. “Now you and Mathis go back to the village, and Viconia and I see what we can do.”

The look that creased the Legionary’s face spoke more than words ever could. Even as he opened his mouth to speak I cut him off with a raised hand. “I appreciate the thought, but this is something that Viconia and I are experienced and equipped for. You proved yourself last night, but this is not something you can help with.”

“I want to fight.” He said simply, gripping his sheathed gladius firmly and looking angry and insulted.

“You will have more than your fill of fighting in the coming months. This is something Viconia and I can handle on our own.”

“What? Delving headfirst into a den of evil without the slightest inclination of what awaits us?” Viconia shook her hands, clenching and unclenching the fist that had punched solid stone. “That’s not something that anyone should have experience doing more than once…”

The expression I shot her direction left her looking smug and teasing, but she nodded to Hadrgar. “Kaius is right though; we’ve done this sort of thing several times now and you’ll only get in the way.”

“You can help keep the village safe if we don’t return.” The expression that crossed both Mathis and his features made me realise that such a scenario hadn’t crossed their minds. Mathis looked pleased to be going back to the village rather than infiltrating the castle, but Hadrgar only wanted to follow in our footsteps. “We’re not going in there to clear it, but to find out what is going on and what exactly we are facing. This is something that stealth is going to win out against force of arms.”

“I can’t do stealthy.” His tone was sombre and slightly humorous and the rest of us laughed.

“That’s why you’re a Legionary, and I was a forester.” Gesturing to his armour I saw him nod in acceptance and square his shoulders for returning to the village. He didn’t like the idea but he was going to follow through with it at least.

He stepped forward and tapped his fist against his chest, holding out the flickering lantern for me. “Dovah Invicta Sir.”

I returned the salute, seeing the way that Viconia’s eyes rolled in her head as she turned to the opened sally point. With lantern in hand I saw them watching us as we entered the tunnel, but they both turned away when Viconia triggered the enchanted mechanism of the door.

In the semidarkness of the tunnel we found ourselves standing on a stone floor so heavily covered with dust that it almost reached our ankles. There were no tracks other than the tiny shuffles of rodents in the powder, and as the door ground closed I could feel Viconia’s eyes on me.

“You’re not just coming in her to ‘look around’ are you?” She whispered.

“Not as my first option.” The dust clung to the base of our cloaks and I could feel my boots sink until they touched solid stone.

Her eyes began glowing a steady red in the darkness as they drank in the heat from the lantern. “So that’s why you didn’t want anyone else coming with us then.”

“What do you mean?”
“Oh come on *mrannd'ssinss*; I know you better than that. You wouldn’t be coming in here alone, with or *without me* unless you fully intended on using your ‘*other*’ abilities.”

I grinned slightly, seeing her look of satisfaction at being proven right. “I took on a werewolf last night on my own and only managed to kill it with my vampiric side. I want to keep my options open if this proves to be more than what we can handle. Having others around means I can’t fight to the full of my abilities without giving away my secret.”

There was a sigh in the darkness. “Yet again you have to go out of your way to be all *heroic*…” Her eyes narrowed, gesturing to the rectangular contraption dangling near my waist. “But in that case, what’s with the lantern?”

“For the sake of appearances.” My grin was somewhat terrifying in the half light as I raised it to my face, showing her the way that my skin was pulling taut and my fangs had begun lengthening. “I didn’t think it was a good idea to let them know that we both don’t need light to see…”

With a puff I blew the tiny flame out and wrapped an arm around her waist. With a tiny yelp of surprise, she felt me pull her close, the lantern dropping into the dust even as I kissed her fully on the lips. For several seconds we held each other close and I felt her gloved fingers tracing down the side of my face where the bones pushed against my skin. There was something about the darker side of my nature that seemed intoxicating to her and even in such a place her desire heated her skin.

“As much as I would enjoy it,” she whispered into my ear as she finally detached my lips from hers. “We have a job to do.”

“Unfortunately we do.” I replied, the darkness falling away from my vampiric sight and allowing me to gaze upon her despite the complete darkness. “Business before pleasure.”

There was a hint of a laugh in her tone as she grinned in the darkness. “After you, *Mrannd'ssinss*…”

Following me with her hand on her hilt in the confined space of the tunnel we both fell into silence. The dust muffling all noise from our feet even if we didn’t have our unique skills to call upon, and even before we had made a dozen paces both of us were fully covered as much as we could. Our masks covered our faces, not only to reduce the shine of our skins but also to stop the billowing wisps of the ages from entering our noses and throats and forcing us to cough.

The tunnel itself was a simplistic affair, hewn from the stone with little care or craftsmanship and just over twenty metres long. From my reckoning it barely even entered the castle’s interior before coming to a stop, the sight of a dozen iron rungs hammered into the stone leading upwards to a solid block that capped the top.

“Well, let’s hope they aren’t expecting guests.” I muttered, gripping the rungs and slowly making my way up. Each one I held firmly, pulling down slightly to determine how securely fastened they were and ensuring that none of them would squeal or otherwise make any other noise. Carefully I climbed up the small iron ladder, feeling the opposite wall press into my back and my shoulders bump into the sides as I climbed. There was barely enough space for someone to climb, and if we had been fully armoured like Hadrgar it would have been impossible to ascend or descend the ancient ladder.

The rungs stopped barely five metres up by a solid stone of granite that seemed to slot seamlessly into the walls of the tiny tunnel. After hundreds of years of disuse, the tiny gaps had filled with dust and debris that left everything caked in layers of the fine powder. Especially after I drew my dagger and began levering it into the seams I was left with the smell of dried earth in the sinuses.
Viconia had thankfully remained at the base of the ladder as when I started carefully prodding the
gaps, tiny trickles of dust rained down in miniature waterfalls of decay. Had she been below me on
the ladder she would have been coated in the stuff and would have most likely had to fight off
sneezing as I soon found myself doing so despite the mask.

Finding the spaces and freeing the stone slab slightly I moved higher up on the ladder until I could
push upwards with my shoulders. Taking the weight and gripping the rungs tightly I lifted, groaning
under my breath until I felt it suddenly give and lift from the grip of dust and soil.

Ten centimetres thick and shaped into an octagon a metre in width, I raised the floor tile until I could
peer out from a gap. The sally point could be accessed from the depths of the castle, within the
foundations where the armouries, treasury and servants living quarters could be found but with quick
glances I could see that it was completely deserted.

In less than a minute Viconia and I were crouched down in the tiny storeroom, carefully lifting and
placing the flagstone down and brushing away the traces that it had been disturbed. Despite the
obvious gaps around the tile we could see that all of the other stones had also been placed into the
floor bereft of mortar to help maintain the illusion that there was no secret exit from the castle.

“So far so good.” I whispered, and Viconia sighed, giving me a light slap over the face that stunned
me for a moment.

“I swear by Shar, if you afflict us with ill-luck I will beat you within an inch of your life.”

“That almost sounds like a fun night.” I retorted and I could see the glitter of amusement in her
burning eyes.

She hit me on the shoulder but not hard enough to make a noise. The castle was deathly quiet and
there were no lights within the room that we had found ourselves in, not that we were hindered in
any form.

“Looks like some kind of armoury.” Like a shadow Viconia slid through the room and quickly
looked over the series of weapon racks lining the walls. The room itself was about six metres wide
and ten long, a door imbedded into the stone walls in the centre of the shorter one. Three sets of
weapon racks ran in parallel rows, two along the walls and another double sided set that ran down
the centre with a short space between the end and the door to allow entrance.

“And it hasn’t been used for a while.” I added. The weapon racks were mostly empty, lined with
dust and the handful of weapons were decayed to uselessness. A pair of halberds had cracked shafts
and rusted heads, and I lightly ran a finger down the length of a bastard sword and felt the rust. “But
there’s no traces of anyone using the sally point though.

“It’s either been forgotten, or those who know about it haven’t needed or had the chance to use it.”

She pressed into the doorframe the same way as she had outside the botany. The door swung open
slowly and gently, none of its hinges squealing or making any noise despite their neglected state.
Using all the skill at our disposal we flitted through the door, moving along the walls and watching
and listening to anything that may await us within the castle.

We were within the castle barracks, a surprisingly small but cosy section of the castle itself that was
built into the southern side of the central keep. The keep itself was a massive edifice, five stories tall
and only matched in height by the towers that jutted from the corners of the walls. Built against the
northern wall, the keep was large yet comfortable, the halls wide despite the narrow spiralling
staircases that were made with defence in mind. The upper levels would be the living quarters, the
library and the various studies and bedrooms while the ground floor was the dining and entry hall and a kitchen large enough to supply a feast for dozens. There were more rooms in the keep, than an entire legion fort and even some of the guest rooms had their own dining rooms and personal kitchens available. The County may have been the fraction of the size of some of the others like Skingrad and Bruma but its strategic location had left it and the castle powerful and imposing.

Under the courtyard and the ground levels of the castle were where the servants, guards and Men-at-Arms lived and served the Counts. Dozens of individual rooms and a handful of barracks dormitories were carved from the hilltop, intermingled with a separate kitchen and dining arrangement for those who served the behest of a member of the Elder Council to live out of sight and out of mind. The larders, storage rooms and wine cellars were built into the foundations and it was from one of the weapons storerooms that Viconia and I had emerged from.

We moved as quietly as possible, but to my straining ears, even the softest of sounds seemed as loud as clashing steel in the total silence. The only sounds that marked our passage was the soft sighs of our feet sliding across the floor, our soft breathing through our leather masks and the rustling of our cloaks as they swirled around us. The air was close and heavy with age, and surprisingly enough I noted the complete lack of any traces of vermin through in any of the rooms or passages we moved through.

The Castle had the feel of the ages pressing down on it, and I could almost reach out and touch the history that had been written here. A thousand years of history had pressed itself into the walls and the barracks had been home to countless generations of soldiers. I felt that if I concentrated enough I could almost see their shades patrolling the halls around us just as they had done so in life. Phantom echoes of orders being barked left whispered remnants wafting down the corridors and the muted clashing of shields, swords and spears reverberated from the training yards above our heads. Even as we passed the mess hall I could sense the laughter and song that would have flowed with the ale and beers, almost as though it could seep from the stones themselves.

It was unease what entered my body with every carefully placed step, moving past and through abandoned rooms that hadn’t seen a living presence for several days, if not weeks. Beds were left unmade, plates and dishes left where they had been stacked and in every room the tiny piles of personal effects were scattered about, alone and abandoned by their owners. Like a large portion of the village the barracks was almost abandoned, lacking all trace of those who should have called it their home but what was more concerning was little signs in the way of violence or disorder.

The vampire was rising to the surface, and my entire body was alive and humming with built up energies as it seemed to react to something my conscious mind was not aware of. It became increasingly difficult to contain the building emotions and the tingles and twisting of muscles and I knew that Viconia was watching with something akin to her own unease as my lips and jaw began tightening my mask to my face. It was only when we walked through into the primary guard post that led into the castle itself that I found myself faced with something that made my conscious mind uneasy. The tiny hall where guards would rest between shifts and stand guard over the tiny prison wing contained a couple of lit lanterns. Most of the collection were long since dead, but there was one next to each door, burning through their tiny amounts of oil, and heavily shuttered to reduce their light. It was enough to leave the room in a faint orange-brown glow that flickered and danced shadows across the walls, but barely enough for normal beings to be able to see.

“Someone still lives here.”

I nodded, moving to the side of the door and carefully looking around the room. It was mostly undisturbed, but other than the lit lanterns there were signs of individuals travelling through quite regularly. Rectangular, the room separated the main portions of the basement levels and acted as the
hub for the militaristic portions of the castle. The southern door where we entered lead to part of the barracks, as I could see through the opened door to the eastern wing that it too contained dormitories and armouries. The western door led to the prison, and a small flight of stairs rose up to the ground level in the northern wall.

Moving along the eastern wall like a pair of ghosts we both froze at the slight sound that plucked at the edges of our hearing. The sound condensed into footsteps of someone wearing soft soled shoes and as Viconia and I desperately looked about for anything resembling cover a tiny figure appeared from the prison wing. Barely more than a shadow, the figure was carrying a cauldron under one arm and a flickering candle in the other.

Viconia pressed herself into the corner between the doors leading to the barracks and I slid into the shadows using my vampiric nature. There was a muted gasp of astonishment from Viconia and I realised that while she had seen me appear from the shadows she had never seen me use the ability to fade. Even to her sight I had become undetectable even despite the fact that I was standing almost in the centre of the room.

Dressed in a flowing dress and appearing no different to the hundreds, if not thousands of servants throughout the empire, the woman was approaching her middling years and looked sturdy enough to wrestle a soldier. Solid and overbearing, even by the way she walked I could tell that she was one of the senior servants; used to ordering the others and ensuring that the demands of her liege were met to the letter. A grubby apron was clasped around her thickening waist, shoulders as wide as a farmhand’s and a permanent sneer of displeasure was plastered on her features.

Moving undetected through the shadows I moved over to her, materialising over her shoulder and pulling her close. Hardened from years of serving the nobility, she was strong but her strength was nothing to the vampire. I was able to hold her firm and have a hand clasped over her mouth before she knew she was no longer alone.

Despite the way I had ambushed her, there was very little surprise from the woman. She tensed from the intrusion of my hands, the way I wrapped my arms around her to pin hers by her sides and stop her from shouting out.

So close, and with the vampire rising to the surface I could feel her humanity and I knew that she was no vampire at least. She was mortal, of flesh and blood and uncorrupted and presented the perfect opportunity to learn more about what was happening.

“I’m going to let go now.” I whispered into her ear. There was no tension or terror in her like there normally was when I revealed myself to others and despite the vampire’s instinctual urgings I didn’t consume her will with my own. “Don’t shout out or make a noise.”

Releasing my grip over her mouth I could hear her licking her lips and trying to get rid of the sensation of the minotaur leather of my gloves on my skin. I didn’t release the rest of my hold though, instead shifting my grasp to ensure that she wasn’t able to drop the cauldron or move her arms.

There was a sigh of what could only be described as annoyance. “I’m getting really sick of your games Rolartolas. Just because you have some new tricks to play doesn’t mean that you can keep playing them on me.”

She sensed the pause and the way I stiffened as I tried to come up with an answer, turning her head slightly in the vain attempt to catch a glimpse of me from the corner of her eye. “Well, don’t just stand there boy... Either do what you have to or let me go.”
Feeling confused I slowly released my grip on the woman’s shoulders and arms, taking a step away as she shook herself and turned. The expression on her face was long suffering annoyance of someone used to being the attention of numerous practical jokes.

“I swear, you and the rest of your useless friends…” Stopping in mid-sentence as she fully turned, I saw the expression of annoyance change into one of confusion as she looked at my darkened form. “You’re not Rolartolas…”

Dressed in my daedroth scale, ebony-alloy armour and almost fully concealed by the deep grey-black minotaur leather cloak and hood I would have cut an imposing sight. It was though, a very unique one. Both Viconia and I cut very specific appearances and even if someone didn’t know our identities they would immediately know that we were not regular people.

“No, I’m not…” I said simply, raising my hands and seeing the look of confusion growing ever more pronounced on her rotund face. “We’re here to help.”

“We?” The confusion lasted for a fraction of a second longer as she caught the shadowed glimpse of Viconia sliding out of hiding with a grace and ability that only her kind could match. “Here to help…”

Darting between the two of us, her eyes wandered over our strange clothing and armours and I found myself staring at the heraldry that had been stencilled into her clothing. A cloth patch had been sewn over a portion of her right breast and I could see the faintest hints of the Glenvar shield iconography under the thin woven strands. What had replaced it was a much simpler design; a simple blue circle with a ruby-red droplet placed in the centre. Almost at the same time both the servant and I realised the situation, and she stepped back in horror and alarm.

“Guards!” she shouted on the top of her lungs, throwing the empty cauldron aside with an enormous metallic ringing sound that echoed through the empty halls. “Guards!”

With the vampire so close to the surface that my jaws were deformed I moved entirely on instinct, ripping my dagger from its sheath on my breastplate and slashing it across her throat. A smile opened up under her jaw that cut off her cries in mid breath, spraying an arc of crimson across the floor and splattering Viconia’s boots.

“What the vith is wrong with you!” Viconia spat as the servant dropped to her knees, grasping at her gashed throat with both hands that left the candle to bounce and extinguish itself on the floor. She was minutes, if not seconds from death as her blood bubbled from between her lips and fingers as she tried desperately to staunch the flow.

“She’s a thrall!” My words were little more than growls around my lengthening incisors as I motioned for Viconia to move back toward the door we had entered through. There were no sounds of approaching feet or any further shouts of alarm, but with the vampire consuming my flesh and mind and the way it had been uneasy about the whole situation I wasn’t taking any more chances.

Not turning our backs on the room or the near dead servant we edged towards the door, glancing back to ensure we didn’t trip even as Sunchild found its way into my hands. I almost expected to hear howls of the cursed and a wall of werewolf flesh come charging down the two-metre-wide staircase, but instead there was nothing. No further cries of alarm or tolling of bells or anything, just the sickening gurgles of a dying woman as she choked and bled to death on the floor.

Again something dark and terrible in my mind stopped me, prodding at my conscious mind and leaving me as still as a statue and gazing carefully into the shadows. There was no sign of movement, no pulsating life-force other than the weakening one writhing a few metres in front of us, but some
deep corrupted instinct I knew that something was wrong.

Sunchild returned to its sheath and Viconia watched as I turned, moved past her and ripped the lantern from where it hung. She was shocked and confused, standing less than a metre from the entrance into the southern barracks even as I opened the lantern’s shutters and flung it overarm in the general direction of the stairwell.

Glass shattered and metal deformed as the lantern hit the stone floor, the tiny burning wick inside spreading its hint of flame to the remnants of the oil as it sprayed over several metres. Where there had been flickering shadows and gloom was for the moment a flaring radiance that filled the room with golden light, and illuminated a trio of figures who until a second before hadn’t seemed to exist at all.

“Well, that was clever.” One of them hissed as he and his fellows were pulled from the shadows. Armour clinked together as they stepped forward over the burning oil, staring at Viconia and I with eyes that seemed to glow in the darkness.

Unlike the servant who had finished squirming as life left her, these were no mortal beings. I could taste their corruption, and looking into their cursed eyes I felt almost as though I was staring into a mirror.

“Kaius.” Viconia whispered, and out of the corner of my eye I saw her gesture to another pair that seemed to glide their way out of the prison wing.

A handful more stepped from the shadows, showing the exact same ability that I had only minutes before. Appearing as though birthed from the darkness, Viconia stepped back slightly at the sight of almost a dozen vampires surrounding us. Pale skin was wrapped tightly under layers of leather, fur and metal; pallid and unhealthy like a corpse yet to feel the bloat of rot. Their eyes glowed in the darkness, reflecting the light of the remaining lanterns almost like those of a Khajiit at night during a full moon.

They were all laughing, a horrible, flesh tingling laughter that crawled over the flesh like insects as the armoured figures surrounded us in a loose semicircle. Facing those creatures of a similar curse as mine I felt my hold on my own animalistic side tighten, pushing it aside and allowing my face to crunch back into shape once more. They were doing little more than sizing up what they believed to be their next meals but I struggled to hold back the smile as I pulled my mask down to reveal the face of a man.

“My, my...” Chuckled one of the grinning vampires as it stepped forward sniffing the air. “How lovely to see a morning snack deciding to come to us for a change.”

Despite my outward appearances I was highly unnerved. Far too easily did these creatures remind me of Volmyr. They were not mindless animals like the rest of his wretched coven, instead they still contained a large amount of their humanity that hadn’t been consumed by the thirst. Some had already drawn weapons, tapping swords against armoured thighs or patting maces or war hammers with a paternal familiarity.

I cursed under my breath and moved between Viconia and the semicircle of blood drinkers. While I had no illusions of her ability in combat and I knew that the creatures could smell her blood, whereas mine was unpalatable. They had us backed into a corner figuratively and literally and even if Viconia and I had tried to flee we wouldn’t have gotten more than a dozen paces before they fell upon us.

Hissing with a warning, I felt all their eyes darting between me and Viconia, seeing the shifting changes in my facial structure and the hint of fangs under my lips. The warning went unheeded, and
one of the armoured vampires moved forward from the group with a disapproving expression on his face.

“Really brother, there is no need for that.” The grin that creased the Imperial Vampire’s face was not one of camaraderie despite his words. “And there definitely wasn’t any need to kill one of the cattle… We’re short enough as it is.”

“I can remedy that…” There was threat laden in every syllable and I returned his smile with one of my own. “Brother…”

Another of the creatures laughed. Dressed in chainmail and plate and transformed there was little to determine the vampires sex other than the feminine tones of her voice. “Oh I bet you can. A thrall for a thrall is the preferred payment after all.”

Their expressions darkened further as I laughed in their faces, waving Viconia off as I sensed her rising anger. “Is this it? A pack of you facing us and all you can think of is satisfying your thirsts? Not how we got in here or what we are doing in the depths of the castle?” I grinned like a mountain lion that hid my eyes in shadow. “I’m going to take great pleasure scattering your ashes…”

The snarls of anger were not lost on me and Viconia gave me an exasperated look despite the scent of fear that was slowly emanating from her flesh. While not one for losing herself to terror and capable of bearing witness to horrors that would have left most people in comatose states, the dread and terror that a vampire excluded was unnatural and affected her nonetheless. In the back of my mind I was concerned with the way that she was feeling fearful of me as I slowly released my grip on the darkness of my soul, allowing the vampire to clothe itself in my flesh and fill me with its power.

“Such questions will be asked and answers found later when we take you to the mistress.” The lead vampire growled, fangs fully extended and fingernails sliding out and tapering to a point even while he gestured to Viconia with his sword. “But we will have a taste of your meat first.”

Even since they had revealed themselves I had been studying them, looking over their clothing and mannerisms and prioritising them from most dangerous to the least. I knew Viconia had been doing the same, seeing the way they held themselves like trained fighters despite how they were all only a few short strands from raving animals. All were dressed in the similar way to the now-dead servant whose corpse was cooling in a pool of blood, and I knew that most were from the original castle guards. Their heraldry defiled, smeared and otherwise covered in some form; they all instead wore patches or surcoats with the curiously simple blue circle and blood drop that the servant had worn. Some deep instinct provided me with the knowledge that despite their corrupted natures, they were not vampire ancients or had been suffering the curse for long. The flesh still had the aroma of their mortal forms and the stink of mortality had not diffused from the corruption and soul-rot seeping into them. A month previous, or in some cases less than a fortnight before they had been normal men and mer serving the county as guards and Men-at-Arms. Now, they were nothing more than monsters.

My terrible grin was growing larger much to their annoyance, the tenseness of their muscles almost leaving them humming in their pale, waxy flesh even as I reached behind my head and drew the Light of Dawn.

Like starved wolves they all looked at the swirling blade that I held confidently in both hands. Almost as long as a claymore, it appeared almost ridiculous that I had chosen to draw such a weapon against a pack of the fiends. They had no understanding of the significance of the enchanted sword, instead they continued to laugh and mock us.
“There’s fourteen of us, and two of you.” my eyes flickered over to one of the vampires blocking our escape through the southern door as it spoke. “You’ve got no hope… Brother…”

I turned and looked at Viconia momentarily. “You might want to close your eyes for a second.”

“Yeah!” said the armour plated leader. “Close your eyes meat… You don’t want-”

I crossed the distance between us in a heartbeat, moving far faster than the newbloods around me could even react. Before any of them had realised I had moved, the Light of Dawn had erupted from between the lead vampire’s shoulder blades, spearing it through the chest and cutting its foul heart in two.

With less than a handbreadth between us I snarled through a mouthful of fangs, more and more of my teeth tapering to a point as the creature in front of me struggled to realise what had occurred. The entire length of the Light of Dawn was coated in its blood after ripping through his body and plate armour like it was nothing more than fog.

The creatures were stunned not only at my speed that made them appear little more than infants but the way how the changes that were consuming my flesh were different to their own. While I shared their curse, my nature was not the same as theirs but before they could move the enchanted blade began to react.

Drinking deeply from the vampire’s blood it seemed to drain a portion of its essence into itself, absorbing the blood into the shining metal to fuel the powerful enchantments. Within a second the powerful magicka bound into the star-metal had ignited and light blasted out almost as a physical force.

The vampire impaled on the blade was seconds away from death from having its heart cut in half, but the scouring light from the sword was what truly killed it. Powerful and ancient, the enchantment burned the creature from within, the sun-like rays striping flesh from bones and turned it to a steaming pile of ash and scorched armour and smouldering clothing.

Roars and hisses in agony the other vampires felt the full force of the Light of Dawn. It burned brightly in my grasp, forcing me to look away from the blade’s edge as it blasted away the darkness with the full force of the sun and crisping the flesh of the other thirteen creatures within the room. The scent of burnt hair and roasting flesh filled the air as they shrieked and scrabbled away from the powerful beams of light. Even above their wails of suffering I could hear their skin and muscles sizzling like cooking fat on a fire.

The true potency of the blade against vampires I soon discovered was not the impossible cutting edge but rather the specific effects of the sword’s enchantment on vampires. Able to cut through anything I had tested it on, it was sharp enough that if I dropped it point first from chest height it would sink to the hilt in solid stone. It could hack a fully armoured orc from forehead and groin in a single blow, slash through marble statues and so far I had not found anything other than Sunchild that could withstand its edge. As such I had been limited in practicing with it. I couldn’t spar against Viconia as even the slightest mistake could result in the loss of a limb or worse, but in the depths of Glenvar castle I found myself thankful for the hours I had trained alone with it.

Overwhelmingly burning, the enchantments fuelled by vampiric blood did effective, if horrible work against the bloodsuckers. Even against a pack of the creatures the light blasting from the sword’s edge was wounding and disfiguring which was how the Light of Dawn was the ultimate vampire slaying weapon. It could cut through anything yes, but the light would burn flesh and blind. Even a half second’s exposure left the creatures reeling and flailing from the light, their skin burnt and blistered. Those dressed in full plate armour and helmets that only allowed the tiniest slits or holes for
seeing and breathing were affected just the same as their brethren with exposed flesh. Eyes were
plucked from skulls, eyelids fusing together and the pair of fully plated vampires were left screaming
and pawing at their sallet helms as the light took their vision.

I danced through their ranks, hacking and cutting through the pain maddened vampires with
impunity. Even someone without my strength could have destroyed them, the light removed their
ability to defend themselves or in some cases even see or hear me coming. More than one was left
shrieking on their knees, cradling their faces even as the magical energies burned and fused their
palms as though welded.

Some fought with all the savagery of animals caught in a trap, ignoring the pain and damage to their
bodies even as I cut through their defences and armour with ease. Weapons were cut into pieces,
armour cloven apart and several burning skeletons were left scattered behind me.

A couple of the vampires hurled themselves at Viconia, their speed only barely matched by her own
Drow reflexes as she parried and stabbed with Dragonbane. Forewarned and having closed her eyes
as I had stabbed the first creature, she hadn’t been left as disoriented as what she could have been.
While somewhat faster than what she was, the blasting waves of light were disorientating and
battering their defences mercilessly, leaving them open for attacks as she swatted aside their flailing
attacks.

I cut through a steel sword like it was made of nothing more than silk, ramming the pommel of the
Light of Dawn into the cringing Vampire's throat as it struggled to comprehend what was happening.
Another dropped into a pair of twitching and burning halves as I bisected it at the waist and I had to
kick away the burning remnants of one that ran screaming onto my blade. It took a second or two for
the enchantments to absorb their corrupted blood but this left the room looking as though it was
playing host to a thunderstorm. The flickering and flashing blasts of light seemed to make the
vampires even more disorientated, leaving them cringing and screaming and alternating between
trying to fight or shield themselves through the fact that flesh was burning and hair smouldering.

Between the two of us we slaughtered them. My vampiric abilities and immunity to sunlight
allowing me to hack and slash my way through the others of my accursed kind, and Viconia with her
natural skill and years of training as a priestess of Lloth allowing her to combat their lightning quick
movements with those of her own. Despite my initial fears for her safety, two of the three creatures
facing her were soon following their fellows into Oblivion. She took one of their snarling heads
clean off its shoulders as she grasped its fellow clawing at her armoured forearm by the throat. There
was no sign of pity or emotion on her expression as she crushed its windpipe, repeatedly jamming
Dragonbane into its armpit until it burned and tumbled away into ashes.

Three of the vampires were left, all burnt and singed and I could see one of the ones facing me had
ripped its eyelids open in its agony after they had fused closed. They were both terrified; an emotion
that the vampire within my soul found disgusting as I advanced towards them, shaking away the ash
that coated my arm to the elbow while holding the blade out to my side. While seemingly open for an
attack I was doing little more than taunting them to attack me. One hesitantly did but the other
decided to try to make a break for it.

Turning tail to flee up the stairs, it didn’t make it far. With a twist of my wrist and a flick of an arm,
the Light of Dawn ripped through the air and pinned it squirming to the wall. It shrieked in agony for
a second, grasping and trying to draw the blade from its chest even as its blood fed the enchantments.
Pure light erupted from the blade, stripping the flesh off its bones and leaving its scorched armour
and clothing to clatter to the floor.

The second looked at me in fear, the skin of its face red raw and weeping from the burning effects of
the Dawn's light. It snarled at me through split and bleeding lips, seeing the way I had disarmed myself and lunging towards me with a sword of its own. No longer holding the blade that had left its flesh burnt as though it had been rolled through hot coals, the vampire attacked with a desperate slash at my throat, cutting through the air before the blade was parried away with a clang.

Sunchild appeared in my hand, being ripped from its sheath and slapping away the careless attack even as I gripped the hissing creature by the throat. There was horror in its burnt and scarred eyes as I twisted Sunchild in the palm of my hand, leaving the blade in a downwards grip before spearing it down its gullet.

Behind me Viconia was left facing the last of the coffin-dwellers as I slaughtered the rest of its kin. Shielded partially by the way I had fought with my back to them it was only partially scalded by the humming blade’s light, leaving half of its face and head a smouldering ruin of blisters and wounds that wept blood and other fluids. Viconia was struggling against the creature that was now pain maddened and thirsting for mortal blood to soothe its horrid injuries.

Hearing her cries of outrage and anger I twisted the red-hot blade of Sunchild from the immolating form of the vampire’s charred skeleton, sending the flame weakened bones and ash across the floor as I twisted around. The burning pain of the repeated waves of light over its scarred flesh had allowed it to utilise its unholy abilities to the fullest, and even my hardened and experienced drow companion had struggled to fend it off. She was pressed back first into the wall, holding Dragonbane tightly even as she pressed a knee into the armoured sternum of the beast on top of her. It was all that she could do with their swords crossed between them, her knee locked into it and hand holding it by the throat to keep its gnashing fangs from her face and flesh. She was screaming and roaring her own pain into the creature’s twisted visage, but where it was thirsting for her blood and pain-maddened; she was infuriated that it had managed to subdue her in such a way.

Seeing her trapped under the weight of the vampire pinning her to the wall and struggling to sink its fangs into her flesh, something within my own mind snapped. Within a second my face had twisted and writhed and I roared on the top of my lungs that left dust shaking from the lanterns and support beams above our heads. Crossing the distance between us, I saw it stiffen at the threat I posed, some bestial instinct triggering a flight response from my daedric bellow. Both Viconia and the remaining vampire froze at the sound, both twisting and staring in horror as I appeared behind its shoulder fully changed into the monster that dwelled within my flesh.

Blackened claws of ivory erupted from my fingertips. Where the other vampires simply had their fingernails lengthen and taper to a point in a similar shape to the claws of Khajiit, mine instead were my fingertips sharpening and pushing through the flesh and muscle and merging with the nails. After ruining several pairs of gloves and growing tired of repairing and patching the minotaur leather I had instead hacked away the ends which allowed the changes to pulsate and corrupt my flesh without destroying my clothing. Every muscle in my body suddenly swelled, my teeth and all the bones in my skull suddenly breaking, separating and growing until it angled forward and left me appearing like a mutant spawn of a man, Dremora, Khajiit and crocodile.

The vampire stood in shock, looking into my soulless eyes as I hissed through a lengthened and expanded maw filled with dozens of needle-like teeth. Each was over six centimetres in length, locking together like a beartrap despite the way they no longer allowed my mouth to close or lips to touch.

There was a moment of horror from both the last vampire and Viconia as she stood in amazed terror at my appearance. There was no denying the daedric corruption that pulsed through my veins, especially how my arm snaked out and ripped the vampire away from Viconia before either of them could react. My right hand grasped it tightly by the shoulder, my claws crumpling the metal of its
pauldron and punching through the armour like they were crossbow bolts.

Shrieking as its shoulder bones were turned to dust in my grip, the vampire twisted in a vain attempt to escape my iron grip. I could feel the hot jets of blood around the unyielding talons imbedded into the meat of its shoulder, spurting out of the holes in the crumpled metal plates and staining the tabard it wore with its life-force. It struggled, writhing and screaming as I dragged it up off the floor until its feet kicked and twitched in the air. With a single arm I held it up, drinking its fear and terror and the stink of our mutual corruption filling the air. I knew that it and Viconia could smell my own daedric taint, the lingering aftertaste of sulphur emanating from my flesh but before either of them could react I twisted in place, swinging it around and throwing it through the table in the centre of the room.

The wooden furniture exploded, splinters flying through the air and pattering like hail off the stone floor and off a couple of the walls. The overwhelming strength of the monster flowing through my body was expanding my flesh, the chain-link armour binding the daedroth scales together into a shirt straining to contain the power. Each of my footfalls was as though from a minotaur, the weighted impacting ringing up my legs as the darkness of oblivion infused me into something terrible and from the very worst of nightmares.

Wooden shards and even a fork were left imbedded into the vampire’s flesh, and mewing and begging it tried to drag itself away. One leg was broken and useless, flopping about where its thigh and shin had snapped in several places, and the enormous holes in its shoulders had left its entire arm dangling and leaden. Using nothing more than its good arm it tried desperately to get away, moaning in terror as I stomped over to it, pushing it face first into the ruins of the table with my boot before stomping down as hard as I could.

I felt the impact rock through my leg as I crushed its skull, blood, brains and teeth spraying out of the ruin of its head even as I lifted my foot again, and again, and again. Everything above its sternum was crushed, ruined with such force that the stone tiles underneath were cracked and broken. The force of my stomps rattled the lanterns hanging from the walls and shook the remains of the other vampires and I did not stop my destruction of the creature until it had burned into ash. Dressed in full plate armour, the cuirass and the back plate were deformed and crushed; looking as though someone had gone to great efforts with a Warhammer to flatten them. By the time I had finished the torso armour and the underlying chain-link were almost unrecognisable, beaten into a mass of scrap metal and burnt leather.

Even in the depths of the caverns of Lake Arrius I had not felt such overwhelming power and corruption of what I was. Where the desire for revenge and survival against the Mythic Dawn had unleashed the creature within me, the sight of Viconia threatened had unlocked it.

Now that the threat was gone, the changes began to shift and mould me back into my original form. The corrupting influence of Oblivion receded like the backwash of a tsunami and I fell to my knees, pain suddenly erupting from every bone, muscle, tendon and organ. I felt bones break and reform, the lengthened and expanded portions turning into a slurry that fed itself into my veins and arteries as my body reabsorbed the additional mass. Organs shifted in my chest and guts, moving about and in a reversal of the growing pains I had suffered as a teenager I could feel my muscles shrink and tighten.

The maw of needle teeth also changed, the slaughterfish like fangs sliding up into my jawbone before snapping in half at the reformed root. Each sharpened tip rounded off like they were made by clay rather than bone, leaving molars and normal incisors once more. It felt as though molten iron had been injected into my veins, my back arching and limbs contorting as I twisted and writhed as the beast struggled against my mind for control.
At some point during the change I had bitten my tongue as it had slid back into its original length and shape. The twisting muscle locked into my bottom jaw writhed with a life of its own, jerking and convulsing and leaving me drooling bloody saliva. The scream that ripped froth from my chest was animalistic and demonic despite the way that I clenched my jaw so tightly that several of my transforming teeth cracked. There was nothing but fire and darkness in my mind, pain and agony and the beast within my soul struggling to consume my conscious mind with its bloodthirsty instincts and desires.

I was losing the struggle. With every breath I could feel it rippling through my bones and twisting me into a shape that was more pleasing for its daedric form. For several moments I felt as though it was a darkened presence in my veins and in my mind; a terrible evil that I couldn’t determine was a result of my corruption, or had simply been allowed to grow in power since succumbing to my curse. I could taste nothing but blood, sense the beating of hearts nearby and wished nothing more to drag them down one by one and gorge myself on their flesh. There was nothing left in me but the desire to tear open throats, drain arteries, stuff bloody organs down my throat and suckle marrow from cracked bones.

Before myself or the bestial instincts wrestling for control of my flesh could realise what was happening I felt the soft caress of a gloved hand on my jaw and a pressure of someone wrapping themselves around me. Hair tickled my face, delicate strands floating into my nostrils and making me involuntarily snort as I opened my eyes to the ash and bone strewn ruins of the guardroom. Just as the sight of her in danger had roused the darkness of my soul, so did her presence suppress it.

Viconia held me tight despite her unease and terror of the changes rippling through me. Holding me tightly and pressing into my back she could feel the way my bones and muscles moved under the layers of armour, leather and cloth. Inexperienced and awkward, the embrace bore little of what I would have considered a loving hug but it was enough for the man to regain control over the monster.

Stilted and wooden and bearing more of a resemblance to grip one might use on an unruly prisoner, it would have been easy to believe that she had been attempting to restrain me. At that moment I knew that without a doubt she was doing everything she could to hold me tight, to attempt to copy the way that I had held her during several nights over the past weeks while she had shuddered and cried. Those nights, whether we were within the rough bedcovers of an inn or boarding house or under our furs and cloaks at a campsite I had held her tight as she rode the waves of emotions that had been suppressed for many, many years. Whether brought on by a memory or nightmare, there had been nights were we had done little more than hold each other tight for hours, gaining little sleep but instead gaining comfort in each other’s presence.

At that moment she was returning the favour, holding me tight with the inexperience of someone who until a month previously had never shown affection or even cared for another living soul. With a hand no longer consisting of blackened talons I gripped one of hers tightly to the side of my face before crying without restraint.

“So that’s what it looks like when you lose control.”

Her whisper in my ear made me snort and break into a choking fit as I tried to clear my mouth of bloody saliva. Instead of pulling away she pulled me tighter again until the arm holding me near the throat threatened to block off air to my lungs.

I could feel Viconia's fingers on my skin, her long flowing hair lightly tickling the skin of my face and the hot perfumed smell of her flesh filling my lungs. Until that point I had not realised that while I was providing her a source of strength and security, that she too was proving the same to me.
“Mrimmd'ssinss.” I breathed, feeling her shudder at the sound of the pain in my voice.

For a moment I patted at her forearm with the hand that wasn’t entangled in one of hers, feeling the last of the changes subsiding and with it the waves of pain. Most of the times the vampire had surfaced there had been unpleasant sensations of my jaws strengthening or my teeth growing but this time it had been nothing short of agony. Even when I had lost control against the Mythic Dawn, I had already been badly injured which had meant I had not understood or recognised the level of pain of allowing my corruption to surface.

Viconia shifted and stepped back, one hand still holding my own as she moved in front of me and looked into my eyes. I was panting heavily but for a second I felt more shocked and frightened at the look of concern in her eyes than anything else that had happened.

“I’m all right.” I was struggling to breathe, forcing the words from my chest even as I sucked in massive breaths of air. “I’ll be okay.”

“You certainly don’t look okay.” She brushed her hand against the side of my face and pulled the gloves back to show the wetness on my cheeks was not just tears.

Dabbing at the streams running from my eyes I felt the stickiness and wiped it away with fingertips and the edge of my cloak. The blood was dark and streaked with blackness as though it had somehow scabbed over and congealed without changing from liquid.

“Daedra blood...” For a second my stomach churned and I could almost hear the beast’s laughter in my skull. There was little doubt in my mind the nature of my curse and that it would most likely destroy me sooner or later.

“You look like shu.” Once more the abrupt personality returned despite the concern floating in the yellow depths of her eyes. Her hand slowly removed itself from mine and brushed my cheek lightly. “But I don’t think they’ll let you sit down and rest.”

With the death of the vampires and the obvious sounds of fighting and screaming, both vampiric and daedric the entire castle was aware of our presence. Shouts could be heard through the stone halls, and the sounds of clanging of bells and other methods of alarm could be heard. In the prison wing we could hear shouts and pleading calls but I knew that the main threats would be the level above us.

“They know we’re here now.” Her hand gripped my own and she helped haul me to my feet. All I could taste was blood and I could feel a large amount in my sinuses that left me hacking and spitting bloody mucus. “I think we can get out of here before anyone else makes it down the stairs.”

The pleas from the prison stabbed into my mind and I could sense the dozens of beating hearts within there even if I couldn’t see them. That though alone made me grimace with determination and I saw her expression harden as she saw my intentions.

“I’ll be fine once I kill the rest of these with’rellen.” Another mouthful of bloody saliva splattered on the floor and dribbled down my chin.

Sunchild was plucked from the floor where it had fallen in the middle of a burnt corpse, and with Viconia trailing behind I ripped the Light of Dawn where it had remained imbedded into the stonework. The burnt ribcage and chainmail hauberk clattered to the floor as I sheathed Sunchild and listened to the echoes from the rest of the castle. What were undeniably shouted orders and running feet could be heard over the bells and I grinned a mouthful of bloodstained teeth.

My knuckles popped around the gleaming emerald hilt of the Light of Dawn as I gripped it tightly.
“There’s nowhere for them to run while the sun is out.” Even with the amount of will I was using to crush the vampire aside I could sense and hear those in the levels above us moving about. The look of concern never left Viconia’s face, especially how she watched the skin pull taut on mine once more.

“I don’t think that they are planning to run.” Her words were bitter, but it wasn’t directed at me. Dragonbane was confidently grasped in her hands and after seeing the effectiveness of the Light of Dawn against vampires she was no longer as concerned with our chances as what she had been earlier.

Together, we bounded up the stairs, following the sounds of movement and tearing apart a pair of vampiric guards waiting for us uneasily at the top. The Light of Dawn cleaved one in half before he could even shout, and Viconia spitted the other on Dragonbane that left it burning and turning to ash even before she kicked it away. Seeing the way they were dressed and that they too were bearing the same circled blood drop heraldry I knew that we were potentially facing a lot of the creatures. The servants, the guards and potentially every other inhabitant of the castle had been turned into vampires or thralls, but with our skill at arms and weapons such as the Light of Dawn we both were fairly confident.

Finding ourselves faced with the door leading into the Entry and Dining hall and hearing the commotion within the two of us paused for a moment, our eyes meeting one another and sharing expressions of grim determination.

“Ready?” I asked, rolling my shoulders and listening to the shouts and sounds of running feet within the room beyond.

“Are you?”

My grin was fierce and the sight of my fangs growing once more made her involuntarily start for a second before she gave me a grin of her own. One hand wreathed in magicka and the other gripping her ancient sword, she nodded once, standing aside as I turned and smashed the door in with a kick.

Roaring with a pair of battle cries we burst through the doorway but staggered to a halt at the array of pikes and halberds that awaited us in a wall of steel. The bladed and sharpened points filled the space between us the huddled mass of vampires that were arrayed before us but it wasn’t the sight of the phalanx that stopped us in our tracks. Only a few seemed armed and waiting for our entrance, but it was the rest of the room that caught our attention.

“Oh vith uns’aa…” I spat, looking about and gripping the Light of Dawn tighter as I stared into the hate filled eyes of over fifty vampires and their thralls.
Chapter Notes

I base my vampires of a combination of those within Elder Scrolls Lore, Bram Stoker, Blade and Hellsing. As such they are not very nice people...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As far as I could tell, the entirety of the vampiric population and their servants had retreated into the main hall, waiting for us to arrive and providing mutual protection for all. Other than the semicircle of halberds and pikes, most of the foul creatures were in various positions across the floor, lounging on pillows and various pieces of furniture with barely the slightest consternation that others of their coven had been killed. Some were barely dressed at all, clad in little more than silken togas that did little to hide their modesty. Others were naked, their pallid flesh making a stark contrast between the comparatively tanned skin of the thralls that were mixed within their number.

Over half however were fully armed and armoured, their gleaming plate and chainmail catching the light of the handful of the braziers and torches that were scattered throughout the hall. Maintained purely for the benefit of the thralls, the room was overwhelmingly lit for vampiric standards but allowed me to know for certain that the castle had fallen to darkness. A number of the armoured vampires were still clad in the black-steel chainmail and dressed in surcoats emblazoned with the Dragon emblem of County Glenvar. Most of them had the iconography that they had worn in life desecrated in some fashion. Whether it be cloth patches sewn over the dragon images or the simple expediency of soaking the cloth in blood, there was no doubt their loyalty was no longer to the living.

The others were more concerning, their blued steel armour marking out the number of the more ancient vampires. Some I could tell were old, far older than those I had encountered in the depths of Normalhorst and everywhere I looked I could see the strange gleaming blood drop symbol. It marked pauldrons, embossed cuirasses and even some of the plate helms they wore had the carefully carved glass gems set into the metal.

But where the vampires and their minions caught my attention, I could still see how they had stamped their presence into the castle in the way only their kind could manage. It had once been a majestic visage of the wealth of Glenvar County, an enormous expanse for the powerful and rich to gather but now was nothing more than a portal into the depths of oblivion.

Cages filled with the freshly dead lined the far wall, the exsanguinated victims of the vampiric coven having been discarded once the parasites had their fill. Most were still fresh, their eyes glassy and unseeing despite the pain and horror that still gripped their flesh tight, and I couldn’t help but notice that some of the lesser creatures and the thralls had been in the process of carting off the bodies when we had interrupted them.

In a handful of seconds, we had scoured the room with our eyes, seeing the several armoured pikemen and halberdiers tense for our assault and the dozens of lesser creatures begin to shuffle themselves away. Despite the numbers I was confident of our chances with the gleaming Light of Dawn gripped tight, but even as I began to move forward I suddenly found my body slowing and refusing to obey my mind.
As though I had been trapped to my neck in a marsh, I found my limbs trembling with the sheer exertion to simply move. Every muscle was twitching and writhing under my flesh but within seconds I found myself completely unable to move. Paralysis gripped me tight, turning me into a fleshy statue that could do nothing more but look about the room with building terror at being helpless.

Surrounding us, the mass of armoured vampires relaxed, smiles breaking their waxy features and revealing a sea of fangs and eyes burning with hunger. Pikes were shuffled upwards, and halberds and pulled back to rest on armoured shoulders and as a group they all casually stood up from their spearwall formation and began laughing.

Viconia too was affected in the same way. both of us were stuck, unable to move or do anything more than blink and look around the room. The noxious, crawling sensation of magicka wormed its way into the back of my mind and I could feel the surging headache begin to throb in my consciousness, growing ever fiercer as a black robed man stepped out of the corner of my vision weaving intricate patterns with his hands.

“So you are the ones responsible for hurting my pets.” The voice seemed to slither pleasurably across my skin like Viconia’s lips during the nights we spent in each other’s arms. My every desire and instinct was to move, to break the crippling paralysis affecting my entire body, but not matter how I struggled and railed against my own body I was trapped.

Even my throat was constricted, the breath in my lungs slowing as I managed to drag in sips of air through a mouth frozen in a grimace of concentration. The owner of the voice was far off to the left, sounding incredibly feminine and painfully alluring, especially compared to the rough growls and rasps from the hedge wizard standing in front of us as he kept us trapped in our own bodies.

“Please relieve our guests of their weapons.” The voice continued, sliding the words around us like coiling mist. “They will not be required.”

In a horror matched by Viconia’s the guards stepped forward, shouldering their weapons while their number went about the process of disarming us. Such a task was not something that was done quickly, and over several minutes they thoroughly searched us for anything that could have been used as a weapon, unbuckling sheathes and plucking our swords and daggers from our grasps. Through sheer force of will I managed to hold onto the Light of Dawn for several long seconds, refusing to let the only real hope we had against the creatures around us despite the surging magicka that consumed my muscles. In the end my hand finally snapped open like a bear trap, taking a pair of vampires to pry my fingers open even as the wizard subtly changed his magicka in an attempt to help them claim the weapon.

Pulling the Light of Dawn from my grasp, one of the vampires gave an appreciative whistle as he looked over the magnificent weapon and its faintly glowing blade. Even as he marvelled at the keenness of its edge, listening to the way the faint breeze made the weapon sing he laughed in my face. Unable to move to change expression, he knew all too well the thoughts and emotions running through my mind.

My daggers were taken, as was Sunchild and Viconia too lost Dragonbane and her other knives. Every seam, pocket and boot was checked and only once they were satisfied did the collection of cursed beings step back from our frozen forms.

“My daggers were taken, as was Sunchild and Viconia too lost Dragonbane and her other knives. Every seam, pocket and boot was checked and only once they were satisfied did the collection of cursed beings step back from our frozen forms.

“Pridir, please make our guests more at home. They look so uncomfortable standing there in such a state.”

Not taking his eyes off us for a second, the hooded wizard nodded. “Yes Mistress.”
Both hands outstretched, one pointing to each of us, his chanting suddenly changed and the words became subtly different. Soon, both eyes were glowing faintly blue, the magicka steaming from under his eyelids as he took control over us like an unskilled puppeteer. The sudden jerking motion of my legs startled me even more than the crippling lack of control over my own body, and I fought against the pressing will that writhed in my mind. I had seen a Battlemage within the Legion use a command humanoid spell for the purposes of taking prisoners, but nothing matched the overwhelming power that this mage had at his fingertips. Without even the slightest effort he moved us about, twitching and jerking our bodies through the press of laughing and cackling creatures.

The only control I had over my body was over my eyes and I frantically looked about the press, trying to see or think of something that could help us. The Mage was too overwhelmingly strong, his ability insidious and impossible to break free of and I somehow knew in my mind that this being was the one responsible for the illusions that had plagued the village during the night.

Unfortunately, he was but a minion to a being of even greater potency. Catching little more than glimpses of Viconia staggering about beside me, her eyes wide and the smell of her fear growing to match my own I soon found myself staring into the features of something I had never believed possible.

She was tall, easily two metres in height and a full head taller than myself. After so many months in Viconia’s company I had long since grown used to being in the presence of beautiful women, but if my chest and throat had been under my control then the breath would have been caught in my chest. A single look into the flame red eyes of the vampiress left me struggling to remember my own name, and for several moments I was completely unable to continue resisting the wizard’s control.

Unlike the others of her kind, her skin was pure and perfect, not a single mark or blemish to be seen on the flesh that she had on display. There was still the lifeless pallor shared by all vampires but her lips, cheeks, and curves of her face were a deep and luscious red hue that seemed to draw out the exquisite beauty of the Vampire Matriarch. A dress made from the finest of silks flowed around her like smoke in the air, wafting about in non-existent air currents with every movement and left very little to the imagination. She didn't as much walk, but instead seemed to glide over the ground without touching the floor, a pair of long curvaceous legs splitting the sky-blue silk and revealing tantalising hints of what lay underneath.

Behind her, the members of her entourage followed in her wake, the collection of individuals appearing almost out of place to her immaculate presence. Just as tall as what she was, there was a pair of what could only be her personal champions; two blood-bound Vampire Ancients so grim and terrible in their silent fury that they could’ve stopped a charging army in its tracks with a single glance. Bare chested, and dressed in a toga tied off at the shoulder there was nothing hiding the fact that they were the strongest looking pair of individuals I had ever laid eyes on. Even the wrestling champion of the legion I had seen several years ago had a physique eclipsed by these vampires. Every motion they made seemed to bunch and tense the muscles under their skin as though they are steel ropes, and the oils that had been rubbed into their pale skin had left them appearing as though they were carved from the purest marble. Golden greaves, boots and gauntlets shone with wealth, and both of their faces were hidden behind funeral masks carved to represent hate and love. Only the tiniest of holes allowed them to see in the golden metal, hiding their features completely from sight and leaving them with as much emotion as a pair of dwemer automatons.

The rest of the entourage were as varied as they were unusual. A trio of bejewelled vampires carried tiny braziers that filled the air with the smell of exotic spices and burning incense, and one of them seemed to carry little more than a satin cushion with what appeared to be a flame scorched skull. At the rear of their little group as they walked down the stairs to the Count’s quarters was a single armoured Vampire, dressed in a flowing cloak and dragging a sorrowful group of individuals along
with a set of chained collars. In comparison to the overwhelming wealth on display with the rest of them, these five collared and shackled beings were almost entirely naked except for a handful of rags. All five of them continuously twitched and all shared the same blank expressions of eternal suffering and madness that left me feeling a distinctly different unease despite the situation we were in.

Of her closest followers, only the pair of champions were armed and between them a pair of enormous greatswords were held in arms bunched and twisted with biceps larger than my thighs. There were orcs that would kill for such strength and power shown by the pair of silent guardians.

The Matriarch moved across the hall with all the softness of a shadow, gliding effortlessly through the room as the crowded press of her coven parted like waves before a ship. Almost all within the room were grovelling on the floor, those without arms or armour prostrating themselves and the guards lowering their eyes and making an effort to ensure that they never laid eyes on the leader of their coven. With the merest of gestures, a pack of them broke away, lifting and carrying the castle throne from where it rested at the far end of the hall, placing it down behind the Matriarch as she lowered herself down to sit.

“You two must those responsible for hurting my pets.” She said simply, the words cold and somehow overwhelmingly alluring. Carefully she sat down with all the skill of a queen, folding her long dress underneath her and showing the hints of her long legs under the blue silk.

For a moment she rested daintily in a throne previously owned by a member of the Elder Council, looking between the two of us with an expressionless mask of a face. There was a tiniest of nods to those of her coven crowding around us and the blackened shadow of the Wizard lurking in the corner of my eye.

The emanating magicka from the wizard, and the growing sense of power from the creature sitting in front of us stabbed into my mind even as Viconia and I were forced to obey. Entrapped in the rolling waves of energies our bodies lowered themselves into the seats provided for us, hands resting lightly on the armrests and feeling the velvet surface under my fingertips. Despite the way that we had no control over what we did, we had not lost any sensation which was not something that boded well for either of us.

“You have trespassed upon my lands, killed my subjects, and have had the tenacity to severely injure my darling pets.” She said simply. Laced into her words was a powerful illusion magicka that was pounding against our will and selfcontrol, and within seconds of her speaking I knew without a doubt that the dozens of vampires and thralls surrounding us had been broken down into menial servants by the overwhelming might of her will. “I had been wondering who was responsible for making my cattle resist so effectively last night. Especially as it cost me three of my hounds.”

The burning eyes locked into my own and I found myself struggling to resist her mind. The dark taint and allure of the exquisite vampire Matriarch was almost impossible to defend myself from but the choked off cry of horror gave me something else to concentrate on for a moment.

Tearing my gaze from hers and seeing the momentary flash of annoyance across her face I looked over a smooth shoulder at a small collection of individuals being herded from the rear of the hall. There was only half a dozen of them but the sight set a burning fire in my guts that was fuelled by nothing more than hatred to the creatures around me. While some within the castle were thralls; men and women who had given themselves over to the vampires mentally and physically, there still seemed to be some who were prisoners. A pitiful collection of women and children were herded out of my sight, the sounds of their crying and horror at seeing Viconia and I trapped in front of the Matriarch ripping into my soul.

As they were lead towards the prison in the lower levels, the Matriarch looked over Viconia and I,
watching our eyes and judging our reactions by how and where we looked alone. Even unable to move a single muscle of my face I knew that she could feel my growing hatred and anger.

“The cattle have been especially boisterous today.” There was a sigh from her and she tilted her head as though showing disapproval to an unruly child. “Some of my more… dull servants had mentioned the defiance of last night and that seems to have given them the idea that they can resist their betters.”

The door that Viconia and I entered the hall closed with a boom and there was another rolling cackle of laughter from the collection of vampires and mortals behind us.

“But it doesn’t matter now. I have you both, and tonight when the sun sets I will let my children go into the village and ensure that no one is left.” Sickeningly fascinated, I found myself staring at the long, elegant fingers as she tapped on her luscious bottom lip in thought. Her skin may have been perfect everywhere else, but every finger seemed to be stained black to the knuckles from countless years of opening veins. “However, I am curious to whom you both are.”

I felt the muscles of my neck and face suddenly relax with a gesture from the Matriarch. The Wizard was still there, chanting under his breath but she had somehow managed to dispel the tiniest fraction of his magic to allow us to speak. Neither of us made a sound but the relaxation of our faces allowed us to show our overwhelming hatred and anger of her and her kind. The skin on my face tightened slightly, not enough to allow them to see the changes but enough to make itself felt.

The look of disappointment on the achingly beautiful features of the vampiress almost felt like a stab to the heart but I couldn’t help but give her a grin that was partly a snarl of rage.

“Of course neither of you have anything resembling manners.” Just as she was going to continue she paused in mid breath, turning her head and staring at the skull that sat on its cushion. Following her gaze, I could see the blackened bones and the lengthy incisors that stabbed into the expensive fabric of the cushion and knew all too well who’s skull it once was. The last I had seen it; it had been nailed to the castle’s gatehouse after I had handed it in for its bounty. Cracked and gaping, the hole between the eyes had been filled with the gleaming crystal of what could only be a black soul gem.

For a moment she stared at the skull and its morbid jewellery, almost appearing as though she was listening to a voice that only she could hear before turning and looking at me with what could only have been surprise. “So you are the one responsible for poor old Volmyr…” the voice returned to the strange mesmeric tone that seemed to seep into my pores. “You don’t look like it.”

Leaning forward very slightly she sniffed the air like a cat seeking a skeever, tasting the air and grimacing at it. “But you certainly smell like it. I never thought I would encounter a vampire who permanently stinks as though he fell in a sulphur pit.”

There were several snuffles from behind us as the nearest vampires tried to understand and detect what their mistress had, but judging by their reactions none of them understood or managed to detect the scent of daedra that permeated my flesh. my eyes however were locked into the darkened sockets of Lord Volmyr’s skull that she had claimed as a trophy. The soul gem glinted, and I somehow knew that she had managed to somehow resurrect Volmyr in such a way that had allowed her to trap his soul within the depths of the gem. In the dim light of the hall I could almost hear the tortured screams and feel the burning hatred emanating from the black gem and the entrapped vampiric soul within.

The creatures around me could tell that I was one of their kind, but none bar their Matriarch were able to discern the differences between us. To the ancient seated in front of us she knew I was different but was unable to determine exactly how. What she knew without a doubt was that I was dangerous.
With a click of her black stained fingers, a handful of her servants shuffled forward, each holding out the various weapons that they had taken from us. She barely spared a glance for our swords, but as the emerald-green inlaid scabbard of the Light of Dawn was offered up to her she visibly wilted from it and turned away.

“Such a loathsome thing.” she muttered, waving the armoured vampire holding the priceless artefact away. He quickly moved behind her so that the sight of Maegalla’s blade wouldn’t offend her sight, but I watched him every step of the way. “Pity it has proven impossible to destroy or corrupt. Many of our brethren have tried and failed over the centuries to dispose of that accursed blade. Maybe with time I can find a way to succeed.”

The expression from the gorgeous creature returned to me and the burning eyes bored holes into my soul. “I am curious to discover just how you have managed to not only withstand that blade’s enchantments, but also invade my home during the day. I doubt that even Harkon could withstand the energies contained within that thing, and not even Lamae’s gets are daywalkers.” She paused, sniffing again and grimacing. “You are far too young and are far too unclean to be a pureblood, but you will be of some use at least.”

“You’ll be dead before you learn anything, bitch.” I snapped. “Either by my hand or the Legion, your ashes will be ground into the dirt.”

The look of disapproval grew darker and she sighed as though listening to a school pupil make a mistake for the umpteenth time. “That’s enough from you I think.” The tiniest of gestures constricted my throat and mouth again and I couldn’t even groan my hatred. “Me and mine no longer fear the Legion. The Empire used to crush our kind, ensuring that we remained in the shadows and burning us from our homes. Under Uriel it was unstoppable, but without the Septims the Legion is nothing more than a paper dragon.”

Somehow my frozen expression conveyed my amused disbelief at her words and she smiled. “The 2nd Legion has what? Less than five hundred within a week’s march of Glenvar? It might be useful for scattering bandits and patrolling the roads but if they come to threaten my home then they will be sorely disappointed. How do you think the legionaries will fare against fifty vampires in the middle of the night? Or better still, a horde of werewolves?”

Her laugh made my flesh crawl in disgust and painful arousal. Somehow every melodic word was entering my mind and driving my desires to untold heights. The unnatural nature of the attraction I had for her was more than just physical. The man within my mind wanted nothing more to pull her into my arms and ravish her, the beast only desired the magical potency of her blood and the taste of her flesh in my mouth. Despite that, the stirrings of my vampiric side was slowly building mental barriers against her infernal aura.

“I have over a hundred cattle within the castle, and the next full moon is less than four days away. It will cost me most of my blood-stock but there are always more mortals to be had. Especially when the only military force within a fortnight’s travel has been left feeding maggots and worms.”

My eyes wandered over the hunched and almost naked forms of the men and women standing at her back. The five of them were lost in the depths of their own minds, staring blankly into nothing and twitching uncontrollably. I knew all too well what these people represented, especially how one of the men was missing a hand, and the woman lacking an arm from below the bicep. Gleaming crystals were lodged in the flesh of their chests like some kind of horrific jewellery, allowing the vampire Matriarch and her pet wizard to effectively control the uncontrollable.

The smile grew larger as she realised where my sight was lingering, the barest hint of a four
centimetre fang appearing from behind a perfectly curved lip. “Unfortunately I am lacking crystals, but I think that a hundred wolves will be more than a match for five hundred of Cyrodiil’s best.”

Unable to move a muscle I still felt the chill course through me at the thought of such slaughter. It was somehow worse than the way how Viconia and I were trapped at her mercy.

“You my dear are positively delectable.” Leaning forward, the ancient vampire queen breathed in heavily, shuddering with pleasure at the scent of Viconia’s blood. It was a smell that I knew all too well. The merest hints of it was enough to drive a terrible burning passion in the corrupted portions of my soul when we laid together. “So beautiful. So cold. The frozen north of Altmora has nothing on your soul.”

Viconia, despite her ability to speak said nothing, choosing to instead glare with such force that the vampire actually turned her own gaze away. The smattering hints of witch light glimmered like sun across the surface of a pond in the yellowed depths of her eyes, until the Matriarch made a gesture and snuffed the power.

“That is unexpected.” She muttered, tilting her head and meeting Viconia’s gaze now that the power that she had attempted to call upon was no more. “You both are just full of surprises. Here I was, believing that you were following this brute for protection. It appears that you are in no need for a man’s protection, certainly not this one’s in any case. What is he to you? A beast of burden perhaps? A servile cur? Or maybe attack dog.”

Still, Viconia remained silent and merely stared the vampire down, refusing to even open her mouth or do anything more than scowl with enough force that some of the others standing at the Matriarch’s back looked elsewhere. The elegant creature however glanced between the two of us, realisation slowly dawning on her immature features.

“Ah. I see. Love.” Again the chattering laughter echoed from the coven, vampire and mortal alike. “Such a pitiful waste of an emotion, and one far beneath a being of your obvious breeding. You would give your heart and soul for a lowly animal such as this? An uncultured ill-bred fiend?”

“Alu vith dosstan xuil natha killian…” Viconia spat, “That fiend is likely to rip your heart out. If I don’t get to you first…”

“I doubt that very much.” The tone suddenly turned serious and despite the cold edge to her voice I couldn’t help but imagine how she would sound groaning with pleasure. That thought alone when it reached my conscious mind seemed to only make my vampiric side grow stronger at the obvious assault on my control. “He will be very much dead in the days to come. As for you? I think I have some far more suitable in mind than being studied by vivisection.”

“You would make a perfect vampire.” She said simply, snapping her fingers and motioning for a servant to step forward. The obviously mortal individual carried little more than a platter with a handful of goblets on the surface, the silver of the items ensuring that none of the creatures present could bare the touch.

“I don’t know whether your lover has told you what it is like to be turned.” A delicate arm was lifted and stretched outwards and a second servant stepped forward. The tiny dagger, too small to be of any use other than cracking wax seals on letters was held in a hand steadied from considerable experience. With the utmost precision the tip bit deep into a pale wrist. “I was turned lifetimes ago but I can still remember the way my body writhed under the changes. An intensely painful pleasure as the blood-gift of our lord spread through every vein, every artery and began to change me. It seeps through you, sinking into your muscles and organs and only when it has you entirely in your grip do you finally die and are reborn as something greater.”
The upturned wrist was angled slightly and the pointed blade had cut precisely into the artery, digging through the flesh with a surgeon’s skill and allowing the pulsating liquid to dribble into a goblet. I couldn’t help but remember the sensation of my first feeding, and the weeks of slow, inexorable corruption as the infection slowly seeped into my flesh. The tiny amount of blood that had entered my veins through the scratches on my arm had been enough to corrode the man that I had once been. I knew that most vampiric infections usually lasted two or three days at the most, but my unusual situation had dragged the process out over weeks and kept most of the symptoms hidden and undetectable.

Several mouthfuls of the Matriarch’s blood dripped into the goblet, and despite myself I could almost taste the raw power that it contained. There was no doubt in any of our minds what it represented. The equivalent of a few drops of vampiric blood had been enough to damn me over several weeks and the amount within the silver etched goblet was enough to ensure that Viconia would be turned in a matter of minutes, if not less.

A flash of light caught my attention and with a merest gesture the Matriarch healed the wound without a scar to show for it. Both of her fangs were visible now in a smile that was entirely that of a nocturnal predator, especially as she motioned for Viconia to take the offered goblet from the bowing form of her servant.

There was obviously not the slightest hint of movement from my Drow companion despite the lessening of the paralytic magicka from the hedge wizard. If anything she appeared even more like a statue, not moving other than to continue showing her burning hatred for the creatures around us.

“I should have expected as much.” The Matriarch cooed. “You will drink, and you will turn. But for your insolence your lover will watch.”

A single finger flicked across as though she was turning a page in a book and my head snapped over to the left, twisting despite my attempts of resistance. Between the wizard and the Matriarch there was little I could do but was not going to simply let Viconia suffer my fate without a fight.

The pressure in the back of my mind increased as the wizard lent his strength to the Matriarch, and despite only being able to see him from the corner of my eye I could tell that he was feeling the strain. The resistance that we were both offering was enough to leave beads of perspiration lining his face which gave me strength, and the stirrings of insanity.

“Never will anyone say that I am without mercy.” The presence of the Matriarch left my skin crawling as she leaned in close enough to whisper in my ear. The pressure in my mind built even further, and all the incense in the world could not mask the death-stink of her flesh. Cold and clammy, the moist sensation of her tongue sliding up my neck would have left me shuddering if I had any control over my body. “Make your last words count, pet.”

My eyes met Viconia’s as the vampire’s will twisted her in place to face me. The goblet of blood sat daintily in hand as though she was attending a noble’s ball, but the yellowed eyes were overwhelmed in fear. It was the only time I had truly seen Viconia terrified despite the mask of hatred and loathing that clad her flesh.

At that moment I made a decision.

Chapter End Notes
I thought I should start adding translations for Drow-to-common as both Viconia and Kaius are now using phrases. Kaius is mostly swearing at this point though as when you are learning a new language curse words are the easiest to learn. (haha)

Alu vith dosstan xuil natha killian. - Go F*** yourself with a sword.
This chapter is another where the "Graphic Depictions of Violence" tag earns its keep. No, seriously it really does, so if you have issues with violence and gore then overall this story probably isn't for you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I started laughing, allowing my face to break out into a smile usually reserved for those bereft of sanity or the most devoted followers of Sheogorath. For a moment Viconia seemed even more surprised and confused at my reaction but as I felt my eyes begin to change and my flesh begin tingling the realisation dawned and she openly gaped.

Trapped by the powers of the hedge wizard and unable to move, the rising power of the vampire within my body was excruciating. The times I had called upon its strength and abilities had been discomforting and mildly painful, but never before had I experienced such agony. Nor had I fully utilised the cursed ability of the corrupted flesh. In the depths of the caverns at Lake Arrius I had lost myself to the curse, but the tiniest portion of my mind had grimly held on. Like a handler of a vicious war dog I had managed to pull the creature back under my control with chains of my will, returning my flesh to that of a man and reining in the excesses. The other times I had used my powers I had kept a firm grip on my instincts, figuratively holding the chains tightly and allowing no slack.

Now, faced with my death and a worse fate for Viconia, I released my hold on the vampire. I dropped the chains to the floor, releasing my grip entirely and even taking a few steps away. The effect was almost instantaneous, although it was several seconds before the changes became visible and those surrounding us realised what was occurring.

The raw power of the daedric infused vampire thundered its way to the surface and I began to change. In Viconia’s horrified expression I could see the way my eyes suddenly appeared to fill with blood, the whites of my eyes being lost to a sudden flood of black ichor that turned them blacker than the night. Moisture dripped down my cheeks as it began leaking from my tear ducts, staining my face red-black like running mascara. Even as a handful of the vampires and their thralls realised what was happening the changes began spreading uncontrollably.

Bones snapped, echoing like dried twigs over the cries of alarm and exclamations of surprise. My own growling scream through a constricted throat was inaudible but soon grew in volume as the torturous agony consumed me. Cheeks, jaws, teeth, and most of the bones in my skull cracked and crunched, drowning out my inarticulate howls even as I continued laughing. With the magicka stopping me from moving I was forced to simply ride out the pain, which only seemed to give the beast consuming my body further strength.

My fingers erupted in talons of blackened bone, my jaw dislocating and locking back into place as my entire face lengthened. Within seconds I could feel my veins twisting and writhing under my flesh as they began pulsing noxiously black corruption throughout my body. The unnatural daedric qualities of my vampirism threatened to rip my body apart but with every second I could feel the magical paralysis locking my limbs in place fade.

Staggering backwards in horror, the Matriarch and her lesser willed minions put some distance
between themselves and my shifting form. Similar to the reactions of those who had witnessed me in my vampiric form they too were shocked and horrified at my nature. While the armed vampires stepped forward in a ring of steel to protect their mistress, I couldn’t help but notice the way they were glancing to their comrades with unease as I began shuddering with more than just the changes.

Screaming with all the force that my lungs would allow, there was nothing left in my universe except pain and soul rending agony. Every muscle and bone was aflame, every nerve ending dipped in acid and I struggled to remain conscious despite the fact that I was losing myself to the vampire. The only thing that seemed to keep me anchored in reality was Viconia’s terrified yellow eyes staring unblinking at me as she witnessed what I truly was for the first time.

“Kill him!” The Matriarch shrieked, stepped backwards behind the enormous forms of her bodyguard as they gripped their claymores tightly. “Kill him now!”

I roared at the press of vampiric flesh around me, my mouth hinging open like a snake and revealing the way how every tooth in my head had turned into razored fangs. My maw was large enough and powerful enough that I could bite through a limb without difficulty.

Magicka twisted and weaved through the air and the building fear of me was replaced with an unnatural calmness. The Wizard was struggling, weaving his hands in ever intricate patterns but as I rose to my feet it was obvious that his magic was no longer working on me. Both he and the vampire Matriarch were casting spells without pause, but while they were still ensuring Viconia was trapped they were trying their best to bolster the minds of their minions.

A pair of vampires died in a second, their unholy flesh rent apart as I hurled myself into the press before me. Some, despite the various spells removing their fear or increasing their bloodlust staggered backwards as I charged, and even as I found myself surrounded in a wall of pallid flesh they hesitated. This hesitation was their undoing as the beast in control of my flesh had no such weakness.

“Kill… Him… It… That thing!” The Matriarch shouted, infusing her potent will into every syllable even as she moved away from the fighting. My appearance was becoming more and more daedric with every second and under my armour I could feel strange protrusions of bone and muscle begin shifting and coursing through my limbs. Even my face was shifting further, the raised protrusions of bone of my brows, cheeks and jaws matching that of a Dremora.

The snarling, armoured visage of a Vampiric guard stepped in front of me, spearing forward into my midsection with his lengthy Halberd. Without even a conscious thought I twisted aside from the attack, grasping the haft with one hand, chopping down with the other and leaving him staring at the length of broken wood in his hands. Weighted and hooked, I flicked the metal head of the halberd across the room, hearing the shriek of pain as it thudded into a chest of a thrall. Before he could react I had pulled the guard forward with my grasp on the broken staff, bunching my taloned hand into a fist that impacted right into the centre of his helmeted face.

Gore exploded in all directions, spraying those closest to us and splattering up the length of my arm as my strike made a complete mockery of the steel helm. With the power of a demon behind it, the punch pulverised the faceplate into his skull and hurled him four metres back through the press.

Before the corpse with the smashed face hit the floor I had added another to the tally. I was faster, stronger and much more vicious that those around me and with the changes consuming my body I ripped them apart. My claws tore throats away, ripped limbs away in sprays of crimson even as the severed arms and legs burst into flames in my grasp. A thrall staggered backwards, shrieking as she clutched at the terrible wound in her face where her eyes and nose once were. Another was picked up and thrown into the air as though I had simply flung a bag of flour over my back.
The brutality of my kills sent fear through the vampires facing me, and only the more truly hardened or brave faced me down. A few blows succeeded in striking me but were wasted on the incredible protection of my ebony and daedroth scale armour. Most I simply twisted and ducked away from or in some cases I even managed to catch blades and maces in my bare hands. One sword I caught in both hands, snapping the metal as though I was breaking a stick before jamming the broken end deep into a stomach. A mace was wrenched from another’s grasp before it pulped its owners face into an unrecognisable mass. My strength and speed was incredible, and was not only greater than the freshly turned vampires of the castle guards but also the more ancient of the Matriarch’s coven.

Another guard tried desperately to tackle me around the waist to grant his comrades an opening. I instead caught him in mid-air, slamming him hard into the floor and gripping his open sallet helm with both clawed hands. In front of all my foes, and ignoring the blows that bounced off my armoured back and spine I gripped him tightly, roaring with the exertion and putting all my weight into my arms. His pained cries were horrific, flailing around with his hands and slapping ineffectively at me as his helmet began crumpling and his head caved in from the pressure. The scream of agony was cut off in mid breath as his head was crushed by my vicing grip, leaving blood leaking from the crushed helmet even as he began to combust.

“Ilhar vith’rellen!” A vampire exploded into burning ash and tumbling bones as I ripped a sword from someone’s grasp and punched it through breastplate, flesh, heart and bone. Another screamed in agony as I punched a kneecap with enough force that the leg snapped in two separate places.

A bolt of magicka caught my arm and I felt the strange tingling sensation course through it. It felt as though I had been laying on my side on rough ground until the limb had gone to sleep. The expression on the Wizard’s face was enough to tell me that it had not been the desired effect of his spell.

Another bolt flashed through the air as he flicked it at me, and I twisted aside from it while ripping a vampires throat out with my claws. One after the other he hurled the paralysis spells at me as quickly as he could, most missing me entirely in the raging melee but those that hit seemed to leave me with little more than pins and needles in my flesh.

Using both hands to cast a more powerful bolt, I grinned through a mouthful of fangs and ripped a serf from the floor as he cast it. The robed servant convulsed for a second as the bolt hit, the sheer potency of the spell seizing his body solid and stopping his heart and lungs in an instant. Despite all of his best spells, I was still killing my way through the press without pause or hesitation and he was trying his best to stop my impossible advance against the full might of the coven.

Behind a semi-rigid wall of her chosen warriors and the toga-clad bodyguards the Matriarch continued casting spells that bolstered her minions that were dying around me. “Stop him Pridir!”

Face suddenly visible from underneath the blackened cowl, the wizard’s mouth dropped and eyes widened as I ripped an arm from a thrall and shattered a vampire’s skull with it. Another paralysis spell hit me square in the chest and didn’t even slow me down as I jammed an elbow into a face with enough force that teeth clattered across the floor.

“I... I... Can’t...” I heard him whisper as another spell failed to do anything more than make me tingle. Desperate, he twisted and flapped his arms in an intricate incantation that shimmered the air like a hot summer’s day. The strength of the firestorm spell built rapidly and embers were born from the very air itself.

The sound of ripping meat stopped the spell before it could fully form, and his arms dropped slackly to his sides. There was horror and dawning realisation in his white filled eyes even as began rolling into the back of his skull.
All movement stopped in the hall, the cringing vampires and their thralls shying away from me as the Matriarch’s spells calming their fears were interrupted. I could sense her presence behind the mass, the spells she had been casting ceasing as she beheld the way I held her pet wizard aloft.

Ripping through flesh, my taloned hand had hooked up under his jaw, my fingers buried to the knuckle in a wash of gore. He was trembling, twitching and shuddering from the agony and the flood of gore that bubbled and ran down his chest and choked him. Like an obscene tongue of blackened ivory my claws had erupted between his lips, shredding tongue, muscle and skin as they curled inside and through his mouth.

“Hard to cast magic without a mouth.” I growled, the thickening of my throat and the way my mouth had been twisted by the changes turning my words into something much, much more terrible.

The wizard said nothing, groaning and twitching as I held him up off the floor with the twisted grasp I had on his lower jaw. In front of all of them standing in shocked silence I reached up with my other hand, pressing it to his forehead and ripping his jaw away and half his face with it.

Slamming into the ground with a ruined face, the Wizard begun the painful process of giving up on life but before he had hit the floor I had exploded back into action. With one of the greater threats in the room vanquished I turned my eyes on the others and begun the slaughter anew.

For his part, the vampire holding the immaculate Light of Dawn held his ground, staring horrified as I began slaughtering my way through those between us. I was deaf to the cries and shouted orders from the Matriarch at his back as she rallied the coven the best she could. The fear in the undead creatures was a sour taste on my tongue that I revelled in and despite their unnatural natures they were still falling victim to my unholy aura of dread. With the wizard dying messily on the floor she was resorting to every spell and incantation that she knew, using her incredible skills in illusion magicka and her vampiric willpower to counter the effects of my presence. She was the foundation of all the creatures around me but the sheer numbers that I still faced ensured that without assistance I could not win.

A shortsword was plucked from a sheath, decapitating a pair of vampires before tearing the blade deep in its owner’s belly. Even as opened bowels and organs slopped onto the floor I had slit the throat of another thrall that died gurgling and trying to stem the wash of blood.

The vampire holding the Light of Dawn hesitated, watching me with growing fear that overwhelmed the strength of the Matriarch’s enchantments. He knew all too well that I was coming for him, and that there was little that was going to stop me. The burning eyes of the creature stared at the blackened pits of my own and despite everything, despite all the carnage around us he suddenly relaxed and held the immaculate Blade out to me with a dumbfounded smile on his face.

“What are you doing you fool!” The Matriarch spluttered, gesturing to the vampire holding the Light
of Dawn. As I punched, clawed and hacked through the press around me a pair of vampires tried to
drag the sword from his unwilling grasp. The Matriarch was desperately channelling her magical
might into those around us and trying to gain some measure of control over the creature that I had
become. It was to no avail and as her servants tried to wrestle the vampire holding the sword to the
floor the realisation crept over her features.

Her vampiric servant was no longer wholly hers, and her burning gaze flickered between me and the
Vampire being forced to his knees by his comrades. It was a battle of wills and one that the vampire
had lost. The same strange ability that had allowed me to feed during the night without killing and
had proven so effective against mortals also appeared to have some use against my own kind.
Rolling out from the pits of my eyes I had speared my will into the vampire holding my sword,
crushing the resistance the creature offered and turning him into a thrall of my own.

Dark incantations suddenly crawled over my flesh, and pausing only briefly enough to break an arm
I twisted around. The Matriarch and her bodyguard were retreating up the stairs to the Count’s
quarters with only a handful of her servants following. She was not holding back in the slightest, and
was no longer relying on simple mind bending tricks and spells to fend me off. Words and phrases
that were ancient when Tamriel was still young slithered off her tongue and down her chin as she
spoke them, turning the air black and pestilent with their power. The hairs of my head stood on end
as I felt the terrible power within the necromantic spell she was casting, ensuring that I did not look
too closely at her gestures as she made them.

The temperature within the hall dropped several degrees and a foul black mist wafted up through the
stoned floor as her powerful necromancy seeped into the sheer level of death around me. Shapes
pressed through the air, twisting the mists into ghostly forms of half remembered shades and the
recently dead. They coiled around me, twisting and weaving through the air but as insubstantial as
smoke as I waded through them. Skeletal fingers and cloud-wreathed limbs reached for my flesh, the
ghosts struggling to grasp me even as my corrupt nature rendered me inviolate to their grasp.

Charred and flame scorched skeletons of the fallen vampires suddenly began tumbling back together,
raising themselves to their feet even as I added more to their number. The dead bodies of thralls;
those that were still mostly intact at least began twitching and struggling to rise from the pools of
blood they lay in. Swaying, staggering and shuddering with unlife they forced themselves to rise as
mindless automatons, zombified puppets to the will of the Matriarch. Every creature and enthralled
mortal I had killed were suddenly rising once more, staggering towards me as they obeyed their
master’s summons.

Infused with unthinking ferocity and hatred and unlike their mortal forms, they were immune to the
daedric horror that I emanated. They were however weaker in death than they had been in life. The
ashen bones of the vampiric skeletons were battered into dust under my blows and the zombies were
infinitely clumsier. One after another I smashed skeletons apart into broken shards, and merely
stepped around the staggering forms of the dead trying to walk on shattered bones and torn muscles.
They were however slowing my slaughter of her coven and buying her precious time to call upon far
greater adversaries.

Over two dozen corpses had risen to their feet like puppets being controlled by an inexperienced
hand, staggering and lurching towards me with nothing but milky whiteness filling their blank eyes.
Magically-bound Vampire skeletons, held together with smoking blue energies linking their bones
reached out for me in a shambling horde. Despite the relative ease it took to destroy the undead forms
I was left watching with a curious horror as she began casting a different spell.

Chained and collared, the five naked and emasculated individuals began screaming in unison, the
sound of their chains audible even over the sounds of fighting. The Matriarch began weaving a spell
of such potency that ice began forming across the floor under her feet, spreading like the onset of winter and clinging to the fabric of her dress. Ripping the energies out of the air and calling upon every scrap of her magicka she twisted and writhed in the ritual of untold power. Even as I tore the head off a zombie I watched the semi-naked slaves fall onto their hands and knees, their screams of agony changing into bestial roars.

Fighting off a sudden group of skeletons that were so recent that the burnt remains of their muscles and skin streamed away in waterfalls of ash, I found myself staring as the werewolves began transforming. Limbs began lengthen, fingers cracking and breaking and growing into a set of claws as long as Sunchild’s edge. Similar to my own recent transformation into a daedric monstrosity, the five cursed beings shifted and were consumed by their own shared curse.

Fur erupted from every pore and every strand of hair lengthened and grew until their flesh was consumed by it. Their bones broke, snapping and ripping apart and expanding to accommodate the shifting changed they were being subjected to. A face akin to a wolf pushed wetly through skin that was stretching and tearing to allow a maw of canines to snap and click together. Whether they were male or female they rippled with primal power and energies, chests broadening with a daedric strength to match a minotaur and every muscles bunched and coiled together.

Gleaming brightly, the crystals imbedded into their chests throbbed with power as the Matriarch fed her will and control into the blood crazed creatures. It was these crystals that allowed her to control the slaved beings. Not only did she control their actions, but she was also forcing them to change when and where she desired. Facing down a foe that was making a complete mockery of her vampiric coven she had forced the beings to change in the middle of the day, calling upon their curse and their strength to do what fifty vampires and their thralls could not.

I exploded, my daedric form shifting and erupting into a billowing cloud of chittering and furred bodies that flowed through the press of living and undead bodies like a liquid. More than one thrall and vampire were borne shrieking to the ground as dozens of fanged mouths worried at exposed flesh and more than one mortal was left drained of their blood as they slumped under a mass of bats. Many struggled to swipe my myriad of forms away, writhing desperately even as I reformed again within an arms distance to the kneeling vampire holding the Light of Dawn and the two trying to wrench it away from him.

His eyes were glazed over, face slack from the strength of my will ripping his mind into shreds. Instead of controlling him I had instead destroyed his sanity, leaving the creature to kneel there with blood trickling down from his nose and utterly unable to control himself as I appeared to claim what was mine.

The two vampires trying to take the sword from him screamed as I appeared before them, ripping the sword from their grasp and ignoring the terrible roars from behind me. The werewolves had gained their true forms and were seeking my blood, but I was no longer to be denied my prize. His mind utterly shattered, there was no resistance from the vampire holding the sword and I tore it out of his grasp.

There was no time for any of them to react as I ripped the enormous curved blade from its sheath and hacked into them. One fell into two separate halves as the Dawn bisected him like the Orc moneylender back in Bravil, and the other stopped in mid motion as she touched the blood that trickled down into her eyes. The confusion on her face was evident even as the entire top half of her head above the eyebrows slid off and she immolated from the head down.

Sucking the corrupted blood into the enchanted metal, the Light of Dawn charged its ability and released it within seconds. The vampire who had claimed such a weapon died in an explosion of ash
and burning blood as I punched it to the hilt in his chest. It scoured his bones clean, ripping him apart in an explosion of light that sent the entire coven reeling away in agony. Even the thralls staggered backwards, shielding their eyes and blinking away the afterimages of the weapon’s potency. Filling with shrieks and cries, the room was filled with the smell of cooking meat and singed hair that overwhelmed the stench of gore and opened bowels.

Over the noise there was one sound that reached my ears and managed to fight through the overwhelming desire for destruction that consumed me. An inarticulate cry of rage and hatred that matched and almost exceeded my own was torn forth from a mortal throat; one that I was intimately familiar with.

The burning light of the enchanted sword had given me breathing space, but more importantly it had finally broken the spell that the Matriarch had over Viconia. Through the entirety of the fight she had been trapped helpless, holding the goblet of polluted blood and completely immobile as I slaughtered my way through the room. Now that she was released, the goblet had fallen to the floor and splattered its contents everywhere and she had immediately gone on the offensive.

A vampire shrieked as she punched an energy-wreathed hand through its spine and heart. The same ability that had allowed her to punch through granite making a mockery of steel plate and flesh. A bolt of lightning followed, crisping a thrall and vampire with the static discharge and within seconds the hall was completely consumed by chaos. There was nothing that she hated more than to be helpless, to be trapped by someone or something or even by the strands of fate. To her there was nothing worse, to have no control or ability to resist or struggle to simply survive. I had lost all my restraint at the sight and threat of losing her to the vampiric curse, but she had lost all her restraint as a result of being trapped and left vulnerable.

“Shar! Belbau uns’aa yorn!” She roared, eyes burning brightly with witch-light as she drew power into herself. Both hands were wreathed in energy as she twisted them around and I felt unconsciously felt the strange shift within the darkness around us. Shadows coiled and writhed, almost with a life of their own as she called upon her patron deity.

A group of skeletons staggered to a halt as she thrust her hands towards them, the simmering blue light within the emptiness of their skulls and binding their flame-weakened bones together flickering and dying. The tumbled into destruction and Viconia was moving, twisting aside desperate attacks and destroying her foes with blasts of energy. One of her vampiric foes was born down to the ground as she leapt and straddled his face and chest, hooking her thighs over his shoulders and twisting him to his knees. A hand wreathed in crackling bolts of lightning was jammed into his shrieking features, her fingertips lost in the depths of his eye sockets as she blinded and electrocuted him to death.

Her magicka was not as powerful as what the Matriarch had at her disposal, but it was not subtle. The vampiress relied on trickery and mind control, the ability to command others to do her bidding. Viconia relied on no one but herself, and her magicka showed this without a doubt. She blasted one vampire apart into tiny pieces like what she had done to a werewolf the previous night, scattering chunks of burning flesh and shattered armour across the floor. A pair of thralls died messily as she managed to get hold a sword that left one scooping up their innards and another shuddering as she electrified the blade and used it like a lightning rod to direct her energies. Zombies and skeletons staggered in her direction but at the last second they would stop, either collapsing to the ground like puppets with their strings cut or even in a few cases turning on each other.

Against vampires, their minions and the undead she was unstoppable, but against five fully transformed werewolves was another story.

“Viconia!” I roared, my voice almost unrecognisable from my transformation. There was a flash of
white-blond hair as she twisted and wrenched a blade from a shrieking vampire’s groin and as our eyes met I could see her face twisted into an expression of pure hate.

Teeth clenched and lips pulled back into a snarl, she almost looked rabid. There was something disturbing with the darkness that could be seen behind the glowing witch light of her eyes. Somehow the hatred within her was greater than mine. The strength of her hatred was even more alarming, as unlike my own it was not fuelled by a taint; daedric or otherwise.

Our eyes met, the burning lights of her gaze meeting my blood-filled pools. The werewolves were rising to their feet in foul parodies of men and mer, but in that moment there was something akin to satisfaction between the two of us.

The Light of Dawn left my hand, my arm snapping out and tossing the blade through the air towards her. There was no mistaking the intent behind my actions, the way my fang filled maw twisting wider and lips peeling back into something that was somehow enjoyment. I had no need of a weapon, even one as unique and powerful as the Light of Dawn but Viconia did.

The emerald hilt of the weapon was snatched out of the air by as ebony hand, the immaculate weapon twirling around in a blur of shimmering silver and cleaving a thrall into two twitching pieces. I was stronger than Viconia and when using the strength of the beast I was also faster. However, she was by far the greater with a sword. If it had a cutting edge she could, and did use it like an extension of her body and the Light of Dawn was no exception. In seconds the blade was stained with the corrupted blood of the vampiric and light was bursting forth with explosive force.

The werewolves howled, roaring their praises to the daedric lord of the hunt as they charged towards me. They were enormous, massively muscled and several times larger than the original men and women that they had been mere minutes before. Each weighed as much as a four or five fully grown men, were strong enough to wrestle a minotaur and their unnatural claws were strong enough to tear through steel plate. They were unstoppable, horrendous and were unmatched within the bounds of Tamriel.

I took them apart.

My first years in the Legion had left me witness to one of Hircine’s ‘blessed’ slaughtering most of a veteran squad of legionaries. The night before I had seen their strength in killing several armed men and women despite Viconia’s and my abilities. In the hall of Glenvar Castle and fully lost to the daedric corruption of my soul they were found wanting. The months since I first fed within Kvatch’s Oblivion gate I had killed, ripped people apart and once held a juvenile minotaur at bay for a handful of seconds. I was stronger than what I had any right to be. Now the true depths of my strength were revealed.

One of the rampaging man-beasts was ripped from its feet as I simply tackled it, slamming bodily into its chest and smashing a clawed hand across its salivating maw. Teeth shattered and splintered across in an explosion of gore from my blow and even as the other four bore down I had crushed its skull and ground its face to a pulp. The second died as I dragged a one handed Warhammer from where it had fallen, throwing it so it tumbled end over end and imbedded itself into a furred chest.

The third missed me with its powerful swipes that shattered a nearby skeleton and shredded the chest and face of a hapless vampire cowering nearby. Ducking and weaving with an unnatural skill I flowed around the beast’s attacks, feeling the wind off its furred paws and talons. Its roars were incredible, buffering me with the volume and where they would have left me terrified and frozen to the spot years before I simply ignored them. A furred arm was blocked, its ribs suddenly caved in with a punch that almost lifted it from its feet from the force of my blow and it fell to the floor with an exploded heart.
By now the hall appeared to be hosting a thunderstorm in more ways than one. The light exploding from the enchanted blade in Viconia’s hands was frying vampire flesh with its intensity. Flashing, the scalding light left the bloodsuckers shrieking and trying desperately to flee from its embrace, covering their faces with their hands and leaving themselves unable to defend themselves as Viconia took their lives. The thralls too were starting to try to escape, some trying to haul open the massive doors leading to the castle courtyard. They were set upon by desperate vampires attacking them in an attempt to stop the mortals from opening the doors and letting in sunlight.

The Matriarch was gone, fleeing from the melee into the higher levels of the castle in an effort to escape the touch of the Light of Dawn. Without her willpower and control and Viconia’s spells and abilities against the undead, several of the zombies and skeletons had turned wild, falling upon any and all around them with unthinking savagery. This only added to the absolute chaos that had engulfed the castle as a couple of thralls and even a vampire or two found themselves born down by the grasping hands and fingers. A different timbre of screams ripped through the air as a collection of zombies gnawed and ripped at one of the thralls as he tried to crawl away from their hunger, and a vampire shrieked as she was pulled apart. The scouring flames of her demise ignited the zombies’ flesh as their potential meal burst into flames and it wasn’t long before a couple of figures were seen staggering about aflame.

Rabid and insane, the werewolves had lost some of the Matriarch’s control but they only had eyes for me. Two were already dead and a third was severely injured from the haft of a Warhammer sticking out of a furred chest. It was trying to rise and pull the offending weapon from where it had crushed its way through ribs, a task made more difficult due to the fact that it had been one that had lost a hand to me the night before.

Roaring rage and spittle, the fourth rushed me, moving around my side to allow the last of it kin still on its feet to flank me. Moving like the pack hunters they were they bounded through the pandemonium around us, alternating between running on two legs and all fours. They moved like quicksilver despite their muscled bulk, and I knew all too well what would have been in store for the Legionaries of the 2nd against a horde of the brutes.

They leapt together, rushing me in a wall of fangs and fur and I twisted ducking in and around their strikes as they snarled and swiped at me. One was missing an arm from the bicep down and soon lost the other arm as well as I caught it by the wrist, put a boot to its chest and heaved. Its whines were pitiful as it flopped to the floor in a wash of blood, the vaunted regenerative abilities of the lycanthrope struggling to keep death from blood loss at bay.

A knee snapped under my plated boot and the fifth beast was brought low, growling and trying to bite me. Somehow I managed to move through its flailing blows and latch onto its throat with my own fang filled maw. The taste of beast-flesh filled my mouth as I worried at the massive creature’s neck as though I was an attack dog myself, bearing it down with my bodyweight and crushing its windpipe. Only after I had gripped it tight and ripped my head away did it finally stop fighting and begin dying.

The greatest threat to me and Viconia were left as cooling corpses after I staggered over to the last wounded creature that was still trying to pull the Warhammer from where it was lodged in its chest. It was badly injured but the wounds were healing quickly. If it had managed to remove the offending chunk of metal and wood from its flesh it would had healed within minutes but I never gave it the chance. I stomped over to it, leaping onto its back, grasping it by the front of the jaw and digging my fingers into the roof of its mouth. For a second it flailed helplessly with my boots in its massive shoulders, before I roared and tore its jaw and the top off in a spray of hot blood.

“Kaius!”
The shout snapped my head around and I witnessed Viconia kick a vampire’s legs out from under it. The blade flashed in the dim light of the hall as the bloodsucker landed heavily on its back and she pinned it squirming to the floor. The searing light turned the vampire to ash and scorched armour and clothes and she gave a quick nod in the direction of the stairs.

“Elgg l’ssindossa!” She shouted, ripping the Light of Dawn from the floor and swiping it at a pair of thralls behind her. For a second one managed to stare at how he was left holding the hilt of his sword after the Light of Dawn had cut the blade away. Before he could react further she had stabbed him in the throat, folding his head over the gleaming bade from the force of the thrust.

She saw my momentary hesitation and snarled. In her fury she had fallen back into speaking Drow rather than common. “Alu! Alu dos waell!”

Spinning around she jammed the enchanted blade into the groin of the second thrall, leaving him dropping to the floor with a pained expression on his face. With a firm grip on his wrist she using his sword to block a blow from a vampire who had lost half his face to the scorching energies of the Light of Dawn.

It died, spitted upon the enchanted blade that seared its flesh from its bones. She kicked its burning remains off the edge of the Light of Dawn, ripping it from the tumbling bones and scattering ash and turning to hunt for more foes. The swarm of undead, thralls and the corrupt seemed all too willing to oblige her hunger for death. By now there were less than two dozen vampires and thralls left standing, and even less undead. The Light of Dawn was carving through them like they were mist, and being wielded by someone of Viconia's skill and ability there were none who could stand before it.

The steaming corpses of the werewolves were left behind me and I plucked a long sword from the floor where its owner had burned into ash and bone. Blazing light from the Light of Dawn and the Viconia’s spells crackled through the hall, and strangely enough I could feel it lending strength to the man within me. The beast was still wholly in control, the blood lust and desire for revenge and death would be insatiable until every last one of the creatures were dead. Out of the horde that had awaited us when we entered, only a pitiful few remained but the Matriarch was still alive. I could smell her rot over the incense and gore lingering in the hall, and even despite it I could smell the fear. Her underlings were dying by the score, her greatest forces ripped into bloody chunks and now there was little between her and the demon that she had thought she had mastery over.

Taking the stairs six at a time I hurdled my way upwards, exploding into bats before I reached the top and swarming my way over the pair of vampires wielding the censers. Their screamed as they felt the dozens of fangs mouths rending the flesh from their bones, tiny mouths worrying and tearing and leaving them coated in their own blood. In an instant I rematerialized, ripped both their heads from their shoulders and swarmed away again before the corpses burst into flames.

“Where are you?” I called out, bounding along the floor as I returned to my daedric form. The sensation of using my more esoteric abilities was indescribable but strangely comforting to the sensation of being clothed in the flesh of a daedra. The man within me was struggling for control but the creature was not having any part in it.

“Where are you?” My words echoed from the halls of the upper levels, the long passageways branching off to the handful of rooms where the most powerful individuals within Glenvar County once lived. Blood and destruction had not been wreaked upon this portion of the castle yet, but my presence heralded coming bloodshed.

The cloying smell of her flesh and her fear was tantalising close and even blinded I would have been able to find my way through the darkness. No torches or lanterns had been lit in this portion of the
castle, no mortal serfs having been allowed in their mistress’s inner sanctum. It was clean and perfectly ordered but the carpet was soon playing host to a series of bloodied footprints and a trail of ash that fell from me.

“Where are you!”

A thrumming sound reached my ears and I ducked, feeling the wind off the blade that sliced across where my neck had been a second before. Inhumanly muscled, the first of her bodyguard appeared out of the darkness despite the toga and golden pieces of armour he wore. Shifting out of the shadows with all the ability of the vampiric and cursed he hacked and sliced with his greatsword, sliding about with a liquid grace that I staggered away from.

The second appeared from behind, using the same ability to flank me and take advantage of the distraction of his comrade. Their golden masks revealed nothing of the vampires’ features, showing only hatred and love respectively. Like the masks worn by the troupe of travelling bards and performers I had seen years ago, they were polar opposites and both seemed to attack with opposing techniques.

The hate-masked vampire attacked with wild swings of immeasurable power and speed, his blade narrowly missing me and smashing through several pedestals holding carved busts of long dead counts. Shattered stone and chunks of marble pattered across the floor and my armour as I shifted into mist, feeling the cold pressure of the love-masked vampire’s sword as he stabbed it precisely into where my spine had been.

They both smelled of oil and incense, their skin taut across their muscles that threatened to burst through the thin layer struggling to contain them. Every vein and artery pulsed to the surface, coiling like snakes and writhing under the skin and I could almost feel their bodies humming under the stain of wielding their enormous swords.

Each sword was over a metre in length, and only just less than ten kilograms of beaten metal. In comparison my salvaged longsword was half the length and within seconds of trading blows I found myself missing Sunchild. Their blows cleaved the air despite the confines of the passageway, and they held the advantage of greater reach. They used every trick and skill at their disposal, using their vampiric speed and agility and shifting in and out of the shadows to ensure that I always had my back to one of them. I instead was relying on my own daedric enhanced strength, and my ability to transform into mist to force them to take care in their blows lest they fall victim to each other.

I parried and blocked, slashing out at the bare chested bodyguards and cursing at their ability. They were considerable swordsmen and while they lacked the skill of men like Belisarius and Alexi they more than made up for it with their speed and strength. Within a handful of blows my longsword was nicked and dented in several places, the last few centimetres chopped away and leaving the metal gleaming at the end. Their movements flowed into each other, twirling and spinning and using their momentum to slash and slice with ever increasing speed while I danced between them, bursting in and out of my mist form to keep them at bay. Several times I felt my arm jar as they used the gleaming metal gauntlets and vambraces to block my attacks, but I did manage to draw blood on more than one occasion.

A large portion of the hall way was left in ruins, blood and gore stamped into the carpet and most of the furnishings laying in a combination of stone shards and wooden splinters. One of my kicks had smashed in an oaken door like it had been hit by a trebuchet, and there was more than one that had a long jagged slice hacked into it from a vampiric greatsword.

Concern was creeping into my mind as we fought, as I realised that other than a handful of grunts neither of the vampire ancients had made a sound. They fought and hacked and swung their
enormous weapons untiringly, but there were no shouts, no roars of anger or hatred and no even the slightest gasp or cry of pain when I managed to cut their flesh. I was roaring and shouting, cursing and spitting my hatred at them but the two of them were utterly silent.

I caught a descending greatsword on the edge of my battered longsword, twisting the blade around and forcing the other vampire the redress his own attack as the tip cut through the air centimetres from his chest. Moving faster than before I twisted around the descending blade, slamming my heel into the flat of the sword and snapping it cleanly in half. A heartbeat I was within his guard, grasping the vampiric ancient with the hate-mask by the wrist and crushing the bones. He was forced to drop the shattered blade from a nerveless hand and despite the injury he was utterly silent. I was moving now, ripping him around off his feet and putting the wounded bloodsucker between me and his comrade trying to hit me with his unbroken weapon.

An armoured fist caught me right across my face and I felt a tooth get knocked clean out of my enlarged maw. Another rocked my head back but by the time the third punch had been thrown I had turned my head and bit away most of his hand. Even with blood jetting from the wound and the sudden loss of fingers he still didn’t make a noise, instead he tried to jam his bleeding stump of a hand into my throat.

My own fist crashed across his face as I twisted him into the path of his comrade’s greatsword that speared him in the gut, punching out his back and coating the entire length in gore. Smashing into the metal mask hiding his features my fist tore it away, snapping the various straps that had affixed it to his face. For the first time during the fight, and perhaps for many years the vampire’s face was visible.

The bodies of the vampiric bodyguards were beautifully perfect in a way that could only be matched in carved marble, but their faces were not. Scar tissue covered every centimetre of naked flesh and savage knots of ancient wounds twisted the ancient vampire's expression to match my own daedric feature with its hideous nature. The creature’s nose had been hacked away long ago to allow the mask to sit closer and more firmly to its face. What was worse was that I could see that its lips had been sewn together with golden strands of an indeterminable string that was almost metallic, before being fused with a glowing crystal. Both these vampires hadn’t been making any noise during the fight as they were physically incapable of doing so.

Like the werewolves and the rest of the coven, these two bodyguards were mere thralls to the Matriarch. The crystals allowing their mistress to control them and ensuring complete and utter obedience. In the burning eyes of the creature I could see into the depths of an insanity that could’ve surprised Sheogorath Himself. Fuelled from decades, if not years of thirst that had not been satiated, both were utterly insane. If not for the burning crystal fused into their maw they would’ve sought death a long time ago.

Its torment was ended as it began burning, the eyes rolling into the back of its skull with an expression of bliss even as its skin blistered and peeled from the fire that consumed it from within. Now there was only two of us and I was moving even before the love-masked vampire could twist his heated blade from the ruins of his fellow.

A fist slammed into his head, another grasping it by the throat even as I knocked its sword to the side. The burning remnants of the vampire behind me scattered into the carpet and ruined it completely, leaving smouldering embers that were crushed underfoot as I pressed the other into the wall. Despite his size and strength, the other vampire ancient could do little more than lash at me with its hands and grapple with me. Moving like a professional wrestler, he locked a leg around one of my own, dropping us both into the singed carpet while we jammed hands, feet, elbows and knees into whatever we could reach. I felt my lip bust open as he head-butted me, a set of fingers jamming
themselves into my armpit in search for the pressure point that dwelled within but I didn’t release my hold on his throat.

Instead I smashed my own head forwards as he went to repeat his attack. My ridged forehead mashed into the golden mask, splitting my brow open but deforming the metal slightly. After three head-butts the mask was looking as though it was a wax figure that had been placed too close to a fire. After six, blood was leaking out from the sides and the wearer was growing weaker. After the tenth the mask was crushed into the creature’s face, crumpled and leaking blood and other fluids from the tiny eye slits and breathing holes. Only then did I stop using my smashed head to deliver crushing blows and instead gripped it with both hands, roaring and twisting with a series of pops until its head faced the wrong way.

I was slowing down, my body finally beginning to tire and the daedric corruption seeping its strength away. The creature consuming my flesh was weakening its hold but it was not yet weak enough for me to regain any semblance of control. As the last of the Matriarch’s warriors burned away into the carpet and fragments of broken furnishings I rose to my feet, looking about at the carnage. Tasting the air with a tongue that coiled like a serpent across my fangs, I could taste the fear and the rot of a vampire far older than any I had faced before; even ones like Volmyr.

She knew I was coming. It was impossible for anyone not to know. The sounds of fighting continued in the hall behind me but it was slowly dying off and was sounding like a minor brawl over the battle it had been minutes before. I strode down the passageway towards the single door at the end, following and feeling her taste and scent on the air grow stronger with every step. Surprisingly the door at the end was unlocked, and even more surprisingly I reached out and opened it gently rather than kicking it open in an explosion of splinters.

The count’s bedroom was incredibly furnished. Silks from throughout the empire lavished the walls and the carpet felt thick enough that I could sink into it. I had few beds I had slept in that would have matched the richness and softness of the carpet underneath my blood stained boots. My clawed fingers left a series of crystal glasses and decanters chiming as I gave them the lightest of touches in passing, and I found myself wondering just how much wealth was contained in this single room. What did seem to surprise me was how a large majority of the items within the room had been recently added and were infinitely more priceless. Most of the newer items all shared the same blood-drop symbol of the Matriarch and they mingled in with the dozens of items of the late Count Albric.

Following the scent of fear and taking a passing interest in the dozens of rare artefacts scattered about, I almost walked past her. Overwhelmingly powerful, and a skilled practitioner of several schools of magicka she had been waiting for me in absolute terror, huddling in the main bedroom next to a bed large enough for five or six people to sleep comfortably within.

Her skill with magicka, especially that of Illusion had allowed her to consume and control the minds of dozens of individuals and enslave not only her own kind but of bestial creatures such as werewolves. She could control the unwilling bodies of those who stood before her, paralyse and blind and as I soon discovered, disguise her own appearance.

Despite her immortality, the vampiric curse had withered and eaten away at her own the centuries of her life. Just as Lord Volmyr had felt the weight of the years press down; she too had her skin pale and crease, tightening and ruining her natural beauty. The glamour that she had been carefully maintaining for so long was no more, stripped away by the scalding effects of the Light of Dawn’s enchantments that had broken her concentration of so many of her spells. While a good portion of her body had been unaffected I could see the trailing lines of fresh burns and blistered skin where the touch of magical light had caressed her.
“What are you?” She whispered, looking up at me with a face taut and wrinkled from age. No longer the peerless beauty that she had portrayed herself earlier, the visage of a hag looked me in the eyes.

“I’m unique.” I growled, looking down at her as she shuddered. The glamour that she had cast was not one entirely fake. Despite the age that had corrupted her there was still signs that she had indeed been that beautiful many lifetimes ago.

Blackened like the bones of the dead vampires in the levels below us, my talons reached down and pressed into the flesh of her jaw, forcing her to rise to her feet and stare me in the eye. She was still taller than me, but there was no hiding the vampiric taint or her flesh. Fear and confusion wracked her body as she stood before me and I revelled in it. Her blood was singing to the beast within me, and despite the aura of death around her I could feel the dark attraction that drew our natures together. There was something within our mutual curse that held an attraction for each other that was far greater than anything sexual. As much as I yearned for the taste of her blood I knew without a doubt that she too could feel the shuddering desires to sink her fangs into my throat and taste my own daedric corruption.

My lips peeled apart in a horrific smile of needled fangs, my black eyes reflected in her own expression of terror at her realisation. So long had it been that she had been resisted by an individual or had even been touched without her permission. The mere fact that I had laid a hand on her was something she was struggling to comprehend, let alone when I pulled her hard into my embrace and sunk my fangs into her throat.

The intrusion left her tensed and arching her back, mouth open in a silent scream even as she clawed desperately at me. I felt claws sink into my face, drawing blood, hands slapping at me and legs writhing against me. Pressing her into the wall I sunk my teeth into her flesh even deeper, feeling the pulsating gore jetting into my extended maw that I gulped down without abandon. The blood was tingling, neither sustaining nor filling like the blood of mortals. What it lacked was more than made up with its potency.

Her struggles rapidly grew weaker as I drained her, feeling the gore shuddering itself into my throat and guts as I greedily slurped every bit I could. The front of my chest was stained anew with fresh blood, and the immaculate dress she wore was left hanging and ruined forever. There was no strength left in her body to resist as I drank my fill from her, ripping away with a mouthful of more than just blood. Spitting the hunk of flesh to the floor just as it caught alight I shuddered with the feeling of her strength infusing me. The closest I could compare the sensation to was when I first fed upon the Dremora, the overwhelming surge of energy and power that it infused every scrap of my flesh. My veins thundered and I could hear the roar of the blood rushing through my body, twisting me about even as she fell limp in my arms.

Death was near, only a few mouthfuls of blood away from meeting her patron lord in Coldharbour. Her blood stained my chin and most of my face, but it was lost to the sheer amount that ensured that I was covered from head to toe. It still tingled in my mouth and throat and I revelled in its intoxicating power even as her eyes fluttered closed.

Roaring with the effort, I dug my talons to the knuckles in her hip and shoulder, lifting her bodily above my head with arms growing tired from exhaustion. She was finally screaming now, despite the proximity to final death the agony of my claws inside of her snapping mind back to mundus once more. I was weary from the fighting, tired from the energy I had expended in the fight but now with her stolen strength inside of me the beast had one last death to claim. With the full strength of the daedra I twisted and folded her in half at the waist in such a way that the sound of her spine snapping was audible over her agonising shrieks.
Without even a second’s hesitation, I turned, facing the solid door that I had assumed led to another portion of the Counts private quarters before hurling her through it. Wood splintered and exploded outwards, shattering most of her bones and snapping hinges with the impact. Her screams were cut off in mid breath by the impact, the last of the air being forced out of lungs shredded by splinters of bone and wood. The door however didn’t lead to another room in the castle, but in fact led to a tiny balcony overlooking the courtyard. Light streamed in through the shattered hole and began stripping the flesh from her bones even as she flailed in the sudden emptiness. From where I stood her body simply dropped out of sight, burning away and leaving nothing more than a greasy smear of smoke and the distant thump of a body exploding into a starburst of blood and ash.

I stood in the beam of light shining through the ruined door frame, feeling the warmth across my flesh even as the beast returned to the darkness of my soul. There was little of the pain that had consumed me when I had first turned, but I was still left shuddering and drooling into the expensive carpet by the time it was all over. Talons slid back under skin, fangs rounded into molars and my face scrunched back into a man’s once more. Under my armour I felt my flesh writhe and shift, the strange protrusions along my forearms fading away and with it the unnatural size and strength in my limbs. Within minutes there was nothing left to show that a daedra had worn my flesh other than the carnage it had wreaked in its path.

Running footsteps echoed from the passageway and I found myself peering upwards and into the scowling features of Viconia. Like me, ash and gore covered every inch of her, streaming and dripping down her armour and bared flesh that left only her yellow eyes peering out of stained ebony flesh. She was panting, bleeding from a handful of scratches but was otherwise totally unharmed. The Light of Dawn as ever, appeared immaculate and didn’t have a single drop of blood staining its surface.

The expression on her face was thunderous, and yet concern broke through the stony exterior. As I rose unsteadily to my feet she glanced between me and the blood splattered remains of door, trying to decide how she felt and how to show it.

“Vith’ez mal’ai.” She spat, slapping me in the face as hard as she could before crushing me in an embrace.

Chapter End Notes

Drow Translations:

Ilhar vith’rellen! - Mother f***ers
Shar! Belbau uns’aa yorn! - Shar! Give me your power!
Elgg l’ssindossa! - Kill the whore!
Alu! Alu dos wael! - Go! Go you fool!
Vith’ez mal’ai. - F***ing Idiot.

I also hope that I portrayed Kaius losing control effectively, as I certainly don't want to portray him as a invincible powerhouse without weaknesses.

This is the largest and longest battle/fight scene I have written and would love some feedback. :-) Thanks in advance!
Stories and Rumours

Chapter Summary

After their experiences in Glenvar County, Kaius and Viconia return to Anvil where they and Azzan talk about the recent events in the city and the rest of the Empire.

Chapter Notes

Drow-Common translations are contained in the end notes.

This is by far the largest collection of dialogue in any of my writing, and contains a significant expansion on the occurrences and events during the Oblivion Crisis. As such I would be extremely grateful for comments or feedback on the style, the writing or the details and headcanon.

But more importantly, I hope you enjoy the chapter. :-D

We stood outside the door, listening to the muted voices coming from within and alternating between fidgeting and studying our surroundings. Only arriving in Anvil a few short hours previously, we had made our way more or less directly to the local Guild. Upon our arrival however it appeared that reporting to Azzan was going to have to wait; as he had a small collection of individuals who were already waiting to speak to him. So, we found ourselves waiting, choosing to remain in the upper levels of the chapterhouse rather than wandering about aimlessly.

“They’re keeping busy at least.” Muttered Viconia as she leant against the wall, arms folded and scowling.

I grinned slightly. “That they are...”

Glancing over to her I couldn’t help but feel more relaxed than I had in the past months. The journey from Glenvar had been thankfully short and quiet, and other than a brief stay in Skingrad we had continued on, leaving the darkness of that devastated county behind. It had been a fortnight since our arrival in Glenvar and the events that had followed, and we were beginning to feel the strain. For almost six months we had been travelling, and a vast majority of the time we were either on the road and had experienced fights and skirmishes almost constantly. The journey to Anvil from Glenvar had been purposely dragged out to give us some breathing space. As such and upon arriving in the port city I knew that Viconia was as thankful for the slight reprieve just as I was.

“So I’m supposed to do what? Sit back and wait while something keeps killing my babies?”

“I’m sorry Arvena, but I don’t have the fighters to spare for at least a week or more.”

The door to Azzan’s office was ripped open and the very flushed face of a dunmer woman appeared, the tight bun of hair slowly losing the fight to stay unravelled. “Well someone has to help
me!” She shouted, anger and frustration eating away at her features and twisting them into an expression that could almost match Viconia’s in intensity.

Ignoring Azzan’s cries from within his office she stomped past, barely pausing in stride but glaring at Viconia and I on the way past. Her anger was acid on the tongue and lingered in her wake as she left, muttering and cursing in Dunmeris the whole time.

There was something akin to silence in the upper floors, lasting just long enough for the echoing boom of a door being slammed downstairs. It only partially hid the sigh from within the office before Azzan’s strained voice called out a single weary ‘Next!’ with the full expectation of the issues that that word could bring.

“Sounds like you are making friends.” I said as I entered the office, moving lightly a few short paces behind Viconia.

Dressed in a simple cloth tunic and belted pants, Azzan was wearily rubbing at his temples and glaring at the pile of documents and parchments that were strewn across his desk. At the sound of my voice he glanced upwards, the strained expression washing away into relief and genuine pleasure.

“By the gods it is good to see you both.” He rose to his feet, shaking Viconia’s hand and then mine in his typical bone crushing fashion. “It’s even better that you aren’t some fresh petitioner or potential contract.”

“What’s the matter Azzan? Three or four months ago you were complaining of the lack of work, now there’s too much? Does anything make you happy?” The grin on my face and the sarcastic tone in my voice stripped away any potential offence I might have given, but I could see clearly how his eyes were starting to shrink into his skull and were red and inflamed. He obviously wasn’t sleeping well. If at all.

“Hmph. Easy for you to say. You don’t have to deal with women like Arvena and her gods-damned rat problem every damn day.” Blowing out a deep breath that puffed his cheeks he shook his head and motioned to one of the many cabinets within his room. “I don’t know about you two, but I could do with a drink.”

“Well… If you are offering.” Viconia replied, moving over and gracefully sitting down into one of the chairs near his desk.

“No brandy I’m afraid Kaius.” The metallic clunk of his Warhammer was felt through the floorboards more than heard as he shifted it to one side to open the cupboard’s doors. “But I have managed to procure a bottle or two of wine that you might enjoy.”

“Wine?” I gave him a suspicious glance as he opened a tiny chest within the cabinet emblazoned with frost runes keeping its contents chilled. “Since when do you drink wine?”

A trio of glasses appeared along with a bottle. “Ever since I won a couple of bottles in a game of dice.” Pulling out the cork, he filled the three glasses and handed us one each. “This is one of Tamika’s. Vintage 399. Quite an expensive drop, but I’ve found it to my liking.”

Like an experienced connoisseur he lifted the glass and took a sip, smiling before pressing the chilled bottle to the side of his head to assist with an obviously building headache. Both Viconia and I took our own experimental sips, finding the rich ruby liquid to be very good indeed. My own enjoyment was ruined slightly by the colouring and texture reminded me all too much of fresh blood and the fact that I would need to feed over the coming days.
“The guild almost looks deserted.” Viconia said between careful sips of her drink, savouring the taste.

Leaning against his desk he nodded and glanced between the two of us. “That’s because we are the busiest we have been in years. I can’t even remember a time when I had to turn down contracts, but since the siege the coin has been pouring in.”

“That good eh?”

He gestured about the room and I couldn’t help but glance at his towering suit of plate armour hanging from its armour stand. It was strange how fleshy and mortal he appeared outside of it, almost as though there was less of him when not dressed in the steel. What was somehow more surprising was that outside of the armour he was shorter, and seemingly less muscular than myself. It was a dangerous assumption to be had though as his body was hard as iron and strong despite how it appeared.

“We’ve taken on over two dozen new members in the past two months, and not a single one of them has been wanting for work. Most of our time these days has been taken over by training the militia and guard as the Countess has demanded. The rest of the time we’re trying to keep our usual contracts so when all this blows over we will still have some income.”

“It’s about time you got yourself some honest work.”

“Hah-hah, very funny Kaius.” He took another sip. “Teaching people how to soldier isn’t exciting… But fuck the Countess pays well.”

Viconia smiled over the glass. “Well enough to gamble for wine?”

“You bet, and it comes with other perks as well.” The deep baritone chuckle made us all grin as he puffed out his chest proudly. “You just happen to be looking at one of County Anvil’s Military Advisors.”

My drawn out appreciate whistle made all of us laugh. “You’re moving up in the world.”

“Yes, but like you two can’t talk.” He gestured to us and the improved clothes and equipment that we wore in comparison to the last time we had been in the port city. “Sir Desin, and Madame Viconia…”

“You heard about that did you?” Viconia muttered. While few others would have been able to notice, I could tell that she felt somewhat uncomfortable with the recognition.

“My dear, all of Tamriel would have heard of how the Heroes of Kvatch, Champions of Anvil, Claimers of the Light of Dawn, are now also members of one of the most illustrious military Orders within all Cyrodiil…”

“Great.” The growl in her tone was audible as she looked darkly about the room. “What about saviours of Glenvar?”

He stopped in mid motion. “I heard you cleared a den of Vampires when you retrieved the Light of Dawn, but that didn’t strike me as something you’d gain a new title for.” For a moment he paused. “But then again… I wouldn’t be surprised if you were awarded a new title with every hundred things you kill.”

The glance that Viconia and I shared caught his attention and he sighed, wiping his mouth and placing his glass on the desk. “Okay, I’ll bite. What shit did you two get yourselves involved in this
“There was more than one coven of vampires in Glenvar.” Viconia replied, staring at me intently the whole time.

“And you killed them obviously.”

I nodded. “Yeah, but not before they had well and truly settled into their new home. The second coven had infested the Castle. Over the past couple of months, they had killed, infected or enslaved most of the Castle inhabitants and were in the process of doing the same to the entire county.”

Azzan stopped, looking between to two of us with stunned disbelief etched into his features. “I definitely haven’t heard any of this. When did all this happen?”

“We were in Glenvar a fortnight ago. Managed to get there in time to rescue a few survivors holed up in the town hall, and the hundred or so locked up in the castle dungeon.”

“How many were there?”

“Those we saved? Or the vampires?”

“Both.”

I shrugged, meeting Viconia’s gaze. “A hundred, to a hundred and fifty survivors. And between fifty and hundred vampires and their thralls.”

“Don’t forget the werewolves.” Viconia added, ensuring like she had the past fortnight that everyone knew exactly what we had been facing.

“Werewolves?” Azzan asked incredulously.

“Almost a dozen werewolves. The Vampire leading the coven was a sorceress and she was somehow controlling the werewolves with the help of a wizard she had enthralled.”

“You killed them all!?”

Shaking my head, I kept glancing out of the corner of my eye at Viconia. Even before the blood has dried on our swords and armour, both Viconia and I had decided on a cover story. What had really happened was not something that either of us wanted known. In any form…

“Not really. Initially we were captured, but after a bit of time Viconia managed to break free of their spells with her magicka. The vampire matriarch lost control over the werewolves in the process and they ended up running wild. For the most part they slaughtered each other.”

“So you two simply sat back and watched…” he said sarcastically.

“Watched from the corner of the room with our backs to the wall.” Viconia added. “Anything that got too close we killed. Then, once all the noise stopped we went about picking off the survivors.”

Looking at him I smiled and added a considerable amount of sarcasm to my voice. “The Light of Dawn is extremely effective against the bloodsuckers.”

He smiled at my comment and shook his head in amazement. “I bet it is.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t heard about it before now.” I replied, looking over to him and finishing off my wine. “The entire county was more or less killed off. There is still several hundred people
confirmed dead or otherwise missing as far as anyone can tell. Hells, even Count Albric was killed by the vampires.”

“Another Count dead?”

“Very much so.”

Viconia placed her own glass on the desk and shrugged. “They skinned him and impaled him on a chandelier.”

Azzan frowned at that. “At this rate there’s not going to be any members of the Elder Council left.”

“Not sure that is a bad thing.” I replied, and the three of us chuckled somberly at the implications.

“If I hadn’t been by your side the whole time we dived head first into Oblivion, I would have doubted that you could have survived a horde of vampires and a pack of werewolves.”

“You wouldn’t have been the only one.” For a few moments I remembered the reactions of Glenvar’s survivors as they found themselves facing the gore and corpse filled ruins of the castle interior. Young Hadrgar especially had spent several long minutes cursing and swearing in complete surprise. His sentences and vocabulary had been reduced to the words; what, who, how, fuck, and the repeated in every possible combination.

For Ylfgar’s part he had simply stood in stunned silence along with most of the others at the sight of the hall filled with bones, corpses and ankle deep ash, blinking with his remaining eye before finally muttering “If this is what you do when you are ‘just going in for a look around’, then what in the hells were you going to do if you attacked the place instead?”

We ended up staying for another day or two to rest up and to help the survivors the best we could. Most of the captives from the dungeons were extremely traumatised and weak from their captivity. All of them, even the extremely young had been carefully bled to feed the coven. But being released, feeling the sun on their skin again and the appearance of a full cohort of Legionaries had done wonders for them all. When we had finally bid them all goodbye they were beginning to reclaim their former lives, repairing and restoring the castle and the village and caring for the injured, distraught or otherwise weakened members. The more enterprising of them were carefully raking and shovelling the ashes of the slain vampires into barrels as to alchemists and wizards, the substance was worth more than ivory. It seemed somehow poetic that those ashes represented a fresh start and a more certain future for the region and those who chose to remain.

“You both obviously haven’t been keeping up with latest events in your travels, otherwise you mightn’t have been too surprised at how we haven’t heard of this yet.” Azzan looked like he was still struggling to comprehend what we had achieved, and if I was being truthful I wasn’t sure whether Viconia and I had yet either.

“Things been that interesting have they?”

“Yeah.” He moved around to the other side of his desk and sat himself carefully into his chair. “Things are not going too well for the Empire.”

“We heard a few rumours and stories on the way here.” Viconia replied.

I nodded in agreement. “Mostly during our stay in Skingrad.”

“Such as?”
Viconia and I shared another glance. “Fighting and skirmishing up on the border of Skyrim and Morrowind, Argonians migrating back to Blackmarsh… That sort of thing.”

“That’s barely even a part of it all.” There was a sigh from the Redguard mercenary. “It’s true that the Eastern holds and House Redoran have started bickering more than normal, but that’s only a tiny part of what’s going on. Best way to put it, is that the whole Empire is starting to go to Oblivion in more ways than just one.”

Viconia ground her teeth together. “Is it really that bad?”

He nodded. “You better believe it. House Redoran is no longer pulling punches anymore, not after Ald’Ruhn. They’re mobilising for war and they aren’t giving a shit about what everyone thinks. Especially the other houses.”

A chill ran up my spine. Years serving in north western Vvardenfell had left me more familiar with the Redoran’s than the other Great Houses of Morrowind. While they were some of the more warlike of the Dunmer, the loss of their capital spelled a change to Morrowind’s political situation.

“That doesn’t surprise me.” I muttered, feeling their eyes on me. “The Redoran’s have always seen themselves as the defenders of Morrowind. Being unable to defend themselves against the daedra will have struck a nerve.”

“It’s done more than that I’m afraid.” Azzan shrugged and rummaged through some of the sheets on his desk until he found a letter opener. “They are pulling out all the stops, buying up every scrap of leather, slaughtering their netch herds and every piece of Ebony that is not required for the Imperial tithe is being smelted. They’re building an army.”

“What does the Elder Council say about this?”

Looking up at me he idly picked at his teeth with the letter opener. “The Council? All the members are too busy trying to gain power for themselves. There have been condemnations of course but it’s not going any further than that. As long as they don’t engage any Legion forces I doubt anything will stop them. It is however giving ideas to everyone else. House Hlaalu are quickly following suit, and Eastmarch hold and the Rift are mobilising their own forces. There have been clashes on the border and if everyone isn’t careful a war will break out between Skyrim and Morrowind.”

I swore under my breath and shook my head. “What else is going on?”

“Well, everyone in one way or another is getting ready for war. Either between the provinces or against the daedra. The Crowned and the Forebears have a semi-official truce going on, which has left Hammerfell with real peace for the first time in decades. If not longer. A few of their cities have been attacked by the daedra so it’s made a lot of Redguards realise the threat they we are facing.”

“How many cities have been attacked?” Viconia was listening intently, scrunching her face with concentration as she tried to piece together the news and everything I had taught her of the provinces. She had been learning as much as she could about Tamriel the past months and I knew she was picturing the maps I had been drawing and showing her in her mind.

“Dozens at least. Most attacks these past months have been more like raids as there have been very few portals opening. Those that do open seem to open in the wilderness rather than just outside a city’s gate like what happened here. I’d bet a lot of money on the fact that your ‘other’ friends have something to do about that.”

Both Viconia and I knew that he was right, and he knew it too. The Blades had not been resting on
their laurels the past months and the fact that most of the gates were opening away from civilisation meant that the Mythic Dawn was being hunted to extinction. This meant that they had to flee from the towns and cities and the enormous network of agents reporting back to Jauffre.

“That’s not to say that there haven’t been massive attacks. Black Heights in Elsweyr, Mournhold in Morrowind, Whiterun in Skryrim and Sunhold on the Summerset Isles have all been besieged like Anvil had. Nearly all have taken damage or suffered serious losses. When the portals open in the wilderness it gives the daedra some time to rally their forces together and do a concerted attack, rather than just rushing in blindly. About the only place so far that didn’t get too badly wrecked during a battle is Evermore in High Rock.”

I felt my eyebrow raise at that piece of news. “The daedra seem to have a habit of underestimating Knightly Orders.”

“You’d think that,” Azzan replied humorously. “but this time no, it wasn’t any of the Orders. They are preparing for war just everyone else though. I’ve heard that the Knights of the Rose have in excess of fifteen hundred fully fledged members. and that number is potentially growing.”

“If not knights, then who?”

There was a gleam in his eye. “Orcs.”

“Bullshit.”

Slapping a hand over his heart and making the sign of Talos with his other he laughed. “On my honour. A warband of orcs several hundred strong appeared, charged the daedra, stomped them into the dirt and left. They stayed only long enough to burn the dead and pick up their wounded.”

“Bet that’s pissing off all the bluebloods up there. Can’t imagine their reactions at being saved by a bunch of filthy greenskins.”

“Oh… Yeah… It’s only the beginning though. Good old King Gortwog is getting them all ready for a fight and they aren’t sitting back waiting for the daedra to come to them. Some of the stories going around at the moment is that there is rolling thunder coming from the Wrothgarian Highlands.”

Viconia looked confused. “Thunder?”

“Yeah, thunder. As in the kind made from of scores of smithing hammers, hundreds of bellowed orders and the tramping of thousands of plated feet.” He looked between to two of us and twirled the dagger in his fingers. “I doubt there is a single Orc up there who isn’t strapping on some form of armour and grabbing an axe.”

Viconia’s eyes widened at the thought of the entire Orsimer race readying for battle. “Why do I suddenly feel sorry for the daedra?”

Both Azzan and I laughed as a ghost of a smile played across her face.

“What about the southern Provinces?” I asked simply.

“Bit of a mixed bag. Haven’t heard much from Summerset other than rumours, but the elves have their panties in a bunch.” There was another chuckle. “A little more than usual at least. They are arming themselves but there are stories of how some of them are turning to daedra worship as a means of dealing with the other daedra.”

My own snort stopped him in mid breath. “That story is older than time itself. The damn elves are
always being spoken of worshipping daedra and summoning the damn things.”

Bunching and twisting, the muscles in his shoulders stood out under the tunic as he shrugged. “That’s what I’ve heard in any case. Elsweyr is as usual full of cats running around chasing after themselves and worshipping the moon. They are still taking precautions after Black Heights was razed. Looks like every Palmraht is capturing and taming every Senchenraht they can find and the rest are digging up every piece of moonstone armour they have been making these past years.”

“And Valenwood?”

The expression that crossed his face was indeterminable for a moment before he simply shook the thoughts away. “Valenwood is an enigma as usual. The tree worshippers have been having fits for the past years since Falinesti rooted itself to the ground. Now they are saying that it a sign from their gods or something.”

“That sounds like you have heard other things.” Viconia asked.

“I have… In a way.” The pause dragged on for a handful of seconds before he markedly glanced between the two of us. “I’ll come back to that in a sec. I will need to explain the situation here in Anvil and why I requested the two of you to come.”

We sat quietly as he took some measured breaths, making a point of meeting out gazes with his own. “I trust you both saw how busy the city is at the moment?”

Together we nodded and he bobbed his head along with us. “It’s a little… crowded to say the least.” I stated very simply.

“Ol zhah aluin ulu plynn tangin inbau l’gow doeb d’ussta ofil’nisha…”

Azzan smiled slightly and nodded as though he understood what Viconia had muttered, before continuing on. “It’s crowded as the population has almost doubled in two months. Since the attack, nearly every village, town, hamlet and farm in the area has been abandoned from as far away as the Hammerfell border. People are terrified, and rightly so. With Kvatch so close nearby, no one is under any illusions of what a daedric attack can do.”

Leaning over the desk he gazed over the gleaming pointed blade in his hands that seemed little large to a toothpick. Such a item seemed ridiculous in the hands of a man who’s go-to weapon was twenty kilograms of lead filled steel. “The guild has easily doubled in numbers, both from us actively recruiting and from the number of volunteers. The local guard has been transformed into a militia and is well on the way of becoming a small army in its own right.”

“How many soldiers?” Viconia voice was filled with awe as she asked the first question that came to mind.

“Before the assault there was only about three thousand guards in the entire city. Now? Easily ten times that number. The recruits are being given weapons so fresh from the forges they are almost still glowing. Every metal worker in the city is tasked with churning out arms and armour and whatever else they need. The Countess is sparing no expense in ensuring that they are as well-equipped as they can be.”

I could feel my mouth go dry as I heard the number. While unable to match the discipline, equipment or exacting standards of the Imperial Legion, six full legions worth of Militia was a sizable force. “Obviously the Guild still has contracts with the Castle for training them all?”

Another nod. “Indeed. Half of us are trying to teach them enough that they won’t stab themselves or
lop an arm off. Most are limited to training with broom handles or sticks due to the shortage in equipment. That in itself makes it interesting to turn a mass of tavern wenches, stableboys and farmhands into something resembling warriors.”

“By the Nine…” My whisper was too quiet for either of them to pick up but my expression was obvious. The numbers and the sheer scale of what was occurring was incredible and hadn’t been seen in Cyrodiil since the Tiber Wars at the beginning of the Third Era.

“That isn’t the issue though. Training the militia, even in such numbers isn’t a problem. We are making good progress. The real issues are what else is going on in the county. We’re in a bad way and it is not going to take much for things to get a lot worse.”

“How so?”

Azzan sighed and gestured hopelessly. “Everyone is scared, terrified of the daedra and most have left their homes and their possessions behind. Half the County is abandoned and the bits that aren’t are havens for bandits and cutthroats. Maybe one in every five caravans heading along the Gold Road make it as far as Skingrad without losing part of their wares or gold from highway ‘tolls’. Some, never even get as far as Kvatch. To make things even worse, the attack on the cathedral has left everyone fearing similar attacks within the city that the guard and militia can’t deal with. Dealing with refugees was straight-forward, but now we also have doomsayers and prophets in the streets preaching ‘end of the world this’, and ‘doom upon all mortals’ that. Those who have come in from the countryside are left as little more than beggars and the almhouses and boarding houses are filled to capacity. A lot of them are simply living in tents on the streets. Those who join the militia are being paid at least, but its draining the city coffers like a drunkards flagon. To top it all off, we’re barely one or two days away from famine and starvation at any given time.”

“What in all the hells do you expect us to do?” Viconia snapped suddenly, looking stunned and concerned at the situation. “I’m half surprised that they haven’t been ejected outside the city walls at least.”

“That was considered by the bluebloods.” Azzan said scornfully, and judging by Viconia’s expression she had said the least brutal idea from her experiences and Drow nature. “Among other things…”

“I bet the idea of killing off a few hundred or so, or letting them starve was thrown around.”

The moment’s hesitation from Azzan answered the question that I knew had been on the forefront of Viconia’s mind.

The same ghost of a smile and the darkness in her eyes returned for a moment before vanishing. “L’shinduago zhah saph l’Har’oloth foldraevals…”

“Anyway,” Azzan continued. “The reason why I sent that message out requesting you both to return wasn’t so you could come back and bust skulls. That might be a part of it but I have a worse job for you two.”

“I’m hesitant to ask what that could be…”

White teeth flashed in his dark face. “Public relations.”

Groaning, I turned and looked at Viconia who seemed to share the same expression. Even though she wasn’t entirely sure of the meaning, she knew enough of the surface and the common tongue to get the gist of it.
“Don’t you have a nice hell-portal for us to go dive into instead?”

“Ha. But no.” The grin grew wider and he was obviously enjoying himself at our expense. “With all the doom and gloom and fear in the area we needed more than just another pair of swords. The locals are going to be a lot calmer and relaxed knowing that the City’s champions and the very heroes of Kvatch are here in person. By now half the city will know that you have returned.”

Nodding soberly, I remembered the expressions from some of the local guards as we made our way through the restored city gates. Our armour alone was enough to provide the city’s inhabitants our identities. Both Viconia and I could see his point and knew that it was well founded. Something as simple as having us in the city would do wonders for morale and let a lot of people sleep better at night, even if it was akin to a placebo.

“So we spend the next few days or weeks or however long walking about the city, making speeches and kissing babies? That sort of thing?”

“Fuck no.” he exclaimed simply. “I’m still going to have you both earning your coin. I have something special in mind for both of you. Especially yourself Kaius.”

My stomach twisted unexpectedly. “Such as?”

“Well, half of the Guild is training the militia, but the other half is trying to do something about the bandits in the area. We’re working with the Mages Guild and taking small squads of guards and soldiers out with us on excursions. So far it has been working well. We’re burning out a few camps, taking prisoners and giving the newbies their first taste of combat in the process.”

“So you want us to tag along on a patrol and hunt some bandits?”

“No exactly, and not the two of you.” My stomach did another mild flip-flop at his words and Viconia and I glanced at each other again. “For the most part, the bandits in the area at little more than beggars and looters. A lot of the locals and their families have been forced to crime and there have been a lot that have taken to robbing each other just to eat. There are some though that have come from further away or are much better organised. They are proving more difficult to find, let alone combat.”

Gesturing over his shoulder in the rough direction of north, he shrugged again. “Whatever ones we can take prisoner we can, and the Countess has decreed pardons in some cases. Even better, her and her cronies are doing a damn fine job at ensuring everyone is fed and looked after. That’s going a long way to stopping the looting and pillaging. Those who have turned to highway robbery and banditry out of desperation are easy to find, easy to deal with and usually surrender at the first sign of a guard. The others however are becoming massive thorns in our sides.”

“Sounds like a bandit plague.”

Azzan tongued his cheek in thought. “You’re not far from the truth. There are several gangs or groups that are very experienced in this area. A couple are from Hammerfell, and there is at least one group that has come all the way from Skyrim to prey upon the caravans supplying Kvatch. Between the Redguard marauders and these ‘Raiders’, they have been responsible for the majority of the deaths and nearly all of the attacks.”

“How many are there?”

“Several dozen or more from Hammerfell and maybe two dozen Nords in half a dozen groups. All are very well equipped, especially for bandits, and are very good at living off the land and hiding.”
The lights were growing brighter in my mind as I realised what he had planned for me. “You need someone experienced in tracking.”

“Exactly.” He nodded carefully and I saw how Viconia was listening intently while remaining perfectly expressionless. “Nearly all of us in the guild and the vast majority of the guard have lived in cities or on ships all of our lives. We couldn’t find our own arses in the wilds, let alone several small groups actively hiding from us. You however, being a forester and all will be perfect and will go a long way towards helping out the others. The only trackers or scouts we have are Llensi and Rhano, and Rhano’s a better trainer than hunter. They are being run off their feet and fatigue is building quickly.”

Trying to ignore the strange expression growing on Viconia’s face I tried to get my head around his intent. “You want me to go out looking for the bandits, find where they are and report back.”

“Yep. That’s the overall gist of it. You find the bastards, and then lead a team of guards and guildsmen and a mage or two back to them to do the heavy lifting. Now I know that after fighting vampires, werewolves, and daedric incursions that you’d be able to handle a few drunken Nords and Redguards by yourself, but please try to let everyone else earn their keep… Okay?”

“What about me?” Viconia added very softly. “Am I going to be stuck babysitting?”

“Don’t worry Vicky, you won’t be bored.” The gleam in his eyes returned once more. “You might be the public face for the guild and showing everyone that the Champions of Anvil are in town, but I’m not getting you to do this because you are prettier than this dumb bastard.”

The faintest hint of a smile creased her face as he gestured to me. “Part of their training is patrolling the streets and helping the more experienced members of the guard. There’s a lot of tension in the city at the moment and this week alone we have had to break up or stop five separate incidents that nearly turned into full blown riots. There’s going to be plenty of fighting to keep you entertained while you have a break from Kaius.”

“I could use with some time to myself.” She said simply, smiling coldly and somehow not letting it reach her eyes which seemed somewhat concerned at the prospect.

“Part of the issue that we have in the city on top of everything else is that there are a number of travellers arriving and staying in the city. Pilgrims, if you can believe it.”

“Why are pilgrims travelling to Anvil?”

He looked me dead in the eye. “The Cathedral is not the only one to have been attacked in such a way.”

Both Viconia and I looked at him stonily and waited for him to continue. Using the point of his letter opener he made gestures as he spoke, drawing a map of Tamriel out of the air with deft movements. “Similar attacks have occurred in Skyrim, Wayrest, Vvardenfell and Hammerfell. Each time it has been the same story; everyone inside at the time died, their bodies ripped apart and used to desecrate whatever altars or holy artefacts lie within. Those responsible have somehow always been able to escape or vanish before anyone can arrive.”

“So no one has been able to tell who’s behind it all?”

He shook his head. “Only guesses and rumours; the usual currency for these sorts of things. One of the guards at the Castle I play dice with has been part of the local investigation. Its seems that despite the other attacks; this was definitely the first that occurred.”
“Was he able to tell you anything more?” Viconia asked, watching his hands move about as he used the gleaming dagger to articulate with.

“She, and not much I’m afraid.” The tanned skin seemed to go a few shades darker for a moment and I wondered whether dice was the only interest they had. “They have ruled out any involvement from the Mythic Dawn, which only makes things even more confusing. Just when we thought there wasn’t any room left for murdering cults and assassins this goes and happens. They’ve also ruled out the Dark Brotherhood and a number of other parties that may have been responsible, but instead they have come to a dead end. The best guess that anyone has had, is that daedra are responsible but it doesn’t seem to fit the *modus operandi* of the lot besieging the Empire.”

“Mehrunes Dagon is not subtle. If he wanted a chapel desecrated, he’d just raze the entire city and be done with it.”

“On that everyone seems to agree with you Kaius. They’ve ruled out the Prince of Destruction but otherwise there could be any number of alternatives. The Church of the Nine has got a *lot* of enemies within Tamriel and beyond.”

“Any pattern anyone can determine?” Viconia’s eyes narrowed as she listened and I realised that she probably had more experience with attacks on temples and faith and the darker side of worship. Especially from her time as a priestess of Lloth.

“Other than that the only temples or centres of worship that have been attacked have belonged to the pantheon of the Nine. Besides the Cathedral of Dibella here, the others have been dedicated to all of the gods. In fact, the only one of the Nine who hasn’t had a temple or something attacked has been Talos.”

My snort raised his eyebrows. “Only a matter of time by the sounds of things.”

“That’s what everyone seems to be thinking at least. In the meantime, there have been a lot of pilgrims and faithful travelling here and the sites of the other attacks. Some are travelling from all over Tamriel and most are arriving little better than beggars themselves. The only benefit from them is that other than the odd demagogue or firebrand trying to stir things up, they are helping keep the peace and are generally helpful and calm. What will be surprising, is that you aren’t the only Knights in the city at the moment.”

“Really?” I exclaimed, somewhat surprised. “What knights? And from which order?”

“Several.” Azzan’s expression changed to mild confusion tinged with annoyance. “They are mostly travelling alone but there are a handful of smaller groups around as well. They are here for the same reason as the pilgrims; they all heard about the attack and decided to come to Anvil. Not sure what all these god-botherers plan is or what they think they can accomplish by coming here, but having Knights strolling about makes our job easier.”

“Is the cathedral reopened yet?”

Again he shook his head. “No, and it won’t be for some time. By the order of the Countess it is to be closed until further notice.”

“Any explanation as to why?”

“Nothing official. ‘Carefully lowering his voice he glanced to the door at our backs, before continuing in hushed tones. ‘Unofficially, my ‘friend’ has told me that what happened in there hasn’t changed since the day it happened. The bodies haven’t been moved or taken for burial due to the
current state of everything in there. Nothing had decayed and the blood is still as fresh as what it was when it was pumped from the arteries of the priests and acolytes. Even Carradil and the other mages are at a loss.”

Turning I gave Viconia a pointed glance until she looked at me. Shrugging, she tucked some of her white hair back behind the circlet she wore around her forehead. “My money would definitely be on Daedric or some other form of what you would consider to be darker magicka. Someone was making a point and going to a lot of effort to do so.”

“That’s also the consensus. There’s writing marking the central altar that has been written in the blood but so far no one has been able to translate it.”

“Drow?” I asked Viconia, and she shook her head.

“Lloth doesn’t do subtle when it comes to dealing with cults and upstart gods. Even her followers wouldn’t have bothered within leaving a statement as such. A few impalements and a public immolation have been far more suitable and they wouldn’t have been so concerned with escaping without being seen.”

“Speaking of people’s expertise.” Suddenly interjecting, the letter opener was dropped on the surface of the desk with a clatter. Quickly but carefully, Azzan began rifling through drawers with wooden scrapes echoing through the room. “I have something I want your opinion on Kaius.”

“Anything interesting?” I said, amused as he exclaimed as he found what he was looking for and lifted it from its storage.

“You will probably think so.” He replied, placing the rolled up bundle of cloth on the desk and carefully unwrapping its contents. “Tell me what you think.”

Leaning forward, I looked over the tiny collection of what first appeared to be sticks, until I realised what I was looking at was in fact a small collection of shattered arrows. Broken in several places, and made up of a handful of separate shafts, they appeared unusual and felt strange as I picked them up.

“Is this… Bone?” Viconia exclaimed as she too plucked one from where it lay. The eagle’s feather had been affixed to the end with what looked like some type of silk and it had been snapped two thirds of the way down its length. Like hers, mine was from a light brown substance that was definitely not wood.

“Yeah.” I held up mine and studied it carefully. The shaft was from a single carved length of bone, whittled from a thigh bone or something similar. Instead of what I considered to be the normal pointed tip, the broadhead was wickedly sharp, carved into a sharp, flat V shape with a pair of razored tips that had been blunted and ruined from an impact. Whatever it had hit had left tiny hint of blood staining the grooves, and the shaft was broken midway. Instead of steel it had been carefully carved from flint and somehow treated with some unidentifiable substance to further improve its durability.

“These are Bosmeri.” My words were met with a bobbing of Azzan’s head as I looked over the small collection. “Traditional make too. That’s unusual. I thought that most Bosmer use modern arrows.”

“They are definitely Bosmer, and yes, usually they do use less primitive arrows. The Fletchers here in Anvil make a huge amount throughout the year and constantly export them to Valenwood. There’s some serious coin in that trade.”
“Where did you get these?”

“Three days north there is a small settlement. The locals abandoned it as soon as they heard about the siege. A group of necromancers had taken up shop there, until someone using these arrows decided to kill them very quickly and very precisely.”

“What were necromancers doing around these parts?”

“Well ever since the ban, those wanting to mess around with the dead have had to go into hiding. Anvil and Kvatch counties are the best places of late to hide out; plenty of dead, lots of elbow room and the guard are too busy running around after bandits and daedra worshippers to bother them.” For a moment he looked like he had taken a bite out of a rotting apple. “There was almost a dozen of them in the town, complete with the usual assortment of skeletons, zombies and undead. Didn’t help them much though.”

The letter opener stabbed in my direction and at the arrow in my hands. “That one you’re holding was pulled out of the mortar of the inn. Whoever had loosed it, had enough strength to draw a bow powerful enough to punch through someone’s skull and over thirty centimetres of rock and cement.”

My whistle momentarily hid the surprise and further stab of unease in my guts. “Unless they fired it from point-blank range they would need a bow with over a hundred and forty pounds of draw strength.”

“Huurwen said the same thing.” He agreed. “She was the one who came across the village. It took her a few hours to thoroughly check the place out. Whoever had been responsible had been in and out and killed the whole lot of them in a very short space of time. Those arrows are the only signs of who was responsible and it took her a lot to find them. The ‘mancers had mostly been killed by arrows, but every shaft had been retrieved and even the arrowheads were cut out of them. Those who hadn’t been shot had been knifed.”

“Plenty of cut throats then?” Smiling, I looked up at his serious face and my humour vanished.

“Not a single one.” Shaking his head, the words dragged themselves from between his lips. “These were no amateurs. Cutting throats is messy and you can easily make a mess of it. Those few who were knifed were stabbed. Very precisely too. In the armpit, between the ribs or right under the ear.”

The tap-tap-tap of a finger against the little hollow where his jawbone met his neck and ear left me nervously rubbing at mine. It in particular, was the spot that foresters were taught in the Legion to kill unsuspecting foes. A hand over the mouth, gripping tightly to cut off any scream, a blade would be jammed in deeply, severing all the major arteries and if done at the correct angle would also jam into the base of the brain. If not instantly fatal, it would leave the victim unable to scream, move or breathe and death would quickly follow.

“Knowing that most ‘mancers in Cyrodiil were once members of the Arcane University, I asked Carradil to have a look into it. This particular group had called themselves the Putrid Hand and had a particular interest in artefacts. Daedric, Ayleid and the like. Apparently the Mage leading them; Lien Valeth, had been booted out of the University for not only practicing necromancy, but also trying to steal a few things from the vaults.”

“What happened to him?”

“Stabbed in the brain while taking a shit.”

With unease crawling and worming its way up my spine, I remembered the tales I had heard during
my time within the Legion. Foresters had their own campfire stories and the more popular and well known were always about hunters and individuals with similar skills to our own. There were those who were known of by every forester and were almost legends within the Empire.

“Rangers…” I breathed.

“Yeah. There’s some of them in the area, and they are keeping out of sight.”

Snorting again, I handed back the arrow and folded my arms. “That goes without saying. There is a running joke in the Legion; If a Ranger kills someone in a forest, does it make a sound?”

Glancing between the two of them, Azzan shrugged his shoulders and Viconia simply stared at me.

“No. It makes a corpse.”

Azzan sighed loudly and Viconia gave me a glare usually reserved for when I overcooked a meal or did something she found stupid.

“F’sarn helothannin’in xuil biu mal’ai…” She muttered darkly under her breath, sarcasm dripping from every word as she handed back her own arrow. “Who are Rangers? And are they that stealthy?”

“They are the epitome of stealth.” Azzan replied before I could and gave me a wink as he did so. “They are the eyes and ears of Valenwood; the scouts, skirmishers and assassins. As the stories go they are also the guardians of the forests and of the Silvenar.”

“They sound like the Blades.”

Cutting Azzan off in mid breath, I returned the favour and Viconia rolled her eyes at us. “In a way. The Blades learned from, or at least they use the Rangers as an example to strive towards. They can travel unseen throughout the Empire but usually they never leave Valenwood except during times of war.”

“Well Kaius… This can be classified as a time of war in a lot of ways.”

“But not the kind of war that would result in Rangers travelling into Cyrodiil. At least not without a host of Warsmers at their backs.”

“Rhano had one speak to him last week.”

Involuntarily, my jaw dropped and I stared at him. “No way.”

“You know Rhano. He’s many things, but he’s never been able to tell a decent story in his life.”

I couldn’t help but agree. Rhano was a solid, dependable warrior but he wasn’t the most imaginative of individuals. “What exactly did he say happened?”

Pressing the tip of the letter opener into the desk, Azzan idly spun it by flicking the blade with his finger. “He was out scouting for bandit camps when all of a sudden this Wood Elf appeared out of nowhere. He says that one second he was by himself in one of the forests to the North of the Brina Cross Inn, and the next the Elf had appeared right beside him. Scared the shit out of him apparently.”

“Did they talk to each other?”

“Not much. Rhano said that the Bosmer had simply told him not to go in the forests between Fort Wariel and Sutch as his safety wasn’t guaranteed.”
“That sounds like a threat.” Sighing to herself, Viconia stretched out and rolled her neck in an attempt to ease some of the tenseness from riding Ultrin.

“Rhano didn’t think so. He said that it was more like a friendly heads-up rather than an implied threat. The settlement full of dead ‘mancers is roughly in that area, and he seems to think that the Rangers are searching for something around there. Whatever their intent is, he didn’t get anything else out of the Elf. He told me that before he could even finish turning around or say anything the Ranger just vanished. Like ‘poof’…” He made a flicking gesture with the fingers of his free hand. “Gone…”

Chewing on the inside of my cheek I thought over the implications. “Did he investigate any further?”

“Nope. and so far he hasn’t had any intention of going back out there. That’s another reason why I need someone else experienced and willing to hunt bandits. His nerve is a bit shot after having that damn elf get the jump on him like that.”

I blew out a deep, long breath and looked over at Viconia. It wasn’t visible to Azzan, but both of us were suddenly very uncertain about separating for any period of time. Going by the look in her eyes Viconia especially was feeling distinctly uneasy.

“What sort of timeframe are you looking at needing us here?” I asked, feeling her gaze burning into mine.

He shrugged again. “A week or two. Maybe more. Once we get a handle on the bandits and take out the more organised groups the guards and the guild will be able to manage the rest. Otherwise after what you both have been through, Anvil should be a bit of rest.”

“How soon do you need us to start?” Soft but with a strange steel-like hardness creeping into her words, Viconia’s gaze moved from me to Azzan.

“How soon can you be ready?”

It was my turn to shrug, and Viconia looked between us for a moment. Almost imperceptibly she took control over feelings and apprehension, crushing them deep inside before nodding. “Tomorrow.”

“Well, looks like I’ve got few rough nights ahead of me.” Creasing my face, my smile hid my own apprehension as Azzan positively beamed.

“Excellent. I knew I could count on the both of you.” He rubbed his hands together and carefully rolled up the broken remains of the arrows into the sheet of cloth. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow morning and give you directions on where our camp is and where to report to Huurwen. Otherwise use this time to get ourselves settled in again and ready. I know I feel better with you both back in the city, but please don’t do anything dumb while you’re here.”

Nodding in both of our directions his grin grew even larger. “Try not to get yourselves in too much trouble while you’re here. There’s enough craziness in the area without you going looking for more of it.”

Chapter End Notes
Drow Translations:
"Ol zhah aluin ulu plynn tangin inbau l’gow doeb d’ussta ofil’nisha" - It is going to take days to get the smell out of my clothes
"L’shinduago zhah saph l’Har’oloth foldraevals" - The surface is like the Underdark sometimes
"F’sarn helothannin’in xuil biu mal’ai" - I'm travelling with an idiot
It takes a certain amount of skill, not to mention will and discipline to be able to hunt or scout. Not many within the Empire would be capable enough or be able to survive on their own within the wilds of Tamriel. Certain races were more inclined or naturally gifted; the Bosmer, Khajiit and Argonians in their respective homelands were the supreme examples. The Foresters of the Imperial Legions however, as the Legions did with most things had turned simple skills used to survive or provide for one’s community and turned it into arts of warfare.

Even then, with years of training it took a specific skillset that was more than just physical to do what those living on the fringes of society accomplished on a daily basis. To be able to move unseen and unheard, to track by the merest traces of prints, disturbed foliage and limited spoor, and above all have the mental capacity and strength of mind to be able to handle fending for oneself in land that grew ever more hostile the further you trekked.

Foresters within the Legion were the eyes and ears of the Cohorts, and were responsible for a significant amount of the legionary’s diet. Usually hunting in tiny groups of two or three at a time for mutual protection, the foresters would roam around the main camps, hunting and bringing back whatever game they could manage to bring down. during times of war they would be the hidden scouts, seeking out the Legion’s foes and harassing them with loosed arrows from concealed positions or picking off sentries or the unwary.

There were a few however that took these skills further, and showed enough ability to not only perform their duties well, but were capable of doing so alone. To be able to wander the wilds with no one but themselves to rely upon and going on patrols days or weeks at a time was a skill that was only found in one in every twenty foresters. These were the men and mer who would find themselves rising through the ranks from mere legionaries, most with their eyes firmly planted on the illustrious rank of scout-champion for each legion.

My skills had allowed me to rise to the rank of Archer-Prefect. This placed me in the position of being one of twenty within my local casta, and one of the few dozen within the 14th with the authority and skill to hunt and scout on my own, I was bar far one of the best. It did however provide me with a greater ability than most within the Fighter’s Guild and soon proved that Azzan had chosen a job well suited for me.

Foresters intrusted to solo missions were usually granted a higher level of initiative within the Legion’s rank structure and I looked forward to being entrusted with such responsibility during my service. The sense of freedom, the fact that I was simply given an order to accomplish a task with the choice of how to do so entirely up to myself. The more I thought of it though, the more I realised it was this same love of having a choice and freedom, combined with my personal initiative that left me travelling down the rocky path to desertion in the first place.

Ensuring that I was well prepared, dressed in my armour, wrapped in my minotaur leather cloak and carrying everything needed for a month of living rough I left Anvil and Viconia behind. Every pouch I had was filled with various items, my tiny travelling pack containing little more than dried rations and my compound bow was left for the most part, unstrung and locked within its leather travelling case. A pair of knives, both Sunchild and the Light of Dawn and twenty arrows found their way onto my person as well, all within easy reach but situated where they wouldn’t catch on passing
branches or otherwise hinder my movement.

I was hollow, empty inside without Viconia by my side. The months that we had been together had left us unconsciously relying on each other more than what we had realised. Until the first night where I found myself sitting before my tiny campfire, I don’t think I fully realised how I too relied on her for support just as much as she did with me. It had nearly been half a year since we had first met, and we had gone from distrusting companions to lovers in that short space of time. What surprised me the most though was how beside loneliness I was also feeling a sense of freedom at finding myself alone and responsible for only myself.

Separating from Viconia was strangely easier, and yet harder than I was expecting. The pangs of loneliness ate away at me in the deepening shadows of the evenings and mornings when I made camp and maintained my equipment, but I was also highly focussed on my task and my surroundings. Only a fool or the inexperienced let their guard down in the wilds, and after surviving years within Vvardenfell and several dozen solo expeditions I wasn’t going to do any different. The Empire might have stamped its presence into Tamriel with paved roads, aqueducts and sprawling farmlands, but its hold was only tentative at the best. When you moved more than a kilometre or more from a road or village, nature ruled with an iron fist and Kynareth was an unforgiving mistress.

While my younger years, and my teenage life within eastern Hammerfell had forged my skill in hunting, it had been tempered and honed in the Legion. Morrowind, especially Vvardenfell was not a place for the unwary or inexperienced. Between the fauna that inhabited he fungal forests and the mountain ranges and the occasional corpus creature roaming the lands, it was extremely hazardous. That was taking into account the fact that numerous diseases were also rife through most of the animal population that didn’t include Corpus, and a considerable amount of the flora was also deadly to touch, let alone consume.

Cyrodiil in comparison was almost laughably safe, but only in the briefest of comparisons. It was a dangerous to assume safety anywhere in the Empire, as the line between civilisation and wilderness was extremely thin. In Anvil county, mountain lions roamed the land, forest trolls could be occasional encountered along the border to Kvatch and minotaurs were not unheard of. Closer to the coast the higher the chances of encountering dreugh became. The shelled monstrosities could be found throughout most coasts and rivers in Tamriel, and after my experiences around Khuul I had no intent of renewing my acquaintance with them.

The largest difference within Cyrodiil compared to Morrowind was the locals. For the most part they were not threatening in the slightest, whereas in Morrowind whether they be the local Dunmer disliking the presence of the Legion, or some of the outright hostile Ashlanders the only real safety was within a Legion Fortress. This time, the only hostile individuals were the ones I was tasked in tracking down.

Before I had reported to Huurwen I had made the decision that I would only hunt at night. Normally, and to most individuals the night was impossible to track or hunt except for the nights where the moons were full. To me however I had every intention of using my vampiric side to its advantage, not only to learn more about myself and control my abilities but to give myself every advantage I could in such an undertaking.

I had found Huurwen in the Guild’s camp, looking extremely tired and haggard from a fortnight’s scouting. As a result, she was extremely glad for the reprieve that I represented. Between herself and Rhano, they represented the only two within the guild who had any real skill or experience in tracking. A such they had been busy the past three months. The weeks of living rough, moving carefully throughout the county and their nerves constantly on edge had sapped their strength and will. For Rhano, his breaking point had been when a Ranger had made a complete mockery of his
skill and ability. Huurwen hadn’t reached her point, but judging by her twitchiness and red-rimmed eyes it wasn’t too far away.

They had been effective though. Two dozen fighters leading three or four dozen fresh recruits would patrol the roads, while the handful of skilled hunters would go out to all the likely hiding spots. Known Ayleid ruins, ancient abandoned Legion forts, caves and mines, and abandoned farms and villages were all checked and rechecked. At any time that recent activity was found it would be followed and those responsible scouted through stealth as much as possible. If they were anyone suspicious or related to the groups of bandits, the scout would lead a squad of fighters to where they were hiding. Well over a hundred individuals had been taken prisoner, and half as many killed as any resistance was not tolerated and punished harshly.

After such a solid effort in eradicating the bandit problem of the county, those that were left were the hard-core elite. In the full tradition of Gaiden Shinji Himself; the best techniques were being passed on by the survivors. Huurwen believed that there were only one or two groups left, but these were the most hardened, toughest, well equipped and stealthy of them all. At least one group was the last of the marauders from Hammerfell, and two were Nordic Raider bands. They were continuing to make their presence felt, as despite the way that they were being hunted they had chosen to continue their actions. Several caravans had been attacked or even wiped out entirely. For the most part handfuls of individuals were left robbed on the side of the road or destitute after everything of value had been taken away to their camps. It seemed that anyone who resisted were being slain and left as warnings for the Guild.

Within the first week I had managed to track down one of the raider bands, deciding not to lead the fighters to their camp where they resided. I fell upon them in the night, using my vampiric abilities to the fullest and slaking my growing thirst. My role for the Guild was a perfect opportunity to test myself and above all, learn my breaking point. A growing portion of my conscious mind had decided to ensure that the slaughter that I had wreaked upon the Blood Coven would never occur unless I explicitly chose to do so.

To hunt prey, whether it be animal or human, or to scout out areas required more than just the ability to move quietly or live off the lands. It required a certain strength of will, the keenness of more than just sight and being able to remain vigilant at all times. There was also two ways of moving through the wilderness. Quickly, or quietly. To be able to dart through the land like a shadow being chased by the light, or being able to move as quiet as a ghost. As a vampire and at night I could do both, leaving no trace of myself as I moved with all the speed of the damned. Those that I sought could only choose to do one or the other. Whichever method they chose didn’t help them as I could hunt by more than just what tracks they left. By smell I could find their essence on the wind, and as I got closer I could hunt them by the beating of their hearts.

Within the shadowed depths of scrubland, a rocky gorge cut through the undulating landscape. A tiny stream had been making it way for untold centuries through the rolling hills and over the years of its existence it had sliced deep into earth and stone. It was a quiet, unassuming place that most would have walked past without ever knowing of its existence, and I would have easy done so if I had not been tracking a group of bandits. They had been responsible for two separate attacks on caravans and travellers in the previous two weeks since I had started scouting. Each time had been messy, and left several families bereft of more than just their money and goods. These particular bandits represented the last of the marauders from Hammerfell and had proven themselves to be very good at what they did.

The campsite was proof of this. Hidden in the depths of the gorge, it nestled into the cliffs under whatever overhangs were present and ensured they couldn’t be seen by someone on the hills. The density of the trees in the area guaranteed that unless you knew exactly where you were going, you
could walk past one or both of the entrances without knowing. The creek itself was little more than a trickle, but provided enough fresh water for the band and a handful of opportunities of food in the form of frogs, ducks and other various creatures who came to drink. It was highly defensible with the two narrow openings in the rock faces and the thickets ensured that both entrances could be watched by bandits without being seen themselves. As a result, they had managed to hide from the ever encroaching guard and Fighters Guild, travelling out every few days to restock their supplies and waylay another hapless caravan or travellers.

Masser lit the darkness with its baleful eye, staring down across the landscape as I slid through the shadows. The nights were growing colder even this far south, and while nearly every centimetre of skin was hidden from sight I could feel the chill across my eyes and forehead. Wrapped in my cloak, face hidden behind my mask, hood and coif I merged with the night even without the use of my vampiric abilities. The darkness was pulled away from my eyes and I could see as well as I could in the middle of the day, and every step I made I barely made a sound or left a trace of my passage. Those that I followed while skilled, were quickly running out of luck. They had no defence against a creature that could see in the dark and track them by the smell that they left on every tree or bush they brushed past.

Still… It had taken me the better part of four days to follow them further into the depths of Anvil County. Their path had wound through the forests and over the rolling grasslands and several times I had lost their tracks as they clambered over rocks and followed creeks and streams. Even without my cursed nature I would have been able to track them down eventually, but every crushed twig and indentation of an armoured boot was starting to make me uneasy. They knew that they were being hunted and had actively been taking measures against it. Without the assistance of the vampire I knew that I would have been hard pressed to catch up as I had. Two things were concerning me more and more with every minute that passed. The first was the more I caught up to them, the more I found myself sure that I wasn't the only thing or being hunting them. The second was that with every step I found myself closer to the area that Rhano had met the Ranger and had been warned to stay from.

Sliding through the undergrowth, hunched over and stepping very carefully, I looked about the maze of brambles and shrubs that were between me and the entrance to their camp. The cliffs were sheer and jagged, rising from the stream to the top of the slopes fifteen metres up and where the hills had once joined was a four-metre-wide gap where the stream had sliced through over thousands of years. Only a skilled climber or an alteration mage would hope to be able to traverse that rocky face, and as a result it was the perfect spot for an ambush or sentry. Normally, once I got this close to an encampment I would return to guide the fighters and the militia back, but there was something wrong. Like a splinter lodged in one of my gloves I could feel it niggling away at me, irritating my flesh until I felt irritated and sore. I knew that this was the camp that I had been looking for, and somehow that those who lived there were present.

Thick and still faintly smelling of minotaur, my mask was briefly pulled down and I sniffed the air. My face was taut in the darkness with the vampire rising to the surface and lending me its enhanced senses. Normally such a location in a hollow in the land between enormous slabs of earth would entrap the usual smells from camps no matter how permanent or temporary. It was another factor of their campsite that showed their experience of living off the land and hiding from potential enemies. Being in a position where the breeze couldn’t blow the smell of cooking fires was beneficial and I had been doing the same thing over the past fortnight, only lighting fires in hollows where the smell was less likely to travel and the flames weren’t visible.

The smells from this particular site were familiar; rendered animal fat that had been used to grease leather and chainmail, bodies that had gone weeks or months without the touch of soap and the faintest hint of a latrine somewhere within the gorge. It had been smells that had led me after my
quarry for most of the day and evening but there were additions wafting on the breeze.

Coppery and mouth-wateringly, I could taste blood on the wind. It had been a smell that I had also followed in the first day of pursuit after they had killed a handful of the trade caravan they had raided. As the days progressed and they washed the gore off their arms and chests or it otherwise dried or flaked away the smell had faded, forcing me to follow in more traditional ways. But now as I crouched in the shadows, I could taste blood. Blood that I knew without a doubt was still mostly fresh.

The vampire within my soul; the beast was troubled though. While tantalising and leaving me licking my lips in anticipation it was not a smell that was entirely welcome in the night. Especially as I didn’t know of the cause of it. As my beastial instincts rose to the surface of my mind I could feel my anxiety growing with the fact that other than the smells I couldn’t hear or see any other signs of life within the area.

Frogs croaked their chorus from the gurgling stream dribbling through their rocks, and crickets called from various places around me. Far off, the sound of wings reached my ears despite how to the uncorrupted and mortal the noise was impossible to discern. The owner of the deathly silent wings hooted to its mate further off in the night and as it looked for prey in the form of a mouse or woodland creature I moved towards my own.

Gliding through the relatively narrow space where the stream emerged from the gorge I would have normally returned to the shadows but my own instincts knew that there was no threat in the form of a watchful guard. The scent of fresh blood grew stronger as I moved into the gorge itself, along with the other scents of individuals making a home for themselves in the wilds.

Within metres of the entrance, I found the first of the marauders, lying face down in the dirt. The coppery smell was overwhelming as I hunched down over the body, seeing the way that blood was leaking out of the armour around the throat. Fifty metres up the gorge the hint of a fire crackled softly on the edges of my vison, providing no illumination to show the way that the bandit was no longer among the living, not that I needed light to see.

I rolled the body over, seeing the way that death had come for the bandit in the single stab wound under the ear and that the blood had barely had enough time to dry. The most concerning thing about the whole situation was the way how the vampire within me was not interested in the blood. It was more interested in the sights and sounds and smells of the gorge, and that did not bode well.

His jaw was clenched, bruising around his throat where someone had choked off his mouth and windpipe before stabbing him in the head. Even though he had been the sentry placed to watch the entrance to the gorge, someone had managed to make their way past him, come up from behind and kill him without being seen or heard. Not even the steel plate armour that he wore, or the chainmail and leather he wore underneath had been of any benefit. Even with surprise on their side his killer was unable to defeat the armour and so had bypassed it completely.

With the tips of my fingers I felt into the corpse's throat, feeling how the cool air had already taken most of the heat away from the dead man’s flesh. It was yet to steal all traces of warmth from the core of the body which meant that he had died only in the past hours and that whoever was responsible was in the area.

Clenching my knuckles in my gloves until I could hear the leather creaking, I rose up from the corpse, rubbing at my jaw through the mask. The entire gorge would have been deathly quiet if not for the sounds of the creek and the various animals and insects that lived in it. In fact, the only sounds that announced a human presence at all was my soft breathing, the cracking of a dying campfire and the thundering of my pulse in my ears.
The entire camp was dead. Fourteen Redguard marauders, all highly skilled and experienced had been left as dead meat on the ground. Some would have been veterans of the numerous conflicts and skirmishes between the Crowned and the Forebears, one or two may have been Legion Deserters like myself. It had done them little use.

Tiny and ramshackle but built with comfort in mind, the campsite was well-worn and had been put to good use during their time in Cyrodiil. In an overhang of the cliff face, canvasses had been erected to further build a space protected from the elements. Rough bedrolls had been set up, along with a couple of crudely built seats made from sawn logs. Close nearby some rope had been suspended between two trees to allow their clothes to dry after laundering. A pair of campfires had been erected further along the gorge, where wooden stands had been erected for the smoking and drying of meat. Overall I was surprised at how cosy of a home they had made for themselves.

There was no sign that they had let themselves grow too unwary in their comfort. A couple of barricades had been set up in places to allow them to fend off attacks, but these had proven to be useless in the face of their sentries being stabbed to death. As I stepped into the feeble firelight I could see that whoever had been responsible had first taken out the sentry, and then had surrounded the marauders.

Besides the two sentries guarding both ends of the tiny stream and the entrances to their camp, the others had been killed from afar. Waiting until they were perfectly ready, the stealthy killers had taken their time, infiltrating the camp before falling upon the unsuspecting bandits.

Stepping around corpses I pieced their deaths together in my mind, looking at the way that they lay sprawled about. Some had been sitting around the central campfire, the overturned bottles of alcohol making the ground damp where they had fallen. Others had been going about their own routines. One had obviously been in the middle of washing herself in the stream when an arrow had flickered out of the darkness and punched through an eye. Her death had been the signal for the others to attack, and it appeared as though that by the time her body had slapped face first into the water the others were well along the way of joining her in Aetherius.

Another had been sitting across from one of his comrades, playing dice on a board that had been overturned when they both had jumped to their feet in surprise. The dice; crudely carved from wood lay scattered in the dirt near their boots. No one would ever know which of the two were winning when they died. A pair of arrows had taken their lives just as surely as the first, one punching deep into a chest to skewer a heart, the other dying the same way as the marauder having a bath with an arrow in the brain.

All bar one had been killed with single arrows, but as I moved through their bodies I could see that those responsible had gone to great measures to ensure that no trace had been left behind. The arrows and their arrowheads had been cut from flesh, leaving wicked, gaping wounds where knives had cut deeply and levered them out. There was a pair of the bandits that caught my attention; a heavyset woman muscled like a prize-fighter and an older man whose skin appeared like dried leather after too many years in the sun.

They had been the last to be killed, and while they were both in different sections of the campsite I could see how they had both moved with far greater speed than their comrades. Either through luck, adrenaline or simple experience, they had both managed to get to their feet and attempt to rush their ambushers.

Neither had made it very far at all. The man had either just come back from sentry duty or was preparing to go relieve one of his friends. Dressed in his full suit of armour, it had managed to stop an arrow aimed for his heart just enough to alert him to the danger and keep him alive long enough to
try to do something about it. Even with a pierced lung he had managed to tear the flanged mace from where it had hung by his side in its leather loop, slap down the visor of his sallet helm and make it five paces before he was brought down. In a shot of incredible skill, a second arrow had been loosed, punching into the tiny vision slit between the helmet and the visor and killing him in mid step.

Like all the others, the arrow had been wrenched out of the dead man’s skull and helm. Leaving only tiny slivers and dust from the shaft behind, there was not much to show what sort of arrow it had been. The slit itself had been tiny, only a few millimetres wide and too small for me to slide anything wider than my knife through. Whoever had loosed the arrow had enough skill to aim it precisely at the gap, allowing the tip to punch between the visor and brim of the helm and buckle the edges enough to allow the passage. Even half a finger’s distance up or down would have either sent the arrow glancing away, shattering it, or in the best case lodging it into the metal and maybe causing injury.

As for the woman she too had taken an arrow to the chest, lodging deeply into breast and pectoral and missing the heart by only the narrowest of margins. Whether it had been luck, fate, or that she simply had twitched at the very last second, the first arrow to strike her had not been instantly fatal. The second and the third that must’ve hit in quick succession were different; one had just like most of the others, punched deep into an eye socket and the second had been successful in finding her heart.

It was not the arrows, or the wounds that they had caused that had caught my attention. She had bled profusely from the wounds up to and including the time where one of her attackers had hunched down with a blade and hacked them from her cooling corpse. The blood that had soaked her clothing and leathers was mostly concentrated on her chest, neck and face but I could see where more had leaked through from an injury just below the armpit.

The warning growl in my mind from the vampire stopped me for a moment as I hunched over her body. There was no sign of anyone or anything bigger than a frog or cricket in the campsite, and even with my enhanced senses there was nothing I could detect. I could hear the insects moving through the grass around me and when I really concentrated I could even hear the tramping of ants from a nest in the cliff face six metres away. There was nothing that explained the unease that the vampire was feeling. I did know that once I had finished investigating the campsite I would getting the oblivion out of the area as quickly as I could.

“Right then, let’s have a look.” I whispered under my breath. One eye was open and unseeing, the other a bloody ruin of a hole where someone had scraped bone to dig the arrow out without ruining the arrowhead.

Ensuring that I didn’t make eye contact, I rolled her over onto her side, running my hands over the pockets of her tunic and pocketing the few coins and uncut gemstones that I found. A trade caravan they had hit the month earlier was carrying a chest of gems from Summerset Isles destined for Skingrad. Despite the amount of money Viconia and I were sharing I wasn’t one for leaving any sort of wealth behind, and one of my spare ingredient pouches found itself host to a small collection of loot that I had taken from each body in turn.

I was halfway through digging through a tiny pouch attached to her belt when I suddenly found myself staring at the lump jutting from under her arm. The blood that had soaked her side in death had taken some time to leak through around the object that had struck her but just like the handful of broken arrows that Azzan kept in his desk drawer something had been missed by those responsible. A knife was buried to the hilt in the hollow of the armpit, jutting outwards, but being lost in the folds of the loose fitting tunic.

For several drawn out moments I simply stared at the dagger, holding the corpse on its side before
very slowly turning and looking about the death filled gorge. Every instinct was screaming at me to leave, that something wasn’t right with the entire situation, but I couldn’t see, hear or sense anything. I was certain that I was being watched but my vampiric ability of being able to detect others by their heartbeats or smell gave me confidence.

My fangs were digging into my bottom lip as I turned back to the dagger, seeing the hilt coated in gore and feeling the stickiness of the blood as I reached down and wrenched it out. For a blade it was highly unusual and was unlike any I had encountered before. Double edged to allow for greater penetration, it was also perfectly balanced which was unusual in itself. What most bizarre thing about it though was the materials of its make. No metal had been used in its creation, neither for the blade or the hilt. Both the hilt and the blade had been carved from bones, but it was obvious that the two sections had not come from the same creature or possibly even species. The blade had been carefully carved, shaped with an artificer’s care before being smoothed and polished until the black ivory-like substance appeared like the night itself. As for the hilt, it was carefully cut and etched before being wrapped in silken strands that allowed the wielder to have a firm grip on the blade before throwing it.

It was one of the most elegant daggers I had ever seen, far surpassing the ceremonial daggers I had seen amongst the Dunmer. It was a sight that was made ever more unusual at the sight of a short collection of greasy strands braided together and tied to the end of it.

The dagger was elegant, but the braid was not. There was something wrong with it, more than the mere sight and colouring. Like off-milk mixed with corpse-bile, it reeked of corruption but as I knelt there looking at the unusual dagger I could feel a sense of familiarity towards it. The beast within me growled again, a cautionary and yet yearning murmur in the back of my mind as I regarded the three-centimetre-long braid.

With the tips of my fingers left uncovered from my fingerless gloves I lifted the braid and felt it directly with my skin. Even the tiniest of touches was enough to send a wave of nausea running into the core of my being. My stomach threatened to rebel from the touch, leaving me feeling clammy and foul all over and I dropped the entire blade to the ground like it was a venomous reptile. For a moment despite what my eyes had been telling me it was almost as though the braid was alive and squirming on my fingertips. The thought left me fruitlessly wiping my fingers on my armoured thighs to rid myself of the sensation.

“What the fuck is that…” I murmured, resisting the urge to pull my mask down to wipe my mouth on the back of my hand. I felt as though I was going to be sick but through little more than sheer willpower I held my rebellious guts in line. It didn’t help the fact that I felt like I had thrown up anyway, my entire body had been wracked with spasms as though it was trying to purge itself of toxins. Now at least I knew without any uncertainty that there was something far worse at play in the region.

The way that my body seemed to be simultaneously rejoicing in the touch and proximity to the braid and rejecting it with every fibre of my being showed me that there was only one explanation. The braid itself was nothing special or that important, but it was a mark showing that the knife’s owner had fallen under the power of the Daedra. Which Daedra I wasn’t certain, but I had enough experience with my own nature and creatures of the Prince of Destruction to know that it wasn’t Mehrunes Dagon. His influence was brutal and straightforward and whatever this braid was made to signify screamed of corruption and taint.

Resting in the grass by my side where I had placed it, the stringed length of my compound bow sat as I glared at the corrupted dagger. For a moment I glanced between the two weapons, half expecting the dagger to begin crawling away into the dirt like a centipede. I stared at it for a few seconds, before reaching for my bow.
Exploding from the back of my skull, the beast’s warning stopped me in mid motion. There was no sign of any presence, no wayward smell or noise and yet the vampire told me that I was no longer alone, that someone or something was directly behind me, close enough to breath on the back of my neck if they so wished. It also told me that not only was I no longer alone, but there was a knife to my throat.

I kept perfectly still, feeling the sense of sharpness hovering near my leather wrapped flesh. The bones of my face pulsed and writhed, my fangs pressing uncomfortably into my lips as I struggled to sense the being behind me. There was no sensation of heat, no trace of life-force or a heartbeat. I couldn't even pick up any sound of breathing or of any movement.

“Who are you?” Breathed a voice that had no rights of being there at all and it made me jump even more than the blade at my throat did. It confirmed that it was indeed a normal flesh-and-blood being behind me and not some supernatural creature from Oblivion.

“Kaius Desin.” I replied simply, feeling the sensation of sharpness drawing closer. “I’m with the Fighter's Guild.”

Right on the very edge of my hearing there was a rustle of noise, like the tiniest movement of skin-tight fabric on flesh. It was so minute that it was almost non-existent, but I knew that the blade was no longer hovering nearby.

“Turn around…” The voice said, this time slightly further away. “Slowly.”

Ensuring that I kept my hands by my sides and away from my weapons I followed the being’s instructions, keeping my hands clear of my weapons. I was thankful that for my travel in the wilds I had strapped Sunchild alongside my backpack on the opposite side to the Light of Dawn. If it had been where I normally wore it, it would have been impossible to keep my hands away from a weapon of some kind. Between Sunchild, the Light of Dawn on my back, the pair of knives strapped to my breastplate and my bow kept in easy reach I was a walking arsenal.

At that point though I was more concerned with the fact that I had been ambushed just as surely as the dead marauders in their camp. What was worse was that I knew that not only had I been ambushed despite my enhanced senses, but that I was now somehow surrounded. The only thing that I had going for me was that I had not been killed before knowing I was no longer alone.

Standing barely two metres away was a figure similarly dressed to myself. He was shorter than me by a considerable margin but there was no doubt that his skill and stealth far surpassed mine. Only the soot blackened sockets and gleaming eyes could be seen of his flesh, as everything else was covered in layers of grey-black leather. Just like me, a mask covered his face to protect his mouth and nose from any possible irritants and to hide the skin’s natural sheen from view.

Even standing in the flickering light from the campfire, it was almost impossible to focus upon him or his shape. He seemed to naturally sway with the shadows as they rolled and twitched, and as he moved there was not a whisper of sound from his clothing or any pieces of his equipment.

“Well… Shit…” I said simply, sighing and looking at the way how he held the shortened blade in his hand. Similar in make to the dagger on the ground, it too was made from carved and polished bone. Unlike the dagger it was only single edged and tapered to a pointed edge similar to a katana but it didn’t really matter what material it was made from as I knew it could kill me just as surely as any other weapon.

Everything in the Ranger’s stance and ability spoke of countless years of practice and a natural ability passed along through hundreds, if not thousands of generations. It was humbling to know that
even despite my vampiric abilities that mere mortals were better than a creature cursed with darkness itself.

We both stood silently, staring at each other from within the darkness of our hoods and despite the tingling of my body I forced the vampire back once more. At that point I knew that if I wasn’t dead already, then they weren’t going to kill me unless I gave them cause.

The silence between us was wearing on my nerves very quickly and I shrugged, raising and eyebrow and looking down onto the short shadow of an elf. “Well? Are we just going to stand here all night?”

“You talk a lot for a scout.” Said a second voice that yet again came from behind me. For the second time in just as many minutes I almost felt like I had jumped out of my skin and I was very quickly becoming tired of the game.

Turning carefully, ever aware of the blade in the hand of the first Ranger I faced the second. Unlike his kin he was unarmed, or at least was not wielding or pointing any weapons in my direction. A pair of glinting eyes peered from the depths of his hood, the twinkle of amusement somehow evident in them.

“I’m not entirely sure what else to do in this situation.” I said simply and honestly. “I’m somewhat surprised that I’m not dead but then that leaves me a little confused on what you want with me.”

“You are right. If we wanted you dead, then we certainly wouldn’t be having this conversation.” The second Ranger’s eyes seemed to roam up and down me from head to toe as he took my measure. “You are also a lot better of a scout than the last member of your guild we met. That was not something we expected from the Hero of Kvatch.”

“I would take that as a compliment, but I never thought that Rhano was much of a woodsman.”

There was a hint of a smile under the mask as the Ranger stared me in the eye. The two of us were mentally sizing each other up, and I knew that whoever he was, he was someone of authority. His armour and clothing was heavily detailed, the leather cloak and hood embossed and etched with rolling scenes and markings that covered every millimetre of surface. Even the mask that covered his face was decorated with trailing vines and other plants, interwoven with images depicting animals native to Valenwood. His armour was unique, and while it was similar to my own how it covered most of the body, the materials were completely different. My breastplate of ebony-plated mithril was in stark contrast to the boiled leather that covered his torso, and the plates of sculpted bonemold that hung from his hips, covered his groin, stomach and chest. Every piece of his armour from the vambraces that protected his forearms to the plates that covered his shins and ankles were made from powdered bone. What little I knew of the creation of bonemold and other similar armour is that once turned into powder, if would then be mixed with other materials, turned into cement and then poured into casts of the desired shapes.

What truly surprised me was the shirt that lay under the armour of leather and bone. A shirt of seemingly fragile strands had been woven together with hundreds of tiny scales taken from some kind of reptile. In a way it matched my daedroth scale chainmail but made me feel shabby in comparison. I could tell that my armour was by far the superior in make and for protection, but his wasn’t designed for any kind of straight-up fight. Stealth was far more important to him.

“You wear the mantle of a great beast.” He said, making a mild gesture to the cloak and hood that I wore. The grey-black leather was lighter in shade to theirs and whatever creature’s skins they used, it definitely wasn’t minotaur leather.
“Taken from the back of a minotaur titan I killed myself.” I replied carefully, suddenly feeling awkward and grimacing “Myself and my companion I mean.”

“Viconia DeVir… Of course. We know of your shared exploits master Desin. This is one of the reasons why you aren’t currently joining these individuals here.”

“Is this some of your handiwork?” My gesture to the dead woman at our feet drew his attention for a second before his eyes snapped back to my own. “And you seem to know of Viconia and myself, but I don’t know who you are. Or, more importantly what brings you so far into Cyrodiil.”

“We are hunting our own kin.” The Ranger said matter-of-factly. Despite the lack of emotion within his tone I could tell that there was a deep pain within him. “While you hunt outlaws and criminals, we have been waging a war against our own kind.”

“So other Rangers did this?”

“Yes. Those who we once counted as our closest brothers and sisters. Now their souls belong to something far darker.”

The silence dragged on as I stared at the Ranger, ignoring his kin standing close behind me. His armour was definitely of greater make, and now that he was somewhat visible I could see that the armour was not the expected dark grey or black but instead a deep bronze. Almost a dark brown, the colour made me remember the few autumns I spent in Cyrodiil when I was younger where the trees had darkened and the leaves had died. It also made me remember more recent memories of the sunrises that I had watched from the walls of Fort Ironhand as the light flowed through the dust and ash of Red Mountain. It was a calming colour, but one that could also signify coming hardship and death in the form of deadly winters. It was a suitable colour for them I decided.

“Daedra?” I said, immediately knowing that I had struck a nerve with the electric jolt that ran through him at the mere mention of the word.

“You are smarter than you look.”

The creaking of my leather and armour was the loudest sound in the campsite filled with death as I shrugged. “And luckier too.”

“That I believe remains to be seen.” Continuing the stare that was the hallmark of a veteran archer and hunter, he again studied me before nodding almost imperceptibly. With a quick, smooth motion he reached up, pulling his hood back and mask down to reveal his face for the first time.

His skin was weather beaten and lined, not with age but from the life he had lived. It didn’t take more than a glance to know that it was extremely likely that this particular Woodelf had never slept indoors in his entire life. But, like an old gnarled tree root there was a lot of life left within him. What skin was visible was also heavily tattooed, the pigments injected or pushed under the surface of the skin to match the intricate markings of his armour.

“I am Malulain.” He said, his strange musical accent flowing the syllables of his name like water over rocks in a stream. “I am father of the Rangers of the Grove Circles.”

As I revealed myself in a similar way, pulling my own mask and hood down, he was able to see my expression of confusion. “I am what you would consider as the commander of the Valenwood Rangers.” He added to cure my unfamiliarity.

“Sir.” The word was simple and seemed to satisfy him, but even as I lifted my head from the very slight bow I was carefully looking and listening to the area around us. If he truly was who he said,
there was going to be a lot more than just himself and the Ranger who had ambushed me nearby.

“You are correct Master Desin; my brothers and sisters have been corrupted by the daedra. Unfortunately, not just any daedra; but by Molag Bal.”

“They wouldn’t happen to be vampires by any chance?” I said, feeling the comforting weight of the Light of Dawn strapped alongside my pack.

“If only it was so simple. If it was, then this threat would have been extinguished months ago.” The head shook sadly and I found myself mesmerised by the collection of braided dreadlocks that hung like creepers from his skull. Unlike the foul braid attached to the dagger, these braids were threaded with effigies depicting various trees bearing humanoid features. They were also pure in comparison, despite the way the hair had originally clumped together with the use of tallow and months of not being washed.

For a moment he looked far older than what he should as the weight of his duty pressed down hard. “We have been hunting these members of our kind for over a year now and the chase has led us through three provinces. The Silvenar has commanded that we stop our lost brethren, and tonight we are grappling at the last dying breaths of our journey.”

“Well then.” I began, carefully wording my sentences. “If I was to guess, I would say that there has been a schism or some recent influx of daedra worshipping that has forced a group you’re hunting to flee Valenwood. But, judging by the fact that you have been hunting them for so long and for so far; that means that it is more than just trying to rid the Empire of their existence.”

Seeing the strange, steel-like eyes of the Ranger commander I gave a slight grin knowing I was right. “They took something, or have something that you and your subordinates want.”

The tenseness that ran through him left his body humming like a taut bowstring and while we spoke my enhanced senses were roaming. With the assistance of the vampire I was starting to get a picture of exactly what I faced.

“Your reputation against the daedra is not given lightly.” Making a brief gesture to the forest that was less for emphasising his words and more giving some unseen individuals a signal he nodded. “Yes. They took something sacred to the forest and the Bosmer. What is of far greater importance is that which they currently seek. The Rangers are protectors of the Graht-oaks and the loyal servants of the Storyteller, but our kin have turned their back on Y’ffre and his teachings. They seek ancient artefacts of dread power, most of which had been placed under our charge for thousands of years. Some of these were what they stole when they fled the Groves.”

“Artefacts?” The crawling sensation making itself felt made me remember how the group of Necromancers that had been killed off nearby had similar interests. “These artefacts wouldn’t happen to be necromantic, or Ayleid in nature?”

The shrug that he provided me did not help allay my fears. “Their true nature and histories have been lost to time. At first glance they are Necromantic but they contain something far more powerful than simple enchantments. The magicka within the pieces of this particular armour are to necromancy, as what summoning a bound dagger is to summoning a Valkynaz.”

“Armour?”

He nodded. “Yes. Ancient armour. Ancient, and immeasurably evil. We do not know whether Graithlan was man or of mer or something else entirely. What we do know is that even the King of Worms would sacrifice all he had for the hints of power that Graithlan had at his command. His
armour acts as vessels not only for his soul, but vessels to the realm of the dead itself. With it he could control the very spectral essences of the un-living, potentially more.”

“I can see why you are trying to stop those who stole it.”

“Trying is unfortunately too accurate of a term. We have been trying, for months now but they have been one step ahead of us the entire way. They must have been planning this for years and despite our best efforts we have been unable to do little more than bleed them and hound their footsteps.”

I could almost feel my mind swirling inside my skull as I tried desperately to understand what was happening. It was too much, too quickly. Between the adrenaline, the unease of coming across the campsite and being ambushed, I could barely grasp onto the words the veteran Ranger spoke.

A sudden flicker of movement caught both my eyes and Malulain’s and we twisted towards the source. From the edge of the clearing a third ranger had exploded into view, moving far more quickly and less carefully than what I expected of one of his ilk. What astonished me the most was the way it was not from the foliage and greenery of the trees and bushes that he had appeared, but from the shadows themselves. His cloak was pulled away from his body as he hurried over to the three of us and as his hand dropped I could see how the carved bone amulet hanging from his chest glimmered with energies. Their natural stealth was incredible, but I knew that to be able to hide from the senses of a vampire that they needed more than just skill and luck. Their clothing and equipment was enchanted as well.

“Father.” The new ranger said as he jogged over to Malulain and myself. In mid motion he suddenly realised that I was not one of them, his keen perception noticeably affected by the weight and importance of whatever news he was bringing and making him blind to everything but his commander.

Providing me little more than a distrusting glare that was almost comparable to Viconia’s usual intensity, he bowed at the waist to Malulain, clasping his hand over his mouth in a strange salute before rising to his usual height. “We’ve found him.”

“Eregor?” Malulain’s words were little more than a hiss of determination between clenched teeth. “He’s here?”

“In some nearby ruins, a few hours away to the east.” The words seemed to tumble out of the Ranger from behind his mask and hood and the eyes were bright and framed in sweaty flesh. He had obviously run a good distance of the way back to his commander but despite that I could only marvel at the way that he kept his breathing quiet. I doubted that even with my vampiric nature I could have been so calm and controlled after a run of comparable distance.

Malulain immediately moved, twisting and casting his gaze across the entirety of the campsite while making the noise of what sounded remarkably like crickets. Between the curt gesture he made and the brief motion of covering his mouth in salute to his subordinate I could only stand in shock and a measure of horror as Rangers appeared from all around me.

They rose from shadows as though the darkness had given birth to them. One seemed to rise out of nothing from where the campfire cast a thin flickering shadow from a still corpse. Others seemed to slide out from behind trees and saplings no wider than my wrist and a few even alighted from the branches that should not have been able to carry such weight. The tingle of magicka made itself felt in the back of mind and the palms of my hands as over three dozen of the Rangers shed their invisibility and began moving silently out of the gorge.

They left without even a backwards glance and I couldn’t help but feel utterly helpless as I saw at
least two appear from places that I had moved past. One appeared from behind a shadowed log, a log that if I had walked any closer to I would have stepped on him. In fact, if most of them had been within the campsite when I had arrived then I would have never been more than three metres from at least one of them at any time.

With mask and hood returned to their rightful places covering his features, once again all I could see of Malulain was the tiny glints for eyes in the cowled shadows. Their quarry was in sight and they seemed content with forgetting all about me and leaving me standing there. That was until I reached out and grabbed their commander by an armoured shoulder.

“So you’re just going to leave me here? After telling me all that?”

The rage that burned in his gaze seemed to mirror the sudden prickling fear that would have been visible as soon as it appeared. Within an instant of me laying my hand on him, the other rangers had twisted, nocking arrows and drawing their powerful compound bows back with such a speed that I would be hard pressed to match. Vampire or not.

Glinting in the darkness his eyes went from mine, to my hand holding him still and back as I sheepishly released my grip. The arrows and the drawn bows didn’t waver, nor did they lower themselves away from my vitals.

“Yes.” He said simply as I dropped my hand to my side. “We are.”

“Why?”

The question stopped him in his tracks as he turned to continue on, obviously intending on leaving me anyway.

“Why? This is a private matter. One that you have nothing to do with.”

“This… Eregor has stolen things that sound bloody dangerous to me. Not only that, he and his ilk have killed a fair few people in the process.” My own gesture towards the bodies scattered about made tiny twitches in the Rangers surrounding me with their drawn bows. “Sure, these lot and those Necromancers a few weeks ago weren’t the nicest of people but I’d bet some good coin that not everyone who have died have been guilty of something.”

His obvious pause gave me a tiniest bit of satisfaction despite the fact that death was pointed in my direction. A death that I wasn’t sure I could evade even with my unique abilities.

“I know that you can kill me right now and could have easily killed me a few minutes ago; but now that I have managed to get a good look at you all, I can see some really big issues.” Nearest to me, a Ranger made a gesture at Malulain that didn’t need translation. Thankfully Malulain shook his head but my heart was still thundering in my chest. “You can all sneak up against unsuspecting people and I am under no illusions of your skill. Correct me I’m wrong though, this Eregor and those he commands have the exact same skills you do. They also know that you coming and I doubt that they would have made it this far if they weren’t cunning enough to prepare for your arrival.”

“What do you suggest?” he hissed threateningly, like a snake hiding in the depths of the undergrowth.

“I’m not suggesting anything; I’m telling you.” Despite the sane part of my mind screaming and giving the rest of my brain mental slaps, I couldn’t help but bait them. “I’m coming with you.”

Not a sound was heard from the other Rangers but the expressions and body language was far more telling. I knew that at that point it was only Malulain’s authority that kept me alive.
Turning and facing him I cut him off in mid breath, leaving him staring annoyed at me. “Before you get any fancy ideas of pulling your disappearing acts, getting the drop on me once is easy enough. Now that I have managed to get a good look at you all and get a sense of your fancy magicka I reckon I could track you. So I’m coming with you whether you like it or not.”

“Really…” For several moments I surprised the tremble of uncertainty. Hidden underneath his hood and mask I could somehow sense that Malulain was also slightly amused as well as frustrated and angry.

“Besides all that I don’t think that any of you are really prepared for a straight up fight. Eregor and his cronies are expecting more Rangers. They certainly won’t be expecting me.”

Silence once again returned and we continued to stare at one another. The arrows of the other rangers continued to point at my direction and I knew that despite their skill and aptitude for archery, their fingers, arms and shoulders would soon be beginning to burn from the strain if they weren’t already.

A nod was all I got in reply, a single, sharp succinct nod that was instantly followed by the relaxing of aching biceps and shoulder blades. At that point I was half expecting an arrow in the spine and was preparing to turn into bats or mist in the unlikely chance I could survive, and felt relief as they turned away again and began fading into the forest.

Seeing the shadowed forms merging with the darkness in a way that no others could replicate I found myself grimly smiling at the upcoming challenge. My own hood and mask were returned to where they covered my features, leaving me to grin through lips beginning to peel apart from the pressure of my fangs.

“Time to put my septims where my mouth is…” I hissed gently, so quiet that the words were more in my mind than on my tongue. Without a moment’s hesitation I scooped up my bow where it lay in the grass before following after the rangers.

Chapter End Notes

The last time I played Oscuro’s Oblivion Overhaul was in 2010 when it was still going through many updates and content was still being added regularly. Two of the quests that were within it, abeit in a limited form to what they are now were "Shadows in the Struggles of Power" and "Light through the Darkness". These two quests obviously feature heavily in Bloodtide Rising, as Kaius has retrieved the Light of Dawn and now obviously encountered the Bosmer Rangers.

Next chapter: A battle with ninja Bosmer Rangers! ;-P
A Struggle for Power

Chapter Notes

16 Nov 18 - I have earmarked this chapter and the following chapter for massive overhauls to clean them up and make them smoother. I'm hoping to have them sorted and fixed by Christmas once work settles down and gives me a chance to breathe again.

Ever since I was old enough I had been taught how to hunt, how to stalk the beasts of the wilds and move throughout the lands unseen. Even before my tenth winter I had taken game with a bow, a bow that as I grew older and stronger grew ever more powerful. In my teens and my first years within the Legion they had taken my skills and tempered them further, teaching me to hunt men and mer and to kill with precision and discipline. Throughout the Empire I was one of the elite hunters, holding a rank and position within the Legion’s elite.

To the Bosmer Rangers I was little more than a rank amateur, a child who had only taken their first hesitant steps from the cities and towns with little to no knowledge at all.

They were incredible, invisible and utterly perfect in every movement and step. Between their natural skill and years, if not decades of experience and the enchantments woven into their armour and equipment there was no hope for any outsider to match them. Not a branch or leaf moved in their passage, spiders webs were left unbroken and neither indentation or mark was left in their wake. They were utterly impossible to track or to follow and mortals would be left wallowing in their wake, completely ignorant of the presence of the Rangers unless they so wished.

If I had been just a man, I would have lost them and would have been unable to follow within metres of leaving the campsite in the gorge. Only with my vampiric senses was I able to have the slightest chance of keeping on their trail, but the sheer effort to do so left my pulse thundering in my ears and my head throbbing. Neither track, scent, noise or even body heat allowed me to follow them as they had none. Their magicka was all too perfect but it did provide them with an unusual weakness. Magicka, no matter how subtle or faint left a trail, a trail that those attuned to such energies could follow.

Using my limited experience and skill with magicka, and the senses of a vampire I was able to follow their progress through the wilds as they moved towards their quarry. The faintest of tingles and the hint of a headache in the back of the skull allowed me to travel in their rough direction. My vampiric senses though gave me a different option. Their stealth was absolute and left no trace, but in doing so left a tiny void where nothing remained. This space that they occupied was devoid of everything; heat, sound, light and movement and between following the tingle of their enchantments it was this nothingness that I was able to follow as they threaded their way through the forests and plains.

One of the only real saving graces was that they were not moving quickly towards their quarry. They were moving no quicker than a normal hunter or tracker in the wild, instead moving carefully and sliding their way between trees and through shrubs as moving quickly would have disrupted the vegetation. Enchantments or not they were still solid and physical; not ethereal wraiths. Nonetheless, within the first hour of following in their footsteps I was almost certain that the trees, shrubs, bushes and the grass itself was moving around them and shifting to ease their passage.
Within a second of fading into the forest, Malulain was gone. His skills eclipsed those under his command, and unlike the others there wasn’t even an ‘empty space’ for me to follow. In fact, as midnight approached I hadn’t seen or felt his presence until he appeared at my shoulder.

“Your skills do you proud.”

My face was taut under my hood and mask, but his sudden appearance made me jump and nearly fall backwards in surprise. He stood there, impassively, but with an obvious grin behind his mask as I struggled to calm my nerves with a series of increasingly vile expletives.

“Is giving people heart attacks another way you kill them?” I spluttered, rising from my crouch and feeling the tautness of my face fading.

“It would be if it was efficient.” The humour in his voice left me grinning despite the way my heart was beating its way through my ribcage.

With a gesture, five other Rangers peeled themselves out of the shadows and I found myself standing in a circle with them. Each of the Rangers had incredibly detailed armour that were far superior in comparison to the one who had originally ambushed me, but none were as detailed as Malulain’s.

“We are close.” One muttered, his words rolling across my ears and barely discernible from the light breeze in the air. “The ruin is nearby and they are there.”

Like a branch of a tree, a glove of spider’s web and scales appeared from within the folds of a cloak, spearing a pair of daggers into the earth at his feet. Even from a few meters away, I could see that the two daggers were identical to the one that I had pulled from the chest of the dead Redguard, complete with their toxic braids.

“Have they camped for the night?” Malulain’s voice was cold and matched the darkness of the night that wrapped around us.

“No father. From the reports from my scouts I believe they are attempting the ritual again.”

The unease that washed over them was obvious and I felt a similar chill course up my spine.

“We must stop it, but we must not let them get away a second time.” Steel crept further into his voice as the commander of the Rangers looked between his subordinates. “We cannot allow a repeat of Narind. They escaped then, but they will not escape now.”

With a boundless energy he stabbed his fingers at each of other Rangers, pointing and gesturing to emphasise his words. “Angudis, Siilyn, Glaromlallor, take your Warsmers and surround the ruins. Nimrdil, I want your Rangers with me in the main assault.”

There was collection of nods and the rustle of movement as each Ranger covered their mouths with their gloved hands in a salute. Malulain locked eyes with the fifth Ranger standing closest to me. She was shorter, but I was surprised to see that she was not carrying any weapons at all. What was even more unusual was the way that her armour and clothing was covered in tiny, thin creepers and vines that threaded their way through the spun fabric of her clothing and across the leather.

“Wylweneth, is the chorus ready?”

The vine covered Ranger nodded, carefully and succinctly. “The Druid circle and Nature stands ready Father.”
Malulain’s return nod was sombre and he turned to me, seeing my look of confusion and the question I was yearning to ask.

“Where do you want me?” I said simply.

“You have made it this far and have proven yourself capable.” He replied. “I will have you by my side in the main assault.”

Carefully, I unstrung my bow, unfolded its travelling case and placed it inside. “Keep them from putting an arrow in my eye and I’ll do what I can.”

Six sets of eyes, hidden in the depths of their hoods and glinting from within the ash-blackened sockets watched as I drew Sunchild. None of them had anything resembling a blade like those I had strapped to my spine, and even their longest swords were little more than lengthened daggers. If their corrupted brethren were equipped the same way, I would have a considerable advantage if I got in amongst them.

“They must not be successful in completing the ritual and awakening the armour. If it costs us our lives, then it will be a fair payment to stop such evil.”

The hardened gazes of the Circle of Rangers swept across each other and I found myself gripping Sunchild tightly in my gloved fist. I had no intention of dying and while I couldn’t rely on my vampiric abilities I had enough confidence in my own skill. Also, as long as I didn’t get shot in the face I had the utmost confidence in my armour protecting the rest of me.

As quickly as it had formed, the circle broke up and the group moved away. All around me I could sense the absences that revealed how many Malulain had under his overall command. Before the groups moved and faded into the forest and hills around us I was able to count over forty hidden Bosmer, and I would have bet a considerable amount of money that there would be others like their commander that I couldn’t detect.

“What is the ritual you mentioned?” I asked Malulain as we moved and joined a small group of rangers hidden behind their magicka.

“A terrible one.” The hesitation in his voice was enough to tell me that it was possible even worse than that. “the ritual we managed to stop in the ancient city of Narind came very close to succeeding. Eregor had sacrificed a handful of his followers, and was going to offer up one of the sacred artefacts of the Bosmer to Molag Bal to gain the Rape-God’s favour. Graithlan’s Vessel is a horror impossible to describe, but if its wearer is also a servant of a Daedric Prince, then the destruction and suffering that it will cause will have no bounds.”

“How do we stop it?”

There was a chuckle from under his hood. “We kill them all. Failing that, we retrieve at least a piece of the armour. Unless it is complete it is useless.”

“Understood.”

The Rangers spread across the hills and moved through the trees and swaying grasses like spilled ink across polished obsidian. Most were hidden within their enchantments but as we moved over the slight rise and beheld the ruins I could sense their unease and the building pre-battle nervousness.

I too felt uneasy, which wasn’t difficult as the night had been one surprise after another and I was becoming increasingly certain that this would have to be some form of intense fever dream instead of reality. To find myself fighting side by side a group of Bosmer Rangers against a collection of their
corrupted brethren in the service of Molag Bal attempting to raise a set of artefacts unique to the world was hurting my brain. Instead I found myself pushing such thoughts aside. Thinking about the situation wasn’t going to do anything more than distract me from the upcoming fight.

The corrupted Bosmer had set themselves up in a tiny collection of Ayleid ruins no larger than the grounds of a coaching inn or messenger post along the highways. Heavily covered in moss, grasses and shrubs, they had gone to considerable amount of effort to clear away a large area in the centre of the ruins. A handful of marble pillars were interspaced around the central ruins where an octagonal altar had been carved from marble. Where it once would have been polished to a mirror, thousands of years of wind and rain had rounded off the edges, and pitted and scoured the surface to the consistency of sandpaper.

Malulain’s Rangers had done their job of picking off the sentries and it allowed us to creep forward to the very edge of the forest and ruins, and see with our own eyes exactly what their corrupted brethren were attempting. There was no doubt in any of our minds as were lurked on the very edge of the forest and vegetation that they were enacting a dark ritual. Eight wooden stands had been erected a few meters from each of the altar’s edges, each containing a bound and writhing Ranger nailed to it. Each had been ritualistically cut open, their ribcages peeled open and organs pulled out in various ways. Each were still alive and screamed as best they could but were unable to raise anything more than a sickening gurgle as their tongues had been cut out along with their eyes.

Shadowed figures lurked in a circle around the altar, some standing behind the crucified individuals glowing as they fed enough restoration magicka into the sacrifices to keep them alive. Others lay prostrated on their faces, kneeling and chanting a dark tongue that crawled over my flesh like I had been bathed in maggots. On one side a single individual stood, hands raised to the sky and facing the figure standing on the altar and leading the rest of the corrupted Rangers in the chant. I could discern very few details of any of brethren in the ruins, but I could see that the two individuals standing by the side of the speaker, and the single being standing on top of the altar were easily as tall as I was.

“The ritual has started.” Malulain’s hiss reached my ear as we crouched in the shadows. I was the only being in his group that wasn’t hidden behind enchantments and his voice was the only sign that he was anywhere near me. “We do not have much time.”

I nodded in the darkness, knowing that he could see me even though I couldn’t see or detect him. “What do you want me to do.”

A chuckle came from the shadow at my side as the Ranger commander removed his enchantments and became visible. “I have no doubt in your skill at arms, but as your stealth isn’t as good as ours initially you will be little more than a distraction.”

The flutter of fear in my belly made itself felt and I chew on my lip. “I can play decoy easy enough.”

If Malulain was able to discern my nervousness he made no show of it, instead pointing to the figure leading the others in the chant. “Lariel is Eregor’s second in command and his mate. She is the one enacting the ritual and to have any chance she needs to die first.”

Sunchild was a solid comfort in my grip and I rolled my shoulders and stretched my arms for the coming fight.

“If you could just… Beware her Xivilai bodyguards.” He continued softly. “You have slain daedra before but I’m unsure of whether you have faced ones such as those.”

“Xivilai?” I muttered, turning to face him. “What the hell are Xivilai?”
Malulain was gone as quickly as he had appeared and there wasn’t the slightest trace that he had even been there. All around me the empty spaces revealing the presences of the other Rangers began moving and I found myself bitterly cursing them and their stealthy natures.

Pushing aside all my unease and nervousness, feeling the pounding of my heart in my chest I rose to my full height and began casually striding towards the ruins and its infestation of daedra worshippers. It reminded me all too much of the time in Vvardenfell that the detachment of Legionaries I was supporting dealt with a coven of Namira worshippers. That situation had hadn’t gone anything resembling the original plan and I had a sneaking suspicion that this was going to be the same.

Eschewing stealth, I simply moved forward without the slightest attempt at hiding. I knew that Malulain’s Rangers were all around, moving slowly and carefully through the knee high grasses and bushes but my walking pace was faster than what they could manage. I was going to be the decoy and hopefully allow the rest of them to get in close to do some serious damage.

The closer I got, the more I could see of their ritual. The more I saw, the less I wanted to and I could feel my stomach rebelling against me as I saw the fate of those chosen as sacrifices. Their organs were spread out, the blood and other fluids used to draw ancient symbols of hideous power around the altar. The air itself was throbbing with energies, dark and foreboding and interlaced between the sounds of their chants were the groans and gurgles of the mortally wounded.

Only a handful of sentries were placed around the outer edges of the ruins, and those few were not paying enough attention. Their trust and faith in the skill of the few slain by Malulain’s party was their undoing and while they quickly spotted me advancing upon them to reacted with confusion and uncertainty. They were expecting the other Rangers, not the appearance of a heavily armoured and armed Imperial breaking into a run at them. With Sunchild in hand, I went from walking to a flat out sprint seeing the gaping expressions of amazement on the corrupted Ranger guards turn into realisation at what I heralded.

Cries of alarm all around the edge of the ruins were stopped in mid breath and those few who reached for weapons were cut down without warning. Arrows flickered out of the darkness to rip them from where they stood, and the two standing before me died instantly. One slumped onto his face with an arrow in the heart, the other fell slack but remained upright from the fact the arrow had pinned his skull to the broken pillar he was leaning against. All around me I could hear the sudden rush of noise as Malulain and his forces shed their concealing magicka, launching the assault a dozen metres behind me as they chose speed over stealth for the first time.

Chaos erupted all around us, the ritual being undertaken suddenly breaking in mid chant as a large portion of the cultists were felled by arrows or reacted to our presence. I had seen kwama nests react with less singlemindedness than these daedric cultists did, as most reached for their arms, but a significant number of them continued the ritual unabated.

We were outnumbered though, even with the Rangers that Malulain had brought with him to Cyrodiil and after months of hunting and picking at Eregor’s forces, he still commanded a significant number of Bosmer. Our only saving grace was that most of those Eregor had at his command were not Rangers. A huge majority of his clan had followed him down the path to damnation but while they weren’t skilled warriors we soon found ourselves facing a desperate horde.

The ruins were lit with a combination of Braziers, lit torches and the building light illuminating the Armoured figure standing on top of the altar. Shadows danced and cavorted about in the light as the mass of loyal Rangers clashed with the surge of resistance. There were dozens of them in the expansive area within the heart of the ruins. It was easily fifty metres in diameter, framed by a circle of pillars and a concentric circle levels that sunk into the ground. Eight separate levels, each only a
few centimetres difference in height had been carved out of the soil and built with marble blocks, and all lead down to the altar at the mathematically perfect centre. Each level had a single crucified victim placed parallel to a side of the Altar, and it was no doubt that this particular ruin had been chosen very, very specifically for this ritual.

Several dozen Bosmer had crowded the ruins and even as the Rangers swarmed through the gaps in the pillars, hacking and slashing with their daggers and blades they reacted. Some were almost entirely naked, covered only in strips of foul braids and daubed in horrific runes drawn with blood and other liquids. Those that wore clothing were as varied as the individuals themselves. Some were dressed in typical Cyrodillic tunics and togas, others were in similar clothes to the Rangers themselves of leathers and spiders silk.

Eregor and his followers had been limited in the number of their Ranger Cadre, but these handful of individuals stood with their backs to the altar and the individuals upon it, facing outwards and gripping their weapons tightly. They were mirrored images of Malulain and his kin, but images that had been distorted and corrupted. Their armour was draped in series of braids matching that attached to the dagger I had pulled from the dead bandit, faces tattooed and bared from their hoods and masks to reveal visages of hate. Everything about them had been altered, their cloaks were made from greasy leather that the vampire identified as human skin, and further sheets of it had had been sewn into breastplates and shell pauldrons. At least one I glimpsed had a mask made from the nose, lips and face of some hapless individual they had skinned, pinning it over their own scowling features and showing nothing more than the soulless eyes of the damned.

To my surprise none of them wielded their bows or used them at all. Only blades and daggers were visible in the last surviving Rangers of Eregor’s clan and while Malulain’s group loosed arrows in their direction I didn’t see a single on felled or hit at all. As I pushed through the press, hacking, stabbing and slicing with Sunchild at the press of cultists before me I realised that Malulain’s Rangers were actually missing their foes. For all their skill and ability, the air itself seemed to be turning against them, arrows were being curved away from their targets or in some cases shattering as though the air itself had turned to rock. From the central altar a deep throbbing pulse of magicka was rolling out in time with those still prostrated and chanting before it. It was a pulse heralding something truly terrible and was affecting the very air itself.

Malulain shouted an eerie battle cry a couple of metres away. He and a handful of his veterans were stabbing and hacking at the press around us and while they were extremely proficient with their bows and stealth, they were not the greatest of swordsmen.

I found myself wishing for a dozen Legionaries as I cut and danced my way through the cultists attacking me. None of them were fighters worth a rusty septim and with all of them wielding little more than daggers I had an enormous advantage in reach. Sunchild’s length and make made a complete mockery of their daggers and short swords, cutting through the Bosmer cultists with ease as none were wearing anything resembling armour. A squad or two of Legionaries would have been able to take this rabble apart in minutes, especially with the deadliness of their bows negated by the proximity to the ritual.

“Damn this all to Oblivion!” my shout came out mostly incoherent but the dozen rangers following Malulain heard it and followed me as I stepped forward, dragging Sunchild from a shrieking Bosmer’s chest. For a second she clawed at my legs with fury, breaking fingernails on the metal plates protecting my thighs even as I kicked her off my sword.

I went on the offensive, as did the rangers behind me as they rushed forward with their single edged shortswords and double edged daggers. The few daggers that were thrown were also affected by the strange properties of the air and with a crunch both the loyal and tainted groups slammed together to
fight to the death. They fought in the way that only families could; a terrible viciousness that came to the fore when siblings turned into bitter rivals or that countrymen turned against one another in civil wars. There was no thought of chivalry or honour or even efficiency, instead they ripped and tore into each other with blades or whatever else they could get their hands on. Within seconds all thoughts of stopping or protecting the ritual were lost to the overwhelming hatred and desire for each side to utterly slaughter the other.

Cutting my own way through the press and using every trick and skill I had learned, as well as a considerable amount of anger. Blades thirsting for a taste of my own blood and flesh were turned aside before their owners were left dying on the ground from ripostes. Others simply had their defences battered through by my superior strength and greater reach, hacking and killing them as efficiently and quickly as possible. Even though those initial moments were fighting against untrained civilians I was still left with dozens of nicks and bruises from blows or impacts I had not managed to block or dodge. It was still a mutual slaughter, as the Bosmer and their Rangers were unmatched in archery and stealth but once those skills were taken away they were not left with much else. This reason and almost this reason alone was why the Legion spent so much time and effort training the Foresters to be able to fight with more than just their bows and do so while wearing heavy armour. To most, it was not surprising that some of the greatest swordsmen and duellists within the Empire could be found in Legion Plate and a bow over a shoulder.

A good number of the Bosmer continued with their chanting, keeping themselves pressed to the floor even as knives and blades sank into flesh and took their lives. One of their number pouring restoration magicka into one of the crucified sacrifices dropped to his knees with the open mouthed look of agony on his face as a dagger speared a kidney. He didn’t utter a single word as the Ranger behind him stabbed him to death. Instead he used his last breaths to keep the magicka flowing down his arm and out from his outstretched fingers, forcing himself to stay upright right up until a second Ranger joined in and cut his throat.

“It is about time you arrived brother!” Called out a booming voice, one that cut through the sounds of fighting and the shrieks of the dying.

Standing above the swirling, hate filled violence consuming the ruins, the figure on the altar stood as still as the marble of the altar itself. In the chaos I had seen how the arrows that had been loosed at the armoured figure had either curved away or shattered on the air as though it was rock. Little of the figure could be seen beneath the full-body plate of the armour it wore, but the face and head were clearly visible. Similar to Malulain, the Bosmer standing on the altar had skin turned leathery from years spent in the elements, hair braided into greasy deadlocks and tattoos covering every inch of flesh. Unlike the Commander of the Rangers, this corrupted individual was openly sporting signs of his allegiance to darker powers.

The braids of his hair were threaded with sinew and smeared with blood, bile and other substances I didn’t want to identify. Hand carved effigies of a reptilian monstrosity of horns, fangs and claws jingled in the air with every movement he made, and as he turned to face us I could see the strange protrusions of his skull pushing against his skin.

“Have you finally decided to stop skulking in the shadows?” Even over the sounds of fighting all around, he didn’t seem to have to shout and I could feel my skin crawling at the sound of his voice.

Malulain was deep in the press of the fighting and I only caught glances of the veteran Ranger as he stabbed one of the toga wearing Bosmer to death. His arm was wet to the elbow in gore already and the mask has slipped down to reveal his face, but in the midst of the brawl he was unable to answer.

“You’re too late. The sacrifices have been made! The blood toll is paid! Now that you have arrived
your deaths will empower the armour once more!” Another arrow shattered on the air a metre away from his head but he didn't twitch or move in the slightest. Those loyal Rangers who were free of the melee were firing arrows as quickly as they could, but not a single one of them seemed to be able to penetrate the boiling waves of magicka filling the air around us.

Surrounded by the last of his own Rangers and veritable sea of death and fighting Eregor seemed stately and serene as he glanced over us. the Altar was only a couple of metres wide, and he stood there alone and dressed in the cursed, dread armour that he had killed so many for. His cultists were dying by droves all around but with a triumphant grin he stood there before us, holding the final piece of the armour in hands streaked with blood and bodily fluids.

“Graithlan!” Shrieked the female Bosmer standing right at the base of the Altar behind the ring of fallen Rangers. “Collect your bones long since dust! Gather your limbs separated by eternity! Shake the soil of Aetherius from your flesh!”

Her arms raised to the heavens, hands streaked with the blood and gore of cutting open the sacrifices and the look on her face was of utter devotion to the man standing before her. The pulsating energies throbbed like the heart of a skooma addict, the waves of energy being felt as physical impacts against our bodies that knocked some of the weaker cultists to the ground.

Even as we pushed forward we all knew that there was nothing we could do as Eregor lifted the last piece of the armour he held in his hand, the helmet carved into the snarling maw of some monster I had never seen before. With complete and utter reverence and in time to the chanting calls of 'arise!' from his mate and fallen clan he raised it high, before placing it over his head until it slotted into the armoured breastplate.

The pulsating energies ceased as though they had never existed but I had the momentary sensation of them being sucked into the central altar and the armoured being standing atop it. All fighting died away as the cultists dropped to their knees or otherwise prostrated themselves towards the armoured figure standing triumphantly at the centre of it all. Even the Rangers loyal to Malulain had stopped, all looking inwards with various expressions of horror or failure etched deep into their ash and blood streaked features.

Eregor stood proudly, looking out from the depths of the roaring skull helm from between its fanged jaws but as one second turned into two and time slowly passed it was obvious that nothing was happening. There was no discernible change that any of us could detect in him, and after the first few seconds of nothingness it was obvious that he realised the same thing.

Some of the cultists lifted their heads in confusion, looking at their leader dressed in the massive suit of armour that I could now see more of the details. Especially now that I wasn’t fighting for my life against a group of insane wood elves. The armour itself was obviously too large for Eregor and had made for someone who was at least six foot in height and weighing more than what I did. Every piece had been made from some metal that I was unable to identify, perfectly carved and polished to appear like blackened ivory. Every curved piece was fashioned into the shape of skulls of men, mer and beasts. Some of the creatures that the skulls had been fashioned in the likeness of I doubted had ever strode the lands of Nirn, or possibly even oblivion itself. It was horrific and discomforting to gaze upon, but was comical in the way that it hung loosely and haphazardly over the mer who currently wore it.

Silence descended upon the ruins, broken only by the groans, cries and moans of the wounded and dying. From their positions beside their mistress, a pair of towering daedra rose to their feet while looking about at the mortals before them with something akin to confusion on their features. The daedra were dressed in little more than loincloths, and were heavily muscled like no man, mer or
even orcs could ever hope to match. Both were well in excess of two metres in height, weighed at least two hundred kilograms and had only been hidden from view by the way they had both been sitting cross-legged as part of the ritual. They too seemed confused and I knew that a confused daedra was only a few short steps away from an angry and homicidal daedra.

“You failed!” shrieked Eregor, twisting and pointing a gauntleted finger carved into a bony talon at his startled mistress. “I will crush your pretty face and the mudcrabs will feed upon your corpse! I will-”

The sound of splintering bone was audible over his hate-filled rant and it cut him off in mid breath, stopping him entirely in mid motion and making everyone who heard it jump. The expression of agony that consumed his features was as terrible as it was sudden and there was a second snap as he dropped to his knees. Deep and terrible, the pulse of dark energies began to build once more until all present could feel them. It didn’t take long for the energies to build, and within those few seconds Eregor went from kneeling on the altar to screaming in soul-rending agony.

His body began to writhe and shift in a combination of pain and spasms and I winced as I saw and heard how his left arm straightened out, folded back onto itself before twisting back into shape once more. The armour gripped around him, squeezing as the seizure held him tight and his limbs contorted in impossible ways. A leg seemed to snap half way up the shin to create a second joint when no man or mer ever had one, before the entire limb straightened out again to a howl of agony from the tortured woodelf.

Without a single word or gesture Malulain, myself and all of the other Rangers surged forward instinctively as the leader of the cult screamed incessantly. The cultists for the most part remained on their faces or kneeling, not resisting as we cut and stabbed our way through their number with little hesitation and no mercy. The instinctive realisation of what was happening drove us onwards even as the corrupted Rangers surrounding the Altar surged forward to protect their new lord.

Clad in their corrupted and defiled armours, covered with foul wrappings of flesh and hair twine that signified their new master they were easily identifiable in the sudden brutal melee. As Eregor’s elite they had given themselves over to Molag Bal entirely, dressing themselves in symbols of their allegiance but also having their bodies twisted like their souls. No longer were they the tan skinned and weather-beaten Bosmer of the south, but cruel mockeries of their former selves. The all may have been wood elves in stature and build but was almost the only thing they shared with the loyal kin. Scars had been carved deep into their flesh, scouring the marks and tattoos of their former lives and their pointed ears had been twisted, studded with bone and metal and turned into scraps of gristle and scar tissue. The first who I crossed blades with had eyes bloodshot with corrupted veins and its skin was a mess of darkened lines like the roots of a tree digging deep into the earth. No longer did it have the bronzed tan of a being who had spent a lifetime outdoors in the elements, but was a pallid and almost decomposing image that seemed to have been starved to the point of death. Their skulls were deformed, twisted and wretched and more than one seemed to have studs of horns pushing through the skin where it was peeling and stripping away.

My own charge forward stopped in mid pace as I recoiled from the hideous form of my attacker, slicing upwards clumsily with Sunchild and feeling the blow jar up my entire arm. Their armour at least proved to be of no match for a weapon of Sunchild’s make and while my opponent hissed in agony I speared it in the throat. It fell to its knees, brackish blood pumping from between its fingers as it tried to stem the pulsating flow and I was overwhelmed with disgust and a cold rage burning within me. All around me, the several dozen rangers loyal to Malulain slaughtered their way through their fallen brethren while Malulain and his veterans fought by my side against Eregor’s chosen.

Dressed in his detailed armour, one of higher ranked Rangers shrieked in agony and the sound felt
as though it had been delivered to my brain with a point of a sword. One who had spent most of the battle so far fighting by my side, fell quickly under the corrupted blades of the brethren. Even as I deflected a thrust with the flat of Sunchild’s blade and speared another on its edge, I could see that death was coming for the loyalist quickly, as he was surrounded by a number of them, their blades rising and falling with an unholy fury.

Three of them quickly turned to face me, hissing and spitting bile and daedric curses even as they danced just outside of my reach with fresh blood covering their foul armour and faces. They looked like an amalgamation of daedra and mer, loathsome and evil but the smell emanating from them was another thing entirely. The burning taste of stomach acid hit my tongue from the merest hints of it. It seemed to bypass my mask and even ignore my inhalations to strike right into the back of my throat.

The battle in the ruins raged anew, but now it was Ranger versus corrupted Ranger and both sides were paying a heavy toll in blood. Double edged bone daggers and single edged swords of ivory cut through leather, silk, cloth and flesh and the brutality of the kills were something that only the vampire within me could match. Bellies were ripped open, groins stabbed deeply, legs shattered and teeth punched clear of skulls. Eyes gouged and throats punched and for a large majority of the Rangers it soon turned into grappling and clawing at each other as their relative equality of skill left them using anything and everything at hand to kill. I even caught a glimpse of a loyalist holding a chunk of broken masonry in both hands, driving it down hard on the snarling visage of a cultist until the fallen Bosmer’s face look like it had been made out of half molten wax.

One of my own foes screamed painfully as it dropped to the floor gurgling blood and with as its organs looped out of the massive gash in its belly. The stonework under my feet suddenly turned slippery in the wash of blackened blood. Everything about this Ranger clan had been totally and utterly corrupted, and even through it was blood, fresh and tantalising, even the beast within me recoiled at the dark taint infused into every scrap of their flesh. They were Molag Bal’s now; mind, body and soul and there was no saving what they had become.

I smashed my way through the inexperienced guard of the second Bosmer facing me, not even using any finesse as I took its hand off at the wrist in a spray of ichor and bile. It screamed, the mask it was wearing slipping down and revealing a face so twisted with hatred and evil that it stopped me in my tracks even as I deflected another cut from its fellow. What was left of its features under layers of creasing scars and crisscrossing veins had been turned into a layer of filth months ago. Cracked lips peeled away from a mouth filled with blackened teeth that had either mutated into a maw of fangs or had been purposely sharpened to points. In the rush and even though it was missing its sword hand it leapt at me, snapping and snarling its ruined mouth even as I buried my elbow into its throat and punched it with the hilt of my sword.

An eye burst under the hammer blow, the first of three that I delivered that left it weeping with pain. Even with the will and gifts of its dark master pushing through from the void into its soul it had been mortally wounded. Its face was now nothing more than a mess of flesh with blackened bone poking through, a maw of shattered teeth and dribbling gore from the injuries. Blinded and insensible from the wounds it was unable to defend itself further as I twisted to one side, taking the throat of another away with the point of Sunchild and ripping a dagger free from its sheath on my chest. The last of my foes died with the dagger tip scraping the top of its skull as I punched it up under the jaw and giving the weapon a twist just to make sure as I pulled it free of flesh and brain.

Malulain had been attacked by a handful of the fallen Rangers and had been left bleeding from several minor cuts and gashes even as he duelled with a surviving pair. He was no swordsman but his natural skill and grace made him a deadly adversary that had allowed him to hold his own in such a riot of a battle. There was no skill or precision that usually accompanied a fight involving legionaries or other professional soldiers. It was little more than a tavern room brawl with increased
lethality and knives. The fact that both sides had lost most of their forces already attested to that fact.

With my own adversaries dead or dying, I rushed to the Ranger’s aid. So focused on killing Malulain, the two corrupted Rangers didn’t notice my presence until it was far too late. The dagger spun as I shifted my grip, holding it by the blade and hurling it with sickening force into the back of a skull with a crack of bone. Seconds later, the other ranger died as I caught its descending arm, stopping it mid attack and spearing it through the torso with Sunchild. With my enhanced strength it writhed and twisted in my grasp as I lifted it up off the floor by the arm, the Vampire in me lending me strength enough to crush its forearm into splinters of bone even as its chest was cut apart on my blade.

The dying Ranger dropped to my feet in a messy pile of shredded flesh and armour, clawing and my feet even as I stomped on its head with a crunch of bone. Very few of Eregor’s clan were left alive, but the glance around the slaughter showed that the same was of Malulain’s force. Easily two out of every three Rangers he had brought with him into Cyrodiil were left strewn about the ruins, wounded or otherwise dead.

On top of the altar, hunched over on his hands and knees, Eregor’s screams changed and all eyes were drawn to him. The agonising contortions were slowing, his body forcing itself back into shape centimetre by centimetre but it wasn’t the cause for the change of the screams being ripped from his throat. The roaring bone helm framing his face in six centimetres long razored teeth had suddenly, and inexplicitly slammed shut. Muffled and consumed with terror, his shrieks and wails of pain shifted to those of damned realisation, before ceasing just as quickly as they had started.

Other than Lariel, her pair of daedric bodyguards and Eregor himself, none of his clan were left standing. The rest were dead or dying at our feet. Dozens of bodies were scattered about, piled three or four deep in places and it was this sea of death that the armoured figure rose to his feet and cast its burning gaze over.

The helm was still shut tight, the interlocking fangs of the mask locking together like a knight’s visor and hiding the face but the eyes burned with fury. A darkness was now dwelling within the armour. One that had not been present before. What I also immediately noticed was the way that he was standing. No longer did the armour appear comically oversized and hanging loosely on the short Woodelf. Now it fit perfectly, locking together in flawless skin of metal without a single piece out of place.

“We’re in deep shit.” I muttered, just loud enough for Malulain to hear and to nod in agreement.

With the sound of snapped bone, the helm snapped open once more, the yawning mouth returning to frame the face of the elf within. However, Eregor was no longer the being who stared out upon the ruins. It was an elven face, high boned and almost chiselled with an almost avian like structure, but it was no Bosmer. A pair of blue eyes, cold and glowing with faint light gazed upon us all and a sneer of displeasure was permanently carved into its flesh. It was a face that I had seen the like of in several places in the previous months, a face that I immediately compared with the statues and carvings I had seen in the depths of Normalhorst and Nonungalo.

Sounding like million tombs closing deep within the earth, the reincarnated Ayleid’s laugh rolled over us and I felt my guts turn to ice. “We’re in really deep shit…”
For a moment the armoured giant looked down at his hands, clenching and unclenching them and smiling as the gauntlets began to shimmer with faint energies. I had no doubt that the ritual had indeed worked exactly as Lariel had intended it but not how Eregor had wanted. His flesh and possibly soul had been consumed entirely by the ancient presence within the armour and allowed the ancient warrior to walk Tamriel once again.

“This has just become significantly more difficult.” Malulain said simply, watching the way the pair of Xivilai bowed slightly to the reincarnated Graithlan and how the expression of triumph was obvious on Lariel’s face.

Watching their every move I stayed by Malulain’s side as he and his Rangers gravitated together. “I’m guessing that the ‘kill them all’ plan is still our best option?”

He nodded. “Separating the armour now won’t do anything except maybe annoy him.” All our eyes were focused on the dread figure as he stepped down from the altar. The crunch of broken marble under his boots was one of the loudest sounds in the ruins. “We can’t let him leave here.”

“I’ll take care of Lariel.” My gaze was firmly fixed on the Bosmer Sorceress as she began chanting again, the sickly corrupted verse of the spell plucking at my senses as I twirled Sunchild in my hand and held it hilt first to Malulain.

With a glance between me and the offered weapon he hesitatingly gripped it tight in a determined but somewhat inexperienced grip. “Are you going to be able to handle her on your own?”

I shrugged and clenched my teeth at the sight of the towering figure reaching into the sky and appearing to wrench an enormous mace from the air itself. Obviously daedric in nature the Mace was sickly green and black, weeping greenish light and carved into the snarling features of a daedra and spiked. “I’ve faced worse odds. I think the more important question is whether you lot can handle him.”

“Apparently only stabbing him in the heart will defeat him…” The handful of Rangers gripped with weapons tightly, some drawing back hard on their retrieved bows in the hope that their arrows would fly true. With Sunchild gifted to Malulain I reached up and drew the gleaming Light of Dawn, feeling its unique weight that provided me some comfort with what was to come.

With the building laughter from the resurrected Ayleid in our ears we broke into runs at them. Arrows snapped from bowstrings, flitting through the air and slamming hard into the metal-bone armour that he wore. Each arrow staggered the towering figure but none seemed to do any lasting damage other than scour the horrific plate. Over two dozen Rangers charged, silent and without a single battle cry or shout while the handful of wounded ones did what they could with groans of agony.

Dark bolts of magicka rippled through the air from the mind burning gestures of the sorceress, bursting bodies like rotten tomatoes, boiling blood in veins until it wept from pores and peeling skin from bones. Several of the Rangers died such excruciating deaths from the Mage’s foul sorcery. I saw how her eyes were burning with a dark power, filled with blackness and corruption as she stared unblinkingly into the mess of bodies for her next target.
I had barely taken half a dozen steps towards Lariel and the pair of Xivilai when the armoured figure of Graithlan began casting his own spells. Blood suddenly seemed to start pounding in my veins, drowning out all the sounds of the struggle around me and rendering me deaf to all but the roaring of my body’s life-force. Dark whispering seemed to grow from the pounding of my heart, rolling into my mind with insidious thoughts and desires not of my own. The creeping blackness was talking directly to the darkness of my soul, tempting me with forbidden pleasures and secrets that threatened to overwhelm me with their mere existence.

Lariel’s expression, a haughty sneer of superiority was clearly visible through the fog and I found myself snarling under my mask. Both fangs were pushing out of my gums, the skin of my face pulling taut and the bones straining forward as the vampire made its presence felt. Her magicka was reminiscent of the Vampire Matriarch’s and the beast within me seemed to have a personal hatred towards illusion spells. She was attempted to ensure or otherwise befuddle the senses of myself and the surviving Rangers as well as taking more direct measures to deal with us. Darkness was building in the ruins as she called upon the shadows themselves to grow in strength and smother the few light sources.

The glowing blade of the Light of Dawn cut through the treacle-like darkness wafting from the gesturing sorceress and I roared on the top of my lungs. Her eyes were devoid of colour or whites, instead being consumed with blackness and corruption. At my battle cry she turned and locked onto me with her gaze almost like she was laying eyes on me for the very first time. Her expression was unreadable, her body flowing unnaturally and limbs almost like they were lacking any form of bone structure as she weaved patterns in the air that stung the eyes.

My roar of anger announced the renewed battle as the handle of Rangers came within reach of the enormous warrior. Crunches of bone, meat and blades ripped through the air that was suddenly filled with the sounds of screams and roars of anger and pain and within the first second of the fight more than one of the Rangers had been brought low by their adversary. The mace the armoured figure wielded screamed with an unnatural hunger for pain and suffering as it laid about itself with massive swings, killing and wounding the slow and careless. In a mob the Rangers and Malulain swarmed their taller adversary, stabbing and hacking and firing their bows with every opportunity that presented itself.

The Light of Dawn was grasped firmly in my hands, glowing faintly and although its radiance would not be unlocked by anything other than the blood of Vampires, its beautiful glow was more than enough to cut through the obscure corruption that floated sickly in the air. I held it rightly in both hands, blade resonating with its sharpness only a few short centimetres from my right ear as I charged right at the Sorceress and her daedric bodyguards.

With every pounding step I took, the Xivilai seemed to grow taller, their unnatural bulks radiating a pure level of power that was unmatched by any creature within Tamriel. They were unlike the Dremora that I had faced over the previous months and other than the Marknayz that I had originally fed on there would be few daedra that would have been able to match their raw strength. A single glance was all that I need to tell me that they would have been able to wrestle a minotaur to the ground.

Both of them surged towards me as I charged towards their mistress, a banshee cry of laughter rolling from my throat. In the back of my mind I was somehow trying to understand how I had been finding myself facing off against every massive creature within Nirm and Oblivion since deserting the Legion. Between the Dremora, daedroths, minotaurs, werewolves and vampiric bodyguards I was almost yearning for a foe my own size. Despite my experience against such foes and the building pressure of the vampiric instincts growing in my mind it was not enough to entirely remove my fear or dread at their unnatural presences. Especially how both of them gestured and conjured weapons...
from the depths of Oblivion like the cultists of the Mythic Dawn.

Unlike the daggers, swords and maces that the followers of Dagon conjured, these pair of hulking monstosties called upon a gigantic two handed sword and a double headed battleaxe that most mortals would have been unable to lift. To these two daedra the weapons looked little more than toys in their oversized fists and they held them one handed as I did with my daggers. What was worse was that I knew that to die against such a foe was a fate worse than death. These weapons were not only imbued with the essences of those that they had killed, but also the spirit-energy of a daedra that would feed upon and toy with the fallen for eternity.

I narrowly dodged the downwards cut from the first, rolling out of the way as the blade buried itself into the marble underfoot. The overwhelming hunger from the trapped demon within the blade was sickeningly strong, and I could almost feel its presence trying to press itself into my mind. The mere thought that I had a daedra trapped within a weapon trying to sink its spectral talons into my mind left me laughing as I dodged another physical blow. It seemed ridiculously funny at the time that with my vampiric nature there wasn’t any more room for further corruption in my mind.

The sheer size of the Xivilai meant that I could easily outmanoeuvre them and ensure that they both were getting in each other’s way. I danced around them, cutting and slicing at them with the resonating edge of the Light of Dawn, forcing them to step back out of the way of the humming blade as it cut through the air with the sound of tearing silk. They were wary of me as I was of them but so far I was merely dodging their blows, getting a feel for their movements and speed. For the first seconds of the fight our weapons didn’t

I swung the Light of Dawn in vicious arcs, cutting through the air and each time only narrowly missing the gleaming flesh of the Xivilai. If I didn’t know better, I would have thought that they had been thoroughly rubbed down with oils or sweating profusely. Both of the creatures were overwhelmingly powerful, matching the minotaur titan in strength but also matching werewolves in their speed and agility and between the three of us we were almost evenly matched. They seemed content on keeping me at bay from the Sorceress as she hurled spell after spell into the raging melee at my back, and by now several of the Rangers had fallen to spells or to the shrieking mace of the Ayleid champion. Malulain and the others were fighting surprisingly well against their unnatural foe; the Ranger Commander was using Sunchild to keep the Mace at bay and the others were using every skill and weapon at their disposal in their attempt to defeat him. Daggers and arrows were hurled through the air but for the most part they simply bounced and shattered against the ancient armour. Every second one of their number would jump in, stabbing at weak points in the armour and leaping away before they could be touched by the daedric mace or a serrated gauntlet of bone spikes and talons. There was a good chance of winning, but not while Lariel still breathed and killed with spells.

The battleaxe wielding Xivilai stepped backwards, wrenching the massive head of the axe from the floor with a crunch of shattering marble and allowed the other to step in towards me. There was no time for me to move to dodge the next attack, and as the massive blade of the claymore cut through the air with a keening wail, I gritted my teeth, locked my back leg and swiped upwards with a diagonal strike to parry the weapon away.

The Light of Dawn had seemed to be capable of cutting through everything, no matter the material or the thickness. During my fight against Lord Volmyr and even while the blade was still corrupted it cut marble statues and pillars in half without the slightest hindrance. Against the Vampires of Castle Glenvar it had made a mockery of armour plate and even some weapons forged in the heart of Orsinium. That night in the darkness of a corrupted Ayleid ruin the Light of Dawn was finally stopped in mid cut.

With a sickening crack both my arms felt as though they were wrenched out of their sockets. Pain
flared from every muscle, and an involuntary whimper escaped my lips as the Light of Dawn was left buried in the unnatural substance of the Daedric Blade.

For a heartbeat I felt the Daedric blade gripping the faintly glowing Light of Dawn even as we both continued our attacks. The Light of Dawn had sunk its entire width into the unnatural substance of the Xivilai’s greatsword, and if it had been made of a natural material the daedric blade would’ve been shattered into pieces. Instead, it felt as though the sword had gripped onto the Ayleid blade and the immense strength of the Xivilai allowed it to continue with its strike. Before I could react, change stance or even comprehend what had happened, my arms gave way and what started off as a parry soon left me standing wide open with only my right hand still gripping the ornate hilt.

It was impossible to determine who was more surprised, myself or the daedra. In the space of a second the fight had changed completely, and while the attack had left me wide open the way our blades had locked together somehow wrenched the daedric weapon from its owner’s massive blue paws. The strange, inhuman look of shock that crossed it features was almost comical if it hadn’t recovered faster than what I could and grabbed me firmly by the wrist.

I was in trouble and I knew it just as well as what the Daedra did. It had me by my sword hand, engulfing most of my forearm and my entire hand it its massive digits in a grip so tight that my vambrace began to buckle in the vicing pressure. Pain lanced through my entire arm lifted me up into the air as its other arm snaked out and gripped me around the throat.

Darkness began to creep into my vision, and I found myself gasping and kicking futilely against the enormous strength of the Xivilai that held me out at arms distance. I couldn’t breathe; my throat was being slowly constricted and the hideous blue-red demon seemed to be delighting in the pain it was putting me in. Within seconds blood began pounding in my skull, my heartbeat seeming to echo through my mind with the strength of war drums and I knew that I had only seconds before I would blackout from my brain being cut off my both oxygen and blood. My right hand grasping the Light of Dawn was slowly being crushed, and my left hand was clawing futilely at the massive digits starving me of oxygen and constricting all blood flow to my head. Both of my legs, rather than kicking fruitlessly at the ground were slamming my boots into its bare chest but I might as well have tried to kick down the Jerral mountains for all the effect they were having.

Even other the pounding of blood in my veins I could hear Lariel’s cackle as she urged the demon to crush my throat, and time seemed to slow down once more as my body was filled with adrenaline. As it had on other occasions, when my mortal, conscious self was no longer capable the vampire took over. The depths of Glenvar, the bottom of Lake Arrius and the caverns of the Mythic Dawn were occasions where the survival instincts of the Daedric Vampire within me took over. With my brain shutting down and being choked to death by a daedra I felt the Vampire take control, my muscles filling with unnatural power even as my eyes opened and stared right into its own inky orbs.

The daedra suddenly had a look of almost childlike confusion as it felt and saw the changes that suddenly filled my being. Mostly hidden behind my mask, hood and armour there was no visible signs of the raw power that surged through me and twisted my body. The Xivilai was suddenly filled with confusion, the grip around my throat allowing it to intimately feel how my body bunched and tensed and the bones and muscles of my face twisted to suit the vampire. It was not used to such resistance from its enemies, especially mortals and that uncertainty made it slow to react.

With my right hand still trapped, I dropped my left from where it had been clawing at the Xivilai’s hand around my throat, and instead felt the leather and metal covering my chest. All fear, pain and every scrap of emotion had been lost from the Vampire taking over and instead it had been replaced by a cold, unthinking logic. I felt the strange hardness gripped tightly in my left hand, the strange tingling sensation that ran through my body as it began to shut down, and everything seemed to grow
dark and quiet like a veil was being drawn down over the world. Time seemed to stretch into eternity as my left hand was brought down savagely and hammered into a solid blue arm as thick as my waist.

Instantly the grip around my throat and arm was gone, and the sights and sounds of the ruin rushed into my skull with a thunderclap of noise and sensation. The marble steps rushed up to meet me with an explosion of pain, but this was welcomed as I sucked in a deep lungful of air and felt the darkness slide away from my mind.

Bellowing, the Xivilai scrabbled at its wounded right arm and I landed on my back right at its clawed feet. Through little more than instinct I had drawn my skinning dagger from its sheath and buried it to the hilt in the creature’s bicep, leaving its entire right arm almost entirely nerveless and hanging limply. It was roaring now in pain and anger as it pulled the blade from where it had stuck in the meat and bone of its massive arm with a spurt of daedric ichor. I had managed to keep my grip on the Light of Dawn and with little more than a feeble swipe of the blade I swung it around in an arc of gleaming skymetal, feeling it sink home and making the cries of the Xivilai reach a higher note.

Like a mountain of muscle and daedric flesh, the towering brute suddenly fell sideways as its leg dropped out from under it. The cut had been sloppy but the sheer cutting edge of the Light of Dawn had meant that the Xivilai was now suddenly missing its leg from halfway down its shin.

The daedra slammed into the ground like an anvil falling from the sky, only narrowly missing me as I lay drunkenly on the moss covered marble. Its bellows were now pained and terrible, ripping through my ears into my brain as it kicked its spurting stump in the air in agony. After my experiences with Dremora I didn’t expect such a wound to keep it down for long and I still had its fellow to contend with. Even winded and dazed from the fall I still managed to roll out of the way of a downwards attack from a shrieking battleaxe, feeling the floor under me tremble with the impact as the axe struck home.

Leaving the wounded Daedra where it had fallen I rolled groggily to my feet. I was still struggling to breathe from being winded on the floor, and my vision was still filled with floating black spots that seemed to taunt my eyesight with every movement. The second Xivilai was pressing home in its attack, tearing its axe free with both hands in a shower of marble chunks and dust before charging me with blinding rage.

I felt every impact of the creature’s feet as it ran towards me, and I merely stood my ground, judging my next attack and preparing myself for it. There was no fighting its immense strength and power behind its muscles, and to try to block the axe would be nothing more than folly. Instead I waited, standing fast until the beast had committed itself into another wild swing of its axe before stepping in and deflecting with a light slice of the Light of Dawn.

Before it could react I had stepped lightly on the balls of my feet well within reach of the Xivilai and inside its guard. The screaming axe was lightly deflected out of the way as I had ensured that instead of trying to block it I had used the entire Light of Dawn to guide the axe away and to my right. This threw the creature off balance, making it lose its grip on the axe’s haft as it sank into the floor once more.

In an arc of gleaming silver, the Light of Dawn cut downwards in a strike that had once left an Orc moneylender in separate pieces from forehead to groin. The Xivilai, half the size again of a grown man grunted as the Light of Dawn cut deep into the centre of its chest. Its sternum was sliced in half, the blade continuing down through its stomach before cutting its hips in two and exiting between its muscular thighs.

There was no cry of pain, roar of anger or snarl of hatred from the Xivilai as it felt the blade slice
through bone, skin and meat. For several seconds that seemed to stretch on for hours we stood there, nose to nose as it doubled over in pain, releasing its grip on the axe where it had imbedded itself into the marble floor to clutch at the thin line of ichor oozing down its chest and stomach. I could see myself reflected in its massive almond shaped eyes as they widened in the sudden realisation of pain and although it didn’t know death as mortals did, it knew agony all too well.

I stepped back carefully, flicking the black bile-like blood from the glowing Light of Dawn as the Xivilai suddenly coughed up a wad of bubbling gore. Whether it truly realised it or not it was already dead. One of its legs buckled under it as I kicked at a bare ankle, forcing its leg to slide on marble made slippery from gore. Its balance gone, it seemed to unfold like the pages of a book, the contents of its body spill out through the massive gash that had split it in half from the chest down. Ropes of gashed intestine slithered across the floor like serpents and with a gurgling death rattle the Xivilai slumped into the mess of its own organs and died.

The first had regained most of its composure and was raising itself up despite its wounded arm to try to claw its way towards me. Badly wounded and bleeding out from the severed stump of a leg, there was nothing it could do to stop me from taking a few short paces, cutting its good hand off at the wrist before spearing it between the shoulder blades as I strode past.

Lariel had seen me dispatch her daedric bodyguards and was whispering dark words of power into the air, boiling and rippling it around herself with the sheer force of her mind. I could feel scratching and chittering things from the very depths of Oblivion gnawing on the edge of my senses as she drew more and more power into herself. Her fear was almost a physical thing as I strode over the rapidly dissolving bodies of the Xivilai. Their links to Nirn severed, their physical forms were now returning to Oblivion where their immortal souls would slowly regain their strength to be conjured once again. This would take days at least, and Lariel knew this just as well as I did as she called on any and all daedra to heed her summons. Both of her hands seemed to squirm and twist unnaturally as she conjured and traced intricate patterns that seemed to have a life of their own. A merest glance of the motions she was making was enough to make me feel sick and left me feeling as though a migraine was trying to force its way into my consciousness.

Plucking my skinning dagger from the ground as I moved towards her, I twirled it between my fingers and grasped it by the blade that was still dripping with blue-black gore. With a snarl of rage and a flick of the wrist I hurled it between us, moving with such speed that she didn’t have time to register my actions before the blade took her in the shoulder. The incantation was cut off in mid syllable, the intricate pattern woven into the fabric of the air collapsing in on itself like a reversed thunderclap as it imploded. In its place was a small spray of blood, and a strangulated cry of pain as the dagger was punched to the hilt in the meat of her shoulder and she was thrown to the ground.

In a half dozen strides I leapt towards her, covering the metres between us in the space of a few seconds. The beast was lending me its strength now and the skin of my face had been pulled taut over my elongating jaw line as my fangs pushed my lips apart. The reek of corruption was a noxious aura around her being and she was now nothing more than a vessel of corruption. Through the blessings of Molag Bal her powers had increased tenfold, but it had not stopped ten centimetres of steel breaking her collarbone and slicing through flesh.

A satisfying crunch of bone was audible as my boot lifted her from the ground, causing the fireball spell she was forming to flutter and die with an inarticulate scream wrenched from her throat. My own pain was slowly making itself felt over the adrenaline and the bloodthirst of the vampire. The flesh of my right wrist was swelling, as was my throat and I could feel the heat burning where the bruising would have already turned my skin red-black and sickly. Despite my armour and clothing, my flesh in places had been shredded by blade, fingernails and the sharpened teeth of the fallen Bosmer. My left shoulder was throbbing where something had stuck me during the melee and I was
beginning to limp on a knee that felt like it had been twisted at a point that I could not determine.

She screamed, her breath ragged and wheezing as I dragged her into a kneeling position with a fistful of greasy, braided hair. Bone shards had punched deep into a lung when I kicked her but there was still considerable fight in the Bosmer Sorceress. Hissing and spitting curses through a clenched jaw she dug her fingernails into the gloved hand lifting her upright, writhing in my grasp as I swung the Light of Dawn back for a killing blow.

Hanging slackly by her side from the dagger in her shoulder, I didn’t see the glowing magicka in her hand until she slapped it against my armoured stomach. The tingling energies coursed through my veins and I felt myself go stiff as though an electric current was being run through my spine. For a moment I lost all control over my body, being frozen into a statue of pain as she forced the magicka deep into my being.

“The Schemer Prince desires your soul.” She rasped, her mouth frothy and pink as the arterial bubbles framed her sharpened teeth. “Give yourself to him…”

The magicka continued to surge through me and I felt a deep, overwhelming presence hovering over me as she poured every last scrap of her magicka into calling upon her patron lord. In the darkness of the ruins I saw a mirage like entity forming from the flickering shadows, condensing into a form that existed only in the depths of my mind. A maw of grinning fangs, a horned, scaled and soulless visage of hate and domination gazed upon me with an emotion akin to recognition. Guided on by the beckoning of its servant, a taloned hand reached out from the depths of eternity with the irresistible nature of an avalanche.

Part of my soul opened itself up to the ethereal visage pressing through the barriers between Nirn and Oblivion, but another part rebelled. A soul portion of iron and fire, hatred and determination shook itself free of the lingering taint and threaded my muscles with surging strength.

The growl that ripped its way from my throat left Lariel’s eyes widening in surprise as she felt me resist both her magicka and her master. Judging by the expression on her face, she could see how my face had pushed forward in the mask and my eyes had turned into blackened pools of darkness and horror. The presence roared its hatred and anger at being denied, fading from my mind-sight as quickly as it had appeared. Beneath the surprise and the confusion on Lariel’s face there was realisation of what I was and recognition of the similar connection I shared with her daedric master. That knowledge flickered for a moment as she realised and understood where I had gained the strength to resist as I swung the Light of Dawn with naked savagery and took her head clean off her shoulders.

Headless from a blade of extreme sharpness, her torso spurted hot corrupted blood all over my boots as it smacked wetly to the ground. The look of surprise was frozen on her face as I held her head with a grip full of greasy dreadlocks and braids, watching as the light in her eyes died before dropping the grisly trophy with disdain.

The battle was not going overly well. My own injuries were slowing me down despite my vampiric nature and I could feel the level of exhaustion creeping up on me. While not as intense as what had occurred in Glenvar Castle I was tired from a fortnight of hunting and if was going to be honest with myself; several months of unceasing fighting and travelling. For Malulain and the other Rangers they too were tiring and paying a terrible price for such exhaustion. Their injuries during the battle and the months of hunting their kin had worn them down. Only a single foe was left standing, but Graithlan was proving to be deadlier than Eregor and his fallen clan combined.

Ancient, and monstrously powerful, Graithlan was slaughtering the Rangers facing him with an almost contemptuous ease. Several had already fallen to the weapon, their bodies pulped beyond all
recognition as the enormous weapon howled with every swing. More than one of the Rangers had been hurled through the air as broken and rent corpses, and even as I turned one smacked wetly against a pillar after being flung through the air by backhanded swing.

A dozen still fought on regardless, stabbing into chinks of the dread armour and managing to draw the ancient being’s blood. Malulain or one of the others had managed to scour a deep cut down the angular, bird like face, and a leg was streaked with gore bubbling from a rent in an armoured knee. Their attempts to stop Graithlan was costing them even more with every second that past as he had more than just his mace to call upon.

Before I had managed to get more than a single step from the headless corpse, another pair of rangers had died horribly. Malulain’s casual mention of Graithlan’s powers at the campsite were proven horribly inaccurate as he wreathed a fist in glowing energies, reaching out in the direction of one of the rangers before gesturing as though he was grabbing and pulling them towards him. A cut off shriek echoed above the screams and cries of the wounded as the Ranger dropped the bow, shuddered and collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut. To our horror, an ethereal form in the shape of a bosmer was ripped from the Ranger’s body, his spiritual essence being transformed into something terrible and unholy as it flung itself at the laughing Ayleid.

Swirling around him, more and more wraiths were plucked from the depths of oblivion and with so much death around us there was no shortage of fallen souls for him to call upon. They rose from the ground, shrieking with unending torment as they were forced to obey his summons. Fallen bosmer and Rangers alike were ripped from the soil and their mortal remains, the howling of their torment ripping through my mind as they swirled around Graithlan’s armoured legs, clawing and caressing the bone-metal armour as he began absorbing the energies.

Some of the surviving Rangers staggered away from the sight, the cries of the damned forcing them back as effectively as a pike phalanx. Others tried to continue their attacks, forcing their way through the swirling wraiths and energies as they swarmed the armoured figure. I saw with my own building horror as one of the rangers stepped forward, his obsidian shortsword held steady as he tried to jam it between plates and into Graithlan’s stomach. A spectre swirled around the sword, wrapping itself around his arm like a serpent and forcing itself into his screaming face before he could even react. The cries of pain and agony were short lived as the ghost ripped its way through the hapless Ranger, leaving him to fall to his knees clawing at his throat as the cold touch of the grave froze his tongue into a lumped mass and solidified the blood in his veins.

A second died just as painfully as an armoured fist grasped him by the skull. Slowed from blood loss and his accumulated injuries, the second Ranger’s head burst like a ripe melon as the skull engraved digits closed like a vice. The strangulated scream was cut off in less than a second as gore sprayed everyone in a two metre radius, coating the front of Graithlan’s armour with the drizzle.

Cackling with a laughter as deep as a grave, Graithlan swung the limp corpse like a bludgeon, knocking some of his opponents down and forcing the others to move away. Blood was spraying through the air, streaming from between his armoured digits, dribbling down over his armour and exploding into the air like a geyser as he stomped down hard on the chest of one of the wounded. The spectres swirled around him in a vortex of death, screaming their tormented cries and begging for release from their new-found hell but suddenly silence fell upon the ruins.

Stopping in place, the armoured wight blinked, scrunching its face tightly in sudden confusion and dropping the corpse with a wet smack. Even the restless spirits had ceased their cavorting and banshee wails and instead hovered near their master, waiting upon him like faithful hounds. For a moment, no one moved as Graithlan lowered his gaze, staring that the emerald green hilt jutting from his stomach.
For the first time in my life I felt regret at being a forester rather than a Legionary. While during my first year’s service I had been taught the rudimentary basics as a Hastatii I had gone on to more specialised training. I had thrown pilum on the odd occasions in the years since but it was a skill that I had let grow rusty and dull.

Out of all of us within that ancient, moss covered ruin I was by far the most surprised at the effectiveness of the throw. Malulain and his Rangers were surprised at the sudden appearance of the Light of Dawn spearing the resurrected horror in the torso, Graithlan was surprised at finding himself impaled on the weapon but I was surprised that I had managed to hit him at all.

The peerless edge had punched through the archaic plate with as much ease as it did most things forged in the physical world, but it was far from a killing blow. Blood slowly pulsed from around the hilt, dripping down the lower portion of his breastplate and turning into a flood as he reached up with a brain speckled gauntlet and dragged the sword free.

“Tami Alata?” The ancient being muttered as he gazed upon the gleaming edge of the unique weapon. Lights danced and twinkled in the deep blue edge like the stars in the night sky, matching the cold gaze of the Ayleid wielding it as he directed the force of his hatred upon me.

I was completely unarmed and now the centre of attention of the towering figure as he began to move towards me, ignoring the dozen felled rangers scattered about. The gesture he made was obvious in its intent and the horde of spirits twitched and rolled like a tsunami as he directed them at me with a roar.

The clank of metal and the choking exclamation of pain stopped him in mid breath and I couldn’t keep the smile off my face as several centimetres of metal erupted from his mouth. Teeth shattered outwards, a flood of gore rushing out from between his lips as the blood coated length of Sunchild punched through from the back of his neck. Malulain, seeing the moment’s opportunity in my distraction had picked himself up from where he had been knocked down, and thrown himself forward with a single, last ditch strike. Sunchild’s point had punched through the gap between the back of Graithlan’s helm and the armoured collar, breaking bone and not stopping until the hilt was pressed firmly into his nape.

Both the Light of Dawn and the corrupted mace clattered to the ground as the bone encrusted figure reached up with a trembling hand, feeling the metallic blade jutting from his face like a tongue. He was twitching and coughing blood, the terrible wound shredding the back of his throat and drowning him even as his body gave out. The dual clanks of his knees slamming into the ground was followed shortly by a clattering toll of metal as he fell forward onto his face.

With the second death of their master, the tortured souls of the deceased vanished like smoke in the wind, faded into the darkness without a trace of their existence. In a handful of moments their unnatural aura, baleful glows and shrieks had vanished, dissipating into nothingness as they returned to Oblivion and Aetherius.

“May your souls find peace.” Malulain muttered, falling onto one knee as he finally let himself feel the pain and exhaustion from the fight. Being knocked down by the corpse of one of his Rangers had left him with a shattered wrist, and he was holding it tenderly as limped over to him and the other survivors.

“I thought you said that only stabbing him in the heart would kill him?”

He looked up at me and grimly smiled through the pain at my sarcasm. At some point during the fight his hood had been wrenched from his head and a jagged cut ran through his scalp that came close to slicing his ear off. “Have you ever met someone that walked off a knife to the skull?”
The collection of grim laughs echoed from the handful of survivors as they picked themselves up and began moving about to tend to the wounded. Those few of Eregor’s clan that had managed to survive their injuries were quickly finished off with economincal stabs to the throat or heart, and the wounded rangers were being tended too as best they could. None of them minded me in the slightest as I walked over, retrieved the Light of Dawn and ensured that Graithlan wasn’t getting back up in case the legends were right with a precise stab.

“It’s over.” I said simply, watching with some distaste as the body within the armour was already withering, decaying and turning to a slimy dust that poured from the gaps in the armour. Soon the dread armour would return to their original state as ancient relics containing nothing more than a baleful influence.

“It is.” Malulain walked over to me, shrugging off the attentions of one of his Rangers trying to bind his arm with a shortsword and a torn strip of a cloak. He watched me carefully as I retrieved Sunchild from the ashen remains of the skulled helm, wiping it clean on the clothes of a nearby corpse before sheathing it once again.

“They are fine swords.” He said simply, gesturing with his good hand at Sunchild specifically. “You have my thanks for its use.”

“What do we do now?” I asked softly, motioning towards the bodies strewn around us and the ugly collection of armour at our feet.

The look of pain that filled Malulain’s face was powerful and unable to be hidden to anyone. “We must leave the bodies where they fall.” He said simply, looking at the remaining Rangers who shared his look of anguish. “There will be no feasting on the dead, nor can provide the funeral rights that they so deserve with the threat of further taint. They will be reclaimed by the Green and may it lead their souls back into the light.”

“What about the armour? We can’t just leave it here.”

There was a nod from the leader of the Rangers. “Just as the Green will claim the fallen, we will call upon it to guard the artefacts. Perhaps it shall do a better job than what we have.”

My look of confusion was either ignored or unnoticed as he turned around to the few that still survived. Two thirds of the Rangers that had followed Eregor’s clan were growing cold in the ruins, and none who were left were unscathed. Most had minor or superficial wounds, but there were some who would not live to see the sunrise even with the most potent of restoration magicka.

“Meneleb, Dirnil. Collect the pieces and take them to Wylweneth.”

The tattooed features of Malulain gave me a weary smile as the two Rangers he had chosen came over and bundled the pieces of the armour into their arms. Carefully, and with an obvious distaste for being so close, let alone touching such foul artefacts they turned and began carrying them towards the forest where we came.

“Come Kaius. You have seen much tonight and are one of the few to have seen our secrets.” Gesturing with his good hand, he bid me to follow as the rest collected their wounded and began leaving the ruins. “You have earned the right to see one more.”

Feeling the stabbing pain in my knee, and the increasing pressure from the swelling on several spots on my body I carefully made my way through the death filled ruins to where the forest thickened. The surviving Rangers stood in a rough semicircle, carrying their comrades and assisting those whose injuries were more severe. Bursting lights danced between some of their number as they used
what restoration magicka they could to seal the more grievous of injuries and I was impressed to see that their discipline remained unbroken. Other than the handful who had suffered truly sickening injuries, for the most part they were quiet and just as stealthy as ever.

“We are one with the Green.” Malulain said softly by my side as I stood behind the group. The two carrying the pieces of armour had approached the last surviving member of Malulain’s inner circle; the unarmed Ranger clad in Vines. “And as we strive to follow Y’ffre’s teachings and protect the Green, the Green also protects us.”

With the Ranger carrying the armour by her sides, the unarmed ranger began chanting, swaying in time with the wordless notes that rolled forth from her tongue.

“Wylweneth is a Ranger Druid.” He offered as an explanation as the others slowly joined in. Even those suffering injuries added their voices despite the pain. It rolled up and into the night, filtering through the trees and I found myself struck dumb at the sound. It was unlike anything I had heard before, somehow conveying the emotional depth of a Legion Funeral Dirge, the uplifting spirit of an Cyrodiilic wedding, and the pride of an ashlander coming of age ceremony. It was a song that was old when the world was new, a song of ancient times and future events yet to come.

It tightened my chest and pricked at my eyes with emotion as Malulain joined in. It was a song of the Bosmer, a song for their families, for their comrades and for their countrymen long fallen to darkness. In wordless chords they sung the funeral lament of those who had died but I was shocked when I heard something join in from the darkness of the forest.

Striding with a sinewy grace, creaking and groaning the spindly figures separated themselves from the forest’s edge and moved towards the Ranger Druid with her outstretched arms. There were five of them, each similar in height to the collection of Bosmer surrounding me but one of their number towered over the rest. Everyone within the bounds of Tamriel had heard tales of the guardians of the forests and while their names may have been different in the native tongues of the Empire; geaga-bain, dryaden, fillii silvam, there would be very few who would not know the name Spriggan.

The branchwraiths moved with all the grace of leaves shifting in the morning breeze, following their towering matron as they moved in perfect harmony. Muscles of rolling creepers twisted and swayed under a skin of leathery bark, and eyes made of flawless amber gazed unblinkingly upon the collection of mer standing before them.

“The forests will safeguard the armour.” Malulain said, breaking the spell the song and the sight of the Spriggans had over me. With a briefest of nods from the oak-like matron, the smaller spriggans stepped forward and wrapped the pieces of armour up in their root-like hands, the finger-vines slithering over them and gently plucking them from the willing grasp of the Rangers. “No mortal will ever find Graithlan’s vessel again, especially with the discovery of all of its pieces.”

Staring at the towering matron as her smaller kin turned with their unholy items I couldn’t help but agree. The song continued, the Rangers raising their voices in time with the rolling breeze and I could only watch, fascinated as the spriggans sung as well, their wooden calls haunting as they returned to the forests with their newly acquired charges.

Silence returned to the land but I found myself wondering whether the song had truly ceased or whether it merely continued on regardless whether I heard it or not. The Rangers with their duty fulfilled and their dead mourned as best as they could, began to move silently away. Most of their number glanced in my direction for the briefest of moments before following in the spriggans’ footsteps and I was almost certain that most were providing me the briefest of nods before turning away.
Standing by my side, I could feel Malulain’s anguish at the death and long journey back to Valenwood that awaited him and his brethren. But there was a strength within him, a pride of completing such a task and succeeding despite the odds that had been arrayed against them.

“We now return to Valenwood,” there was a distinct twinge of happiness in his voice at the prospect of returning home after so long. “You too will return as we walk separate paths from here. Know that you have won my respect, and the respect of brothers and sisters.”

Fumbling with some difficulty with his good hand, he managed to unbuckle a small sheath from his side and held it out to me. “The use of a sword calls for the payment in kind. You fought by our sides tonight without thought of reward or thanks. For that, you can count me and my clan as friends and allies.”

Carefully, I took the dagger and the sheath from his hand and saw how the dagger was beautifully fashioned the same as the other Rangers from a single length of bone. What I also noticed was this was far more heavily detailed than the others I had seen that night.

“If the time comes that you need to call upon myself or the Circles, take that dagger to Falinesti and show it to the druid circle. No matter where you are in Tamriel we will come to you aid.” With a brief glance back at the death filled ruins his gaze hardened into a mask of determination. “In these dark days we all may need as much help as we can get.”

“If I call for aid I’ll try not to drag you into a fight with a thousand-year-old necromancer and a pack of daedra.”

The grin we shared was mutual, and for a brief moment we grasped each other’s arms firmly. “Safe travels Kaius. May the Green assist you in your travels.”

We turned away from each other, and I took a moment to glance up at the stars to gain my bearings, and down to the dagger that I held in a fist. It was almost more of a work of art than a killing tool, and what such a gift represented was not to be taken lightly. It was a sign of the utmost faith and trust and a pledge forged in the darkness of the night against the backdrop of death.

Turning to say my parting farewells I found myself alone in the darkness as Malulain and his kin vanished as quickly and as easily as they had appeared, and leaving me on my own. Blood was congealing on my clothing and armour, my body was battered, bruised and bleeding in places and I would have trouble walking for a few days but the immaculate bone dagger in its sheath of spider’s web, chitin and leather showed to me that it all wasn’t a dream. For the final moments that I stood where the forest thickened I listened carefully, but whether the music I heard was a memory or a brief moment of clarity to the hidden songs of the world I couldn’t tell.

Chapter End Notes

Translation: "Tami Alata?" - "Dawn's Light?" (Ayleid)

Shadows in a Struggle for Power is one of the largest and most complex Quests within Oscuro’s Oblivion Overhaul and involves five separate NPC factions, multiple locations and rewards the player with the Dread Armour, the Sword Icxth, the ability to use 'spectral' weapons from ghosts and the alignment with the creature faction (NPC
Animals no longer attack you). This chapter, and the ones previous are heavily based off that mod, but diverges significantly from the mod's 'lore'.

I did plan on writing something much, much closer to the ingame quest, but as it involves travel throughout the entirety of Cyrodiil it was just not feasible to include it in the overarching plots of the Oblivion Crisis and the upcoming "Knights of the Nine". Even as it stands this chapter has been 'toned down' from what I had originally intended. There was going to be a portion where the Rangers called upon the help of the Spriggans and Lariel summoned Storm Atronachs but its almost over the top with two groups of Rangers, the presence of Molag Bal, a reincarnated necromancer summoning and ripping the souls out of people, a sorceress and daedra. (Spriggans may appear later on in the series...)

As it may be plainly obvious, this is not the last Kaius will see of Malulain and his Rangers. I thoroughly enjoyed writing about them and writing my take on the Bosmer themselves.

Please leave feedback as it would be greatly appreciated! :-D
The oppressive heat of the smithy was suddenly and abruptly replaced with the cool salty coastal air, lifting the sweat from our flesh. Viconia and I had spent the past hour in discussion with Varel Morvayn as we arranged for our battered, damaged and worn armour to be stripped, repaired, replaced and otherwise refurbished after almost three months of adventuring. While Varel seemed pleased in how effective his and his fellow master smith’s creations were in combat, it still left him aghast as just how much damage they had suffered in such a short time frame. Moonstone chain links had been broken and parted, ebony-steel plates had been bent, buckled and rent and it was only our breastplates that seemed to be intact. For most of the time that we had spent inside of his smithy he has simply muttered, cursed and swore as he went over each and every piece and studied the damage.

In the end we departed slightly lighter of our collection of wealth, and armoured in only our breastplates. The rest was left arrayed across a table, the chainmail thrown into barrels filled with sand for scouring, and the worst pieces simply dumped into buckets to be fed into the smelter. It was concerning the number of pieces that were going to be smelted down and reforged as it showed just how much fighting we had experienced recently.

“Well, that will keep them busy for a while.” I commented offhandedly as I closed the door behind Viconia.

The sign displaying the anvil and tongs symbol of Morvayn’s shop creaked above our heads as Viconia simply shrugged her shoulders. “Three days. I’m surprised that it’s going to take that long with how much he pointed out with your armour.”

“It was only a few busted links, buckled pauldrons, crushed vambraces, split back plate, cracked faulds, dented rerebraces…” I trailed off, realising that not only was she making a joke but the sheer amount of damage I had sustained during the months was a little overwhelming. Especially how Viconia’s armour was going to require a significantly smaller amount of repairs. Her attitude towards wearing and using armour for protection was not to get hit in the first place.

“Well, you will go out of your way to fight people and monsters. It’s not my fault that you come back beaten and bloody from the wilderness.”

The smile on her face lit her expression for a moment as she glanced in my direction. Ever since I had returned from patrolling the county she had been a mixture of relieved, annoyed and amused. Especially after I informed her and Azzan of my encounter with the Bosmer Rangers. Azzan was particularly pleased to know that they were not a threat and that whatever danger had been present in the region had been dealt with. I didn’t provide full details however, after making a conscious decision to keep a large portion of the battle in the ruins to myself as I didn’t think that Malulain would have appreciated too many outsiders knowing. I had gained his trust and in extension the trust of the Ranger Clans and they were not individuals that I wished to offend. Azzan may have been mostly content with my version of the story, Viconia had been annoyed somewhat when I withheld
And now we both found ourselves in Anvil, together once more and with less and less work to keep us occupied. In the weeks since our arrival the city had improved, the mood had been lifted and even despite the ever growing numbers of pilgrims, refugees and travellers the situation was contained. Where there had been a detectable layer of fear hovering in the air, there was now instead a growing sense of festivity and commemoration as those who were attempting to restart their lives found opportunities to do so.

Dozens, if not hundreds of new traders, merchants and craftsmen had relocated themselves into the city, along with their families and unemployment was soon becoming a past issue. Every street corner, alley, or communal place were growing new stalls and there wasn’t an empty building within the curtain walls. Those who didn’t have trades soon found themselves being offered work as couriers and runners, labourers and warehousemen to help fuel the ever increasing number of tiny businesses.

It wasn’t to say that all things were going smoothly. Riots and brawls were still common place and the city guard had its hands extremely full dealing with the increasing number of robberies and petty crimes that were occurring on a daily basis. Pickpocketing was rife and on my return I had some urchin attempt to lift my purse before he found himself dangling in the air with my iron grip on his arm. Ever since it seemed I was no longer a target, and I consciously noted that Viconia had not once been the subject of anyone’s attentions. Her weeks of patrolling the streets and ‘dealing’ with infractions in her customary style had left no doubt in anyone’s mind what would occur if they earned her ire.

Azzan had been completely correct though. our presences alone were calming to the city’s population and our actions had a vastly increased effect over what would normally be expected. While little more than a drop in a pond in comparison to the actions of the local guard and the guildsmen our actions were a lot more publically visible. Whether we were known to individuals as the Heroes of Kvatch, the Champions of Anvil, Knight’s Errant of the Order of the White Stallion or members of the Fighter’s guild it didn’t matter. We were heroes and as such we gave everyone hope.

As we made our way from Morvayn’s Peacemakers and along the city streets we could feel dozens of eyes watching and looking upon us in awe. My hearing caught snatches of conversations discussing us and not for the first time I cursed the articles that the Black Horse Courier had been distributing about our feats. It was now common knowledge that we had closed the oblivion gates of Kvatch and Anvil, slew the Titan of Titan’s End, received Knighthoods and battled vampires and werewolves in Glenvar County. Personally the attention made me extremely uneasy. Especially how I knew that despite the best efforts of the Blades that there were still a number of cultists at large within the Empire. our deeds were quickly becoming legendary and on two occasions that I was aware of our likenesses had been captured and distributed as part of the articles.

“What makes the Legion so special?” Viconia asked abruptly as we made our way down the street, shifting our way through the throngs of people going about their daily business. The mid-morning markets were doing very well for themselves and there was no shortage of customers.

“What do you mean?” My reply was almost cut off as I moved around a pair of servants bearing their lord’s heraldry on their tabards, moving from place to place with their arms full of goods and foodstuffs.

Viconia too shifted around them and they both started slightly at the sight of our swords at our hips and our ebony-mithril breastplates. “No matter where we have been, the Legion is spoken about almost reverently or in awe, and yet as far as I can tell every province… By Shar, every city on the
surface has its own standing army.”

“That’s true.”

“Then why are they so special?”

I spared her a glance as we continued through the busy streets, my hand hovering in the vicinity of Sunchild and wary for pickpockets. Technically we were both were in our own time but the two of us walking about constituted as a patrol in the eyes of the Guild and the local Guard.

“It’s the training.” Shrugging for a moment I made an apology and squeezed through a small group of people lining up to buy poultry from a nearby stall. “For the most part at least.”

“The guards and militia we have encountered seem adequate enough.”

“Yeah, in a way. But they aren’t professionals. Most of the guards you will see spend only part of their time in mail and only a portion of that training. A Legionary signs up for life, for all intents and purposes. Not everyone who takes the Empire’s Septim will live to see retirement.”

Her gaze lingered on me as we managed to extricate ourselves from the press and into a calmer portion of the city streets. “What is it about the training then?”

“Well, for one thing it’s a lot more intensive physically and mentally. Most join in their mid to late teens. A bit older if they are elvish and a bit younger if they are orcs.” For a moment I chewed on my lip in thought. “When you take a teenager when they have almost finished growing and put them through the sort of physical training that literally results in broken bones and torn muscles, it hardens their body and mind until it is as hard as the armour they wear. From sunrise to sunset they are hammered into the ground with relentless drills of marching in formation in armour, running, lifting weights, wrestling, sparring and every other activity you can imagine. The training is that hard it will break several people a day, but the Legion has a large cadre of healers specifically allocated to heal the recruits. You break someone in the morning, heal them at lunch, break them again in the afternoon and heal them before bed. Day after day, week after week and you soon turn them into something more than just a warrior.”

“You create a soldier.” Viconia replied, looking somewhat deep in thought.

“Exactly. The strongest swords are made by heating and folding the metal dozens upon dozens of times until the last of the imperfections in the material have been beaten out of existence. In the same way, the training and breaking and mending of an individual, especially when they are on the cusp of adulthood makes them stronger both in body and spirit than what they would be normally.”

“The Legion uses pain to temper their minds and breaks their bodies to allow them to heal stronger…” She said. It was a statement rather than question but I nodded anyway. “What about starting the training process at a younger age?”

“It has been attempted and done. A couple of times I think. Some of the more…free thinking Legates during the reign of Pelagius the Mad tried making Legionaries from recruits taken as young as six.”

“Did it work?”

I shook my head, both to Viconia’s question and the handful of citizen’s offering me a portion of their meagre rations. Their clothing was so threadbare from their journey that they were little more than rags and if it wasn’t for the daily bread that the Countess had decreed be handed to every inhabitant they would be on the verge of starvation. Their desire to show their appreciation to
Viconia and I make me feel extremely awkward but I noticed that Viconia barely reacted except to make a polite but firm refusal. The time she had spent in the city while I was hunting had changed her and the past weeks she would have had to deal with numerous similar situations.

“I don’t know the full details but I know that they proved that it just wasn’t as cost effective. There was a higher amount of injuries obviously, the cohorts had much higher discipline and were harder to break in combat but within a few years it was obvious that the use of restoration magicka during training had disastrous effects. For the most part they all suffered various illnesses; tumours and the like before they had reached their mid-twenties. On top of this that they were not as strong or fully developed physically until they had reached their late teens so after a decade or so of training they end up with less time being able to serve the Legion. Similar ‘experiments’ have had the same result.”

“Is all this why you seem so much more capable than the others we have met?”

Not knowing how to answer, I chose to shrug instead. “I guess.”

“You are much more used to pain, and are certainly stronger than most I have seen in our travels.”

“That’s not entirely a result of being a member of the Legion.” Pausing uncomfortably, I grimaced and saw her expression mirror mine in more of a humorous fashion.

“Within the first days of meeting you were going to brand yourself with a red hot sword blade before I stepped in to stop you from making a wael of yourself.” Her laugh was pleasant and I realised how much I had thoroughly missed her during my short time in the wilds. “Surely you were at least somewhat proficient before you left the Legion.”

It was my turn to chuckle darkly. “Somewhat. Managed to hold my own during the yearly tournaments within the 14th and even managed to be proclaimed sword champion for my cohort once.”

“Which proves that you know which end of a sword not to stab yourself with at least.”

The curve of her eyebrow was the only sign of amusement on her face as she returned to her usual dour look, but I couldn’t help but grin.

“Well, what about the Drow? Do they have anything comparable to the Legion?”

“Organisationally? No. By skill of arms I would say that most Drow who have reached adulthood are more than a match for any Legionary.”

“Really?” I was surprised, but only partially. Viconia had never made any attempt to proclaim that she was a trained warrior and without my vampiric nature there would be little help that I could contend with her.

“The Drow are violent and cruel and exceptionally capable as warriors, mages, thieves and assassins, but that is as individuals. We fight for ourselves and even during battle it is rare for any Drow to come to the aid of another. Death on the battlefield can come from any direction and even those who we fight alongside.”

“Sounds inefficient.”

Once again she laughed, but this time it was full throated and drew the attention of most passers-by. It was not an entirely pleasant laugh and for those who weren’t accustomed to her it was enough to send shivers up the spine. “Yes, yes it is. I always thought that the Drow were superior to everything
and everyone, that only through purity could a race gain supremacy. But since being on the surface and seeing everything that the Empire has accomplished and what surfacers have achieved I have had to rethink everything I thought I knew.”

“How do the Drow fight wars?” I asked simply.

“Unlike the surface, that’s for certain. Most battles I have experienced or heard of are nothing like Kvatch. The Drow rely almost solely upon slaves to fight, sending them forward in mass waves until the enemy is either destroyed or worn down enough that the handful of warriors can finish off the survivors.”

“It sounds extremely inefficient…”

She nodded. “In one battle against the illithids, Menzoberranzan lost three thousand slaves. That was almost a quarter of the total slave stock and several of the lesser houses were subsequently destroyed in the coming months with the loss of so much property and wealth. The illithids force had only numbered a thousand or so, mostly their own mind-slaves with a hundred or so of the creatures commanding their force. It was a victory for Menzoberranzan but now when I think about it, it just seems so wasteful.”

“So in Drow society a handful of elite trained soldiers lead a much greater force of conscripts?”

“Effectively yes.” She made a gesture that seemed to convey utter hopelessness. “And all it does is keep the Drow trapped and reliant upon Lloth’s blessings and power to survive. Most of the ‘professional’ Drow soldiery consist of mages and clerics with a handful of what you would compare to foresters. An even smaller number would be blademasters and while their skill would put anyone to shame; Belisarius and Alexi included, they could not contend with the way the Legion fights. I may not have fought with a cohort as you did at Kvatch but I saw the outcome all too clearly. Five hundred assaulting a city four times the size of Menzoberranzan? It should have been impossible! But, not only did the Legion succeed but they did so with comparatively few casualties!”

“It is what the Legion does.”

“Indeed… I have been comparing the surface to the Underdark and have been struggling to comprehend the differences, let alone understand them. I have also seen enough to understand that while you don’t compare to a Drow, you and other members of the Legion far exceed them at the same time.”

“I… guess that is a compliment?” I said hesitantly.

The way she rolled her eyes was almost audible. “Sometimes you are really thick headed mrannd’ssns. The Legions does with science and sorcery in mere months what has taken the Drow hundreds, if not thousands of generations to accomplish.”

“I wouldn’t go as far as that…”

She twisted and stared me right in the eye and poked my breastplate with a finger. “You said it yourself; they break you down into absolute nothing and then with magicka and determination they build you back up into something more… Something greater than what normal men and mer would normally become. Kvatch is proof of that.”

I couldn’t help but fall silent at her words and after she turned and continue on I hurriedly followed in her footsteps. There was no way that I or any other legionario would ever consider themselves superhuman. Well training and fit yes, but nothing more than that.
“What makes the Drow so deadly?”

It was my turn to give Viconia pause but it didn’t last for long. “Detholusin kyuvrem lu’ dro’xundus”

“Surviving and what?”

“Selective breeding.” Despite the steeled edge in her voice there was no emotion in her tone. “The weak were actively culled as infants, and those who couldn’t survive to adulthood didn’t breed anyway so only the strongest would pass on their heritage. Do this over the course of, I don’t know… Centuries? Millennium? Thousands of generations at least. The gods only know how long the Drow have been living in such a way but it has made them stronger, faster and more dangerous than what the surface can offer. It comes at a price though. As far as I can tell Drow are much more fertile than any surface elf, but the mortality rate is so high the population is stagnated.”

“So you believe the Legion is superior in creating soldiers?”

Again she rolled her eyes. “It is obvious that they are. It takes a lifetime to train a Drow warrior, and while they are better than Legionaries, the Legion can turn anyone into a warrior. Not only that they can do so in only a few short months.”

Clicking her tongue in thought she lead the way, shifting through the press until we found ourselves in one of the many streets where the crowds were significantly thinner. A tavern nearby was filled to bursting and the sound of music was audible even over the chorus of locals singing along with enthusiasm rather than skill. From the few snatches of the song I managed to hear, the song was a recent addition to the collection of wandering bards and troubadours throughout Cyrodiil. Taken from some well-known tune, the lyrics had been shifted and changed to tell the story of how Viconia and I closed the Oblivion Gate at Kvatch. The bard’s words sent shivers down my spine as I remembered our first experience with Oblivion, and of how I drank the blood of a Dremora. The crowd listening to the song however were full of cheer and alcohol, singing along with the chorus and hammering the wooden floorboards with their feet in time with the music.

Over the sound of the tavern, the city was suddenly filled with the sound of tolling bells and for a heart stopping moment I thought that it once again signified an assault on the city. I quickly realised that the bells were sounding out the eleventh hour, somehow conspicuously absent of the bronzed thunder of the cathedral of Dibella’s enormous bells. Even after so many months, the Cathedral was still closed to the public and the bells sat silent, gathering dust and languishing in the darkness that hung low over their home.

Viconia’s attention was caught by the bells and she cocked her head momentarily at the sound, silently counting the tolling and grimly smiling. “Well, looks like we have places to be.”

“Places to be?” I watched her as she gained her bearings in the city, turned and motioned for me to follow. “What sort of places.”

“You’ll see…”

Of all of the places in Anvil that I was expecting her to lead me, the courtyard in front of the Cathedral of Dibella was not one of them. Nor were we the only ones moving towards that portion of the city. As noon approached there was an obvious stream of people from all walks of life moving towards the towering spire of the Cathedral. Pilgrims and refugees moved alongside traders and merchants and the armoured forms of the city guard marched almost in step with the armoured and mailed forms of knights and adventurers. In streams of humanity, men and mer alike gravitated towards the courtyard and by the time we arrived a crowd was filling every free space, and some even jostled for space along nearby rooms and balconies.
“So why are we here?” I asked Viconia and we shifted our way through the press with our armed appearances and the deference afford to us by our honorary titles.

“With the Cathedral still closed the priests have been holding their sermons in the courtyard.”

I stopped in mid motion, ignoring the tutting annoyance from behind me as a woman and her children were forced to come to a halt lest they walked into me. “Sermons? Viconia…”

She saw my expression and grinned. “Don’t worry mrannd’ssinss, I’m not converting to your gods. I’ve just found that this is the best entertainment in the city.”

There was no way that my expression of confusion could go unnoticed, even in amongst the crowd that was building. “Entertainment?”

“Oh of course. Last week I was here with the guards and I had to help stop a riot. At mid-day the clergy allows some of the travelling priests to speak or perform their own rituals. Some are the usual boring platitudes and rambling that seems to be usual for your faith. Others like the one I dealt with seem to be really good at riling everyone up.”

Moving half way through the crowds, we found a suitable location near the stone-brick walls of the townhouses, excusing our way through some of those nearby until we could lean against the wall. Nearby a towering knight and his squires bearing the heraldry of Wayrest made their own way through the crowds. There were other such knights scattered about, their colourful heraldry and armour making them easily identifiable. His eyes met with mine for a moment and while he returned my salute there was little warmth in it. He was more a nobleman in a tin suit rather than the men and women of the Order of the White Stallion but there was still a holy devotion in his appearance, as he was in the courtyard in service to his faith.

“Sometimes religion isn’t boring.” I muttered softly, feeling the hard stones push the sheathed Light of Dawn into my spine as I leant against them.

Viconia for her part chuckled darkly, in turn moving up against me and leaning back against my chest as we watched the courtyard fill. The way she pressed into me was somehow affectionate and yet wasn’t. She was treating me almost as though I was a fixture of the wall itself or even a doorframe, leaning into me with a shoulder and crossing her arms. To everyone who would have looked upon us it would be as though a pair of trusted comrades taking solace in each other company and familiarity. To ourselves it was almost passionate in its simplicity, equivalent to a loving embrace in other couples.

“Some of your priests have very interesting views. Ones I wouldn’t find amiss amongst the followers of the Spider Queen. All the talk of death and suffering in the afterlife and fire and brimstone from the skies. It’s all very… poetic.”

“You should listen to the Legion chaplains and priests then.” I replied. “I believe they would fit well in the Underdark.”

With Viconia leaning against my chest, I thought deeply for a few moments. I had never considered myself on speaking terms with the gods, and believed that a man needed to rule his own fate. It was partially this belief that made me desert the Legion to make my own life, and it was one that I was not going to change easily. It was obvious to see that many of those making their way to the Chapel were the diehard followers who utterly believed in their faith in the Nine Divines. There were the pilgrims to the Knights, and the sheer numbers impressed me.

The courtyard was a simple affair and just like Kvatch the very entrance to the cathedral opened up
into the massive cobblestone filled expanse. It was large enough to contain a hundred legionaries standing shoulder to shoulder, and anywhere up to two hundred ranks deep.

Filing in from all sides and from every part of the city the crowd grew until there was barely space to move. The general murmur of the crowd was growing and swelling in size as well as more and more voices added to the background noise, and soon as the numbers of people grew together so tightly packed that they resembled a school of fish in a barrel.

Roaming the crowd with my eyes, I took in the dozens of expectant looks and eager faces, seeing many eyes almost brimming with tears. Most of those nearby seemed to be clutching at tiny symbols and talismans, made holy by their make of poor quality silver or blessed at some shrine or another. What struck me the most however was the general feeling that I sensed on the air. This was not a gathering of depressed and despondent individuals but those whose simple faith in the powers of the almighty Gods kept them going through the greatest of hardships. Many around me were poor and were barely clinging to existence from their travels and desire to be at the very location of the attack on their faith, but nobleman to beggar and knight alike, they had all been drawn by the common aspect of their faith in the Divines.

“Just how many of these have you attended since I have been gone?” I asked, my eyes continuing to take in the sights and faces of those nearby.

“Every day for the past three weeks.” There was honesty in her tone and I felt her shrug. “The first few it was part of my duties with the guard. Such a gathering of people has been problematic even without the few doomsayers causing problems.”

A dozen metres away from us I saw another one travelling knight. Unlike some of the others who travelled with several attendants and squires at all times he was alone and his armour had long since seen better days. Dents and gouges marked every plate and while his sword was notched and chips in places it was sharpened to a silvery edge. Scars were worn like badges of honour and for a moment our eyes met and I could feel the determination that dwelled within. His eyes were as sharp and cold as the metal of his blade and despite the youthfulness of his flesh he had lived more than a dozen lifetimes in his past.

The crowd hushed, almost like the minutes before a mighty storm would unleash its fury upon the world and I felt Viconia suddenly grow excited as we watched a single figure walk unsteadily up the short flight of steps onto the stage on the far end of the courtyard.

“Excellent.” She said simply. “I was hoping to hear this man again.”

From where I stood there appeared nothing too out of the ordinary about the individual moving his way towards the centre of the stage. His clothing was worn like many of the pilgrims and despite his obviously advanced years there was a strange energy about him. “One of the firebrands?”

“He is in his own way. His speeches though a much more interesting and sometimes seem more like history lessons.”

“Who is he?”

There was another shrug. “I’m not sure if anyone knows. I’ve heard him simply called ‘The Prophet’ for some reason and the local priests seem to be content with letting him speak.”

“What does he talk about?”

“As far as I can tell, everything and anything. Lately he seems to be concentrating on what I think is
ancient history but I’m not sure. I’m still not familiar with the surface.”

“Fair enough.” I replied, looking over to him as he carefully walked across the wooden platform. As close as I could estimate he was close to eighty years old, hunched over by the weight of the years pressing down on his shoulders. His face was partially obscured by a mane of unkempt hair and he looked almost the same as the dozens of the poor and unnourished beggars that had made the long journey to Anvil. There was something different about him, something in his movements that spoke of energy and conviction. It was almost like he was possessed by a boundless energy and zeal, one that made his frail and minor physical appearance pale in comparison to the strength of his will.

With the expectant hush building in the crowd he gave a smile and cleared his throat, gesturing to the crowd and even before he spoke I could identify the signs that he was a highly skilled orator. When he did begin to speak he was somehow able to cast his voice over the crowd to allow every being present to hear his words, and yet did not seem to shout to do so.

“Hear me, o people of Cyrodiil!” he cried, his voice being carried to everyone in the courtyard. “Look well upon the Cathedral of Dibella; Look at the faces of the dead. This is your future. Evil has returned, and the Nine need a champion! Is there no one who would stand for the Nine? Now Mara’s children cry out from beyond the grave for vengeance! How many more must die at Umaril’s hand?”

From the first word the crowd was hooked, listening and watching his every motion as he gestured and raised and lowered his voice in perfect cadence to draw attention and emphasised his words. Every syllable was perfectly placed and every word was precisely enunciated. It was obvious why Viconia had chosen to attend these sermons and speeches despite her own conflicting faith.

“Most of this I don’t understand.” She said as the Prophet continued with his speech. His words had hushed the crowd but neither Viconia or I were gripped by the same religious fervour that held sway over those around us. “The names he mentions seem important but I have no idea who they are.”

“I’m not surprised.” Listening carefully, I nodded despite he being unable to see the motion. “He’s talking about the creation of the First Empire during the Alessian Rebellion.”

“Must have happened a long time ago.”

“Three or Four thousand years.” I shrugged and jostled her with the movement. “Give or take a few centuries.”

“Who are the individuals that he’s talking about?”

Blowing out a breath I puffed my cheeks in thought. “That is a history lesson that could take days to explain, but simply put mankind used to be enslaved by the Ayleids. Alessia led the rebellion to gain freedom and as the stories go the gods sent her help.”

“This Pellennial Whitestruck?”

“Pelinal Whitestrake.” I corrected. “He and the demiprinces Morihaus were sent to assist her and mankind in gaining their freedom. Pelinal was a great warrior.”

“Right up until he got killed at least.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at her tone. “You seem to be picking up surfacer history.”

“Such deaths interest me. He must have had a name for himself for the Ayleids to go to the effort of cutting him up into pieces and scattering him about Cyrodiil. They either hated him immensely or
they didn’t want to risk the chance of him coming back to life.”

“Knowing half the stories I wouldn’t be surprised if the truth was a bit of both.”

“And this Umaril was the one who defeated him?”

“Umaril the Unfeathered. He was one of the last and most powerful sorcerer kings of the Ayleids. While Pelinal succeeded in killing him the witch-king’s followers ensured he didn’t live to celebrate the victory.”

The two of us stood in silence for a few minutes and continued listening to his calls and proclamations that doom was approaching Tamriel. It was not the emotion driven pledges of a doommonger but rather a simple statement of danger, a warning of a threat. He wasn’t inciting panic or a riot and so the guards were for the meantime content in leaving him speak, but there was a growing current of emotion building within the crowd. Especially in the collection of robes acolytes and priests representing the church of the Nine off to the side of the platform.

“You pore over your dusty tomes of lore.” He continued, looking over the crowd and somehow managing to make every single person present feel as though he was talking to them and them alone. “You study ancient genealogies and bloodlines. Look you to blood for truth? There is truth in blood, but it is not the truth that you seek!”

With a finger that stabbed in the direction of the towering cathedral on the far side of the courtyard he almost snarled the words out, his tone hardening like steel and the eyes flashed with righteousness. “The truth is written in the blood of the innocent, there in the Chapel of Love! Can you not read the ancient runes? As oioabala Umarile, Ehlhada racuvar!”

Viconia stiffened at the words and I heard her sudden and sharp intake of breath. Even before the Prophet could translate the words for the crowd she had choked the words out. The sheer level of disbelief in her voice enough to leave it cracking. “By the eternal power of Umaril, the mortal gods shall be cast down.” She said a mere second before the Prophet did.

“You understood that?” I said to her, resting a hand on her shoulder and giving it a reassuring squeeze.

“That was Drow.” There was no mistaking her level of surprise and I could almost feel her shaking.

“It didn’t sound like Drow to me.”

“It is but it isn’t. It’s a very old dialect, like what ancient Cyrodiilic is to common.”

“But you can speak it?”

She shrugged again. “Fluently. It’s the language used by the priestesses when conducting rituals and by Drow officials for diplomacy and the like. I never expected to hear it spoken on the surface, much less by a surfacer.”

“Well, you’re not the only one he seems to have gotten the attention of.” I added quickly, looking at the way eyes and heads continued glancing back at the increasingly nervous guards standing outside the barricaded cathedral doors. His words were starting to have an effect and there was a religious fervour starting to grip tight.

“Oh unhappy Tamriel!” He continued on his platform, raising his hands and head to the sky as though he called upon the gods themselves to appear, “Where is your Divine Crusader, in these latter days of petty strife and lesser men? Who will match the deeds of Sir Amiel and his companions
when they smote the Wyrm of Elenglynn to recover the Cuirass of the Crusader? Who will walk the Pilgrim’s Way, as did the questing knights of old? The blood tide rises! Will no one take up this holy crusade? Will no one walk the ancient Pilgrim’s Way, and take the fight to the Unfeathered one?”

“Oh fuck…” It was my turn for my breath to get lodged in my throat and my mouth was suddenly dry. “He’s declaring a crusade…”

“A what?”

“A crusade, he’s declaring a crusade!” My words hissed between my teeth and I saw that I wasn’t the only one to have realised the same thing. Judging by the way that a pair of robed priests had scrambled onto the platform and were doing everything short of grabbing and physically hauling him off the stage it was not a sentiment shared by the official Church of the Nine.

“A crusade for what?”

“To recover the relics of Pelinal Whitestrake!”

The pair of priests had managed to gather the courage to approach the Prophet but were stopped in mid motion as a pair of words were bellowed out over the growing noise of the crowd.

“I WILL!”

One of the many knights attending the sermon, clad in his gleaming silver plate and a violet cloak thrown over an armoured pauldron raised his fist in salute and began to stride towards the prophet. With a simple shouted affirmation, a path appeared in the crowd as they parted to allow him free movement, and without the slightest hesitation he marched through the press.

To the official members of the church, they could only stare aghast at the sight of the Knight, as he was soon joined by several more who punched their fists or weapons into the sky and joined the crusade. It was not an official crusade, but like a rolling boulder down the side of a mountain now that it had gained momentum there was no stopping it.

Viconia and I stood in silence, watching as the first knight made a show of kneeling to the Prophet, offering him his sword in his gauntleted hands as several others clambered up to join him. One after another, Knights, soldiers, mercenaries and other faithful rose to the challenge. Soldiers and citizens alike; a multitude of the faithful took up the cry of “I WILL!” and walked through the press as the rest of the crowd broke out in cheers and applause.

With every individual who declared themselves part of the growing crusade, I began to feel dozens of expectant eyes falling on Viconia and myself. It began as one or two of those closest to us glanced in our direction to see whether we would be the next to step forward. As more and more assembled in front of the crowd, the looks we were receiving began to change from expectation to almost outright hostility. When the nearest knight in his poor quality armour hefted his broadsword in the air and pledged it to the Crusade, the look that he spared us did not go unnoticed. I caught snatches of shared whispers from onlookers wondering why heroes such as ourselves didn’t pledge their services to the growing numbers of holy warriors, but neither Viconia or myself outwardly paid them any attention.

As the last of the Knights, a handful of sell-swords, adventurers, mercenaries and even a few of the common folk joined the Crusade, the crowd’s cheers rose in pitch until the ground shook with the noise. There was at least thirty men and women who had pledged themselves in service of the Divines, and the entire city was filled with the cries of adulation with their sworn oaths. In that moment and by doing something that appeared to be so simple an act, those few had forsaken their
own lives in pursuit of something that was far greater than themselves.

The Prophet silenced the crowd with a single wave of his hands, drawing attention to himself once more as he ritually blessed each and every one of the newly sworn crusaders. Even despite his whispered prayers of protection and guidance being far too muted for anyone to hear, the meaning and intent behind the words was plain to all. There were still disquieted glances to Viconia and myself for not pledging our own swords to the cause and we remained as still as statues, impassively watching the scene unfolding before us.

With the Divines’ blessings imparted upon the faithful the Prophet turned to the crowd once more, his words flowing as easily as before. He spoke of a journey of hardships that each of them would have to face. Only clad in the holy armour, and wielding the mace and sword of Pelinal Whitestrake could the new Divine Crusader hope to defeat this ancient and terrible evil. The freshly sworn crusaders would embark themselves upon a quest that was as spiritual as it was physical. They would take up the challenge that had been assailing holy orders of Knights for centuries and with their faith and the blessings of the Nine Divines, they would recover the armour and weapons of Pelinal Whitestrake. With the holy relics in the hands of the just once more, the reincarnation of Pelinal would be revealed to lead the righteous to victory.

It was an incredible spectacle, but not one that fully gripped me as tightly as many within the crowd. The relics had been lost for centuries. Some for thousands of years. Such a quest was an impossibility and while it was impossible I understood what the true effects of his proclamation would have. With such a simple act; one that seemed to be giving the official priests witnessing it heart palpitations, the Prophet had managed to instil hope and dreams of glory for Cyrodiil. In such dark days where daedra were ravaging the land and the very temples and houses of worship were under direct attack, he had managed to ignite a spark that could burn away the darkness. The word of this crusade would soon spread throughout the Empire and there would be others who would journey to be a part of it. At the merest sight of one of these crusaders travelling abroad, the citizens of the Empire would feel safe and part of something much larger than themselves.

The sermon finished shortly afterwards, with the Prophet granting the blessing of the Nine to all those present. Slowly the crowd began to shuffle and disperse back through the city. Most slowly moved back to their normal daily routines without the slightest hint of disturbance, but there were some who remained behind for a personal benediction or to place themselves close to the members of the newly formed crusade. From my limited knowledge I knew that no knightly order or the Church had declared a crusade for over a hundred years, and certainly not for as grand of a cause as retrieving the Relics of Pelinal Whitestrake. The fact that it had been called by a nobody, some random orator not directly affiliated with the Church didn’t change the fact that it was now a legitimate crusade.

Empires and kingdoms had been toppled by less.

“We need to meet him.” Viconia’s voice was cold and dark and she was stating a simple fact. The way he had spoken a language that she had recognised had ensured that there would be no option but to follow, and her current mood wouldn’t allow any alternative actions.

Moving towards the platform I saw how most of the Crusaders had already left or were in the process of doing so. Their oaths had been made and many of the more experienced of the warriors had already gone to stock up on supplies or to prepare themselves for their quest. Many had travelled this far with nothing more than faith and the desire to do some good in the name of the Nine but now that they had a specific goal in mind they threw themselves into it with a worrying zeal. A few others, mostly the handful of adventurers and common folk who had been caught up in the heat of the moment milled around nervously, unsure of what they were meant to do or how to do it. Many of
them would soon attach themselves to one or more of the travelling Knights as temporary squires or Men-at-Arms, but for the moment they had the look of startled deer etched into their features.

Moving into the alleys behind the platform on the far side of the courtyard to the Cathedral, we followed the trail of faithful, pilgrims and the collection of priests and acolytes milling about like a flock of nervous geese. The Prophet had shaken up their routine and lives in a way that they had never had dreamed of and now that the crusade to recover the relics had been called they had no choice but to support it. It did not stop them from voicing their outrage and uncertainty directly to the man responsible for their sudden weight of responsibilities that had been abruptly dumped onto them. As we moved into one of the many public gardens within the city, we found the Prophet surrounded by a small group of senior priests and clergymen, their robes showing that they were some of the ranking bishops of the Nine within Cyrodiil.

“-don’t care your reasons, you are not an ordained member of the church and have no authority or right to call upon the retrieval of the Relics of the Eight!”

“Well, it certainly appears as though such esteemed individuals such as yourselves were not stepping up to the mark and shouldering the burden. What would you have done instead hmm? Sit around waiting for the end of the world or wait for the Eight and One themselves to appear before you to tell you to get up off your arses?”

“How dare you! You are not so disconnected from the Church not to be excommunicated you bast-”

One of the bishops caught our movement out of the corner of the eye as the small crowd lurking at the edge of the public garden parted for us. His first glance at us was short and quick but a tremor of recognition caused him to look back and watch as Viconia continued to stride in their direction with me following in her wake. Between the cold expression on her face and the coal black breastplates were wearing with their silver vine etching we were both intimidating even without the recognition that our armour and appearances afforded us.

“We interrupting anything?” Viconia said, somehow conveying threat and the fact that she obviously didn’t care whether she was anyway.

The small group of priests shared a glance and one shook his head after a moment of considering whether it was worth crossing the dark elf burning holes into him with her gaze. “No. Not anymore at least.”

“Good. I have business with this man.”

Another glance was shared between the group and there was almost a mutual sigh from them. “Very well.” The priest who had spoke to Viconia turned and pointed at the prophet with such aggressiveness that his orange tinged ropes snapped about his arms. “Don’t think of going anywhere Saccicius. You are going to help us in cleaning up your mess.”

“If the Eight and One see fit.” The Prophet replied, not quite hiding the smile from his face as the collection of priests and their acolytes shuffled their way out of the garden. As they receded from sight amongst the crowd he turned and gave a full smile to Viconia.

“Oh my, Madame DeVir and Sir Desin... To what do I owe this honour?”

Viconia stepped closer, her eyes never wavering from the Prophet’s and the cold expression on her face deepening. “I have questions of you, questions that need answering.”

“Of course my child. I am but a humble prophet but I will answer whatever I can.”
“Lu’oh xun ni epe va xanalress av va Ilythiiri?”

The old man was taken aback, mouth opening and opening and closing several times and looking utterly confused as he returned he gaze. “Know of the... what? I don’t fully understand what you are saying.”

“The Drow.” She snapped, her patience suddenly wearing thin. “How do you speak a language of the Drow?”

“The Drow?” I could almost hear the cogs in his mind turning as he looked between her frustration and appearance before his expression suddenly lightened. “Oh... Oh! I see. I have caused some confusion it seems.”

“Confusion over what?” Stepping closer, I found myself looking down on him as he was hunched over due to his age. Many years before he would have easily been a similar height to myself, but old age had added its weight until his eyes were in line with Viconia’s chin.

“Although I have heard of them, it is not the language of the Drow that I am able to speak, but Ayleidoon.”

“Ayleidoon… The Ayleids?”

He nodded, the thin white head on his head bouncing slightly by the motion. “Indeed.”

“You can speak their language?” I asked incredulously. “It’s supposed to be a dead language.”

“For the most part it is yes, but there are still ancient texts and writings that have survived since the first era. It is one of the languages that Cyrodiilic is derived from and as it shares its linguistic roots with Aldmeris, and in turn Ehlnofex. It can be recreated, if given enough time and effort in any case.”

Staring at the man standing before us, I could feel Viconia’s roiling emotions from where she stood just a few short metres away. The implications were more staggering to her than myself that the Drow may have ties with the Ayleids but I found myself more interested in the Prophet than ancient history. He was old, very old and reminded me of the Emperor before his death. They both were old for the standards of men and the Prophet had seen at least seventy winters if he was a day old. Like the Emperor, he seemed to be gifted with an indescribable energy, a youthfulness that the years could not dim or fade. It was this energy and strength of will that I felt and saw when he looked at me with a pair of eyes as cold and blue as a glacier on the Sea of Ghosts.

The smile he gave was of a mouth filled with yellowed teeth but there was no hostility to it. Viconia seemed stunned and somehow disappointed and he proved himself to be a very good judge of character when he recognised it. “You seem troubled my dear.”

“It’s just...” She paused for a second before physically shaking the thoughts from her mind. “Nevermind. It was just strange to hear words from my people in such a place.”

“You people are not familiar to me, but unfortunately the Ayleids are. Hence I have found myself here, where the Divines and the souls of the slaughtered cry out for vengeance.”

“Umaril.” My words were a hiss and he nodded solemnly.

“The Unfeathered has returned and like the Prince of Destruction he too threatens the world in these dark days.” He paused, wetting his lips with his tongue and gesturing for the both of us to follow,
much to the disappointment of those awaiting benediction from him. “I saw you both in the crowd but I also noticed something else in particular.”

“How we didn’t join the crusade?” I said, pre-empting his question as we moved deeper into the tiny garden where he made his home. It wasn’t anything special, just a single tent’s worth of canvass stretched between a pair of trees near the winding path in the greenery and a single travellers bag. Normally leaving such items alone would result in their theft but he had so little to his name that not even the lowliest beggar would have given it more than a glance.

He simply nodded, looking between us and noting Viconia’s expression as she gazed at me.

“Many have pledged themselves to recover the Relics, but we have already pledged ourselves to another cause.”

For several moments the Prophet looked at me, blinking slowly as he thought over my words. I stood there, feeling the level of nervousness growing as I wondered whether my answer was truthful or whether he could see the seed of doubt planted within my mind.

“What Legion?”

The questions startled me, and I twitched as he grinned at my discomfort.

“Uh, 14th Legion, 8th Casta.”

“Morrowind. That’s a dangerous posting.” He nodded once before kneeling down over his bag. “And your rank?”

“Archer-Praefect.”

“Thought so. You don’t look like a legionary but you certainly aren’t a quill-pusher.”

“You were in the Legion.” I replied, making it a statement rather than a question.

“A long time ago, but yes.” For a few moments he rummaged through his bag, shifting through the small amount of personal possessions before retrieving a book with dog-eared pages.

Raising himself painfully to his feet with swollen, arthritic knees he sighed at the sound of his cracking joints. Carefully, he handed the book to Viconia, who took it from his slightly trembling hands.

“What is this?” She simply asked.

“The book that taught me all that I know about the ancient Ayleids, including the portion of their language that I can read and speak. It is of no further use to me, but I think it will be of benefit to you.”

Nodding, Viconia ran a gloved thumb over the pages and took note of the age and wear of an extremely well read book. Her uncertainty was still obvious but she still had the presence of mind to give the tiniest of smiles it polite thanks.

“Would you mind my dear if an old legionary reminisces with your companion?” The question was put very politely and he had the air of a paternal grandfather about himself for just a few moments. She shrugged, flicking open the book to a random page and scrunching her face in concentration.

The elderly prophet motioned for me to walk beside him as Viconia leaned against one of the trees
while flicking through the book. I hesitated briefly, wanting to go and provide her what little comfort I could but knowing that in her current mood she would prefer to be alone. It was green in the gardens, the flowers and grasses hibernating in the chill of late winter. While Anvil was too far south to feel the touch of snow or truly frigid temperatures it was still cold enough to make itself felt in the evenings. In the coming weeks Spring would bring life back into the gardens and flowerbeds of the city and I idly wondered how different the city would look when they bloomed.

“How many years has it been since you retired?” I asked him as we walked and despite his shuffling gait the two of us soon moved in step with each other. “Twenty.”

He recognised my polite query for what it was and chuckled. “It’s been much, much closer to thirty and you know it. In another life I was Centurion Saccicius of the 8th Legion, 1st Casta.”

“And now?”

There was an amused sigh as we came to a small bench in the centre of the gardens and he carefully lowered himself into it. “The older one gets, the closer one comes to the gods and they look upon their life with all the brutality afforded by hindsight. I gave the Legion my life despite the fact that I still live to talk about it, but there are weights upon my soul that need to be lifted.”

“So coming here and declaring a crusade for Pelinal’s Relics is a way of releasing you of these weights?”

“In a way.” Reaching down he snapped a strand of sweetgrass from the ground before popping the end into his mouth.

“Then why do it?”

Clouding with age and the early beginnings of cataracts, his eyes looked into my own as I sat down beside him. “Because someone had to. Because despite Pelinal’s efforts and success Umaril’s spirit survived and now he has returned to seek vengeance upon the gods. Most of all, I did it because dozens have died as a result of that accursed being.”

“Dozens? I thought there were only a few who died here.”

The length of grass in his mouth twitched and a melancholy fell over him. “Here, yes. There were only a few who lost their lives in the Cathedral yonder. But this is not the only house of worship to have fallen to darkness. The Church in their holier-than-thou attitudes are hiding the facts. The truth will be known sooner or later.”

Seeing the way I had fallen silent he raised a hand and ticked off the cities on his fingers as he named them. “Rihad, Markarth, Dunlain, Camlorn and Bravil. Each brought to ruin by unknown means but each showing clear signs of Umaril’s influence. There may be more as the Church is going to great lengths to keep this hidden from the citizens of the Empire.”

“For what purpose?”

His laugh was bitter. “Purpose? They are afraid of what they cannot control and what they cannot control will eventually destroy them in time. They are afraid of the truth, afraid of the implications that Umaril has returned and afraid that I am right; that without the relics and someone worthy to wield them he cannot be defeated.”

I caught his expression and caught my laugh before it escaped my throat. “I hope you aren’t waiting on me and Viconia to take up this quest.”
“Why not? The legendary Relics have been sought by mighty warriors throughout the ages? I struggle to think of names as commonly known as Sir Desin and Madame DeVir. Are you not worthy knights?”

Sitting quietly, I could feel his expression move from my face to the way that I way toying with my signet ring that represented my Knighthood. “Your faith is not my faith, and it certainly isn’t Viconia’s. More importantly we have oaths that we have taken and responsibilities that preclude us from roaming the lands seeking that which cannot be found.”

“Ah. I see. You have a sense of duty, despite having challenged it in the past and you believe that something that has been lost for three millennia is doomed to be lost forever.”

“Three thousand years is a very long time.”

“True…” He replied. “May I ask that if you didn’t have your current duties and responsibilities; whatever they may be… Would you have sought the relics?”

“No.”

“And why is that?”

“I have no need of the gods, and to my knowledge I do not owe them any favours either. It is more so the fact that the things that I have done and the choices I have made have left me far from worthy.”

Unseen to the elderly legionary, my own thoughts were left in turmoil. Even if I wasn’t infected with vampirism and had fed upon a creature of Oblivion I had done far too much during my time to be considered worthy in seeking the most holy of artefacts in Tamriel. He took my dark expression with a simple smile that left his lined with age even more than it had been moments before.

“Only the Gods have the right or the ability to truly judge the purity and worth of a man. For most of us our greatest foes are the ones that dwell within. Everyone within the life that they have been granted are destined to commit sins, and we are our worst enemies. But by accepting our downfalls and striving to remedy them, we better ourselves and honour the Gods in the process.”

A hand lined with age and heavily scarred from years of swords practice came to rest lightly on my shoulder. “One of the greatest truths that I have come to realise in my life is that the Aedra and the Daedra are much closer than what the church would have you to believe. The Eight and One do not wish for blind obidence, nor will they come to those that beg and grovel. They will come to those who truly need help and when they are truly needed, but like their cousins they reward those who do not seek as such. They mightn’t be as straight forward about a boon for service like the Daedric Princes but they certainly do not favour those who simply pray and ask and ask and ask for something they aren’t willing to do for themselves. Do not ask what the Divines can do for you, but ask what you can do for Tamriel and those in it. In this my boy you are more holy than most.”

Silence fell between us despite the noise of the city all around the tiny pocket of calm in the public garden where we sat. he couldn’t tell my doubts or fears or true thoughts but he didn’t seem to be trying to perceive them either. For a minute or two he sat quietly, massaging his sore knees and chewing on the strand of grass and simply taking in the sights of the garden around us.

“You’re too young to have retired from the Legion, and I very much doubt that you have suffered the sort of injury to have left you invalid. The fact that you have been Knighted also leads me to believe that you didn’t leave the Legion in the traditional way.”
“Leaving the Legion traditionally usually involves a septim over each eye and a bonfire.” I said with grim humour.

He laughed. “I know that far more than yourself. It’s a unique life, and the older I become the more I seem to miss it. I can’t help but wonder what kind of duty called you from the ranks, but my curiosity is piqued by something else.”

Once again, the cold blue eyes gazed into my own and I suppressed a shiver at the strength in them. “When was the last time you prayed?”

“Trying to make a believer out of me sir?”

His mouth curled upwards in one corner. “You’d prefer to put your faith into the sword at your hip and your mesmerising companion has a look about her that would put pause to an acolyte of Boethiah. I’ve found that sometimes praying can grant a small measure of peace that you didn’t know that was lacking. There is never any guarantee that the Gods will grant our prayers or even respond to them at all. What it can also do is give you a different perspective on things. Perhaps it can give you answers that you didn’t know you were seeking.”

“Wherever next your journey takes you from Anvil,” He continued, dropping the remains of the piece of grass to the ground. “Consider stopping at the wayshrines along the roads. It will not add any more time to your journey and it might help you to clear your thoughts with a higher power.”

The smile he had was contagious and I returned one freely. “I’ll consider it.”

“Good. Now, tell me of Morrowind. It has been years since I stepped foot on Vvardenfell.”

It was a couple of hours before Viconia managed to pry herself from the gifted book and come looking for us. The shadows had begun to lengthen noticeably but she found us both still sitting at the bench, laughing and swapping stories like a pair of old comrades. For the first time in months Viconia and I found ourselves relaxing, sitting and talking with Saccicius until lanterns were lit and the stars began to shine in the skies above.
After my afternoon reminiscing with Saccicius; the ex-legionary-turned-prophet my own thoughts had been darker than normal, causing me to repeatedly think back on my time within the Legion and all of the friends that I had lost over the years. While it was good to be reminded of my years serving it was still very much a raw wound that I hadn’t realised had been mostly unattended. Many of my old friends and comrades were cold in the ground, some like Burd had retired and moved on and only Lukah and Ozzarious would still be within Fort Ironhand. Especially on the open road during the times where Viconia and I would fall silent and be content in being in each other’s company my mind would wander far over the lands and return to Vvardenfell, and wonder whether my remaining friends were even still alive.

Our duty in gaining the allegiance of the Fighter’s Guild had born fruit and now that it was complete we could return triumphant in more ways than one. After a few more days in Anvil where we awaited our armours to be repaired and went about the process of gaining the necessary supplies for the journey we set out to return to Cloud Ruler and the Blades. While the climate in Anvil was positively luxurious compared to all the others in my recent memories, the northern portions of Cyrodiil were much harsher. If the winds blew the right directions or a storm managed to breach the defences of the Jerral Mountains, then it would not be unheard of for the Imperial City to wake to white marble covered in white snow. In preparation we purchased thicker clothing and layers to be worn both underneath and over our armours as well as supplies that could be utilised even in frozen environments.

It was with my mind turning dark that I had made a surprising decision within our first day of travel as we set on our journey to Bruma. Along the roads throughout Cyrodiil were scattered wayshrines to the Nine. Some were ancient, crumbling and ill-kept, others were prosperous and had been perfectly situated to have towns, villages or simply coaching inns grow about them. The first time that I knelt down and prayed at the shrine to Julianos had been as much as a surprise to myself as it was to Viconia who was resaddling Ultrin. The tiny shrine had been built in the courtyard of the Brina Cross Inn and the stables had been built almost around it, and Viconia’s expression at me once I had finished and had risen to my feet again had spoken volumes more than mere words ever could have. During our entire time that we had travelled she had only ever seen me pray a handful of times, and most of which had been along the lines of please-don’t-let-this-vampire/minotaur/daedra-kill-us.

The next few days, each time we stopped near or at one of the wayshrines I would take a few minutes to pray at each. Each time I knelt down, pressing my fists to my chest and lowering my gaze I remembered Saccicius’ advice from our chats.

“The Eight and One don’t seek blind obedience or fawning supplication,” He had said, staring pointedly at me with his cold blue eyes. “Like loving but stern parents they will watch over us to keep us safe from the worst, but they want us to make our own paths. Remember; there is never a guarantee that they will respond to our prayers or come to our aid. They are busy being like parents fending off the wolves at the door to worry about how their children are playing with their toys. They will not help us up if we trip or fall down or break a finger, but they will watch with pride as we stand up, dust ourselves off and push on. Even more so, they will be delighted and much more willing to help us if we take those first steps and begin thinking and doing that which helps both them and us...”

On the third day of travel we stopped briefly at a lone wayshrine to Stendarr; the God of Mercy and the ‘official’ patron of the Imperial Legion. When I knelt before the shrine I did not beg for his mercy or forgiveness. Even if I believed I deserved any I was a vampire and not welcome to it. Instead I
promised to live up to the ideals of the Legion even despite my oath-breaking and desertion. That afternoon nearby a messenger post I managed to find a tiny altar dedicated to Arkay. As the god of life and death and sworn enemy to necromancers and their undead minions I felt uncomfortable praying to him but I did so anyway. There was part of me that needed to get thoughts off my chest. Through the prayer to Arkay I spoke to those comrades of mine that no longer dwelled among the living, promising that I would not repeat the mistakes that had contributed to their deaths and promising that despite my undead and corrupt nature I would ensure that others would not suffer my fate if it was in my power.

Viconia seemed content in standing off to the side or leaving me to go about my business. She didn’t question or comment, but instead sat in silence and watched in curiosity. After I completed my prayers I always felt as though I was merely an insect trapped in sap and she was watching me slowly sink deep into its mass. This time however, as I finished my prayers and returned to where Viconia remained with our steeds, I noticed how she was sitting very still in the saddle, eyes closed and fists clenched tight.

“Viconia?” I asked, moving over to the massive form of Acheron and lightly patting his flank as I moved around to his side. “Are you okay?”

She didn’t seem to hear me, even as I swung myself up into the saddle and took hold of his reins. “Viconia?”

“Viconia?” My sudden wariness being reflected into Acheron’s considerable bulk as he too tensed under me. I carefully reached out as we drew near, resting my gloved hand lightly on her shoulder.

At my touch she recoiled away with such speed it was like my hand had been the fangs of a venomous reptile. For a split second I saw the level of utter hatred in her eyes, mixed with an overwhelming fear but these brief emotions evaporated as she looked at me. I knew without any doubt that her fear and anger was not directed at me, but brought on by some dark memory or thought. There was even a moment where she seemed embarrassed and regretful at her reaction, turning away and brushing a lock of hair out of her eyes.

“Are you alright?” The look of fear in her eyes brought me to instinctively rest my hand on Sunchild’s pommel.

“I’m fine.” She replied, twisting her body slightly and looking at me with a half-smile. “I was just thinking, that’s all.”

Tapping my heels into Acheron’s flanks, I felt the now customary sway as he began to move forward while somehow managing to make his weight unfelt through the ground and cobblestones beneath his hooves. Ultrin moved off as well, and we began moving along side by side with our massive destriers plodding along the road in the noonday sun.

“In a way.” She sighed, eyes moving down to where she was lightly scratching the back of Ultrin’s midnight black head. “I was thinking of God’s and Faith mostly.”

“God’s and faith?”

“Yes.” She looked at me with her enrapturing eyes once more and sending the familiar shiver down my spine as I gazed into them. “You see… Among the Drow we are taught nothing of other gods, and little enough of our own bar Lloth.”

“The Drow have other gods?” I asked simply, ducking under a branch as Acheron decided to move under a towering pine. We were on the very fringes of the Great Forest now, and it wouldn’t be long
until the landscape began to close in with vegetation around the imperial highways.

“They have some, but religion within the Underdark is so different to the surface that I have been struggling to understand it all.”

“How do you mean?”

She paused, furrowing her brow in concentration as she came up with the words to describe how it was in common. Although my understanding of Drow was improving daily, I still a long way to go before I was fluent.

“Within the Underdark our gods are physical and are almost like you and me; just infinitely more powerful. There is no prayer outside of rituals and offerings and belief is just so much simpler.”

I smiled as I understood the point she was trying to raise. “You can’t understand how we can believe in something that doesn’t show itself directly, or how we can believe that there really are Gods if no one has actually ever seen them or any evidence that they truly exist.”

“Our Gods are a lot simpler than your own, and we have few in number.” She replied, obviously finding some difficulty putting her words into Common. “There are those like Ghaunadau the Abomination, and Vzhaeraun the Murderer who hold some power within Drow cities, but Lloth is strongest by far and forbids even their mention.”

“But you have said many times before that you worship Shar.” I said, hearing the way that she had to force herself to speak that which she had been taught from birth never to discuss.

“Nightsinger is mistress of Darkness and Loss. I was born and raised in darkness and I have lost much; my family, my home, my people…” For a moment her hair flowed in the breeze as she shook her head. “My mistress has returned much. I am grateful, and I honour her in darkness and with the deaths of my foes.”

She seemed to shudder for a moment as she recollected some past memories from her life before. For a moment I thought she would go silent as she would whenever she discussed her history. Instead she slowly exhaled and continued.

“I was but a child and I began my training in the service of Lloth. I was taken away and placed in the care of the Priestesses at onlenggin.”

“Onlenggin?” I asked, the unfamiliar word rolling off my tongue roughly.

She chuckled at my attempt to copy her language, but continued anyway. “Onlenggin is the altar of Sacrifice, and where a slave screamed in agony. He had been tortured for days and although I was still very young I was granted a Spider Dagger to end his life.”

“This human was an animal to me, as we were all taught that every other race, almost including each other were lesser beings but it still felt wrong somehow. I remember all too well his tears as that ran freely as he spoke in his unfamiliar tongue. While I lived in the Underdark I had never bothered to learn another tongue but I knew that he was begging for mercy. The matrons were there to judge; hesitation was punishable by death and the Spider Queen would brook no weakness.”

A shudder ran through her body, and I found myself reaching out and grasping her hand as she clenched it tight. I could feel her body shaking as she relived the memories, and despite the discomfort of her grip on my hand I continued to listen.

“He screamed when the blade split his lungs and the matron mothers were pleased when I pulled his
“beating heart out of his ribcage.”

“How old were you when you were put through this?” I asked, seeing her eyes glisten slightly with the tiniest amount of tears.

“Our time is different to your own, as we have no sun, nor seasons to allow us to track time. The only measure we have is Narbondel. It is a giant stone pillar in the heart of Menzoberranzan. Every ‘day’ one of the High Priestesses will cast a bolt of fire within the pillar and as the hours pass the pillar heats and glows allowing all to see it from within the city limits. It acts as our sun of sorts, and as far as I can tell the time between when the spells are cast are equivalent to a day on the surface.”

“So no dates, no calendars, no seasons, no years. No methods of tracking time at all?”

There was a very uncommitted shrug of the shoulders. “Other than the number of Black Death’s of Narbondel that a female Drow experiences whilst with child there is very little I can do to compare to the surface. It is very aggravating in a way not being able to determine my age in relation to the surface. I could be faced with an extremely short lifespan in comparison to yourself and other surfacers, or I could outlive all other mer.”

“I doubt you’ll outlive me if we don’t meet untimely ends.” My mouth felt dry at the prospect and I shuddered. “Vampires are apparently immortal.”

“So despite everything we may be separated through the ravages of time even if we defeat all other foes. Seems almost poetic.” Silence fell between us as she took several long breaths to control her breathing “I cannot help but think of Lloth. She is cruel, and not known for forgiveness. Despite the distance, and the barriers between here and the Underdark, I know she will come for me eventually.”

I gritted my teeth, and felt the beast within me shift noticeably at my displeasure. “If she does come I will be ready.”

Viconia glanced at me with a look filled with sorrow and pity, despite the determination within my words. “It will mean nothing. Lloth’s reach is far and I fear that there is no escaping it.”

“What makes you say that?” She saw the grimace I made as I suppressed the last vestiges of the beast into my subconscious.

“It is because I have seen her, I have felt the lash, and she will let me think that I am safe or free. Then, and only then she will come for me.” Viconia looked pointedly at the ground in front of Ultrin, her face transforming into an expressionless mask that I knew all too well. “My dreams of late have been of Valas, and try as I might to speak to him I cannot as he is nothing more than a monster. What can Lloth do to me if she has done this to him?”

Our moods seemed to be mutually dark and the further we travelled north the more the temperatures seemed to drop to match. It wouldn’t be long until we reach areas where the winter snows had fallen and while I had full faith in my own abilities of surviving within the wilderness I was still teaching Viconia as much as I knew of winter survival. Not that travelling the highways of the Imperial Province was as deadly as Vvardenfell. It had its own dangers of course but none could compare to the ash storms or the blizzards rolling in from the Sea of Ghosts.

Over the following days I prayed at further shrines. At the Shrine of Zenithar; the God of Work and Commerce, I thanked the men and mer who had crafted our armours and weaponry for their skill and dedication. To the Goddess of Beauty; Dibella, I promised her that I would hunt down those responsible for the desecration of her Chapel if it was within my power to do so. To Mara; Goddess of love and mortal compassion, I made thanks for Viconia’s and my feelings for each other and
promised that I would do anything to ensure that she remained safe from harm no matter its source.

It was at the shrine to Akatosh; Dragon Lord of all the Gods and master of time that I found myself surprised when Viconia joined me herself. With my unnatural hearing it took willpower not to be able to listen to her words as she awkwardly kneeled before the altar, eyes closed and head resting lightly against the faded marble. My prayer to him was simpler than the others, all of Tamriel and beyond would need his continued vigil over the last of the Septims if we were to survive the daedric invasion in our future. Viconia’s prayer lasted another few more minutes before she rose and moved over to where I was standing with our steeds. There was an odd silence pass between us as our eyes met and I could almost feel her embarrassment and insecurity at what she had just done, but I didn’t say anything for the first few minutes. It was only when we had mounted our steeds once more and had continued on in an uncomfortable silence for a few minutes that I finally raised the courage to ask her why she had prayed to Akatosh.

“He is the patron of your gods, and in the Underdark there is only one other god that Lloth will allow the merest of mentions. Lloth may claim many things and in Drow society it is the dragons are the masters of creation. I have read and heard stories of how dragons used to exist on the surface but they haven’t been seen in centuries, maybe longer. In the Underdark they are not myths or legends but infinitely powerful beings. One of the few dragons I know of; Hahdrimrii is one of Lloth’s few allies.”

I looked at her questioningly. “And so you can believe in Akatosh easier than the other Divines?”

Her smile was seemingly innocent, but I knew her far better than that. “I believe that Akatosh is indeed a real god, or at sometime within the past he was a flesh and blood being. I don’t mean to blaspheme against your religion, but I believe that many of your Divines began as humans or other mortals who ascended into godhood just as Talos did. Akatosh I can believe was once a great dragon and now is something even more powerful.”

“And is that why you prayed at his shrine?”

“I prayed not for me or to acknowledge his existence, but for you.”

“For me?” I asked, puzzled.

“I believe in Shar, the goddess of the Night and to turn from her faith without a reason such as when I turned from Lloth would be a quicker and surer death than the one I should expect from Lloth. When I prayed to Akatosh just before, I asked him to watch over you and to give you strength to face your inner demons.”

For a moment I didn’t know what to say or do, and instead chose to look into her eyes and give a very timid smile. “Thank you.”

“We have spoken much of our past lives and on almost every topic that we can think of,” she continued, her fingers tracing down my face as Acheron and Ultrin moved apart. “but you have never spoke about your demons, or your darker side that makes mine seem pale in comparison. You have a great darkness within you, and I have been unable to do anything or understand even as I have been forced to watch as you fight against an enemy within your own soul.”

An awkward silence fell over us and although we returned to talking about everything and everything my mind was already trying to plan how I would tell her about how it was being a vampire. We had spoken about almost every topic imaginable over the previous months, and the trip north had been quite pleasant as I continued to teach her how to read common with the aid of the small collection of books that she was collecting. A tiny part of me was worried that if I told her
exactly what I went through and struggled with that it might scare her away or make her leave me. I knew it would take more than that for me to lose her, but the darkness, the beast seemed to take pleasure in taunting my conscious mind.

The next shrine we came across was of Kynareth’s; the Goddess of the Heavens, the Wind and the Elements. I promised I would venerate nature in all its glory and ensure that I would never take more than what I needed from her blessings.

It was cold in the north within County Bruma, and the months of snow had settled until the landscape was bleak and a discoloured grey and white. Leafless trees rose into the sky and their roots disappeared into the white snow, appearing as though dead as they awaited the spring thaw to bloom with life once more. The chill had settled into my bones like a lover after the years within Vvardenfell and I was almost in a continuous state of mildly shivering. It wove deep into my being, even under the furs and wool garments we had acquired. A massive cloak of Bear fur clung to my armoured shoulders, and a wolf hide clung to my sides as I trudged through the snow between the road and the shrine. Condensation from my mouth billowed out in white clouds even through my concealing mask, and the wind was like pinpricks across my exposed eyes and forehead. Winter truly held sway over the lands and although we were still a considerable distance away from the true base of the Jerall mountains, Viconia’s and my discomfort was building.

Unlike the others, this particular shrine to Talos was one of the few that we had come across that was not as well maintained or regularly visited as the others. The reason for this was surprisingly simple as less than an hour’s ride to the north, the towering belltower of Bruma’s cathedral of Talos stood tall framed by the towering peaks of the Jerrals. For most travelling the roads or undertaking any kind of pilgrimage it wasn’t worth the effort to stop at a tiny nondescript shrine to Talos when the largest cathedral dedicated to Talos was so close. For myself, the seclusion, the lack of people around and the informal nature of the shrine suited me perfectly even if I was attempting to convince myself that I wasn’t feeling uneasy near holy places.

It was still well maintained, the inhabitants of the tiny collection of farmsteads and hunters shacks within the area were obviously using the shrine as their place of worship. The marble was polished and kept clear of any weeds or encroaching vegetation and unlike the ground surrounding it, the top of the metre-wide altar had been recently cleared of snow. It was clean, tidy and there were dozens of tiny talismans and other offerings left frozen into the chilled altar.

“The shrine to the Ascended one.” Viconia muttered as she walked up beside me.

“Patron to the Blades, ancestor to Martin and founder of the Third Empire.” I replied, reaching up and pulling my mask down from my mouth. The first breath of cold air went straight into my lungs like a mouthful of icicles and I felt my whole body shudder.

Viconia saw my involuntary shiver against the cold and without saying a word, strode forward and ran a gloved hand over the surface of the altar.

She didn’t feel the cold as much as what I did, and the times that she did her self-discipline and stoicism ensured that she didn’t show it. The lightless depths of the Underdark had left her accustomed to temperatures that all but the Nords would have found inhospitable. Her home in the inky black would only be warmed from cracks that entered the fiery heart of the earth, or from other geological formations such as hot springs. Some of the tales of the Underdark she had told me weaved stories of how Drow cities were founded around such formations as boiling lakes or rivers of lava for the warmth and life that it granted. This might not have been her first winter on the surface, but as she was not having to struggle to survive she was slowly beginning to take note of the beauty it held.
“Anyone blessed with such a power, or to ascend into the heavens as a god is worthy of respect and reverence.” Viconia said as she strode around the altar. “Talos must’ve been a great warrior and leader to be granted the gift of immortality and incomprehensible power.”

“As the legends go,” I replied, moving up to her and pulling her close for a handful of moments. “He united the Empire within the Second Era, forging together and conquering the providences in turn until they all fell under the sway of Cyrodiil. He ushered in the Third Era and was then granted the gift of immortality by Akatosh for his deeds, becoming the Ninth Divine within the Pantheon.”

“A hero, soldier, leader,” She whispered, pulling me closer into the embrace as my hands ran down her back. “and now a god. Such power is worthy of worship.”

Our lips pressed together for a moment and I felt the warmth of her body flowing through our connection. Even with the wind and the cold air around us, our mingling heat merged together with the kiss that left me feeling giddy and a rush of warmth flowing through my veins.

We broke apart after only a few seconds of closeness as the frigid temperatures threatened to freeze our lips together. Even with the months that had passed while we had remained within each other’s company, she still affected me with the same rush of emotions and yearning for her. It was a level of connection that I couldn’t describe and I knew that my love for her was becoming almost unbreakable.

“I will pay my respects to Talos.” She said simply, turning and moving over to the altar. “Such a being of power is worthy of respect, no matter what faith or gods you believe in.”

She moved with her natural grace to the altar, choosing a spot not as thickly covered in snow and kneeling close to the altar. Although she closed her eyes as I did when I prayed, she was acknowledging the strength and power of a god in the ways of her kind. The Drow only respected power whether it be physical, spiritual or even political. To the Church of the Nine she would have been a heathen or even a heretic, branded in similar was to Daedra worshippers which she was in a way. It was this attraction towards power in a more authoritarian sense that allowed me to understand why she could acknowledge Akatosh and Talos without betraying her own faith in Shar.

I too moved towards the shrine’s altar, keeping a respectable distance from Viconia as she bowed her head slightly and whispered her acknowledgement of Talos’ power and ascension into Godhood. My prayer would be more than just simple acknowledgement of his existence and power, but rather making promises to the god considered to the ‘soldiers’ god’ to members of the Legion.

“Dragonborn,” I whispered, lowering my head and closing my eyes tight as I rested my forehead against the cold marble altar top. The age-worn marble was smooth and incredibly cold to the touch but I refused to move an inch. “In these dark times since your ascension I ask that you lend your watchful gaze across the lands that you once called your own. I know that I am far from deserving for any of your benevolence and I do not ask for it. I do however ask you to watch over your descendant in the presence of the Lord of Destruction, and give strength to his defenders as they will need it before the end. If it is in my power I swear to fight the evil plaguing these lands to my last breath, to protect the helpless and to uphold the oaths I swore long ago and had forsaken the day that I deserted your Legions. I care not for forgiveness. Forgiveness is lost to me with my curse but I will take evil within me so that others will not have to suffer it. If this means being tainted till the end of time… So be it.”

Pressing my fingers to my lips I quickly pressing them into the carved image of the Imperial Dragon on the side of the hexagonal altar. Since leaving Anvil, I had prayed to a shrine of each and every one of the Nine and although there was no divine glory or release from my curse I felt more at peace with myself than I had the weeks previous.
“Hail Knights!” A deep and booming voice echoed out over the shrine, startling me with its sudden appearance. “It seems like an age since I heard such words spoken from the heart!”

Rising to my full height with a start and feeling the light cascade of snow fall from my shoulders, I looked about in all directions looking for the unseen speaker. The words seemed to billow up from the ground, echoing out from the air while somehow whispered from the trees. It was deep, purposeful and full of wisdom and experience that resounds deep within my bones.

For a moment I thought that I had somehow imagined the voice, but a glance to Viconia put end to that. She too was looking about the tiny glade that the altar was set within and the hairs on the back of my neck began to raise as I saw the way her eyes moved and focussed on something over my shoulder. Instinctively my hand shifted to the pommel of Sunchild as she grasped Dragonbane and her ebony hued skin became several shades lighter. Her reaction made me feel distinctly uneasy, even more so than the presence at my back as I turned to face it.

He was tall, so tall in fact that I barely came up to his nose. There was a strange power infusing his limbs and even fully armoured with his face hidden from view behind a full helm of steel the sheer force of his personality made it difficult to gaze upon him for any more than a few seconds at most. The armour was ancient, a design of decades, if not centuries before. He was also heavily armed with a lengthy bastard sword strapped down his spine, and a mace hanging by his side in a loop of leather with all the appearance of being able to shatter kingdoms with a single blow. A shield of blood-red and mithril silver gleamed under the noon-day sun was strapped to an arm and despite its sturdy appearance it was surprisingly small, more of a buckler than the tower shields of the Legion that I was more familiar with. Besides his overwhelming personality I also had to advert my gaze as every inch of his armour was polished to an incredible shine that seemed to melt the snow with reflection alone.

Within seconds and despite my mind struggling with the realisation, there was no doubt that this being, this warrior was not among the living. His boots didn’t leave a trace on the ground behind him but instead sunk effortlessly into the snow. While solid appearing, there was no doubt that he was hazy and indistinct but he was also transparent to some degree.

“Your prayers have awoken me from my endless dream…” The shade of the ancient warrior muttered, almost to himself as his words echoed out of the air caressing our bare faces and the very land around us “Or perhaps you have entered my dream, and I still sleep…”

“Pelinal…”

The shade of the Divine Crusader nodded at my whispering of his name and I felt as though my entire soul and mind had been laid bare under his intense gaze. I could not see his face as it remained hidden behind a solid full-plated helm that covered his features under a skin of steel but there was the sensation of eyes within the tiny vison slit. It was like in a moment he had looked into me, seen my entire life and past, every event that I had endured from the cradle and I suspected all the way to the grave.

“I think others have sometimes spoken to me. Others like you, but my memory is doubtful.” There seemed to be a moment’s hesitation from the ghostly warrior, almost like he was struggling to think clearly. “Perhaps the others came after you…”

Pausing with head turning and looking between the two of us again and I couldn’t help but flinch under his unyielding gaze. It was powerful enough to penetrate armour, skin, flesh, bone and soul, and within the presence of such being, even dead I felt as insignificant as an insect under a boot.

“The need must be great for the gods to allow us to speak…” With his hands covered in segmented
gauntlets, they grasped the sides of his helmet tightly, tugging it free and allowing us to gaze upon him in the flesh.

If I had ever thought of it prior to such an impossible encounter I would have struggled to imagine what such a hero would have looked like. Somehow Pelinal seemed to fit his titles and legend like it was a second skin. His face was hardened and weather-beaten with a multitude of scars crisscrossing his skin until wrinkles and scar tissue merged seamlessly together. It was impossible to determine his exact age as he appeared to be as young and powerful as a man fresh from his teens, and yet his flesh, eyes and hair spoke of a man who had lived beyond fifty. His expression and force of personality was overwhelming, as the grim determination in his features spoke of the will to defeat any evil and he was a man who would’ve faced down the daedric princes given the chance. He knew no fear, knew no doubt and had not known defeat until the very hour of his death.

What struck me the most was his eyes, and I struggled to hold his gaze for anything more than a second. They were the cold sharp colour of a Skyrim glacier, piercing and unflinching in their silent intensity. I knew he could see deep within the darkest recesses of my soul with his eyes, and the thought was enough to send a shiver of fear through my body.

“I am indeed Pelinal.” He turned his gaze upon us once more, taking in and dissecting our souls purposefully and without any hesitation. “And who may you two worthy Knights be, who the Gods have granted an audience?”

For a moment I struggled to even form words, as Pelinal’s presence stripped me of any thoughts that entered my mind.

“My name is Kaius Desin,” I finally managed to stammer, motioning towards Viconia with a hand without taking my eyes off the holy visage of the Ghost in front of me. “And this is Viconia DeVir.”

Pelinal nodded to each of us respectfully as he held his helmet in the crook of an elbow. For a moment he listened to the winds, eyes glancing around us like he was witness to sights that only he could see.

“The land speaks your Names and your deeds Sir Desin and Madame DeVir. You are mighty warriors and renowned Knights, but I fear that there would only be one reason for our meeting. Has Umaril the Accursed found a way back? The foulest of a foul race?! A thousand curses upon his unholy Name!” Pelinal seemed to tremble with such rage that even his ghostly armour seemed to creak under the strain. “I thought I had won, but I should have known! The Slave Masters are a cunning breed. Umaril found a way to cheat death as I could not.”

I glanced to Viconia, and breathed in slightly as I tried to regain some of my composure. “The Forces of Mehrunes Dagon are invading the world, and there are those who believe that Umaril has returned. The Chapel of Dibella in Anvil has been desecrated, as have several others throughout Tamriel. Dark magicka has been used to defile the shrines and a Crusade has been called to reclaim your arms and weapons so that a new Crusader can take the fight to Umaril.”

There was an undeniable rush of emotions that flowed through the long-dead shade; there was fury at the attack on the Divines, and joyous surprise at the call to find his relics.

“A crusade you say? And the faithful have responded to the call?” Curiosity kept in over the fury and surprise and he was looking at us questioningly. “And what of the two of you? Do you seek my relics as Knights of the centuries past have?”

An embarrassed silence fell between us, and I knew that we answered his question without any words needing to be said.
“No… No you do not. Your silence tells me much, as does your hearts.”

“How a true and pure Knight, blessed by the gods can hope to wield your weapons and don your armour.” I replied, staring him right in the eye properly for the first time despite the way that I had to physically force myself to meet his gaze. “We are not pure enough to be the ones to face down Umaril if he indeed is returning. I am a vampire and as for Viconia?”

At my side and looking slightly grey at the close proximity to such a being in front of us, Viconia nodded in agreement. “Your gods are not my gods and I walk my own path. We are not capable of fighting against Umaril but we can fight against Mehrunes Dagon and his followers.”

“A noble sentiment and true… To some extent.” Pelinal’s lips pursed for a moment. “Within every being in the bounds of this world there is a fight deep within their very souls between the goodness of the hearts and the darkness that lies within. No one, not even me, are completely pure. We always have to struggle against our darker natures. In the later days of the war against the Ayleids I slaughtered hundreds, if not thousands of Khajiit; mistaking their strange forms as being nothing more than another variety of Daedra commanded by my hated foes. Upon my discovery of what I had done and the foul murder that I had committed I was disgusted with myself. Even until the very moment of my death I sought repentance for such evil I had committed. What makes us all who we are is the constant battle between our opposite natures and it is not the absence of evil that makes you holy.”

He cracked his neck with audible crunches and I couldn’t help but think of a mountain heaving under a forceful earthquake. “I have heard your prayers these previous days and so have the gods. Unlike so many you have neither asked, nor expected anything for your prayers. Despite your differences and your backgrounds and the darkness inherent in your souls you have only prayed to help others or for what is required for you to do so.”

“Viconia,” He said, turning and gesturing to her with a steel encased hand. “You have prayed to gods that are not your own. Even despite the threat of severe punishment, you prayed for Talos himself to look over the land and help your love.”

Ignoring the way that Viconia simultaneously scowled and managed to look uncomfortable at his words, he then gestured to me. “And you Kaius… Did you not say that you would take evil within yourself so that others will not have to suffer it? Even if it meant being cursed for the rest of your life?”

I nodded, slowly and carefully at his words.

“Well then.” His smile was broad and friendly. “Only the gods have the right to pass judgement on those who they deem worthy; and here I stand in proof of their decision. The only question is what you two choose to do with the knowledge that I may grant you.”

“Why us?” I asked as I finally managed to find my tongue and

“Because you have been chosen to.” He replied. “Every few generations there are individuals who are outside the influence of the Elder Scrolls and can choose their own fates. Most mortals live out their lives and have only one thread of fate to follow, but your futures are both clouded and ever-changing with the decisions you make. You two alone have the power to change the fates of the entire world and it falls to you to do make a decision.”

Viconia’s voice was hollow and empty at the ancient shade’s words. “What decision?”

“Whether you follow the path of so many before you on the trail of my relics, or whether you turn
from the quest to face down your previous foe.”

“So we have to choose whether we hunt for your relics and face down Umaril, or to continue on our previous path against Mehrunes Dagon.” My own tone was bitter as once again I felt as though my control over my own life was slipping from my fingers.

“There is no easy answer or any easy decision, but you two stand at a crossroads in fate.” Pelinal’s eyes seemed to glaze over for a moment and his incorporeal body seemed to shift slightly with the wind as he stretched out his hand towards us. “I can see two separate futures for the both of you, and both have a great effect upon the fate of the world.”

His thin, scarred lips seemed to curl into a smile as he reached out to us. “I will show you the results of your decision.”

I flinched away from his ghostly fingers but the light streaming out of his eyes brightened and hit me right in the face like a punch. It was blindingly bright and colder than the frozen north of Atmora and for several seconds I tried to scream through frozen lips and a locked jaw. Billions of images and whirling sights and memories that were somehow my own and yet not wheeled in front of my eyes, spinning dizzyingly until I felt my stomach threaten to rebel against me.

Scenes of utter destruction flashed through my eyes as I gazed across a landscape strewn with the debris of perpetual war. Arms, armour and bones lay where they had fallen, soaking the burnt ground in their blood-stained forms as they poked out of the ash and fumes. Everywhere the greenery of Tamriel had been consumed by the fires of Oblivion until nothing but death and destruction remained.

But life, and resistance remained despite the Daedric power that was consuming the land. Walled cities stood tall against the foe even as the world burned around them. Soldiers of strength and faith stood alongside the citizens that they had sworn to protect against a roaring sea of Daedra laid siege to them. Their numbers were uncountable and just trying to estimate them gave me the beginnings of a migraine. In hordes and dying by the thousands, they piled their corpses against the walls in an effort to scale over on the bloodied forms of their dead. Despite all the death, despite everything that had happened there was still hope and strength against the daedric invasion of Mehrunes Dagon. While the Nine supported the faithful, the Lord of Destruction could not prevail.

Despite their faith and courage in the face of destruction, the greatest threat came from within. Attentions solely on the more obvious threat outside their walls, those fighting didn’t see the dark canker that grew within. While their back was turned I watched horrified as a new danger rose from within, growing from the very heart of the faith in the Divines. It was one that they would not have the strength to fight at the same time as the armies of the Lord of Destruction.

“You see…” The rolling voice of Pelinal said as golden Daedra rose from the chapels and shrines of the Divines and assaulted the living from behind. “Alone, and fighting solely against Mehrunes Dagon, the people of Tamriel are capable of holding off, or even defeating him in the war to come. They gain their strength and conviction from their faith but while they fight against the foes to their front and which are noticeable; they are blind to the threat that grows from within.”

With the golden Daedra attacking from the rear, and already pressed hard at their front’s by the forces of Mehrunes Dagon the last surviving mortals were overcome. Horror grew within me as I saw the widespread destruction and desecration of the world even before the last mortal was dragged to the ground and killed. Against one foe there was a chance of victory, even without the Amulet of Kings and the Dragonborn, but against the other, more insidious foe there was no hope at all.

“So Umaril must be dealt with before the Lord of Destruction attacks.” I said simply, trying to close
my eyes to the sights of such horror.

“He must.” Pelinal replied, his voice echoing out of the rolling darkness that slowly replaced the sickening visions of the world’s ending. “More importantly and what many will not realise until it is far too late, is that with every attack the barriers between Nirn and Oblivion weaken that much faster. The more attacks by Umaril and his minions that are successful the greater the damage and the sooner Dagon’s invasion will occur. Unfortunately only a true and just knight wielding my relics has any chance of defeating Umaril. You and Viconia may not be those who wield my mace and my sword against the Accursed; but you may be the ones who finds the one who will.”

“And if we choose to hunt down your relics and we fight against Umaril… What then?” I asked the void, trying to blink away the impenetrable blackness that had fallen across my eyes that even my vampiric sight could not penetrate.

“The future is clouded and uncertain for as you both are outside the influence of the Elder Scrolls it is nearly impossible to ascertain anything. Nothing is certain in your futures, and I see uncountable paths that your actions might take you. These are but some of the events that may come to pass…”

There was another explosion of light behind my eyes, and I found myself nauseous at the millions of sights and experiences that overwhelmed my mind. I saw lands that I had never been to, people I had never met and thousands of memories that I had not yet lived through to remember. In a heartbeat I saw my entire life from birth to death and everything in between. I saw my mother, raising me when I was still very young and singing me to sleep in our home within the mountains of eastern Hammerfell. I saw myself crouched close to my father as I pulled back the string of my first bow, and felt the exhaustion and agony I felt in the first months of legion training. Every moment I had ever experienced was suddenly fresh and alive as though they were all happening again with the space of a moment, but then the future began to force itself into my mind.

Friends and acquaintances aged and withered before my very eyes, the lands grew older and the flitting forms of people jostled around me, crumbling to dust as the weight of the years pressed down. Decades passed in a matter of moments, and as mortals faded into nothing but muted whispers of their former lives, I remained young and undying by my cursed and corrupt nature.

I found myself staring across a castle under siege, arrows, shouts of anger and screams of pain filling the air as burning rocks were hurled at the towering walls. The ramparts were filled with jostling and packed men who stabbed and hacked at each other, fighting fiercely to control the castle walls even as more poured into the fray from both sides. Night was falling quickly, and the dance of carnage and death was being played under the burning lights of dozens of fires from inside and outside of the castle.

My vision seemed to move to where the fighting seemed the thickest but instead of packed bodies dressed in all of the accruements of war, there was a visibly clear space around a single pair of warriors. Alone and unaided the two of them fought against a massive host of their foes. They were both dressed in the plate and surcoats of the defenders, but were so drenched in blood and gore that any heraldry was now unrecognizable. Bodies lined the walls where they had been killed and despite facing off against such numbers that outnumbered them ten to one the pair continued to fight relentlessly.

Both fought like demons, their movements like quicksilver as they flowed over the piled dead and sliced through their opponents. Blood sprayed into the darkening sky as they slashed through the pressing numbers arrayed against them, dodging attacks that appeared clumsy compared to their levels of skill. For a moment I watched, spellbound at the spectacle unfolding before me, but as the taller of the two warriors turned and faced the other I found myself staring into at my own face.
The years of existence might have been near-invisible on my flesh but I could see the years etched deep within my eyes and the dozens of wounds and scars that had slowly accumulated over the decades. I could see how experience had toughened me, tempering me like steel until my mind, body and resolve had been hardened to almost-unbreakable levels.

But it was when I laid eyes upon the warrior by my side, that my heart seemed to freeze in my chest and shock filled the very core of my being. For several moments that seemed to drag on into eternity I stared at the warrior fighting alongside me. He was several inches shorter than myself, but matched me muscle for muscle that were filled with youthful power and energy. Together we fought with wild abandon, but our movements were perfectly matched, our techniques filled with the same grace and liquid dexterity that we could’ve been twins. Although our plate armour and surcoats were bathed in blood and had all trace of their heraldry concealed in gore, there was no mistaking the colour of the warrior’s skin. Under the metal and leather of his armour, his skin was a deep tanned grey that looked as though he had been covered in a thick layer of ash, but there was no mistaking his features.

I stared at his face, seeing his ancestry in his pronounced bone structure and feeling a shiver of recognition as I gazed into his hard yellow eyes. His face was sharp and pronounced, but there was a very familiar feel to it even as he grimaced and roared out a battle cry to match my own. Hair waving about in the strong wind blowing up over the walls, I could clearly see the sharp tapered points to his ears, and knew immediately who this young warrior was. I knew, without any doubt in my mind that I was staring into the face of the son of Viconia and I.

We fought together, side by side and back to back on the towering walls of the castle even as the enemy swarmed up over ladders and a massive siege towered lowered its ramp for the attackers to pour across. Dozens were slain with every moment that passed, until the bodies had to be kicked or thrown from the walls to allow the others to advance across the blood-slick stone surfaces. I watched with pride as he hurled himself at two enemy soldiers who were charging me with halberds, deflecting one easily with his blade and cutting the other’s throat with a single contemptuous flick. My back was turned to face down another trio of foes but he fought them off easily, fighting with moves that were identical to my own and within moments our enemies were dead and dying on the blood-soaked walls.

There was a look shared between the two of us, and I could see my future self beaming with pride as I fought alongside my son. Turning to the massed group of soldiers lowering their pikes and halberds into a wall of steel points to keep us at bay I could see their fear, a terror that was billowing from them despite the way they outnumbered us easily ten to one.

For a moment we stood together, congealing blood dripping from our swords and down over our armour, staring silently at our foes as they nervously dropped back into defensive positions. There was a tension fuelling our limbs now, and we shared a briefest glance between us as we faced our foes. Their fear was growing at our actions, but fear soon gave way to utter horror as we dropped into fighting stances, roaring on the top of our lungs as I let out the beast. My face stretched and elongated, fangs erupting out from between my lips as my eyes turned into swirling whirlpools of blackness. My roar was viscous and terrible to behold, but to my utter surprise and horror I saw similar changes go through the features of my future son.

His skin pulled tight over his skull and he too let the animal within loose as his teeth lengthened to form fangs. With dual roars of vampiric hatred, we hurled ourselves into the press of wavering enemies and the vision faded to be replaced with another.

My eyes seemed to open again but this time the visage of the burning castle surrounded in death had been replaced with the seemingly cold darkness of a richly furnished bedroom. Silks and banners
hanged from the walls, all clad in an indefinable heraldic mark and the furniture was expensive and covered with items of the highest quality. Although despite all of its finery, the entire room had the feel of a tomb about it.

Lying on the bed and almost appearing consumed by the richness of the silk and velvet bedcovers, was Viconia. Her ebony flesh, normally vibrant and full of life was now pale and resembling bleached coal. Sweat matted the rich sheets and covers that were pulled up over her chest and under her arms, and my heart broke to see her in such a condition. She was dying, and I knew in a glance that she had less than an hour, if not minutes to live.

Not that she was alone in her pain and sickness, as yet again I was within the vision, sitting by her side and looking as though was world was crashing in around me. A glance into my own features told me enough, and I could see the pain and agony at watching Viconia die etched upon my features. I could see my face twitching and writhing under the skin as the beast rose up with my emotions, but it was calmed and suppressed as Viconia weakly lifted a hand and pressed her fingers into my cheek. This vision too faded into nothing as I crushed her hand affectionately into the side of my face, tears rolling down my cheeks and staining the bed sheets.

Again I found myself in darkness, watching my future self slowly make his way through the depths of the world. I was alone, wielding the Light of Dawn in my right hand with a migraine inducing haziness around my left hand that spoke of powerful magicka. No torch or lantern illuminated my path through the darkness, and the way my face was taut and fangs visible showed that the vampire was assisting my passage over the rocky cavern floor.

The cavern itself was huge, giving my future self the appearance of an ant moving through an amphitheatre. Towering columns rose up into the blackness, holding the roof dozens of metres above the floor and each one over three metres thick at the base. Nothing else seemed to move within the darkness except my future self, and the dust that my passage stirred into whispering shapes half-seen in the shadows.

For a moment the earth heaved, rocks pattered down from the ceiling far above my head and in a flare of light a magical ward was born from the energies contained within my future self’s hand. Deep and terrible, the roar of something ancient and powerful rumbled through the ground and stirred the centuries of dust laying on the floor into billowing ghosts and phantoms reaching towards the ceiling. The cavern’s sole inhabitant had finally noticed the intruder to its home and bellowing its challenge from a head the size of a siege ram, the creature of scales and fire rushed my future self.

Again the vision changed, twisting and weaving and showing thousands of my future paths.

I saw myself within another mighty cavern, striding up flights of steps of a ziggurat within the bowels of the earth to face a creature of limbs and darkness.

I stood upon the bow of a mighty warship bellowing orders to the crew as another pulled in close as we traded arrows, ballista bolts and grappling hooks.

I was a knight clad in armoured plate mounted on his massive warhorse,

I was a trader dressed in rich furs bartering his wares.

I was a beggar clad in mouldy rags begging for coins

I was a brutal pit fighter killing with his hands for the amusement of the crowd.

I wore the robes of the Emperor, and wore the ruby crown upon my brow.
I was clad in gilded mail and raising my sword to the roars of a million soldiers.

I witnessed dozens of victories, hundreds of defeats, dozens of friends I was yet to meet, enemies I was yet to face and places that I had never even dreamed of existing. But with every sight that I was shown, I was shown the opposite; of what would occur if Viconia and I didn’t seek out the relics.

The world would end. Against the forces of Mehrunes Dagon there was hope, the chance even without our assistance that the Amulet of Kings would be found, Martin be crowned Emperor and the Dragonfires relit. The world could be saved and while our actions would improve the chances, the festering canker that was Umaril would breach the barriers between worlds far, far too soon for victory to be in our grasp.

Pelinal was right.

Although we had a choice with the information that we now had, there really wasn’t much of a choice at all. We had to find his relics and find the new Champion of the Gods or our futures would be brutally short.

“Enough.” I spat, trying to block out the thousands of sights and experiences rushing through my mind. “Stop this. I’ve seen enough!”

Slowly the images faded away, and the overwhelming tension and nausea vanished with them. Darkness crept back into my mind once more, strangely soothing compared to the kaleidoscope of sights that had assailed me earlier and I found myself staring into the void.

“You have come to a decision?” Pelinal asked, his voice rolling out of the darkness like a closing tomb deep within the earth.

“Like there is any decision that can be made.” My reply was bitter, the words like acid as they crawled across my tongue. “Even with all this talk of being able to choose my own future there is only the choice of whether I have one or not.”

In a voice that was just as much vampire as it was human I growled at the invisible, unseen champion of the Gods. “I will hunt for your relics.”

“Very well.” There was a moment of pause, and slowly I found myself being able to see once again, the darkness spreading into a flowing white light that grew from nothing. Slowly, like a morning fog that was slowly burned away by the rising sun, sights once more began to fill my vision.

“I know little that can help you.” Clouds of unstructured thought and memory condensed before my very eyes as Pelinal whispered. “All that has passed since my death is like a mist… A mist that my mind cannot take hold of.”

I felt Pelinal’s sigh waft through me like a northern breeze, chilling me to the core as my eyes focused upon the sights of millennia ago. “My friends built a shrine upon the site of my death, where the Elves tormented me in a final act of revenge. Perhaps it is there still, and perhaps there you may find clues to that which you must seek.”

Gazing onto the sight before me I suddenly found myself far to the south of snow and mountains, looking across the dozens of kilometres of open water to the towering spear of White Gold Tower. A warm breeze flew over the water where the Upper Niben met Lake Rumare, plucking at the layers of wolf fur and daedroth scale but I barely noticed it. The warmth was soothing and calming, even as I lowered my gaze down the slope to the flurry of activity around the structure below me.

The slope around the water’s edge was bustling with activity, as dozens of men and women worked
hard to erect a mighty shrine in the honour of the Divine Crusader. I watched them as they worked hard, unloading massive marble blocks off a ship moored close to a small jetty, wheeling carts and wheelbarrows from the depths of the shrine where obvious excavations were being made into the earth beneath my feet. It was a work of love, and despite its smaller nature compared to the enormity of the Imperial city but its workmanship was going to be unmatched.

“Here, where my own path ended,” Pelinal murmured, his voice fading slowly despite the strength within it. “your new path will begin. Seek this place out and take up the fight against the Accursed Umaril.”

The vision faded to white once more, and a chill seeped back into my bones as the whiteness was replaced with the sight of the snow covered shrine of Talos. Icy air forced its way into my lungs, bringing me completely back into consciousness once more.

“Fare thee well brave knights.” Pelinal’s voice echoed throughout the glade, growing fainter with every syllable. “May the Gods bless your passage and grant you strength during these dark times.”

My limbs became my own again, and warm blood seemed to begin flowing once more as the ice and snow that had settled on me robbed my limbs of strength. I coughed, shaking myself from the strange feeling of light-headedness that had seeped into me to the core.

“Mrannd’ssinss?” Viconia murmured as she too pulled herself out of a similar trance.

There was a feeling deep within me, a strange and overwhelming pull towards the south. It resounded deep within my bones, almost like an addiction like the vicious desire for blood. “What did he show you?”

“Aphyon.” Came the reply. There was a tremble in her voice that was only barely restrained by her iron will. “Death... No matter what he showed me, it all resulted in your death. I saw you die thousands of times. Whether it was by the sword, under Lloth’s talons, a dragon’s maw or a god’s grasp you died. I have come to depend upon you, and it tears at me being so reliant upon someone other than myself.”

Unbidden and instinctively I reached out, grasped her tight and pulled her into my armoured embrace. There was no shuddering of breath or wetness to her eyes but her emotions were raw and close to the surface. “I know.” Her forehead thudded into my chest and I could feel the shudder that flowed through us both.

In her own familiar way that I had come to know intimately, she crushed all her emotions deep inside once more and what had been a semi-loving embrace had only lasted for a few heartbeats before she pulled away. Within moments she had turned back to her old aloof self once more, concealing her pain and worry and fears deep within where it continued to eat away slowly.

“So… I suppose we’re heading south?” She said, looking over the shrine.

To the north I could see and faintly hear the clamouring of the cathedral bells, knowing that Bruma was close, and Cloud Ruler was only a few hours ride away. The location of Pelinal’s shrine was several days away at least, but both of us could feel the subconscious calling of its hidden location.

“We head south.” I agreed.

“Then I shall be at your side.” Viconia said softly, moving closer to me until I could smell her perfumed flesh over the smell of fresh snow and the furs we wore. “But don’t think I’m doing this for your yeunn Aedra or some long dead wael. I’m going to do this for you.”
I crushed her in an embrace once more, feeling her heat pressing against me. “I know. It’s not like we have a choice in this at least.”

“Find the unfindable, or watch the world be turned into a funeral pyre.” She shivered as she pulled away and brushed snow from her arms, her gaze turning and looking to the south. “Either way, we will be warm at least.”
The Shrine of the Crusader

For the four days that we travelled south there was a strange pull, a desire that we could not shake no matter how hard we tried. From our discussions both Viconia and I had been granted the same sight of our destination on the south eastern portion of lake Rumare; a shrine under construction on the banks of the enormous lake. This was a region that was rarely travelled, sparsely populated and almost entirely wilderness. The Red Ring Road may have cut a jagged path through the region but with the Panther River further south and the hundreds of kilometres of swamps and rainforests spilling over from Blackmarsh it was almost entirely untouched.

Moving off the highway as it snaked its way south east to the Blackmarsh-Morrowind borders made for slower travel. Within the first few hundred meters we were forced to dismount and lead Ultrin and Trygve on foot as the forests changed with every kilometre, becoming thicker, denser and shifting away from pines and hardwoods to more tropical and exotic varieties.

It was noon on the fourth day’s travel by the time we managed to clear the vegetation and find ourselves gazing upon Lake Rumare. From our positions on the far bank we could only barely see the towering spire of White-Gold Tower dozens of kilometres away, and to the south west there was a smoky pall hanging on the horizon that announced Bravil’s presence. On this side of the Lake there was nothing, or towns or villages and not even the usual assortment of docks and jetties for the fishing boats and barges that clustered the shoreline further to the north. It was peaceful, serene and the only clear sights of civilisation was the handful of white sails of caravels and other trade ships moving to and from the Imperial City.

As a thin strip of sand between the water’s edge and the encroaching vegetation, there seemed like there was little room as Viconia joined me with the enormous bulk of Ultrin close behind. Even without the two enormous warhorses there was not much space in the tiny bay that we had found ourselves in.

“The Surface world always seems to be filled with such wonder and beauty.” She said simply, looking about the sight before us. The calmness of the bay and the feeling of the warm breeze on our faces were strangely relaxing but Viconia was still as taut as a wire. “I cannot help but look around myself for the hidden spider’s web amongst the greenery.”

There was no doubting the coldness of her tone and I put my arm around her and gave her a reassuring squeeze. “The Underdark is far from here.”

“Not far enough.” Viconia shuddered before pulling away and tying Ultrin’s reins to his saddle. “But now that we are here, we best start looking for this shrine.”

I nodded, following her to where our steeds trotted into the water to drink their fill. It was a beautiful day but as we moved closer to the water and down the sandy slope to the small beach, I felt a cold chill pass through my body as my subconscious picked up what my conscious mind had not.

Realisation crept into my mind and I stopped in place, feeling the sand grip tight to the soles of my boots. “This isn’t right.”

Vicona had realised the same thing as I had, keeping one eye on our horses while looking about at the sight before us. “Vith... There’s no trace of any shrine. There’s almost no trace of anything being here.”

“There has to be something though. We both saw what Pelinal showed us.”
“You can see for yourself Mrannd’ssinss,” Viconia said with a wave of her hands. “There is nothing here.”

I closed my eyes and controlled my breathing. The overwhelming feeling of failure and that we had wasted almost a week on a useless journey was like acid in my stomach, even consuming the nagging instinct that we were in the right place. It was all I could do to relax, and my gloves creaked as I formed fists.

The sights that Pelinal had revealed to us flowed through my mind like water, and even as I stood there with our enormous warhorses trotting closer to the water to drink I knew that I was standing close to where I had in the vision. In my mind’s eye I could see the dozens of builders and miners scurrying about with their tasks as they raised a marble statue of Pelinal outside the Shrine’s entrance. Smoke lingered on the horizon of my vision, far across the Niben where the triumphant army of men looted and pillaged the Ayleid capital. It was clear and precise and even despite the thousands of years between us I could feel the tension and excitement as I looked down the slope to where the laden barge moored close to the makeshift jetty.

“Oh vith uns’aa…” I swore under my breath, pinching the bridge of my nose with forefinger and thumb with the realisation.

While I had murmured the expletives in Drow it was still loud enough for Viconia to hear me, even over the sounds of Ultrin and Trygve splashing into the water. “What?”

“We are in the right place, and the shrine is here.”

“Really? Where?”

Ignoring the sarcasm in her voice, I gestured to the water. “Right in front of us.”

“I think the accursed sun has gone to your head…” She trailed off, blinking and scowling forcefully as she too realised what I had. Over the course of thousands of years, Lake Rumare and the Niben had risen considerably and had effectively submerged the entirety of the shrine under several metres of water. “Have I mentioned that I am not overly fond of your Gods?”

“I’m not overly impressed with them either.” I replied simply, unclasping and shrugging off my cloak before working on the various leather straps and buckles that fastened my armour to my body. “They seem to have a twisted sense of humour.”

“And they don’t have the decency to inflict their tortures face to face.”

Her face was impassive as she watched me pull the various pieces of my armour off and left them in a neat pile on the grassy edge of the tiny beach. Even the daedroth scaled chainmail was shrugged over my head and laid out in the grass along with nearly every other piece of heavy clothing I usually wore.

“Well, it was about time you had another bath.” Viconia laughed but there was little humour in it. She too had begun stripping her armour off despite her obvious distaste.

“I hate water. Its filled of disease and fish fuck in it.” Another thought entered my mind as I buckled Sunchild down my back. “Speaking of fish, keep your eyes open for slaughterfish.”

Stopping in mid motion as she took off her boots, Viconia gazed at me intently. “What do they look like?”

“A stomach, with a tail on one end and teeth on the other.”
She directed another glance at the water but copied me in adjusting Dragonbane’s scabbard and belt to hang down her spine. While I knew that armour would have resulted in us drowning, I wasn’t liking the thought of coming face to face with one of the most voracious denizens that lived in Tamriel’s waterways without it.

Rolling my arms and loosening them up I took several deep breaths in preparation for the swim. “Here’s hoping it’s not entirely flooded.”

“Here’s hoping that some bandit doesn’t come and steal our equipment.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that. “Any bandit that is smart or lucky enough to get past two tonnes of trained warhorse is welcome to our stuff.”

Whistling to our steeds before diving into the water I was left as ease at the sight of the pair of saddled destriers moving over to graze near our discarded armour. Neither of them would wander too far in our absence and I doubted that anyone was anywhere nearby anyway. The tiny bay was far away from the main roads or any form of settlement.

The water was chilly but bearable, the snow-melt from the northern counties and the somewhat cool days ensuring that even at the mouth of the Niben winter was making itself felt. Swimming was one of the many skills that I did not have confidence with, but my vampiric nature at least allowed me to ignore my unease. I was far more comfortable in hills and mountains than the water as the water had always represented several painful and horrifying ways to die and something that needed to be tolerated.

It was a sensation that was not helped with how quickly and abruptly the ground fell away as I swam from the beach. The bottom dropped away almost a metre vertically with every metre that we moved from the shore and within a few strokes I felt uncomfortably exposed.

Viconia entered the water with all the grace of a being born to it, diving under and resurfacing with her hair plastered to her neck and face. The only metal other than her swords that remained on her person was her circlet and it proved its worth in keeping her hair out of her eyes.

“I’ll dive down first and see what I can find.” Brushing my hair from my face with one hand while treading water with the other, I couldn’t help but think of the way that my clothes were sticking to my body. It was even more difficult not to think of how Viconia’s clothes would be sticking to her curves as she bobbed effortlessly only a couple of meters away. She nodded briefly, and I took several deep breaths of air before plunging myself under the water’s surface.

The bright blue sky fell away into a world of blurs and echoing burbles of sound. Light sparkled through the rippling surface, playing across the bottom of the lake nearly ten metres below and I found myself admiring the strange still beauty of the underwater world.

Strangely thankful for my curse in a new way, my vampiric eyes turned the crystallised view of the underwater realm into something hollow and two-dimensional but allowed me to see much clearer than I would have found possible as a mortal. Large rocks and boulders poked through the silt of the ages, and everywhere I looked I could see how over three thousand years of time had left the river and lake levels to rise until it had turned the Shrine to the Divine Crusader nothing more than an underwater tomb.

But it was there, and my eyes looked over the enormous marble blocks where they were almost hidden under three millennia of mud, picking out the larger pieces of the shrine and even glimpsing a darker recess in the marble where the entrance beckoned. Kicking my legs, I pushed down and dived a few metres until my ears began thundering with the pressure, but my vampiric eyesight allowed me
to see what others might not have. There was a cave within the depths, a blocky, rectangular hole that I somehow knew curved upwards and deep into the shoreline. I wasn’t able to stay submerged for too long, but with the last of my breath rapidly being used and the burning sluggishness filling my body I twisted in the water and rapidly pushed myself towards the surface.

Viconia saw me appear several dozens metres away from where she remaining treading water, and as I regained my breath she made her way over to me. “Well?”

“It’s worth a shot.” Feeling the strain in my muscles that were not used to such exertion, my mouth slipped before the surface for a moment and left me spitting “The shrine is mostly flooded, but there is air down there. It’s a bit of a swim though.”

“I’m sure I have experienced worse.” Viconia muttered, choosing to ignore my unspoken warning and suggestion. “I’m a better swimmer than you anyway.”

I raised an eyebrow questioningly and shrugged as best I could while I treaded water. We swum in place for several minutes, breathing heavy to fill our bodies with air and with a mutual nod between us we filled our lungs with one last massive breath, plunging our heads underwater and kicking out for the bottom. My world was once again turned into a sparkling crystalline existence and the roaring of the pressure soon filled my ears as I reached the gaping entrance to the shrine ahead of Viconia. Keeping one eye on her at all times, I could physically feel my arteries and heart pounding with the exertion, my limbs becoming leaden as they began to tire.

The vertical dive was somehow the easiest part as the weight of our swords pulled us down, but once we reached the yawning abyss of the shrine’s entrance we had to angle ourselves through the silt and various plants growing from the bottom. It was easily three or four times deeper than I was tall to the bottom, and almost twice that distance horizontally into the ground. There was air in the depths, but my vampiric eyesight struggled to reveal exactly how far away it was and I was beginning to panic.

So was Viconia, and her motions began to become more jerky and hurried. With trembling arms, she pulled on the sides of the tunnel to propel herself forward, appearing as a shadow with burning red eyes as she used her own abilities to see in the darkness. Between the pressure, the darkness and the distance we had to travel I suddenly realised that we had made a considerable mistake as my lungs ached to drag in a breath despite the fact there was no air to be had. Something within me clicked and I realised that we weren’t going to be able to make it to the end and the taunting vision of safety. There was no way we were going to reach it.

Fangs split my lips in a smile and suddenly death by drowning appeared as inconsequential as a mosquito bite. Just like it had when I had fallen into Lake Arrius the vampire simply ignored such fragile mortal concerns and concentrated on surviving instead. Bubbles billowed out of my mouth as I turned to Viconia as she began to thrash in desperation to reach the air pocket. Turning on the spot and moving towards her, my hands snaked out and gripped hers tightly even as she began to panic. The submerged tunnel was too far to have swum easily, but it didn’t stop the vampire within me as it simply ignored the issue, and dragged Viconia’s increasingly slack weight behind like she weighed nothing at all. Where the tunnel angled up a short collection of marble steps where the water lapped peacefully I practically exploded into the air, wrenching Viconia from the water onto a somewhat dry surface and ignoring the scampering forms of rats and amphibians as I rolled her over onto her side.

Coughing and spluttering she began to vomit up a considerable amount of water, alternating between her uncontrollable heaving to try to stare at me murderously. In between the sound of her retching I could hear a staccato of curses and epithets in Drow, only pausing to throw up until there was nothing left to expel.
Her eyes glowed blood red in the darkness as they picked up all sources of heat and warmth within
the small antechamber that we had found ourselves in, but there was just enough light for us to see
the faintest of shapes. Small chunks of Welkynd Stones glowed faintly in their sockets embedded in
the walls, showing the squirming traces of movement as vermin and other tiny scavengers scattered
into the darkest recesses within the walls and deeper into the shrine.

“Are you all right?” My words came out as deep and terrible growls and I flinched as she twisted
away from me instinctively. Between my changed throat and appearance, she pushed herself away
slightly before I crushed the vampire away with my will.

The silence that fell between us was broken only by the soft crunches of bone as my face returned to
normal. “Sorry.”

Viconia turned her eyes away, running her hands over her scalp and pressing the water out of her
long blonde hair. “It’s okay. You… You just startled me.”

It was obvious that she was doing everything in her power not to look me in the face. “I didn’t mean
to. Are you alright?”

“I’ll be fine. Next time we really need to check how far we have to swim.”

Nodding in reply, I turned and gazed off into the depths of the shrine with my eyes peeling the
darkness away. “We can rest here for a little while if need be.”

“I said, I’ll be fine…” She rose to her feet, checking that Dragonbane was still within its scabbard
and continuing to cough. “Let’s go see what surprises this ruin has in store for us.”

With no available reply, I turned and began moving softly into the darkness. We moved with the
utmost care, following the paths of the ancient halls carefully as we had little idea what we were
venturing into. It was cold, especially with how both of us were soaked to the skin and for the first
dozen metres at least, moisture seemed to seep out of the walls. Our stealthy progress was only
marked only by the scattering sounds of rats and other vermin hiding from our passage, and the
steady drip…drip…drip… as beads of water rolled over the stalactites and stalagmites that had grown
in the thousands of years before.

“It’s a curse.” I said suddenly, surprising Viconia enough for her to jump.

“What?” the pair of ruby red glows turned and faced me in the shadows. The handful of welkynd
stones scattered about the ruins were enough to show her outline but not much more.

“Vampirism. It’s a curse.”

After several long, pregnant seconds she turned and attempted to concentrate on the passage before
us. “Is this really the best time to be talking about this?”

“I have said that I would eventually tell you more about how it is to be a vampire, and this seems to
be as a good a time as any.”

“Why now?”

“Because of how you reacted. I don’t want you to be afraid of me.”

She sighed, very softly that it was almost impossible to hear. “I’m more afraid of the unknown than
you *Mrannd’ssinss*. We have faced them together, killed them together and while I mightn’t truly
understand the curse I know that you would never hurt me. You have proven this several times
already.”

“I don’t think I could ever harm you, vampire or not.” I said, stooping under a fallen marble support where it had taken part of the ceiling away as it fell. Roots and creepers hung down from the soil and rocks above our heads, a sign that we were under the beach at least. “Most of the time I am… well… me. But the other times I am… something else and my thoughts and my mind changes accordingly.

“Something else?” Ducking down, she took my offered hand as I helped lift her up from under the fallen column. “How do you mean?”

“I revel in bloodshed, and inflicting pain. When I let the beast take control there is nothing more thrilling than the taking of lives. I relish the agony and there have been several times where despite the overwhelming thirst to feed on someone’s blood has been sated by the mere act of torturing them.”

“Such as that, woman… you dealt with near Anvil those months ago.”

I couldn’t help but grimace and feel ice grow in the depths of my stomach at the memory. “Yes.”

“You should do it more then.”

She watched my reaction as I stopped in place, turned and looked at her in shock. “What?”

“You should do it more. I’ve been watching you and your changes these past months and while you might think you are being careful I can tell when you satisfy your urges.”

Despite the darkness of the ruins where only a handful of faint welkynd stones lit our path, I knew that she saw the flush that spread up from my neck and across my face. It wasn’t the first time that I had cursed her unusual ability to see heat in darkness. “Satisfying those urges for the most part simply involves drinking blood.”

“What would happen if you were to not drink?”

“I would lose myself to the darkness, become more and more like an animal until I fed.”

“And when you do you become stronger, both in body and mind.” There was steel in her tone and I could feel the burning embers of her eyes resting on me. “I have seen you become something far greater than a mere surfer during our travels and I believe the longer you live and the more you feed the more you will continue to grow.”

“I realise this, and I told you of what Volmyr spoke of before we fought. Blood is the key to the strength of the vampire.”

Stopping in place I held a hand up in front of me, concentrating as I stared at the palm of my hand. A small ball of fire sprung to life for an instant, casting flickering shadows through the passage and illuminating Viconia’s ebony features.

“What…” She hissed, confused and trying to understand what she had just seen. “You have never shown me that you can cast elge faer…”

“Destruction Magicka? Until recently I thought I couldn’t.”

“How recent is recently?”

It took me everything not to meet her gaze. “The past weeks. I discovered I can conjure fire in the
days after my run-in with the Rangers. But even for the weeks before that I have noticed that my restoration has markedly improved.”

“It appears to be more proof that the more you feed the greater your strength and power becomes.”

“Yes. But I also know that my ability with magicka has markedly increased since I fed on the vampire matriarch in Glenvar.”

“You… You fed on that elg’caress?” The steel in her tone was increasing with every second. “I thought you had simply killed her…”

“Well, technically I did when I broke her spine and threw her outside.”

“But you still fed on her. Is feeding on your own kind even possible?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I suppose it is as I’m living proof but I’m also able to exist in sunlight and I’ve never heard of my other abilities.”

“Whether it is or it isn’t, it is useful.” A gleam was building in her eyes that was uncomfortably reminding me of how power was intoxicating to her.

“It is. I can move faster than almost anything alive, I’m strong enough to meet werewolves and minotaurs head on and can simply ignore injuries that would leave veteran legionaries screaming on the ground. Although it comes at a cost. The more I call upon the vampire’s strength and abilities, the more I lose myself. If I don’t keep a tight rein on my darker nature and urges then there would be a repeat of Glenvar, and next time I mightn’t be as lucky to find myself surrounded by enemies.”

“Is this why you prayed at those shrines? For nelgetha… forgiveness?”

“I don’t think that what I have become can be cured or forgiven and I don’t think there’s any repentance available from the gods. The only thing that truly awaits me is a daily struggle not to give in to this… curse…”

Awkwardly, Viconia’s hand ran down my arm, pressing the soaked fabric against my flesh and making us even more aware of how cold it was in the darkness. For the briefest of moments our fingers brushed together, but we both pulled away as I came to a halt and stared at the long corridor in front of us.

“You see that?”

“I can’t see much of anything mrannd’ssinss.” She replied simply. “It’s far too cold and there’s not enough light.”

“Wait here.” I said to her as I snapped off one of the many tree roots dangling from the ceiling that appeared drier than the others. We may have been above the waterline but there was a permanent dampness to the ruin despite the dust and soil that had fallen through the cracked masonry over the centuries. The cracks had grown large in places due to the persistence of tree roots and the cracks had allowed more than just roots passage. Spiders, skeevers and other assorted insects and vermin had managed to burrow into the ruins and I spent a minute or two binding other roots to mine before collecting an impressive amount of webs to the end. A moment’s concentration and I had managed to light my makeshift torch and watching as the small collection of creatures fled from the burning glow.

“Traps… We must be getting close.”
“How can you tell?” Viconia’s eyes were positively glowing now with the heat of the torch, giving her an intimidating, daedric appearance in the gloom.

Kneeling down I lowered my head almost to the floor until my breath stirred up the dust. “This place has almost been reclaimed by nature, but this section is almost untouched.”

My gloved hands ran lightly through the collection of dust and soil that had built up over the centuries and scraped the tiles clear. “My guess is either the walls are much, much thicker, there’s some kind of enchantment on the stones or both.”

“But how can you tell that there are traps?”

I gestured to the pile resting up against the wall and as she moved closer, the feeble light from the torch allowed her to see that it wasn’t a pile of loose soil but in fact a body of someone who had died a long time before. Like us, whoever they are had been wearing clothes rather than armour but of what make or design was impossible to tell. Between the skeevers and other vermin and the march of time, there was little left except for the few metallic pieces like buckles and the rough pile of bones that were only a few years from being reduced to powder.

Handing the burning torch to Viconia I motioned for her to step back slightly, picking up a stone from where it had fallen from the ceiling and gently tossing it underarm down the passage. The effect was immediate and as it bounced awkwardly a few metres in front of us it triggered a series of blade traps that swung from finger wide slits in the walls, and even a collection of metallic spears that snapped out faster than the eye could see. The blades swung back and forth a couple of times before disappearing into the walls again with a barely audible click, and there was a groan as the spears were drawn back as well.

“Vith…” Was all Viconia was able to mutter as the last of the spears snapped back into place and their trigger mechanisms reset. “Well, that explains the magicka I can sense.”

“Yep. Still operational even after thousands of years and just as deadly as the day they were made.” Taking in several deep breaths and looking down over the dusty floor I motioned for her stay where she was. “Let me get a few metres ahead, and step exactly where I do.”

Carefully, metre by metre I moved forward past the threshold into the collection of traps. My nerves were quickly strained but we were both still making good progress. Viconia looked just as stressed as I did, perhaps more so as she ensured that she stepped precisely into the indentations of my larger footprints.

“You’d only have this sort of defences near something that you really want looked after.” I said to her as we continued and skirted around a portion of floor that looked as though it fell away into a pit. “There is definitely something down here.”

“Traps or not, I’m expecting to find this place picked clean of anything of value.”

“I believe that few, if any have made it this far.”

I couldn’t spare a glance back at her with how much I had to concentrate on my surroundings but I could hear her tiny breath as she scoffed at me. “You sound very sure of yourself.”

“I have reason to be. There have been plenty before us who didn’t make it.” There were mushrooms growing out of the accumulated layers of dust all around us. Some as small as those we had made stews with on the roads, others easily the size of a mudcrab. “All of these are Cairn Bolete and only grow where someone has died.”
“How do you know all this?”

“In Morrowind there are dozens of ancient Dwemer ruins and every single one is filled with dozens of traps and other sorts of nasty forms of death to guard against intruders. I’m not entirely sure of what sort of magicka they utilised but like this place their ruins are still incredibly dangerous even after three millennia.”

“What interest would the Legion have with a long dead race?”

“The artefact trade. Every bit of their equipment, furniture or even pieces of scrap metal are considered to belong to the Empire. No one is allowed to trade anything of dwemer make without a contract or the correct licences. The Legion is usually called into various ruins to either hunt down artefact hunters or in some cases protect archaeological teams as many of their old devices still work. Foresters are responsible for identifying or disabling the traps, and the Legionaries are usually tasked with hunting down any Animunculi that might still work within the ruins.”

“Animunculi?”

“They’re like golems, but made of the dwemer’s strange brass-steel and filled with cogs and steam. I don’t know if they are alive because they somehow act like they are and not at the same time. The smallest ones I have ever seen were about the size of a cat, and the largest was almost twice my height. I’ve heard stories of ones that are much, much bigger though…”

The traps suddenly stopped along the passage and even those few that I had half expected to trick the unwary failed to materialise. Instead we found ourselves in a single, rectangular room approximately a dozen metres wide and two dozen long. First appearances gave the impressive of a complete lack of ornamentation, but closer inspection allowed Viconia and I to realise that the marble carvings and statues imbedded into the walls had actually been smoothed with age or consumed by centimetres of caked dust. No plants, fungus or roots could be seen and the walls, floor and ceiling was completely intact. Other than the layers of dust that covered everything there was no sign that the room had existed for thousands of years.

Words failed us both as we moved into the room, and I found myself rubbing dust and the grime of the centuries away from the bas-relief in the walls. Even after rubbing away some of the dust I could tell that every centimetre of surface had been utilised, showing enormous flowing scenes carved with such intricate skill that I would have been able to identify the subjects had they still been of flesh and blood. Men fought like heroes against towering daedra and the slave-master Ayleids and stylised depictions of the greatest warriors and leaders of the age could be found amongst them. Queen Alessia, Morihau the god-bull of Cyrodiil could be found in amongst those they led, gazing forward into the brighter future they had brought forth. The Eight Divines were there too, each gazing down on man as they lent their might to their faithful and granted Pelinal his relics so that he could take bloody vengeance upon their ancient foes.

The magnificent carvings wove a story of the rebellion but otherwise the room was empty except for the stone dais and marble pedestal at the far end. It in itself stood out far more than the carvings as it had been simply made and was left undecorated after being sanded to a perfect smoothness. In amongst such priceless artworks the simplicity drew the eye and our attention and without a word spoken between us we moved towards it.

Built in honour of a man long since dead, the room was but a small part of the shrine and had been made specifically to contain and protect a relic of the Gods. Neither of us had truly expected to find anything on this journey, even despite the subconscious yearnings that drove us on. We had been doubtful of our chances of success but those doubts were washed away with the simple act of laying eyes on something we had considered impossible to find.
The Helm of the Crusader glimmered in the faint light of the shrine and reflected our makeshift torch’s light back a dozen fold. Despite thousands of years in the shrine where the years had taken their toll on the marble and the very pedestal it rested upon, I would have sworn that the Helm had only just been recently polished. Not a single mote of dust rested upon its perfectly forged surface and the faint light sparkled off its silvery finish despite not feeling the touch of mortal hands in over thirty centuries.

In the shape of a full helm it was rounded off like a bucket and covered in tiny rivets and studs where the separate layers were kept secured. The workmanship was incredible to behold, every seam, rivet and the eye slits were perfectly made with no deformities or imperfections. Scripture had also been inlaid into the very metal itself and while it was impossible to read from more than twenty centimetres away it had the curious effect of allowing the helm to glitter and gleam even in the faintest of light.

“I never actually believed that we would find anything.” Viconia said softly, unable to take her eyes off the shimmering helmet. “I didn’t even think that any of the relics existed and were just stupid surfacer legends. But if this one exists then so can the others.”

Studying the helmet but not being able to bring myself to touch it, I nodded in agreement. “It’s been too many years since I learned about the relics, but I think that the Helm was one of the few that have never been discovered.”

“Not taken you mean.” The torch in her hands moved with her as she made her way around the dais. “It’s had company over the years.”

I raised my head slightly and looked past the helm to where she was pointing. Hidden in the darkness and facing the dais was a sad looking collection of bones that had rested for far too long without a proper burial.

“Looks like we weren’t the only ones to have made it past the traps.” I said as I moved over to her side and looked at the skeleton. “And he made it all this way only to die with his eyes on the Relic.”

“He’s no tomb robber, that’s for certain.” Viconia added. “That’s Mithril.”

I knelt down over the body and knew that Viconia spoke the truth. The flesh had long since rotted away, but there was surprisingly little damage done as there had been no trace of vermin at all within the room. The skeleton was still dressed in a thick suit of mithril chainmail, pulled tight around the stomach with a leather belt that looked as dry as the masonry at the corpse’s back. Remnants of a surcoat, one that would have easily reached the knees had faded but I somehow knew that other than the heraldry it would have been completely white. A skullcap helm, complete with nose guard, coif and chainmail aventail covered the fleshless skull and I couldn’t help but feel uneasy at the way the body was sitting against the wall. The head was tilted back, feet outstretched with a rusted longsword in the lap. If it wasn’t for the fact that the body had been laying there for a long time it would have appeared as though the individual had simply stopped to rest for a few minutes to catch their breath.

“That would have been a bastard swimming in.” I commented offhandedly, looking closer at the make of the armour and the handful of other items scattered nearby. A small travelling bag laid against the wall by the skeleton’s side and I found myself staring at the book that was still being held tight to its owner’s chest with a mailed, skeletal hand.

The realisation sunk in abruptly and I looked at the hollowed skull with an uneasy feeling creeping into me. “He didn’t intend on leaving. He came here to die.”

“Why would anyone do that?” Viconia asked as I chewed my lip as I began to carefully pry the
**book from the skeleton’s grasp.**

“Faith can drive you to extremes.” The mailed hand slipped into the body’s lap on top of the longsword as I lifted the book free. “Look at us; we’ve travelled for several days, risked drowning and followed the advice of a hallucination for gods we don’t really believe in.”

She chuckled dryly at that as I carefully cracked the book open. It was old, but the strange material of the pages left me confused until I realised that rather than using paper or vellum it had been made of papyrus instead. Paper might have been the most popular material for books, but papyrus was still popular for those regions close to Elsweyr. The book was exceedingly old, but despite its age and submersion so long ago the writing was clear and easy enough to read.

“This journal is a record of failure. My failure...” I said, turning and holding the pages up so Viconia and I could read the words in the light of the torch.

*In the immediate sense, this is no doubt obvious. If you are reading this, you are probably standing over my body, slain in the depths of the Shrine of the Crusader. Perhaps the gods granted me the gift of at least glimpsing the holy Helm before I died, undeserving though I am. I must believe that you are indeed a holy knight, following in my footsteps in quest of the Crusader’s Relics. It is to you, Sir Knight of my hopes, that I direct these words. May the account of my failures help you avoid my fate. Know that my failures encompass far more than my own death (which is of little account, at the end of a long life). The high ideals of the Knights of the Nine, of service to the gods rather than men, of dedication to a higher purpose - these are my failures, as I shall record here.*

As I write this, the scratching of my pen the only sound in the empty Priory, I am preparing to embark on my last quest for the Helm of the Crusader. I know that my chance of success is small. I am too old for such a task. This quest should have been taken up by the next generation of Knights of the Nine, while Sir Caius and Sir Berich and the rest of us stayed behind and spun tales of our days of glory. Alas, there is no next generation. Sir Berich is my embittered enemy, the rest of my old companions are all dead. There is only me, the last stubborn Knight of a failed Order.

*For many years I blamed Sir Berich for the dissolution of the Order, but in my old age I have finally come to recognize my own part in those tragic events. I now believe that the seeds of our destruction were sown early, although the fruit did not ripen until late. Even in the first heady days, questing for the Cuirass with Sir Caius and Sir Torolf, I set the pattern of personal glory. The Cuirass was mine, and although it resided in the Priory, I wore it into battle and accepted the acclaim of my fellows and the people for its recovery. And so it went. The Sword and Greaves, recovered by Sir Berich, became his personal arms, and the Gauntlets to Sir Casimir. Why not? Should the holy weapons lie idle while there was evil to be vanquished? And who more fitting to carry them than the knight who had proved himself worthy by their recovery? So we told ourselves -- so I told myself -- but all that followed flowed from this.*

*When Sir Berich wanted to take his Relics with him to the war, who was I to forbid him? I, who had jealously considered the Cuirass my own and none other’s? Sir Berich was wrong, but I was wrong first, and the blame for the dispute over the Relics falls first on me, the leader and founder of the Knights, who should have set a higher example, but was instead first to claim a Relic for my own.*

Sir Berich’s later actions I will leave for others to judge. But let it be known that I do not blame him for the dissolution of the Knights. If he would speak to me, I would tell him so myself. He and I are now all that are left of the original Knights. The others are all dead, and I have dedicated myself to recovering their bodies and interring them in the Priory Undercroft, as is fitting for such holy warriors. Alas that they did not have the leader that they deserved.
Now it is time for me to depart on my quest for the Helm. If you would follow in my footsteps, Sir Knight, know that the Priory basement, at least, will remain inviolate. I have sealed the stairs and only my ring will now open it. My brother knights will sleep in peace, in company with the Cuirass, the only Relic that remains in the Order’s keeping. I say that, although the Order is officially dissolved, hoping and believing that the Knights of the Nine will one day be reborn. Perhaps you are the one to restore the Order. If so, go to the Priory in the West Weald. Use my ring to enter the vaults beneath the Priory House. There you will find the Cuirass, and claim it for your own if you are a true knight.

May the Nine guard and guide you.

Farewell.

Sir Amiel

Year 153 of the Septim Era.

A deep silence fell in the room as I slowly gazed over the remains of the last Knight of the Nine. I couldn’t help but feel humbled at the strength of will and conviction needed for an individual to travel all this way to simply die within sight of the Helm.

“So...” Viconia said at last, looking at me questioningly as she held the dying remains of the torch. “What do we do now?”

“We finish the quest that Sir Amiel began so long ago.” I replied, carefully closing the journal and slipping it into my traveling pack. “We take the helm, find the Priory of the Nine and see if we can find the other relics.”

“I was thinking we needed to put our other affairs in order before we attempt anything like that.”

“Such as?”

“We have to return to Cloud Ruler. Jauffre and Martin both need to know that we will be unable to support them for some time.” She paused, clicking her tongue in thought. “If we return at all.”

“Agreed.” Carefully I lifted the decayed remains of Sir Amiel’s hand that was still gripping his sword tight after so many years. With great respect and care I pried his fingers away from the hilt, allowing me to slip a large signet ring bearing nothing more than a stylised red diamond set in a silver shield into the palm of my hand. It was heavy and potentially worth a fortune, but I didn’t even give it a second thought as I tucked it securely into the deep recesses of a pocket.

With my hands clad in their gloves I reached out for the Helm, hesitant of even touching or disturbing the relic. For several moments I stood there, my fingertips quivering just short of picking the helm up from its resting place until I mustered the courage to lay my hands on it.

“Ready for another swim?” There was a triumphant grin on my face as I carefully placed the helm into my travelling bag alongside Sir Amiel's journal.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” Viconia muttered darkly at the prospect of navigating the traps and the swim ahead of us but we moved out of the room together, the weighty relic secured and ready to be brought back into daylight once again.
Progress and Delays

Chapter Notes

Another dialogue heavy chapter. I did contemplate scrapping this chapter entirely but it tidies up a considerable amount of plot points that I didn't feel happy with leaving unattended.

The next few chapters should flow a lot more smoothly though. :-D

After the years that I had spent within Vvardenfell I should have been used to the cold, but I was most definitely not. While the freezing temperatures of the southern Jerais were mild compared to the blizzards and winter months of northern Morrowind, they were still uncomfortable enough to make me glad to enter the interior of Cloud Ruler. It had been late into the evening when we had arrived, well after the evening meal and we wasted no time retiring to the sleeping quarters.

By the time we had both risen, the Blades were going about their morning duties and routines with their usual discipline. There were obviously a lot more of them present within the fortress than what there had been the last time we stayed and everywhere we looked we could see one or two of them scurrying about on various errands or tasks. The fortress as a whole felt a lot more lived in, more like a home but in an extremely militaristic way.

Much had changed, and yet the fortress-monastery was still just as it was when we had left it over four months before. It had felt as though it had been an eternity and judging by Jauffre’s gaunt frame and sunken eyes we were not the only ones feeling the strain. As Viconia and I entered the main hall we could see him sitting close to the fire in one of the armchairs, deep in thought and gently puffing away on an immaculate hand crafted pipe. A pile of papers and parchments were piled on the table next to him and he had the look of a man with all too much weight of the world on his shoulders. It was an expression that softened slightly as one of the Order approached, bowed slightly to him before gesturing to our approach and it broke into a true smile as he recognised us.

“Viconia! Kaius!” the smell of pipe tobacco reached us a few moments before he did, grasping our hands in turn with a grip that showed none of his fatigue. “I heard you had arrived in the night. It is good to see you both again.”

“It is good to be back.” I said honestly. “You could have made the weather a bit nicer for us though.”

“Ha, it’s nothing but a late winter snowstorm. You should have been here a month ago when the ramparts were nearly hidden under the snow.”

The amused twinkle in his eye returned some of the boundless energy that he usually contained and he made a handful of gestures to the nearby Blades staring at us to go about their duties.

“Cloud Ruler seems to be a little more ‘full’ these days.”

“Just over a cohort and a half now.” Jauffre remarked, showing his true role as Grandmaster but no dealing with or telling whole facts. “We’re as prepared and fortified as we can be.”
“How’s Martin?” Settling herself with a sigh of pleasure into one of the chairs nearly the fireplace, Viconia dragged over one of the foot stools and leaned back with legs outstretched.

“He’s doing well, as are we all. The translation of the Mysterium Xarxes is taking much longer than we thought but we have made significant progress, especially in these past weeks.”

One of the Blades must have gone and found Martin, for we barely had time to make ourselves comfortable in the chairs before he appeared from the direction of the Library, head down and thumbing through pages of a considerable tome that looked heavier than Sunchild. His concentration may have been elsewhere but he still broke out into a massive smile of pleasure at the sight of us seated in front of the fire, waving us off as we both went to rise to greet him.

“By Akatosh it is good to see you both again.” Thudding alarmingly on the small table in front of the fire, he placed the book down and gave us both a quick handshake before dragging over a chair of his own. Hovering at his shoulder, I initially didn’t recognise the Blade who had followed him like a shadow until I saw the smile and the tiniest of nods. Later I would find that Baurus had taken it upon himself to be Martin’s personal protector to alleviate his personal shame of Uriel’s death. He went everywhere with Martin and I wouldn’t have found it surprising if he would have attempted to sleep standing upright in full armour if Jauffre hadn’t had a few quiet words to him in the preceding months.

“You are looking well.” Viconia admitted, and I took had to nod in agreement. Despite the fact that he would have been effectively under house arrest in the fortress he was looking much fitter and healthier than the priest he had been in Kvatch. He may have been as pale as he usually was, but there was a growing strength in his arms and torso that hinted towards him doing more than just studying books.

“Belisarius has that effect on people.” Jauffre replied humorously at Martin’s discomfort at how Viconia gave the ex-priest a quick up-and-down with her gaze that was as predatory as a wolf’s.

“You’re training with Belisarius?”

He nodded in my direction, shrugging and trying to deflect the way how Viconia’s teasing expression had been a little unnerving. “Two or three hours a day. Jauffre’s orders.”

“You’ll be a swordsman in no time.” There was a mutual chuckle between us at my comment but it wasn’t far from the truth. Belisarius would be able to teach an armless man well enough for him to enter tournaments.

“Nothing like what I have heard about your mutual exploits.” He pointed between the two of us, relaxing into his own chair and obviously feeling strain from his latest training session. “Closing another Oblivion gate, hunting minotaurs, knighthoods…”

“Slaying vampires and werewolves.” Viconia added, holding her hands out to the fire and warming them.

“Vampires and werewolves.” Smiling, he continued unabated despite Viconia’s interruption. “You are the talk of Tamriel my friends.”

“We like to keep busy.”

“That’s good.” While his tone was humorous there was an edge to Jauffre’s voice. “We may have further use of individuals with your talents in the coming weeks. Martin has completed a majority of the translations and we have a clearer picture of what is needed to track down Camoran.”
“Then you have been successful?”

“In a way.” For a moment he looked uncomfortable. “It took longer than I was expecting and we needed to bring in outside help but I have managed to create a ritual that if successful, should allow us to breach Mankar Camoran’s Paradise and attempt to retrieve the Amulet of Kings.”

Viconia leaned forward slightly and continued massaging her fingers. “Doesn’t sound easy.”

“It isn’t. The ritual is going to need significant resources in order to be successful, and a lot of these resources are very, very particular.”

“How particular?” I asked hesitatingly.

Jauffre’s pipe smoke thickened the air around us like the grey-black clouds blanketing the cliffs all around the fortress. “The Blood of a Daedric Lord, the Blood of a Divine, a Great Welkynd Stone and a Great Sigil Stone.”

“What…”

Martin suddenly looked extremely worn and haggard. “Four pieces of incredibly powerful magicka and essentially essences of creation and destruction. The only problem is all four of these are incredibly rare.”

“One of the problems.” Jauffre muttered.

“The Blood of a Daedric Lord and the Blood of a Divine is surprisingly simple wherein we need Daedric and Aedric artefacts respectively. The Great Sigil Stone was the easiest to acquire but the Great Welkynd Stone could prove to be one of the more difficult to attain.”

Looking between them both I felt like most of the conversation was completely beyond my comprehension. “How was getting a Great Sigil Stone the easiest?”

“Thanks to the efforts of the two of you, we have three such Sigil Stones from the stockpile taken from the Mythic Dawn’s Shrine.” The grin that Jauffre suddenly wore was slightly uncomfortable. “One will be more than enough.”

“And if we didn’t have the stones?”

Both of them shrugged. “Then we would have had to acquire one.” Martin replied after a moment’s hesitation. “and the only way that I could imagine us gaining such an artefact would be to allow the daedra and the Mythic Dawn to open a series of smaller portals and allow them to combine together like at Kvatch.”

“One down, three to go then.” I added.

“Yes. In more ways than one it is much easier than allowing, and then counter attacking a major daedric incursion.” Billowing around Jauffre, the pipe smoke seemed to grow thicker and more physical. “We also have leads on the other three artefacts. A handful of Blades have been dispatched to retrieve a Daedric Artefact and while I’m not comfortable members of the Order affiliating with daedra worshippers there is no other option.”

“And the Aedric artefact?”

Martin shrugged, looking between the three of us. “This is a little more difficult. Unlike the Daedra Lords, the gods have no artefacts and do not physically manifest themselves in our world.”
“What about Pelinal’s artefacts?” Viconia asked suddenly, and both Jauffre and Martin looked shocked at her words.

“All bar one of the artefacts have been lost for centuries, if not longer.” Gesturing helplessly, he sat back into his chair heavily. “The only pieces of the Divine Crusader’s armour are the Gauntlet’s in Chorral and while it was the obvious choice there aren’t suitable for this ritual.”

He must have felt my gaze upon him and looked me in the eye before I could open my mouth.

“Aren’t suitable? They are artefacts of the Eight aren’t they?”

“They are… In a way. Some of my ‘outside help’ includes Hannibal Traven and the Cyrodiil Mages Guild. I managed to get the Guild in Chorrol to undertake some tests on the gauntlets and as far as any of us can tell, while they are holy artefacts of incredible power, they are not artefacts in the same way as Daedric ones are. Teekeeus, the head of the Chorrol Guild has the theory that the artefacts aren’t directly created by the Divines, but instead were ‘blessed’ with measures of their power.”

Both Viconia and I shared glances and I struggled not to look at the tiny travelling bag that she had attached to her hip. Instead, I chose to change the topic away from the awkwardness that I was approaching.

“What is a Great Welkynd Stone?”

“The pinnacle of Ayleid magic. Once, every Ayleid city had its Great Stone but they’re all been plundered over the centuries. As far as I have been able to discern, the Great Welkynd Stones acted like the city’s heart, allowing the Ayleids to charge and recharge Varla and Welkynd stones. They used these stones for almost everything from lighting to temperature control and various magicka and rituals. Some of the theories I have seen have also stated that the smaller stones help maintain their cities and constructions without mortal assistance.”

I nodded. “I can believe that. Some of the cities are easily four thousand years old and are in better condition that buildings made a decade ago.”

“Exactly. Now, the biggest issue we have with the Great Welkynd Stone is that they are exceedingly rare and it’s almost easier to get our hands on a Daedric Artefact than one. They have been plundered one by one over the centuries due to their great value to mages and occultists but there is one place that is rumoured to still contain one.”

Still puffing away calmly on his pipe, Jauffre looked relaxed but appearances were extremely deceptive. “The ruins of Miscarcand. We’re currently organising an expedition to that ancient city.”

“How do you know that one of these stones is still there?”

Martin shrugged again in Viconia’s direction. “We’re not entirely certain. The Great Stone of Miscarcand is reputed still to shine in the deep darkness of its ruined halls, but no one has done more than glimpse it from a distance. It is said to be guarded by the ghosts of its last king and his subjects. Miscarcand is one of the most extensive Ayleid ruins in Cyrodiil and was also the capital of one of the largest Ayleid kingdoms. It is also one of the few ruins in near-perfect condition which adds weight to the theory of the Welkynd Stone’s magical natures.”

“Let me guess though… No one who has entered the city has ever returned?”

“There’s been a few who have made it back alive over the years.” Jauffre replied with a billowing cloud of tobacco smoke. “But it’s been confirmed that the city is still almost entirely intact even despite the best efforts of Imperial archaeological teams and assorted scavengers. This is why we
want you both as part of this expedition.”

“Not hunting for Aedric or Daedric Artefacts?”

There was a joint shaking of heads from them both. “No.” Martin said a second before Jauffre could. “The expedition to Sancre Tor departed last week although it might be some time before they are successful in their quest and we have several agents already seeking out Shrines and Daedra worshippers. Your skills and experience are better suited with this.”

I turned and looked at Viconia and felt my unease and anxiety grow.

Viconia beat me to it. “We’re not going to be able to help.”

Silence fell between us and for the most part Jauffre and Martin looked confused and amused in equal ways.

“We have other commitments now.” I added, seeing Jauffre’s expression of bemusement through the slight haze of smoke.

“Oh? Other commitments? Are they more important that stopping the end of the world?”

Jauffre’s sarcasm was almost a physical slap to the face but I continued on. “You would’ve heard of how there has been a call for a crusade to recover the Divine Crusader’s Relics?” I said carefully, watching as Jauffre’s expression became thunderous and Martin merely nodded.

“We’ve both decided to join the crusade.”

Jauffre snorted, coughing as he choked on Viconia’s words and a lungful of smoke. “You’ve what?”

“We’ve decided to search for the Relics of the Crusader. It’s something that we both must do.”

Jauffre laughed, anger burning in the pit of his stomach and I struggled not to flinch away from his rising choler. “Neither of you have ever stuck me as being overly pious, or the types to be taken on wild flights of fancy. You would turn away from your duty to the Empire, to the Emperor, and to every living being in Tamriel to embark upon a lost cause?”

“The relics have been lost for hundreds of years, if not longer.” Martin’s voice was the sound of calm and reason to Jauffre’s building anger. “You both have done miraculous things, and performed such extraordinary feats that you will have songs sung about you for decades to come, but what makes you think that this is even possible? The relics are legends, nothing more.”

Fumbling with the traveller’s pack and ignoring them both, Viconia reached in and withdrew the gleaming helm and placed it on the table in between all of us. The effect upon the room and both Martin and Jauffre was instantaneous and a silence fell, broken only by the crackling and spitting of the fire.

“Impossible.” Jauffre breathed after several moments of silence, his features framed by the roaring fire and eyes reflecting the light sparkling off the gleaming silver helm.

Martin was completely lost for words, his eyes never wavering from the helmet as its empty eye slits absorbed the burning light from the fire in pools of darkness. His mouth opened and closed for several moments as he struggled to form words, eventually breaking her gaze from the Helm and looking me square in the eye. “Serene Beauty… How…” 
“You wouldn’t believe us.” I said to him. “But it is important that we find the other relics.”

“Could this be used in the ritual?” Jauffre asked, directing the question at Martin and receiving a shake of the head in response.

“No. As miraculous as it is, the armour of Tiber Septim is still our best hope. I will run a few magical tests just to be sure but I know that it’ll be the same as the Gauntlets.”

He looked between us, his expression equal parts amazed and incredulous. “You do realise that Dibella’s Helm hasn’t ever been discovered before?”

“We’re aware.” Viconia leaned back in her chair, crossing her thighs as she did so. “We’re also aware that the barriers are weakening each time a house of worship is attacked.”

I couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable at the expression that consumed Martin’s face. “We still have time, a year or two at the very most but it is quickening. You aren’t the first to have said such.”

“Umaril the Unfeathered is returning.”

He nodded to me. “Yes. The word that has reached us points to that fact despite the Cardinals of the Nine fervently denying it. Too many chapels and cathedrals have been attacked across Tamriel and for one of the lost relics to be found only adds to the weight of evidence.”

“The Relics need to be reunited and Pelinal’s ‘heir’ or ‘reincarnation’ or however you describe them needs to be found.”

“Are you sure that you or Viconia aren’t that person?”

Shaking my head, I gestured to the Helm. “It’s not us and we have that fact on good authority. I’m also fairly confident that only the person chosen by the Divines is going to be able to wield the artefacts and defeat Umaril. It’s probably very similar to how the Amulet of Kings can only be worn by certain individuals and I certainly wasn’t able to wear it.”

“You tried to wear the Amulet of Kings?” Jauffre spluttered, trying to decide whether he was upset or amused at my confession.

“One of the most famous and unique artefacts in the entire Empire and one that shows whether you are worthy to rule or not by wearing it? I carried the damn thing for over a week so of course I tried it on.”

“And… What happened?”

I shrugged. “It fell right off me almost like the chain broke.”

He seemed to visibly relax although I could feel Viconia’s amusement. “Anyway,” I continued. “Umaril’s returning and only the person who is blessed by the gods and wielding Pelinal’s relics can defeat him. The longer it takes for him to be defeated, the sooner the Daedric Invasion will occur.”

Jauffre looked at Martin and saw the nod in agreement. “It’s true. Both the Arcane University and the Telvanni have confirmed that the barriers are perceptibly weakening.”

“You seem to have made some friends.” Viconia added.

The sigh was audible and revealed some of the weight that was on his shoulders. “I would have never been able to translate the Mysterium Xarxes on my own but I have been lucky in securing help
from several sources. The College of Winterhold, the Council of Mages, Hannibal Traven at the Arcane University and even Master Aryon of House Telvanni have all been immense help.”

Finishing the last of the tobacco, Jauffre tapped the ash out of his pipe into the tiny ashtray on his table. “What do you intend to do?”

“Travel to Skingrad and track down the old Priory of the Order of the Nine. We’re hoping to find the Cuirass there and clues on where to find the other Relics. Hopefully we can find the relics and whoever is supposed to fight Umaril before the invasion.”

“You have until the end of the year.” Martin looked despondent at the fact and we all shared similar feelings.

“Nine months? That soon?”

He nodded. “Things will soon begin to advance quickly and it will not take much for the balance to shift away from us. The Mythic Dawn is almost entirely smashed but those that remain could be enough to bring about the end. It is imperative that we complete this ritual and retrieve the Amulet of Kings.”

“Then we will try to buy us all some time.” Viconia said simply. “And, if time and fortune permits we will return once Umaril has been defeated.”

“You seem extremely confident.”

Sharing a glance between Viconia and myself, I shrugged and turned back to Martin. “We were told that our choices and decisions hold a considerable amount of weight.”

The silence that fell between Jauffre and Martin did not go unnoticed, nor did their sudden dark expressions.

“You both know something…”

It was Jauffre that broke the silence this time, coughing into his fist and leaning forward in his chair. “As part of my role as Grandmaster and to assist in the investigation into the Mythic Dawn, I contacted the Elder Moth Temple for assistance.”

“You had them read the Elder Scrolls in regards to us?”

He nodded. “Although, I found out that I didn’t need to order them to do so. The Cult of the Ancestor Moth apparently have known of you both for quite some time.”

“How long is quite some time…”

“Almost a thousand years. Give or take a century or two.” He again paused as he let that fact sink in before starting to refill his pipe. “Among other things they like to keep track of individuals whose fate is tied to certain events or prophecies. My understanding is that there is only a handful of these individuals every century, and for the most part that are unheard of or simply disappear from the pages of history.”

“So we’re going to vanish?” Viconia asked, looking somewhat alarmed. “What are the Elder Scrolls anyway?”

“Pieces of creation from outside of time and existence as we know it.” We all watched as Jauffre snapped his fingers together and created the tiniest flicker of magical flame to light his pipe instead of
a match. “They are impossible, incomprehensible and unknowable but can be used to divine prophecies despite holding untold power to change the world itself. To us, they look like simple, if expensive scrolls but those with the right training can read them.”

“And if someone without the right training reads them?”

“They either can’t read or understand them at all in the best case.” I added. “Or in the worst case they are rendered entirely blind. We feature in one of these prophecies?”

Puffing away like a chimney on his pipe Jauffre nodded, “The current events involving Uriel’s death and the coming invasion were recorded in the eighth century of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Era. The Moth Priests have been expecting this for a long time although as you can expect readings are extremely lacking in specifics. The correspondence I received from them states that two individuals would be involved in these events and would play keys roles.”

“Did they say anything else?”

“That this isn’t the only prophecy that you are both potentially involved in. The other prophecies are all dependant and stem from this crisis of sorts.”

Closing his eyes, Martin took a breath and began to recite a simple rhyme.

\textit{The towers will fall; a hero stands tall.}

\textit{Mortal men - the Mer shall fool.}

\textit{Those without eyes, shall gaze upon skies.}

\textit{The Empress and the Dragon shall rule.}

“Where in Oblivion did that come from?”

He looked at me directly. “Jauffre showed me the correspondence from the Priests. That was one of the few fragments of a prophecy that directly involves you both. The meaning as such is elusive but there is something about it that disturbs me.”

“It disturbs you? How do you think it makes me feel?”

“\textit{Terrified}.” Viconia said under her breath in such a way that only I could hear her. Unbidden, our hands came together briefly for a tight squeeze, a motion that was not lost to either of the men sitting before us.

“So what will you do now?”

I rubbed at the stubble on my jaw and tapped my fingers against my flesh. “We will leave for Skingrad as soon as possible. This evening or tomorrow morning at the latest. If our actions do have such effects on the world, then I guess tarrying isn’t going to be the greatest of ideas.”

“Well, it makes me feel better at how the two of you can accomplish so much is such a short space of time.” Martin smiled but it was somehow hollow. “I guess an explanation as such is better than no explanation at all.”
“I guess, although I think that I prefer the idea of the world ending rather than every action we take having untold consequences.”

More smoke began spreading through the air and partially masking Jauffre’s stern expression. “I’m confident in your victory my friends. The Blades stand by your side and if you need assistance you know where to look.”

“Thanks.” Viconia gave me a tiny smile as I looked over to her. “I hope that we find success in Skingrad; otherwise it’s going to be a long journey for nought.”
Pride and Desire

We left Cloud Ruler shortly before the evening meal, choosing to travel the last few hours south and stay the night in the first of several coaching Inns over the coming days. Martin and Jauffre were sorry to see us leave, but they were understanding of our reasons. We left with a handful of supplies, and another pair of books that were added to our suspiciously growing collection. Viconia was still continuing to read the book she had received from the Prophet Saccicius for an hour or two every day as we stopped for the night, but she was otherwise keeping her own company. I took it upon myself to begin reading the books that Martin had provided while Viconia was otherwise distracted, and while we continued to talk during the day, the evenings left us both sitting in each other’s company with our noses stuck in books.

The two books that Martin had provided us were filled with details and stories of the Divine Crusader and the Order of the Nine. From his time as a priest of Akatosh, he had his own knowledge and experiences regarding one of the most famed heroes of mankind and had specifically chosen these pair of books for the information they contained.

Pelinal Whitestrake was perhaps one of the most written and spoken about individuals throughout history but the enormous length of time that had passed since the years that he had walked the bounds of Tamriel left more fiction than fact. Over the course of three thousand years, little had truly managed to survive as his story had grown from a tale, to a legend, to a myth.

Of what had managed to survive the ravages of time was very simplistic and precise. He was clad in, and wielding the armour and weapons of the Eight Divines themselves, each piece as such being gifted directly from an individual god. The Helm of Dibella, the Boots of Kynareth, the Curiass of Akatosh, the Gauntlets of Stendarr, the Greaves of Mara, the Mace of Zenithar, the Shield of Julianos, and the Sword of Arkay. If the Helm was anything to go by, then the Relics were incredibly, if not incomprehensible power. There was no sign whatsoever that the Helm had spent the past thirty centuries in a partially flooded ruin and even when I accidently dropped it from a saddlebag into the dirt not a single mote of dust clung to its surface.

Martin had performed a few tests on the Helm before our departure to test whether it was the same as the Gauntlets and was proven that they too were unsuitable for the ritual. While powerful in a way that made the Light of Dawn appear little more than a dagger of sparks, they were in his opinion “not true Aedric artefacts” but were instead blessed by the Divines instead.

It was during our third night’s stay while Viconia had been looking over my shoulder that she had brought something else to my attention regarding Pelinal. As I had been reading my way through a section of the Song of Pelinal she had idly noted that “It is extremely difficult to cut someone into eight equal pieces unless they cut either the legs or the arms in half at the joints.” I wasn’t sure whether I was more disturbed at the fact that she spoke from experience or that she was correct.

The journey between Cloud Ruler and Skingrad went without incident, and it proved most fortuitous that we had purchased a home within the city in the previous months. Rosethorn Hall was something that I could have only dreamed about during my time in the Legion, but now one of the most expensive houses, in one of the richest cities in Cyrodiil was wholly ours. Viconia and I had bought the house equally during the journey after being proclaimed champions of Anvil and I was completely certain that the purchase had been entirely on a whim. A whim that was somewhat concerning as it cost more than three lifetimes of Legion pay and had only served to reduce our wealth to a third of its total. The riches of Nonungalo had been worth far, far more than either of us were expecting, and we had been expecting a lot from nearly seven kilograms of precious artefacts.
and gemstones.

In a way our fame was proving to be of even greater worth than the treasures that seemed to simply fall into our hands. Our subsequent journeys through Skingrad had allowed us to invest the other spoils of our adventures with the Bankers' Guild, spoils that included the vampiric treasures from Normalhorst, and the three full pouches of gemstones I had acquired from the slain marauders in county Anvil. But even with such wealth, the only thing that was stopping us from being fleeced and all but robbed by moneylenders and jewellers was our fame and the way our names carried as much weight as a Baron or Counts. There were few within positions of authority within Cyrodiil who didn’t know of us, many by sight as our ebony-mithril breastplates and White Stallion Signet rings announced our identities more than our reputations.

Although, I still struggled to comprehend we were some of the richest individuals within the Empire, comparable to counts and the Septim Emperors themselves. Between our swords, armours, horses, house, collection of jewels and coins we carried in our saddlebags and the amount invested into the Guilds, we could easily purchase enough land to put some baronies to shame.

All of this wealth, our reputations and our skill at arms were proving to be entirely useless in the search of the home of the Knights of the Nine. They were proving elusive in ways that were equal parts confounding and infuriating but unlike the Relics of the Crusader, the Order of the Nine should have been easier to find.

The difficulties lay in a combination of reasons. Firstly, unlike almost every other Order, the Knights of the Nine had been few in number. Most orders easily contained dozens, if not hundreds of fully fledged knights and just as many, if not more squires and men-at-arms. Fittingly enough the Order of the Nine only contained nine such individuals, but these nine had accomplished feats and deeds that made older, larger, more established knightly orders pale in comparison.

Within the city archives, one of the few gems of knowledge I had discovered was a fairly concise list of their achievements during the two decades that the order had been in existence. First and foremost, several members of the Order had successfully recovered five of the Eight relics of the Crusader. The Order’s founder, Sir Amiel Lannus himself had slain the only dragon seen in Cyrodiil during the entire 3rd era with the help of his brother knights, Caius Fulberia and Torolf Asanderssen. From the dragon’s clutches they had retrieved the Cuirass, and after founding the order they were shortly joined by another champion who had retrieved the Gauntlets. Casimir B’olden was a sword-champion of the Forebears who had singlehandedly bested the ogre class of Garlas Agea, and he was quickly followed by another couple of champions from throughout Tamriel. Henrik Fenrahrson, Thane of Haafingar and Ralvas Ulento of House Redoran pledged their swords to the order, Sir Ralvas accepting banishment from his home due to his ‘heretical’ beliefs in the Nine. The last to join were Gregory Arcio; a sellsword born in Elsweyr, Juncan Nirtke; a Breton born of Redguard parents living in Sentinel and a young Colovian noble by the name of Berich Vlindrel.

Sir Berich would be destined to become the most infamous of the Knights of the Nine. Even before joining the order there were records of his victories in various tournaments and jousts but his fame exploded when he retrieved not one, but two Relics of the Crusader from the Necromancers of the Rotting Eye in County Bruma. Claiming the Sword of Arkay and the Greaves of Mara, he brought the Order overwhelming fame, recognition in the eyes of the Elder Council and the full financial support that only being the son of a Baron could bring.

Champions of their generation, if not the entire 3rd Era the list of their accomplishments and victories was contained on a scroll the length of my arm. Even Viconia and myself with our wreath of victories under our belts, including retrieving a relic and saving entire cities couldn’t hope to match the Knights of the Nine. They had fought dragons, necromantic and daedric cults, forged peace
treaties between warring factions, saved not one or two, but seven cities throughout Tamriel from everything from goblin migrations, orchestral warbands, and even a sorcerous outbreak of zombies.

But, they also seemed destined to prove that the brightest candles burned twice as quickly. After a decade of travelling the lands, their fame and renown growing with every impossible victory the War of the Red Diamond broke out. Queen Potema of Solitude brought war to the Tamriel and several of the knights followed the clarion calls to battle. In an argument that was never recorded, Berich Vlindrel slew Caius Fulberia with the sword of Arkay on the steps of the priory before leaving the order forever. He was not the last to leave.

Some of the knights died during the war, others simply disappeared. Sir Berich returned from the war a hero and upon inheriting his father’s barony earned a seat on the Elder Council and became a prominent politician. His untimely death in 159 was attributed to a bout of illness but there was apparently rumours of poison and assassination with his own son as the likely culprit.

The relics too vanished like they had over the centuries previously. The greaves and sword were buried with Sir Berich in his family tomb, a tomb that subsequently got lost almost a hundred and fifty years after his death when his last surviving heir died in a horse riding accident. Without heirs the Vlindrel Barony was broken up, distributed and absorbed by several of its neighbours and in the resulting administrative confusion the location of the tomb was lost, and with it the location of the Relics.

Sir Henrik left and with his home still under the influence of the Wolf Queen established ties with the Knights Mentor. His story was one of the few successes during the fall of the Order. Retrieving the Shield of the Crusader from an unknown location and from unknown foes he vanished from the pages of history shortly other, taking the fate of the Shield with him.

Casimir’s B’olden’s story was one of the most well-known of all the tales, as is the location of the gauntlets. After publicly disgracing himself by accidently murdering one of the cathedral’s worshippers, the gauntlets had fallen to the floor of the Cathedral of Stendarr where they had been impossible to lift ever since. Judging by the few conversations Viconia and I had overheard during our travel and arrival within Skingrad the gauntlets were there still, becoming increasingly popular as the Prophet’s crusade continued to grow. As yet they hadn’t appeared to have budged in the slightest despite the increasing attention they were gathering from pilgrims and crusaders alike.

It was the stories of the other relics that interested me, despite our primary goal was finding the location of the Priory of the Nine. The Helm had never been discovered, nor had the Boots or the Mace. It wasn’t surprising that the Helm hadn’t been discovered with the submersion of the shrine under a dozen metres of water, but rumours of the Boots and the Mace were spreading. The boots apparently were kept within a grove somewhere within the northern portions of County Bravil, and those praying to a Saint within Leyawiin’s cathedral of Zenithar would sometimes be granted visions of the mace.

Four days… Four days of searching, reading moth and mouse eaten scrolls and feeling dust and cobwebs clinging to my flesh had brought Viconia and I no closer to finding the Priory of the Nine. There were records of its existence of course, but they were space on its exact location. Despite people’s opinions the land and the Empire was in constant change. Rivers and creeks were dammed and redirected, lakes dried up, mines and ore veins would run out and new ones would be found and trade routes and roads would change in importance. New villages and townships would spring to existence even as old ones withered and died as their economic lifeblood gave out.

The Priory of the Nine had once been the Abbey of the Eight in the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Era, until the southern trade route from Skingrad to Elsweyr shifted further to the east and took the caravans with it. This
particular region of the West Weald was sparsely populated to begin with, but in two centuries since the founding to the Order it had turned into wilderness. Without an exact location or precise directions, it was going to prove impossible to find a handful of buildings in thousands of square kilometres that were for the most part heavily forested.

Viconia and I visited every bookstore in the city, gained permission to enter the various chapel and cathedral archives and for two full days from dawn to well into the night I rifled through the city archives for clues on the Priory’s location. There was enough evidence to prove that it did exist, but not enough to narrow down its location. After spending three hours reading through a stack of parchments half my height in search for Sir Amiel’s original land purchase of the Priory from the local Baron, I was met with utter disappointment in the shape of a decades old rat nest. Time, along with vermin seemed intent on making a mockery of Imperial administration and records and it was this that finally forced me from the archives.

Viconia had left a few hours previously to follow up on a potential lead with one of the local bookstores. By now all of the book merchants knew of what we were seeking, along with a considerable number of city officials and a growing number of local citizens. Once or twice a day we would have some messenger or courier arrive with word and we would take it in turns to go and see if it bore and fruit. If anything, Viconia was growing more impatient than I was and I was almost at the point whether I wouldn’t have been surprised to come back to find the archives on fire as a result.

Another day of fruitless searching done, I wrapped myself up in my cloak and stepped out into the fresh air. Spring had arrived during our journey to the north, and while the nights were still cool there was no an overwhelming scent of flowers filling Skingrad’s streets. Midnight was approaching, the taverns and inns throughout the city were still doing a brisk trade allowing their patrons to drown their sorrows and sensibilities in ale and locally made wine.

With a single breath the vampire in me took in the smell of baking bread filling the streets, overlaying the deep scent of wine from the vineyards outside the city walls. The evening cool had meant that many homes had their fires lit but unlike other cities Skingrad had the calming scent of burning pine wafting through the air, leaving the city with a very homely and calm feeling compared to many others. I strode onwards into the streets, walking through the flickering lights of dozens of torches hanging from their poles and the odd glimpses of light peeking through curtains of the dozens of multi-story buildings. Gardens and flowers were planted everywhere and now with the arrival of spring, during the day the city was a rush of colours swaying in the breeze, removing the taint of anything even resembling a sewer.

The nightlife was also lively and strong as everyone from all walks of life would be involved in the dozens of various treats and spectacles. Plays and other such performances could be seen within the city theatre; a rarity outside the Imperial City and it seemed that anything other than the gladiatorial blood sports found within the Imperial City Arena could be witnessed there for those who could afford it. For others with less coin, the taverns and inns of the city were always conducting a brisk trade and their qualities ranged from the usual flea-ridden shacks filled with the lawless and scum of the world, to the upper-class and expensive where the only limit was the weight of your coin purse. Even without my vampiric senses I could hear the overly raucous cries from the tavern down the street, picking up the dozens of thrown insults and curses even as the fight got well underway. As I made my way further down the street it quickly became apparent that insults weren’t the only things being thrown, as one of the many patrons soon exited the building via a window. His unconscious form to lay in the gutter as the brawl continued on unabated and I gave a smile to the members of the city guard as they moved towards the tavern, their swords in their sheaths and wooden batons tightly gripped in gloved hands.

It had not just been the sense of failure and the hours trapped within the suffocating confines of
shelving, parchments and paper that had driven me into the night. The desire to feed, the thirst for blood had been building and the last time I had fed was the first day we had arrived in the city. I would not have been able to keep it at bay for much longer and so I had other plans before I returned to Rosethorn Hall and Viconia.

The thirst was both a need and an addiction. I had seen men and mer alike suffer the effects of their addictions to skooma and other illicit substances and I had also bore witness to the effects of withdrawal. The irritability, the shaking and shivering and the all-consuming need that grew and grew until it was impossible to ignore or resist. Especially those souls’ dependant on Skooma, this need drove them to such extremes that they turned on friends and family. In a village near fort Ironhand, I had witnessed one of the locals selling his own wife to the flesh trade for the merest hints of the substance, and I had heard stories of far worse.

In a terrible way I could relate. The third for blood could be put off and resisted but it would always come to the surface. The longer I ignored it, the greater it would fight and consume my every waking hour until I succumbed. As yet I had not gone for more than five days without drinking blood, but those hours before I finally drank were almost a living hell.

The beast within me also grew in strength as the thirst did. My senses would slowly improve without conscious effort until I began sensing the beating of hearts and tasting everyone’s smells on the air. I would also find my face growing tighter, the bones in my body shifting imperceptibly under my skin and my muscles growing stronger. For the first day or two after feeding I would be content, sated and full but the longer I put it off, the more dangerous I became.

As I moved through the streets, I was feeling the urge so greatly that I could almost see the blood pumping through the veins of those who I passed. With the merest flicker of will I could make the sense more precise, turning the night time shadows into ghostly greys and seeing the swirling red fibres of life force in all living beings. Instead I supressed it, knowing even as I did so that I would have to feed if I was to maintain control.

With my thoughts focused on the thirst, it was almost a surprise when I walked around the corner and almost collided with a young woman moving in the opposite direction. Dressed in a flowing silk dress with a shawl wrapped around her shoulders, she was almost indistinguishable from the dozens of other minor nobility making their way through this particular section of the city. Indeed, other than her attractiveness and rich clothing, the only other distinguishing feature was that she was obviously moving quickly away from something or someone while attempting to not appear as such.

At my sudden appearance she yelped in surprise, coming to a sudden and abrupt halt as she looked up into my eyes. Slightly shorter than Viconia, she only just came up to my chin but had none of the steel-like hardness that filled my companion.

“M’lady.” Waving my hand across onto my chest I patting my breastplate just loud enough that the metallic thudding was audible, seeing her eyes widen in response.

“Oh… um… Good evening.”

I knew from experience that I was somewhat intimidating, but her nervousness was not in response to finding herself face to face with a stranger dressed in grey-black clothing, clad in an ebony breastplate and openly carrying a sword. Her attention was elsewhere, eyes darting back over her shoulder and glancing about.

A dozen metres down the road, a trio of young men stepped out onto the street from one of the taverns almost exclusively catering for nobility and the wealthy. They looked about the city street, quickly seeing the young woman standing in front of me and moving quickly in her direction.
My eyes met with hers and while there wasn’t fear in them, she was uneasy. Skingrad was one of the safest cities within the Empire, the streets well protected and while this wasn’t the usual tavern scenario I was accustomed to from my days in the Legion, it was still unusual.

“Constadonia? Where are you going?”

The way she shied away a little from the trio, eyes locked on the one walking ahead of the others. They, also appeared to be minor nobility, out for the evening where they had been obviously sampling the local wine.

“Home.” She said simply, trying to meet their gaze and failing. While nowhere near as inebriated as the other three I could still practically smell the alcohol that she had been drinking.

“No you’re not. You’re staying with me as your father wanted.”

The tone was insolent and with a considerable amount of scorn injected into it to cover the annoyance at having his authority tested in front of others. There was also no mistaking the slight quiver in the young woman as she stood there, trying desperately not to step away from the trio.

“Are you in need of assistance m’lady?” I asked softly, seeing the answer in her eyes as she looked at me.

“She has no need of help from you, peasant.” The ringleader answered, and my decision was made so much easier. Normally I would have continued on without a moment’s hesitation and not involved myself in the affairs of others, but the drive to feed was affecting my judgement and such a challenge was like a red rag to a bull.

Stepping slightly in-between her and the trio, I fixed their leader with a gaze that would have normally provided anyone with second thoughts, but the liquid courage her had been drinking all night had afforded him with more than just a rosy complexion.

“Obviously manners are a rare commodity these days so I will introduce myself. I am Kaius, and who may you three be?”

One of the trio stopped like an electric current ran through him at my name and the way I shrugged my cloak away. The mithril-ebony breastplate was not commoner’s attire by any stretch of the imagination.

“So the peasant has armour, am I meant to be impressed?”

“Ah… Nigenix…”

“Shut up Melomo.” Nigenix; the leader of their little group leaned sideways and gave Constadonia a ‘come-hither’ gesture. “You. With me. Now.”

She shook her head. “No.”

“No? Who do you think you are to say no to me?”

“She has every right to say no.” I interjected, suddenly becoming their centre of attention again.

“You need to stay out of this if you know what’s good for you.”

“Nigenix…”

“I said shut up Melomo! Or I’ll make you shut up after I deal with this fellow.”
Like many cities within the Empire, Skingrad had laws about the carriage of weaponry and while it wasn’t illegal to bear arms, it was still frowned upon to use them aggressively. Normally, the rattling of a sword in a scabbard could be more than enough to be awarded a fine, but this young noble decided to take it one step further and begin dragging his from his scabbard.

Sixty centimetres of straight steel kissed the air and he held it in a confident, if inexperienced and considerably intoxicated manner. In his world of nobility, balls, and politics he would have been considered to be an able swordsman and of great martial prowess. In my world he was a young man, barely out of his teens with some of the worst judgement I had ever seen and equally terrible luck.

“I am Nigenix Gratar Agrissaeia Curiosus, heir-apparent to the Barony of Gottlesfont.” His sword weaved a slight pattern in the air that I was uncertain whether was because of his drunken state or was some attempt of intimidating sword play. “And you will stand aside.”

My chuckle was enough to leave them all on edge, as I brushed my cloak away, revealing Sunchild’s sheathed length at my hip and drawing it in one smooth motion. “I will not stand aside. I am Kaius Treblanus Desin, Knight-Errant of the Order of the White Stallion.”

After a moment of confusion at my actions and the fact that his attention had been solely focussed on the curved Ayleid blade that had appeared in my hand, the coin finally dropped. Whether it was the unique appearance of Sunchild, my knighthood proved by the signet ring or my name itself, all the blood drained from his face with such speed that I was simultaneously surprised he didn’t faint or have the ruby liquid begin pouring out of his immaculate shoes.

Silence fell between us as I held Sunchild in an unwavering grip, the tip of my sword pointing at the ground casually. Neither the baron’s son or his two friends seemed to have any idea how to react, and judging by the reaction of Constadonia, neither did she.

“That’s the Hero of Kvatch you idiot.” Hissed his other friend just a little too loudly, and somehow even more blood drained from Nigenix’s face.

“Oh… I… Ah…” he stammered, his sword now obviously quivering from nerves more than anything else.

“Well? If we are to duel I would prefer it to be sooner than later. The night isn’t going to last forever.”

Melomo stepped forward, grabbing his rash friend by the sword arm and pushing the blade down from where it had begun to shake even more. “I’m sorry for the disturbance Sir, please don’t concern yourself unduly with my friend here. It was an honest mistake.”

“Very well.” I twirled Sunchild in my hand, reversing the blade and sliding it back into its scabbard with a click in the same way that Belisarius sheathed his katana. While nowhere near as effortless and flawless as the sword champion of the Blades made it look, the six months of practice were well worth their looks of astonishment at the action.

“Come brother, a bottle of Surilie’s and other maidens await.”

Dragging off the mildly protesting Nigenix the trio beat a hasty retreat, only pausing momentarily to bow in the direction of myself and Constadonia before disappearing through the door of the tavern. Adjusting my cloak, I turned and gave a bow to the young lady, smiling slightly as I did so.

“You you all right m’lady?”

She nodded. “Yes. Thank you.” Pausing, and glancing between myself and the swiftly closing door
to the tavern a dozen metres away she didn’t seem to know how to react. “Are you really the hero of Kvatch?”

“One of them, yes.” I replied simply. “I hope my presence hasn’t caused any problems for you.”

“No. No of course not. Nigenix will get over it and I have nothing to fear from him or his father.” She glanced at me a smiled a true smile. “Although, I hope you realise that by noon tomorrow, half the city will believe he crossed swords with the Hero of Kvatch?”

“And by tomorrow evening he will be known for successfully besting him in a duel that lasted for hours. Maybe I should have cut him a little and gave him a scar to help sell the story.”

She giggled, covering her mouth with a gloved hand and trying to get a better look at me while not looking directly at me. “I’m glad you didn’t, he is barely tolerable as it is. You have my thanks though Sir Desin.”

“Your welcome. It’s a nice change of pace to put young noblemen in their place.” Thudding my fist into my chest, I bowed slightly again, meeting her gaze with my own that was less human than before. “If you desire I would be honoured to escort you home or to a location of your choosing.”

As had dozens before her over the months, she didn’t seem to notice the way my eyes darkened with shadows as we looked into each other’s eyes. While I was still in control, the beast was growing stronger with a potential meal standing before it and any resistance she had faded in a heartbeat. “I would be honoured Sir Knight.”

With a gesture I fell into step alongside her, moving and keeping in step with her as we moved along the city streets. While we walked side by side, she was leading the way but would glance at me every dozen paces or so. It would have been impossible for her to realise but with every sideways glance, every time that her eyes met mine, my dark charisma bubbled out and continued infecting her with its taint. By the time we had made our way into the depths of the noble districts she was entirely within my control and enamoured with me in more ways than one.

“Is this your home?” I asked quietly as we approached a three story manor set off on a cul-de-sac alongside several other home for the wealthy.

“Only in winter.” Constadonia replied, smiling up at me. Her fingers were by now interlaced with my own and I had spent the last few minutes marvelling at how soft and delicate she was. If I was honest, Viconia was several times more beautiful but she was entirely hard and unyielding. Constadonia in comparison felt as fragile as spun glass, as though I would break her fingers by merely holding her hand.

“A winter residence?” she saw the way that I couldn’t help but shake my head at the thought.

“As I said Sir Desin, my father is a very wealthy man.”

“Placer mines and gemstone trading.”

Her smile continued and while to any onlookers if there were any about she would have appeared slightly inebriated, she was in fact entirely under my control. My willpower had overwhelmed her, and while I knew that it could be strong enough to melt someone’s mind and leave them a vegetable, she instead was left utterly infatuated with me.

“Well, it appears that this is where we must part ways.”

I nodded. “Indeed. I am glad that you were able to make it home safely.”
“The entire county’s militia couldn’t have provided better protection than yourself. A commendable success.”

Bowing at the waist with my fist on my breastplate, I nodded once and then turned on my heel as she returned the gesture. My task complete, I made my way across the cul-de-sac, feeling her eyes on me every step of the way as she stood at the door to her home.

At the end of the street, in the shadows between lanterns I stepped once onto the solid cobblestones before stepping through the folding shadows and fading from sight. My face was now taut and fangs pushing against my lips despite no one in the street to see it, but within the instant of fading into the night it was impossible for anyone to have detected me.

To Constadonia, I would have simply slipped from sight, disappearing down the street and out of her life. Instead I shifted through the darkness, moving and hugging my way along the walls and flitting across thirty metres of street in just a few seconds. In the space of time it took for her to turn to the door and reach with a gloved hand towards the brass handles I had slipped into one of the alley’s between her home and her neighbour’s watching her every move from the shadows.

I could hear and even feel the way that her heart was beating, feeling the way that her pulse finally began to slow its thunderous pace from my proximity. The control I had over her was almost complete and impossible to break, and for those handful of seconds she stood facing the door, reaching for the handles but not quite touching them with an expression of puzzlement on her porclline features.

Hidden in the shadows and invisible from all sight, it should have been impossible for me to be seen but she turned and looked right into my eyes once more. The smile on her face, while remaining somewhat that of a dullard was pure and filled with joy. My control over her was absolute, drawing her away from the door and moving into the darkness of the alley where I waited.

In the weeks previously I had fed in a similar manner, choosing and going to great lengths not to be caught but also not to kill or harm those I fed upon unless I couldn’t help it. Feeding every three of four days allowed me to control the urge to drain my victims of every drop, and my basic skill at restoration allowed me to ensure that no scars or marks would be left on their flesh.

I had realised very quickly after becoming a vampire that my tastes in victims lay very specifically in young women than anyone else. Women in the early years of womanhood, no less than ten years younger than me seemed to suit my palate and while I had fed on nearly every race and age that I could imagine, outside of battle I had very specific tastes. The simple act of bending their minds with my own was intoxicating almost as much as the act of feeding upon them was, and what had surprised me somewhat was that my appetites did not extend to their bodies as well. Controlling them, dominating them and drinking of their blood was enough to satiate the beast for a couple of days and in this manner I had not succumbed to any other desires.

At least, not while feeding in this particular way. in battle, or during times where my blood was up it was a different story as I had discovered with the bandit so many months ago on the road near Anvil. I may have had a thirst for blood and a desire for sex, the two emotions were kept quite separated unless brought on by battle or conflict.

And so Constadonia unconsciously discovered my tastes for her did not include that of her body as she stepped into the darkness of the alley, and found a pair of shadowy arms wrap tight around her. Her mind, while not entirely her own was running purely on instinct, and while I would have found it easy to shred or otherwise remove her dress nad ravish her she simply gave herself to me in other ways. My control over my will was growing more and more acute, and I somehow instinctively knew that she would have no recollection of my feeding. If she did remember anything, she would
easily put it down to being a half-remember dream brought upon a combination of lust and alcohol.

There was no fear in her eyes as she gazed into the dark whirlpools of ink that had consumed my own, instead there was a sultry smile that I had seen the like of several times on Viconia’s face. The lust and dark attraction that the vampire provided was enough to ensnare almost anyone I chose, but she seemed to be giving herself to the shadows far more freely than some that I had fed upon previously. Her warm body pressed into my own, her hands looping around my shoulders and filling my nose with the scent of perfume even as our lips came together. The shudder of what should have been horror at the tight flesh of my lips and jaw was instead one of pleasure and she sighed into my arms.

With a strange hunger that almost matched my own she ran her fingers through my hair, pulling me into the kiss even as my arms drew her further into my dark embrace. Her heart fluttered with lust as she felt my clawed fingers run down the length of her spine not covered by her long dress and tight corset, shivering in my grasp even as she pulled her lips away from my own. Even without my enhanced senses, I could tell her body was aflame with lust as she licked the taste of me from her lips, tasting the small measure of blood where my fangs had pricked her lower lip.

The merest drop of blood ran through my mouth like fire, electrifying me even as I pulled her close and my tongue snaked in and caressed her own. The tiniest drop of blood from her lip had sent me wild, and we passionately kissed like long lost lovers for several moments, until the thirst grew stronger still and I found my mouth moving on its own accord.

Like tender kisses of a lover I moved down her cheek and down along her smooth neck, feeling the strange fluttering pulse under my lips even as I was forced to keep her upright as her knees buckled. A growl echoed from my throat as my fangs peeled my lips apart, my tongue lavishing kisses on her smooth neck that was aflame with desire for the beast within me. I tasted her body, feeling the hard pumping of her blood under my lips and as my jaw distended horribly and my face elongated in the form of a demon once more, I sank my fangs into the vein of her throat.

She startled at the strange intrusion of my fangs in her flesh and surprisingly there was no resistance from her at all. Even with my will controlling their every action many of my victims instinctively fought against me. Some would struggle and writhe at the feeling of my fangs into their flesh, others would simply fall limp and nerveless. Constadonia instead groaned with pleasure digging her fingers into the soft gaps of my armour as though she was dragging me in rather than the opposite. There was a hunger in her that matched my own and I found myself slightly concerned and amused at this merchant prince’s daughter hidden side.

I drank from her as easily as I would decant a wineglass, feeling the vein in her throat pulsing into my mouth and throat and allowing me to simply gulp and swallow the warm mouthfuls. A part of me enjoyed the taste, and texture and every tiny sensation, and a smaller portion of my mind railed against it, wishing nothing more to twist aside and retch and void my body of her blood. That portion of me seemed to be growing smaller and dimmer and less insistent with every passing day and successful feed and I wasn’t entirely sure whether I was fighting to hold onto it anymore.

As the beating of her heart grew weaker and began to flutter unexpectedly I pulled away, felling the last mouthful slide down my throat and leaving me with the taste of her youth and strangely enough the flavour of the wine she had been drinking all evening. Unlike some of my previous feedings there was little trace of it, only a pair of tiny rivulets making their way slowly down her white, powdered flesh.

Unlike my other feedings this one left me feeling uneasy and I found the hairs on my neck prickling with a wave of gooseflesh that ran from my temples to my feet in a wave. I was fed, sated and even
with the insensible woman in my arms acting as though she had just experienced her most intense
lovemaking I couldn’t help but feel the strange sensation of fear worming its way through my mind.

Within the darkest portions of the alley, furthest from the front of the mansion there was a presence,
a shadow within the night that had no right in being there. It was perfectly still and hidden,
motionless and blending into the darkness. If not for my somewhat recent experience, I would have
thought that one of the Bosmer Rangers were present but this was no naturally gifted and enchanted
wood elf. This was something akin to the corruption and taint within me and it was watching my
every move.

Still holding Constadonia in my grasp as she moaned insensibly, I turned and faced the presence,
looking through the darkness with my vampiric sight at the humanoid figure hiding there. We shared
more than just our love of the shadows, and for a second its stealth slipped and revealed the hard-
boned visage of another vampire. It was fully fleshed as the creature, eyes as burning coals and fangs
fully lengthened and gleaming between gash like lips.

Before I could move, growl or even attempt to place the woozy girl down on the ground the other
vampire was gone, wrapping the shadows around itself like a cloak and vanishing without a trace.
Even with a stomach full of blood and the warmth of the night a chill crawled down my spine. Of all
the vampires I had faced, I had never seen one simply retreat without challenge and for a moment I
could have sworn that its expression had pity mixed in with the anger.

Wasting no time, I pressed my fingertips into the pair of puncture wounds in the girl’s throat, feeling
the restoration magicka flow through my hand and into her flesh. Come morning there wouldn’t be
the slightest blemish day and other than strange dreams that were bound to visit her in her sleep in the
nights to come there would be no evidence that she had been paid visit to by a vampire. Lifting her to
her feet and holding her head as she found her balance, I pushed my mind into hers once more,
releasing my hold on her as she stumbled around the corner into the light. Only when I heard the
rattle of the door and the creak of hinges closing did I wrap myself fully in the shadows and fled as
fast as I could.

Avoiding streetlamps and the few armed patrols that were making their way through the city, I sped
towards my destination. Rosethorn hall was easy to find within the chapel district, and while we had
not stayed there often over the previous months both Viconia and I were familiar enough with the
city to find it no matter the time of day. Still cloaked in shadow and hidden despite the rising full
moon I climbed up the side of the building, choosing to enter via the bedroom balcony rather than
risk running into our maid Eyja.

The door opened a fraction before closing shortly after I entered. Somehow blending into the
shadows allowed me to fit through gaps that should have been impossible but as I entered the
bedroom I shifted into physicality once more. the room was darker than a moonless night, the candles
long since burnt out and leaving nothing more than their waxy aftertaste in the back of the throat.

Unlike the vampire in the alley, the presence at my spine this time was a welcome one. Even despite
the sharpened edge of a dagger coming to rest in my armpit. The point was as sharp as my fangs but
it barely even caressed the tunic I wore under my breastplate.

“I somehow keep forgetting just how stealthly you can be.” I said simply, feeling the dagger’s point
shift as Viconia stepped in closer.

“T should be for one who was raised away from all this worthless light.” A different set of burning
eyes gleamed in the darkness, a pair of priceless rubies rather than the burning embers of the vampire
I had encountered. “I trust you had a productive evening?”
“You could say so.”

The dagger traced a pattern across and down my breastplate as I faced her and I didn’t need my vampiric sight to known that she was wearing far less than myself. By the sounds alone there was little more than a silken nightgown wrapped around her shoulders, if that.

As it always did, her caress left me tingling and shivering but I pulled away slightly as her fingertip brushed across my lips.

“You missed some.” She said simply, feeling the stickiness of drying blood that I had forgotten to wipe away in my effort to distance myself from the other creature of the night. I went to knuckle it away on the back of my hand but she moved quicker, stepping in closer, grasping me by the back of the head and drawing me down into a kiss.

There was no softness in Viconia like young noblewoman Constadonia as she gripped me tight and ran her tongue up the side of my jaw. There was also no denying the similar hunger that we shared as she licked the last of the blood away, shuddering with pleasure at the taste even as my hands gripped her tight. The dagger clattered to the floor, followed shortly after by my breastplate and everything else we were wearing.
“The consolation is that if it was easy to find, it would have already been found.”

I nodded, looking over the table and the amount of hand written sheets of parchment, paper and the sizable map of county Skingrad that were arrayed upon it. “ Doesn’t make our life any easier.”

“Most of the records within the mages guild were useless or barely even made mention to the Priory.” Viconia bit noisily into an apple and for a moment I couldn’t help but stare at her and remember how her teeth sunk in my shoulder during the night. “There were records confirming that it had existed but no trace on where to find the gods-damned priory.”

“It was the same with the archives. References and hints but nothing substantial.”

“So, plan B?”

Shrugging helplessly at the map I couldn’t help but chew my lip in frustration. “Plan B it will have to be, but I am expecting that we will have to resort to plan C to make progress.”

Moving in from the kitchen and the larder and carrying a bottle of wine Eyja appeared as she had several times that morning. “Plan B milord?”

Viconia and I shared a glance. Eyja had proven herself more than trustworthy enough for most matters, especially from her position of housekeeper for the manor. We hadn’t even tried to hide what we were doing in Skingrad as the rumours and gossipmongers were already spreading how the Heroes of Kvatch were seeking the Relics of the Crusader.

“Plan B is that we travel into the region of the West Weald where we think the priory is located and spend several days searching for it.”

Our maid scrunched her face at the thought and I knew that all three of us understood just how difficult and monotonous that task was. Especially when combined with the fact that there was not much chance of finding the priory in several hundred square kilometres of forest and wilderness.

“And plan C?”

“We travel to Leyawiin and enlist the help of the Knights of the White Stallion to do the same thing.” Viconia replied.

“So, you both will be leaving Skingrad soon?”

Watching her as she refilled Viconia’s glass with wine, I nodded to her. “Tomorrow at the earliest. There is little more that I believe we can gain staying in the city. You’ll soon have us out of your hair and the manor will be yours again.”

“I’m not sure whether I actually enjoy having such place all to myself milord, as it is far too big for just one person to live.”

“Well, it is yours as much as it is ours.” Viconia and I shared a glance and I couldn’t help but grin. “We’re not the ones staying in it every day.”
“Thank you milady.” A loud knock echoed from the direction of the front door and she placed the bottle of wine on the table before excusing herself.

“Hundreds of square kilometres to search with no real clue on where to find the Priory, or even what it looks like or what state it is in. We have as much chance as navigating through Bravil blind, deaf and wearing nothing but our riches unmolested.”

I couldn’t help but agree with Viconia and I leaned over, taking a freshly baked sweet roll from the bowl that Eyja had provided for us earlier in the morning. We had been sitting and planning and discussing at the table for a couple of hours at this point and Eyja’s baking skills were highly appreciated. “Two hundred years old… We’ll be lucky if it can even be seen under the growth. That’s if it hasn’t decayed too bad to even identify.”

Eyja appeared again, one hand brushing the front of her apron and the other clutching a scroll. “Milord, a page from the castle just arrived with this message for you.”

“The castle?” Turning and gently taking the scroll from her outstretched hand I placed the remains of the sweetroll down on my plate. “Why would someone from the castle send us a message?”

“The page did not say, but it bears the Count’s seal.”

The scroll was indeed marked with the signet of Count Hassildor, and I curiously broke the wax seal and read the contents. Despite the seal it wasn’t written by the Count Himself, but instead by one of his servants and I couldn’t help but frown at the words.

“I’ve been invited to have lunch with the Count.”

“Just you?” Viconia queried, eyebrow raised.

“It appears so, although only the Divines know why he wishes to see me.” Turning in my seat, I looked over to Eyja where she was busy collecting the used crockery. “Eyja, what do you know about the Count?”

“He hasn’t been seen in public for years and is widely known to be a powerful wizard.” She said simply, blowing a strand of hair out of her eyes that had come loose. “I’ve never known him to see visitors other than the last time the Emperor came a couple of years ago. He also never takes part in or watches any of the Tournaments and all official county business is managed by his steward Hal-Liurz.”

“That’s who this invitation is signed by.” I added, looking over the elegant lettering. “That’s an Argonian name too.”

Eyja nodded, turning and collecting our plates from the table as she moved back towards the kitchen. “One of the few in the city. She’s also one of the only ones in such a position of power within Cyrodiil.”

As she walked out I could feel Viconia’s eyes upon me as I read over the invitation again. I knew that she felt slighted that she had not been included in the invite, but that small niggling fact was enough for my gut to tell me that all was not what it appeared. It was very specific that I and I alone would be allowed in to see the Count; a fact made more suspicious as the man was a recluse. This was not the same as the Count of Leyawiin and his martial fascinations. There was no reason that I could image why I had the invitation in my hand.

“So?” Viconia asked, her voice filled with venom. “Are you going to accept?”
“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t tempted to simply ignore it, but it has me curious as to why someone such as he would want to see me. It’s obviously not an opportunity to meet the Hero of Kvatch as we both would be going. There’s an ulterior motive to this.”

“Then I suppose that we better get you into something suitable to wear.” While there was humour in her tone, I knew that she was a combination of concerned and jealous. “We can’t have you meeting the Count in such a condition and smelling like ink.”

With the extra riches we continued accumulating in our travels, Viconia had spent a portion ensuring that we had the clothes to look as wealthy as we were. Viconia had bought several dresses, and while they enhanced her natural curves and suited her perfectly they were almost scandalous in the more conservative regions such as Skingrad. What she had purchased for me however had left me feeling equally impressed and apprehensive from the mere price of the clothes. Between the black velvet doublet with its golden filigree, the knee length cloak and the pair of ash blackened knee-high riding boots that kept the loosely fitting leggings tucked in against my calves I felt as though I was wearing a lifetime’s worth of wages within the Legion for what might be just an afternoon. To complete the entire suit was a pair of black satin gloves that ensured that the only flesh that was visible was my face and part of my neck.

Never during my time in the Legion did I ever imagine being close enough to see such expensive clothing, let alone own it and another two sets of similar worth. I felt a little strange at the fact that all of it had come about after I had become a convicted criminal, but the sheer amount of wealth Viconia and I had acquired had been through hard work and experiencing considerable danger. We had both come a long way since leaving our respective prisons with little more than rags on our backs.

Viconia came up behind me, wrapping her hands around me and resting her head against my arm. “How handsome.” She whispered, her fingers trailing down my chest. “Now you look like someone worthy of being my slave.”

We both chuckled and I bent my head down and kissed her lightly on the lips. “I am still tempted to send an apology and not go at all.”

“You didn’t get dressed for me to pull it off you again.” The expression on her face could only be described as hungry as I added the last item to my person. As the Mythic Dawn’s attack on me at the fellmongers those months previous had proven, it was not a good idea for either of us to travel unarmed. It felt unusual and somehow wrong to strap Sunchild’s ancient scabbard to my hip with the worn leather harness and belt but it equally felt wrong to replace it with something newer.

“That sounds like a plan for when I return.” Pulling her close for a moment I received another kiss that was all arousal.

“Go, I’ll be here.” She said with a grin. “Go see what the Count wants.”

Despite our several stays within the city, neither Viconia or I had been anywhere near the castle. It was unlike many of the other Cyrodiilic cities which had their castles built directly into the city. Instead Castle Skingrad was located externally and not connected to the curtain walls in any way. Built within an easy pilum throw from the south walls, it was easily as defensible as Glenvar, if not more so. A tower of stone rose out of the ground and on this spire the castle had been built. The base of the walls were fifteen metres from the ground, and the stone spire itself was even more solid than the walls themselves.

It was completely unassailable from the ground, and the only way to reach the Castle was through the City itself and across a single stone bridge from the city to the Castle Gatehouse. Even sappers would struggle to make any progress against such an obstacle as it appeared to be solid granite,
weathered, worn and yet reinforced in places.

The two Men-at-Arms guarding the Castle Gatehouse stiffened to attention as I approached, crossing their halberds to deny me access until I could prove that I was there for more than just taking in the sights. I simply showed the closest guard my invitation scroll, signed by the Count’s Steward and while he studied it carefully for any trace of forgery I studied him. Most of the Skingrad guards and soldiers were tough, highly trained individuals who held onto their weapons like veterans. Their maroon surcoats were clasped tightly around their waists over their steel chainmail, bearing the heraldic mark of County Skingrad; a stylised image of two crescent moons facing each other on a black background, one large and red, and the other small and white.

Satisfied with the legitimacy of my invitation they pulled their halberds apart once more, motioning inside the gatehouse to the tiny courtyard. I couldn’t help but notice the defences as I entered, looking at the dozens of murder holes and arrow slits that would allow only a small force of archers to hold off an entire army. Glenvar and Cloud Ruler could have gained a few improvements by studying Castle Skingrad. But there was little else that caught my eye as there was no detail other than the handful of guards and the massive banners bearing the Count’s heraldry hanging from either side of keep’s entrance. It was with a strange sense of trepidation that I walked between the next pair of guards within the open castle doors, and inside the keep itself where a cool perfumed air greeted me into the home of one of Cyrodiil’s most powerful men.

The interior of the Castle hall was smaller than the others that I had seen, but it was designed and laid out more as a home than a greeting hall for the public. A fire could be seen in the far end, tended by one or more of the castle servants as they scurried around on their individual errands and there was a comforting feel to the entire castle as though it was a home first, and a fortress second. Rugs lined the floors, and a handful of tapestries hung from the walls but there was no obvious show of wealth and power. There were no trophies, only two banners hung from the walls either side of the massive staircase leading into the private quarters proclaiming the castle’s allegiance and no other works of art.

“Good day Sir Desin.” Said one of the several servants in the hall, and I gave a slight bow to the well-dressed Argonian.

“Steward.”

“Your invitation please.”

Obviously not one for ceremony or wasting time, she took the scroll from my hand, gave it a quick glance and provided me an approximation of a smile that was all fangs and scales. I had limited dealings with Argonians within the Legion and in Northern Morrowind, but enough that dealing with a six-foot-tall lizard dressed in a traditional Colovian dress didn’t faze me in the slightest. I was more uneasy at the fact that she was arguably one of the most powerful individuals within Cyrodiil, and that I was expecting to meet her lord very shortly.

Holding the scroll in her clawed digits, she motioned for me to follow and we began making our way through the hall and up the staircase into the higher levels of the keep. The walls hemmed in close as every passage that I saw had been purposely built small and enclosed. There was only just enough space for three men to stand shoulder to shoulder, and the roof was only a few centimetres above my head as to hinder the use of any weapons that relied on swinging. Each of the doors that we passed were thick and unyielding and I knew that while any defenders were still breathing the castle would prove unconquerable.

The further we moved into the castle though, the more we found ourselves surrounded by artworks and other priceless artefacts. Painting and tapestries depicting everything from great battles, forests,
various mountain ranges such as the Jerals, the plains and deserts of Elsweyr hung from the walls. There were portraits of various men and mer, some I assumed were of the various Counts and rulers of Skingrad over the generations but there were far too many to be them exclusively.

“Does your master normally receive visitors like this?” I asked Hal-Liurz as we continued, the oppressive silence wearing on my nerves until I couldn’t stand it any long. It was dark within the passage and I realised that other than the few lanterns hung from the walls there were no windows or other sources of light in what I assumed was another defensive feature of the castle.

“He rarely sees visitors at all.” She replied, not even looking back as we neared the end of the hall. “The Count is a busy man, both with his studies and the running of the County.”

“He is a powerful wizard from what I have heard.” Stopping briefly in front of a beautifully painted depiction of the port city of Rihad on Hammerfell’s southern coast, I remembered the last time I had been to the city as a child and felt nostalgic for a moment. “It almost seems a shame having so many pieces of artwork kept here, and no one to look upon them.”

“The Count is a collector of sorts.” Hal-Liurz stopped just outside the last door in the hallway, one flanked by a small collection of chests fitted with locks. “Although, most of his collection is contained within the museums and galleries within the city itself. He’s never been one for hording and prefers to have his collection available for viewing by the public. As for his study into the Arcane, the eastern tower is his own private laboratory and usually the only visitors he sees are high ranking members of the Mages Guild.”

With a single flowing movement, she motioned towards the door and the surrounding chests either side of it. “The dining room is just through this door, but I cannot permit you to bear arms within the Count’s presence.”

I nodded, expecting the request despite not desiring to part with the blade. “Very well.”

“You will not need to worry,” She said simply, watching me quickly unbuckle Sunchild before I handed it and the leather harness to her. “Your weapon will be quite safe. The locks can only be opened by one of three keys, one of which you will hold onto.” With a loud click the chest locked, and she handed me the key. “The other two are held by myself and the Count.”

“Count Hassildor will be along shortly.” Bowing courteously to me in the manner of a Colovian noblewoman she gestured to the door. “Please make yourself comfortable. I assure you that you will not have long to wait.”

As she held open the door, I stepped through and nodded my thanks, only glancing back as she quietly closed it behind me. the door itself, despite leading into a private dining room was over twenty centimetres thick and I would have been more surprised if all of the other doors weren’t the same. The castle, while feeling more like a home than a fortress was extremely defensible.

The dining room itself was splendid, but it was a far cry from being described as a hall. Rosethorn Hall’s dining room was in fact larger than the Castle’s, as was the table itself. It surprised me in many ways, and while the table was worth years of legionary’s salary, there was only enough space for half a dozen people to sit at it at any one time.

A pair of large silver candlesticks were surrounded with several small bowls of flowers and I walked around the table, looking over its polished mahogany surface and running my gloved fingers over the high backed chairs as I went. There were only two chairs in the room, but they had been obviously placed at both short ends of the table. Again I found myself wondering about what sort of man the Count was as both chairs were completely identical, neither one larger or more expensive appearing.
Silver plates and cutlery were arrayed before each table on immaculate silken cloths bearing the county’s heraldry. Wine glasses were also set up and I was finding myself more and more uneasy with such a situation. I might have the riches and the property of a nobleman and the title of Knight to go along with it all, but only a week previously I had been wet to the elbows in blood gutting and hacking apart a deer for Viconia and I to eat during our journey to the city. I might dress, appear and have the title of Sir, but I certainly didn’t fit in such an environment.

Desperate for anything to take my mind off the situation, I moved toward the far end of the room from the door I entered, moving past another door set in the middle of the room where the smells of roasting food were emanating from. Obviously the kitchen, I guessed that the third door opposite it was the living quarters or otherwise private rooms for the Count. They didn’t interest me though as my attention was drawn to the display cases and the trophies hanging from the walls.

A pair of enormous stuffed heads were mounted near the corners of the room. The first was a massive black bear that I had never seen the size of before, and the second was obviously a minotaur titan. Scarred and ruined in combat, the taxidermist had obviously chosen not to replace both of the minotaur’s eyes with glass ones as the blade wound had plucked an original from its skull in its dying moments. It was impressive, and suffering a lot less damage than the head Viconia and I had left at the village of Titan’s End but I could also see that it was substantially smaller.

Within the cabinets there was a breastplate made of polished ebony, a double bladed broadsword forged from malachite, and a shield made from what appeared to be a mithril-steel alloy. They were incredibly made, priceless but also broken in various ways. The breastplate had been punctured by something, creating a hole three fingers wide and two fingers tall only a few centimetres under the heart. Whatever had been successful in causing such damage, especially to a material such as ebony would have ensured that the wearer would’ve been introducing themselves to their ancestors very quickly. The sword was shattered into three sharp pieces, the nature of the volcanic glass ensuring that whoever had placed the pieces within the cabinet would have done so very carefully, or wear chainmail mittens to ensure that they didn’t slice their fingers to the bone.

The shield was surprisingly not as expensive or priceless, despite the obvious mithril within its make. It was simple, plain and almost entirely unadorned except for the county heraldry on its face. It was also a lot smaller than the legion tower shields, instead being a knight’s heater shield designed for use on horseback. At some point it had received a blow that had cracked the metal and wood, threatening to split it in half and I somehow knew that whoever had been holding it had suffered a broken arm as a result.

The painting in the middle of the all was what really caught my attention. While the trophies and heirlooms were impressive, the painting holding the place of honour in the room had been made by a true master. A man and woman, well into their fifties gazed off into the distance and were clothed in the finery of nobility. I assumed that the two individuals in question were the current count and countess, and I looked how the count stood tall in his black and burgundy outfit, a vest pulled tight across his chest, one hand resting on his wife’s shoulder and the other tucked behind his back. The woman, dressed in a luminescent white dress with pearls threaded into her hair sat gracefully with a large Colovian mastiff at her feet, smiling as she appeared to be lightly scratching the dog between the ears.

There was a serene feeling to the painting, the unknown artist somehow capturing the light hearted nature between the two of them instead of creating the usual portrait that seemed dry and soulless. The littlest of details sprung out to me, the way that the hand the count rested on his wife’s shoulder was being held by one of her own, the tiny half smiles they wore in each other’s presences and the
overall sense of contentment that could be felt between the two of them.

“A man can be judged by what takes his interest the most.” A sudden, but soft voice said from the room behind me. “While I would normally expect one such as yourself to be drawn to a blade or armour, I must say I am surprised at your taste for art.”

“It is an incredible piece.” I replied as I turned to face my sudden company. “The artist is incredibly talented to have captured their subjects’ likenesses such as they have.”

None of the doors had opened, at least not that I had heard or otherwise detected and as I took in the room I realised that I was still somehow alone. The light was limited within the dining room with only the candles on the table and the small number of lanterns on the walls, but it was enough to see that whoever had been speaking was very much invisible.

“It is good to make your acquaintance Sir Desin.” The suddenly visible shadow of a man said from the furthest end of the table. I blinked with his sudden appearance, struggling to make out any details of his features even as my vampiric nature began to pull the darkness away.

The shadow condensed into a man as he stepped into the flicking candlelight, and for a moment I found myself grasping for the empty space at my hip where Sunchild normally was. Its absence was keenly felt as he stepped closer, raising a hand and smiling warmly at my obvious reaction.

“You are in no danger, and if I had wished you to come to harm I wouldn’t have invited you into my home to do so. The carpets are awfully expensive to replace.” Continuing to move closer, the smile broadened and he gave a very slight bow with his head and shoulders. “I am Janus Hassildor, Count of Skingrad.”

“You’re a vampire.”

The simple nod was almost lost to me as I found myself staring into the burning pits of eyes. They glowed very slightly from within the tightened bones of his face. Eyebrows, jawbones and cheekbones all pushed against his flesh but it was obvious that he was still very much human. Unlike the others Viconia and I had encountered, he could have passed for human with a passing glance. It was only when he smiled that the illusion would truly be broken at the sight of the fangs pushing from his gums.

“Yes. I am. I also assure you that despite your encounters with others of my kind you have nothing to fear from me.”

For a moment I considered the difficulty involved in turning and smashing the display cabinet to get my hands on the broken sword but reconsidered it. For the moment at least I wasn’t in any overt danger and I still had my own abilities to call upon if needed.

Taking his offered hand in my own I felt the strange power and solidity that seemed present in all vampires. The simple act of shaking hands with him immediately increased my wariness as I could feel the overwhelming strength in him, and the incredible control that he had over it.

“I am fully aware of your exploits and understand how… unsettling my appearance is.” the grin he provided this time was calculated and ensured that his lips remained closed to hide his fangs. “You can also fully understand and appreciate why I am not seen out in public.

Eager to shed my nervousness, although keeping a small part of me ready for anything I breathed deeply and tried to relax. My nerves were shredded as I had also realised very quickly who the vampire was that I encountered during the night. “It also explains why so little is known about you.”
“A necessary requirement for a man in my position. The utmost secrecy is required, lest I suddenly find myself surrounded by enemies and the County under siege.” There was no disguising the unease and the way he felt about that scenario but instead he sighed, turning his gaze upon the painting instead. “She’s beautiful, is she not?”

“Your wife, I assume?”

“I had this painting commissioned sixty-five years ago, and although the artist is long since dead I have several other samples of his artworks throughout the hall. It reminds me of a better time.”

Studying the portrait of the Count I compared it to the man who stood beside me. There was no mistaking that they were one and the same, even though the man in the painting was approaching sixty and the vampire beside me looked no more than a day over thirty. My flesh crawled with his close proximity, but unlike Volmyr or the vampires of Glenvar there was nothing else untoward about him. There was no obvious bestial side and other than the obvious vampiric traits in his face and jaw line there was nothing there to suggest the curse at all.

“Please be seated.” He said, turning away from the painting with barely concealed traces of a deep and lingering pain while motioning towards the nearest seat. “My butler will be along shortly with refreshments, and our meal will not be long after.”

I took my seat uneasily; still unnerved by his very nature to sit still and I caught myself staring at him intently without meaning to. He noticed my apprehension, sitting down with a grim smile and meeting my gaze.

“I must apologise for our meeting like this, and for any concerns that you may have. It is rare that I reveal my true nature to anyone but several incidents of late have brought me into this awkward position. I can promise that you are in no danger and I am no threat to you, but in fact I have invited you here to ask for your assistance in a matter that you are well suited for.”

He saw my questioning expression, leaning forward slightly and pressing his long fingers together in front of him as he rested his elbows on the polished tabletop. “But before I ask you, I wish to tell you some information that I hope will put your fears at rest.”

Sitting back into the comfort of the high backed chair I couldn’t bring myself to say anything so instead nodded.

“Let me begin by saying that I know all about you, and your experiences against the other Vampires in your travels. You might be surprised to hear how pleased I was that a hero such as yourself recovered Maegalla’s Sword from Normalhorst. It was a pleasant surprise receiving word from some of my agents that you had successfully eliminated Volymr and his entire brood. I also applaud you and Madame DeVir for dealing with Larissa’s blood coven in Glenvar; she was not one to be underestimated and you did the Empire a great service in removing her.”

“You speak of them as though you knew them intimately.”

“In a way you could say that I did.” There was no venom in his words as he gestured between us. “Despite what you may have thought at first, I have no love for my kind. My wife and I were turned just over fifty years ago and since then I have pledged my studies and authority in combating the threat of vampirism throughout southern Cyrodiil. I also have considerable sway in northern Elsweyr, Valenwood and influence in all neighbouring counties. It is a dark and covert war that I have been privately waging for the better part of four decades; four decades that have also included research into the curse and towards ways to combat and cure the various strains.”
The smile this time was honest and open and revealing fangs in what was meant to be friendly gesture. “Thanks to the efforts of you and your companion, I can rest lightly for the time being knowing that two of the greatest threats in Cyrodiil are nought but ash and bones.”

“But this doesn’t explain why you have invited me today.” I said simply.

“No, it doesn’t but it does give you an idea of my overarching goals. I hate these beasts with a burning passion but by becoming the demon I have allowed myself the time and power to study the creatures and fight fire with fire… So to speak. I invited you today,” he continued, leaning back in his chair with his hands on the armrests. “Because of our own mutual hatred and encounters with the creatures and after the events last night I have a request to make of you.”

Pausing thoughtfully for a moment as he collected his thoughts, I found myself watching the way his fingers tapped on the armrest of his chair. “Last night during one of my weekly… outings you might say, I encountered one of my kind feeding within Skingrad. This came as something of a great surprise, as I pride myself with being meticulous of keeping this plague from my city. At first I had thought that it was simply a single, starving animal that had either been existing within the wilds on its own or had been missed by my hunters. Whatever its story, the more I thought on it this morning, the more I came to believe that it may be one of the many travellers that have arrived recently.”

I swallowed lightly, my mouth dry and guts cramping as he spoke but forcing myself to look nothing more than curious at his revelation.

“I will be completely truthfully with you Kaius,” he said simply, using my first name freely. “I invited you today, in the middle of the day because I was suspicious and believed that you, of all people may have been this vampire. You are obviously experienced in these matters and known that it can be difficult to identify a Vampire when it’s not in its animal form. The easiest way that I could prove whether the creature in question was indeed you or not, was simply inviting you to a civilised lunch in the middle of the day. If you had refused or failed to arrive, then… there were other avenues available to me to discern the truth.”

There was a pregnant pause as I weighed up my options, trying to wet my lips with a suddenly dry tongue. The Count had obviously placed a lot of faith upon our meeting, and upon me by merely revealing his true nature to others. “But what if the vampire you saw last night is me anyway?” I asked with a deadpan expression, watching his own intently.

His expression was one of curiosity, almost trying to determine whether I was making a joke. Laughing, he waved me off, chuckling to himself as my expression remained set in stone. “Quite impossible as you are clearly sitting in front of me, and you travelled through the noonday sun to come here.”

Taking in a deep breath, I let the vampire loose very slightly, feeling my face grow tight, the skin and muscles pulling at my shifting bones as my jaw restructured and brow and cheeks became more pronounced. My fangs pushed out of my lips, peeling them apart in a horrific smile as I looked at him with a visage that was akin to his own.

The Count lost any mask that he may have been hiding his true emotions behind, gaping at me with astonishment as I underwent the changes and revealed my true nature to him.

“What…” Opening and closing his mouth like a fish his shock seemed absolute. “That’s impossible…”

Both our attentions were drawn away from each other to the sounds coming from the kitchen doorway. With a flash of will my features relaxed just as the door opened and the richly dressed
muscular form of an orc entered, carrying a large silver platter with a single bottle of vintage wine resting on top. We remained silent as the orc butler filled our glasses, receiving our individual thanks even though he seemed oblivious or was ignoring the hostile atmosphere within the room. Without even a word or simple acknowledgement of our gratitude he simply filled our glasses with the expensive wine and then left through the same door into the kitchen.

“So…” Count Hassildor muttered to himself, sitting back into his chair with narrowed eyes. “After all this time the Order has finally succeeded in creating a day-walker.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow you…”

“Don’t think you can deny it from me Sir Desin. The Vampyrum Order has been trying for centuries to breed out our kind’s weakness to sunlight and in you they finally succeeded. Although I’m not sure whether I’m impressed at the success, or irritated at the breaking of our treaty.”

“I’m not part of any Order, at least not one of vampires.”

“Really? Then just which vampire clan do you belong to?”

“None. I don’t belong to anyone, and other than yourself all the other vampires I have encountered are now dead.”

If he identified the implied threat in my words he chose to ignore it, instead continuing to tap his fingers on the armrest of his chair. “So who was your sire?”

“No idea. He died well before I turned. Shortly after biting me in fact.”

“Ah. I see.” Slowly leaning forward, I couldn’t help but notice how his vampiric side had come much closer to the surface. “So how did you accomplish what countless vampires since the dawn of time had sought to achieve? A spell? Some form of boon from a daedric prince perhaps? Maybe even meddling with an Elder Scroll?”

“Nothing like that, at least I don’t think so.” His expression remained one of wary interest and he motioned for me to continue. “I was infected a few weeks before the Siege of Kvatch and the curse took hold as Viconia and I entered the oblivion gate. I fully turned when I killed a Dremora and drank its blood.”

Count Hassildor wore an expression that I can only describe as the level of utmost horror, one that slowly changed and faded as the beast within him came fully to the surface. “By the Nine and all that is holy… Do you have any idea what you have done? Of what kind of threat you singlehandedly pose to Tamriel and Nirn itself?”

“I think I do actually.” My reply was straightforward and cut him off in mid breath. “I am dangerous… I know this without any doubt.”

“What kind of Dremora did you feed from?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Describe it.”

Sitting carefully in my chair I looked up at the ceiling and tried to remember. “It was larger than the others, taller and broader, a leader of some kind.”

The Count’s eyes narrowed. “Horns? Were they small and stumpy, or large and pointed?”
“Large, curved forward like a bull’s but still close to the skull. The points were maybe, three or four centimetres apart…”

He saw my shrug and nodded, lips still tightly pursed. “A Markynaz, possibly even Valkynaz although I find that highly unlikely.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

The silence that fell between us was overwhelming and all I could hear was the **rap-tap-tap** of his fingers on his chair. “You consumed the blood… the soul essence of a creature of oblivion. Not only that, the very creature you consumed was among the highest strata of Dremora society; equivalent to a duke or a count. Even with your limited experience in such matters, surely you would have noticed the difference between members in their society?”

“The strongest ones’ rule.”

There was another nod from the vampire count. “And you took its strength and made it your own. Did you drain it?”

The memory of bone breaking under my fists came to mind and I shook my head. “No.”

“Hmm… so there’s a very, very pissed off daedra somewhere in the Deadlands.”

“He was very dead after I had finished.”

“You are a fool then.” the Count’s tone was very harsh, and the eyes were blazing with anger. “Unless you drained it of every drop of blood, it will eventually regenerate and return. This is one of the any reasons why the current daedric invasion is so much of a threat. Although… I would argue that you are almost as much of a threat as this crisis is.”

“My lord…”

He raised his hand and cut me off in mid breath. “You can’t apologise for what you have done but at least I am aware of the situation and can account for it. I hope you realise that the safest option for myself and every mortal being would be to kill you. How many others know the truth?”

“Only Viconia.” My moment of hesitation was not lost on him and I considered the various consequences of answering his question. “Everyone else is dead.”

“Good. Do try to keep it that way. The more who know of your ability to withstand the sun the more dangerous it will become. Vampires across the world and throughout history have sought out that single ability and if they were to either discover your existence or the nature of how you accomplished it there’s no telling what damage will be caused. If you were to be discovered, you would find yourself beset by enemies no matter where you try to hide. Daedra worshippers, necromancers, mages, kings, sorcerers, and even daedra would want to capture you and dead or alive it would not matter. They would experiment upon you, try to replicate you and try to discover the source of the power that you have consumed.”

Carefully he took a sip of wine. “Other than surviving sunlight, has this feeding unlocked any other powers or abilities?”

“Other than how strong and fast I am I’m uncertain what is ‘natural’ and what is because of my feeding. I have wrestled a young minotaur and ripped werewolves apart with my bare hands but I also have other abilities.”
“Such as?”

“I can turn my body, and whatever I may be holding and wearing into a flock of bats or into mist. I’m able to hide in darkness and become invisible that way but I’ve seen others, yourself included who can do this. I have not heard of or found any record of vampires who can transform into something else like I can.”

There was a strange expression cross the Count’s features, one totally different to his previous anger and instead he suddenly seemed merely curious. “You may not, but I have heard of such things.”

Count Hassildor’s butler once again entered the room, this time carrying a pair of steaming plates containing our meals. My mouth watered with the smell of roasted lamb and the food’s appearance made it appear as though it was worth as much as the clothes I wore.

He looked up as his Orc butler handed him his meal, nodding his thanks without hiding his vampiric side in the slightest. It was at that point that I realised that many of his servants would’ve known of his condition and instead of fear there was loyalty to the Count. He was so totally unlike any other vampires I had encountered or even heard of. Cultured, refined and almost entirely in control of his darker side, it was the way that he had accepted the curse that had made him monstrously powerful.

“Many vampires as you are not doubt aware, are little more than mindless animals who have given in to their instincts. These monsters need to be exterminated in one way or another. There are those who have managed to keep some form of mental coherence, and have over time evolved into their very own distinct bloodlines.”

I lifted my silver eating utensils, suddenly thankful that I chose to wear gloves as the metal would undoubtedly burn my flesh without them. Even as I slowly cut up the steaming meal in front of me and put the first delicious pieces into my mouth I noticed how the Count also protected his hands with silken gloves.

“The vampire species or race as some describe it is mostly made up of slavering creatures who have reverted to their base instincts and exist for nothing more than to feed on the blood of the living. Because of their numbers these are the ones most frequently encountered and as a result are where all the myths and legends have originated from. Allergies to silver are commonplace and highly accurate, but many of the other legends such as being unable to cross flowing bodies of water or enter homes without the prior consent of the occupants are total nonsense. Other so called ‘facts’ such as being able to ward off a vampire with one’s faith in the divines are much more hit-and-miss.”

“This I can believe.” I said between mouthfuls. “Viconia and I are currently in Skingrad because we are searching for the Relics of Pelinal Whitestrake. That said, I feel somewhat uncomfortable entering chapels or other holy places.”

“Exactly” He replied, chewing thoughtfully on a piece of lamb. “The clans, tribes, families or broods of vampires are as varied as their natures. The Vampires of House Serentin for example are permanently trapped in their bestial forms and cannot change back to human at all but their skills in combat are second to none. The Krillatri clan is known to have existed in the deep deserts of Elsweyr and were little more than scavengers feeding on beasts and the poisoned blood of the long dead. There are dozens, if not more bloodlines ranging from the Volkihar vampires with their transformation abilities and natural inclination towards frost and ice magicka, to the Bonsamu vampires of Valenwood who are completely indistinguishable from other wood elves unless you see them by the light of a candle. Your abilities to transform yourself sounds like the blending of the transformation abilities of the Volkihar tribe, and the Keerilth clan ability to turn into mist. An interesting combination to be sure and one I would be interested to find out how it was managed in the first place.”
“What is the Vampyrum Order?”

The scowl he wore didn’t go unnoticed to me. “The Order are a collection of vampires who exist within Cyrodiil within the upper levels of society. Unlike many others of our kind they are able to hide within plain sight, and when fully fed they can pass themselves off as fully human. Discounting the weakness to sunlight and silver of course. They survive by hiding in the cities and towns throughout the Empire, and you would be surprised how many barons, lords and other politicians are members of the Order.”

“Are you a member?”

He shook his head, popping another slice of roast meat into his mouth and chewing carefully. “No. Although my sire was one of them, I reacted a similar way to being turned to yourself. The order tried to establish a greater hold over southern Cyrodiil by bringing me into their undead ranks.” The dark smile he had was enough to chill the blood. “After the first decade they learned that it had been a mistake and not to enter any lands under my control. Similarly, I learned just how imbedded they are into Imperial society and how impossible it was to burn them from the Empire.”

“Sounds like a conspiracy.”

“You’d think so, but it simply narrows down to the fact that all Vampires, no matter our beginnings or choices in life are consumed by the thirst for power and control. It manifests itself physically in the drinking of blood, but the simple fact is that drinking blood is power. To take someone into your arms, whether it be willingly or not and then take from them a part of what they are is the curse’s purpose. We drink their blood and rape their flesh but we also consume souls.”

“Before,” I asked him directly and while looking at him as he sipped at his wine. “when you spoke of my curse and how drinking from the daedra had made me a threat to Tamriel, what exactly did you mean...”

Scowling again, he placed his glass down gently despite the tremor that ran through his arms. “As you have obviously discovered for yourself, a vampire grows more powerful with age and depending on who he or she feeds upon. If a vampire continuously feeds upon the weak, the sickly and the infirm then their mind slowly rots and their body grows corrupt until they reach the point of madness where they drink not of the blood, but feed upon the body. For others who feed upon the strong, the able and the magically adept, then those vampires take a small measure of their host’s power and imbue themselves with it. The blood nourishes us physically and we can survive wounds that would kill mortals dozens of times over by the mere act of drinking, but what some don’t understand is that we also absorb a bit of who or what we feed from. The more powerful vampires, some of which who are centuries old have never given in to their animal sides for specifically this reason and this reason alone when some many hundreds have gone mad. Your feeding upon a Dremora has made your own blood unique, and infinitely corruptible if you were to sire others of your kind.”

With a questioning expression he looked at me intently, and I shook my head at his unasked question. “I haven’t sired anyone, and have taken great effort not too.”

“Good.” He replied with a little bit too much relief for my liking. “It is obvious that you have the inner strength to contain great power and to suppress the demon that has consumed your flesh but as with all vampires it is only a matter of time before the beast fully assumes control. In your case it may unlock something that may be nigh impossible to destroy, and if spread into lesser-willed beings the end result could be a plague of un-death throughout the land.”

The hollow and doom-laden prediction hung in the air for a moment, and I couldn’t help but shiver
at the thought of so many others like me, tainted like me but lacking the strength to keep the evil inside.

“I have promised to fight the disease, and to use its power to help others.” I said softly, and the Count looked up with an intrigued look upon his face. “To this end I do believe I am succeeding, as many of the things I have done these few short months would’ve been impossible for others. I will face evil with evil as I know that the great darkness in me is more than enough for the task.”

“Then our own goals are not so dissimilar.” Swallowing the last of his meal, he leaned over slightly and picked up a small bell seated on a satin cushion near his plate. Its light ringing tones echoed through the room and were answered quickly by the muscular form of his green skinned butler.

“Please fetch me the scroll for our guest.” The Orc merely nodded once, as silent as ever and turned on his heel smartly and left the room.

“He’s rough around the edges.” Count Hassildor stated simply as he lightly dabbed at the corners of his mouth with a silken napkin. “But he’s a brilliant cook and devoutly loyal to me. Many of the other Counts and Countesses couldn’t even comprehend having an Orc as a servant, but I have found Shum gro-Yarug to be the perfect butler.”

“He’s obviously not your bodyguard.” I said light heartedly.

“First appearances are useful, and while I have no doubt that Shum has enough strength to pull an attacker’s arms off I am quite capable of defending myself. I do however take great pride in the fact that I only hire the best for my county.”

The butler gro-Yarug returned very quickly, carrying a silver platter containing a single rolled up scroll upon it. It was much like the one that I had received inviting me to lunch, but just as before I had no clue of what it might contain.

“My sources within the city have informed me how you and Madame DeVir have been scouring the city’s records in search of the Priory of the Nine.” With deft movements of his fingers he folded up his napkin once more, motioning for me to take the scroll. “I had intended on giving you this as payment for disposing of the ‘vampire’ within the city, but instead I wish you to have it as a token of our potential working relationship.”

I carefully picked up the scroll, ensuring that I had no grease or trace of food on my fingers before doing so. It was slightly larger than the lunch invite, but as I unrolled it I felt my stomach fill with butterflies as I saw what it contained. It was a map, beautifully drawn and with a single glance I saw how the priory was so clearly marked that even a cripple could’ve found it.

Why are you giving me this?”

He smiled with a face that was mostly human and barely containing any trace of the vampire. “Because our goals are very much alike, yet we are fighting the evils from two separate directions. While I am confined to fight within the darkness, constantly attacking our foes in a war of espionage… You are capable of taking the fight to them and attacking them on their own terms and succeeding. I pity what you are and what you may become, but despite all my misgivings I can see how your unusual circumstances can benefit the Empire as a whole.”

“Shum,” He said, rising to his feet even as I moved to match his movements. “Please ensure that Hal-Liurz is informed that Master Desin is to have full and completely unrestricted access to myself at any hour. Day or night.”
His butler nodded once and left the room even as Count Hassildor walked over to me, hand extended once more. “When you first entered this room I considered you a potential enemy but despite our differences I would like to extend to you the offer of a personal alliance. We have much to offer one another and I believe that it would be foolish for either of us to remain neutral or even worse, have any trace of hostility.”

Glancing down at his offered hand for a moment I weighed my options and felt the leathery scroll in my gloved hand. He had offered me so much, and given what Viconia and I had been searching for a better part of the week for. There wasn’t much that I could think that I could offer him, but the opportunity to gain such a valuable ally with a mutual hatred towards the vampires was not something to lightly toss aside. The personal allegiance to one of most politically powerful Counts of Cyrodiil was not something to refuse and so I took his hand in my own, shaking it with a grim smile across my face.

“I will try to repay your trust, my lord.”

“I will never demand nor expect payment.” He replied, baring his fangs in a true smile and releasing my hand after the firm handshake. “Every vampire you kill is one tiny step towards vengeance for what has occurred to you, myself and my wife.”

Nodding his head slightly at me, he gestured to the two filled wineglasses that his butler had left on the silver tray, picking them up and handing one to me. “Now, the first order of business is to call me Janus. We have far more in common than I was expecting when I sent you the invitation. Here’s to a long, beneficial friendship.”

Our glasses chimed together and we each took a sip of the expensive wine. “To our friendship.” I replied, relaxing my face and returning his fang filled smile with one of my own.

Chapter End Notes

Count Hassildor was one of my favorite characters within Oblivion and is one of the few characters within the game that has a surprisingly amount of depth. A vampire, and yet a count he is struggling to maintain both while not succumbing to darkness. In this regard his is very much the same as Kaius, but with arguably more responsibility (at this time) resting on his shoulders.

I also wanted a way to explain how Kaius and Viconia find the Priory of the Nine. The first mod I install in all TES/Bethesda games is one that removes all quest and compass markers entirely, forcing me to explore and roam and try to find what it is that I'm needing to find. Cyrodiil in the Bloodtide Rising universe is approx 1000km at its widest point and for the most part sparsely populated. They aren't going to be able to wander in a direction and simply stumble across a set of 200 year old ruins covering less than a acre and so I wrote this in to explain their 'luck' and to set the scene for portions within "Sos do Dov" regarding Kaius' vampirism...
Our journey to the south east of Skingrad was peaceful, serene even in comparison to our previous journeys throughout Cyrodiil. Within a few hours of saddling up Ultin and Trygve we had left the roads and Imperial highways and had vanished into the rolling depths of the West Weald. The map that Janus had provided us was worth more than our collective weights in gold as not only did it show us exactly where to find the Priory, but also the routes leading towards it. The trade routes that had once cut through the region towards Elsweyr may not have been utilised for nearly two hundred years, but they still existed in their own way.

Tiber Septim and his reformed Legions had transformed the lands in more ways than one. Routes between cities were fortified, messenger posts constructed every few kilometres, aqueducts built to supply thousands with fresh water but it was the roads where the Legion had truly excelled. Cutting them from the very soil and creating a bed of smaller stones, layers of progressively larger stones would be placed in turn to create a true road. No matter the climate, whether it was a Skyrim Blizzard, a Blackmarsh monsoon or a Hammerfell dust storm, the Imperial Highways would stand firm and allow traffic in even the worst conditions. As a result, these roads left scars on the world, and even after falling into disuse they could still be seen cutting their way through the forests and hillside, tracing the trade arteries of the Empire even as they became overgrown.

This one particular road, despite the fact that the cobblestones were hidden under layers of grass was visible by the way it ensured that no trees grew upon it. We had followed it for the two days, seeing little else in the way of civilisation besides the odd farmhouse or hunters cabin. It was remote and isolated, but the map and the knowledge of what to look for ensured that we soon caught glimpses of a small collection of buildings on top of every hill we climbed.

“So you believe the Drow are Ayleids?” I said simply, feeling Trygve’s enormous bulk as he made his way down the slight slope between the enormous pines rearing up into the sky.

“That’s my theory at least.” Viconia’s hair was fluttering in the breeze, choosing for once to leave her circlet off her forehead due to the somewhat warmer temperatures of the region. “There are far too many similarities to be mere coincidence and the fact that Ayleidoon and Drow are so similar only confirms it for me. Whether it is written or spoken, I can understand Ayleid and there are significant similarities between the two cultures.”

As was our habit we filled in our time travelling deep in conversation, and even though I was listening intently I was still keeping an eye and ear on our surroundings. This far from towns and cities ensured that there was any number of animals and beasts and we had already come across signs that everything from wolves to trolls were lurking within the region.

“Similarities?”

“The penchant for slavery for one. Daedra worshipping and architectural tastes as others. Every Drow city I have ever seen have been built in rings or otherwise in the shape of a wheel. Menzoberranzan especially is built in circles around Lloth’s temple. It is the same for every Ayleid city or ruin I have seen or heard about. On top of this, the more that I have been reading the more I am realising just how much about my people I didn’t know or understand. Where did we originally get our slave populations from? A large number of the slave population may consist of Kuo-toa, svirfneblin, and the odd fomorian or two but what about the large numbers of humans? Or goblins
for that matter? Even the Illithids have an enormous population of humans they use for breeding more of their kind but humans are obviously not off the Underdark.”

“So you think that the Ayleids, or a group of them entered the Underdark somehow?”

“I almost know that they did. The question is when? Or better still, why?”

“Religious persecution?”

Riding alongside me on Ultrin’s enormous body she shrugged, flicking her hair over a shoulder and out of her face. “It’s the most likely cause. Everything I have read points to the entire Ayleid race either being exterminated by the Alessian Empire or being driven into Valenwood and Highrock. Nonungalo proved that they dug just as deep into the ground as they built into the sky, so I find it very believable that a city or two had found a way into the depths.”

“Is there any way to be certain?”

She shook her head simply. “No. The only being I suspect who knows the truth is Lloth. The Drow have no recorded histories as such, and the ones that we do have all point towards Lloth being the creator-of-all-things. It’s a maddening feeling as though the answers lay just out of my grasp.”

the collection of buildings we had been riding towards finally came into view through the surrounding vegetation and pines and were revealed to be little more than ruins. built very much like many of the messenger posts and coaching inns scattered through Cyrodiil, it a less a collection of buildings as it was a single walled structure built around a central courtyard. The ancient doors in the archway that doubled as a gatehouse lay in the dirt, their hinges long since rusted and broken by time. every window we could see was either cracked or covered with mould and dirt, blocking sight within the buildings.

The courtyard itself was overgrown and filled with weeds, the tiny garden within the centre now playing host to an enormous oak that had burst free and dug its roots into the cobblestones. If it wasn’t for the strange solidness to the ground we could have easily believed that the courtyard was dirt and soil, but in places the paving was visible.

To the right immediately as we entered was a spired building that was unmistakably a chapel or tiny church, and to our left was a collection of stables and a tiny roofed smithy and smelter. The bellows were rotten, the forge long since having felt the heat of a flame and the tiny smelter was broken and appeared to have gained the attention of scavengers. The stables themselves were ruined, the roofs mostly broken and collapsed in on themselves.

The central building on the far side of the courtyard towered over the others. Three stories with a heavily sloped roof allowing for an attic, it was by far the tallest building in the region. It had the appearance of a home, but a well-fortified one at that. All the windows within the building were thin and slitted, allowing them to be opened for light and fresh air, but also doubling as arrow slits to allow those within to defend from attackers.

“This looks like it could be it.” I said simply, tugging on Trygve’s reins and sliding from the saddle. As I spared a glance behind me I saw how Viconia was on edge, her eyes slowly and carefully studying everything within sight.

She saw my expression of concern and shrugged. “There’s a magicka here. Dormant but detectable.”

“Dangerous?”
Her snort was not lost on me. “All magicka is dangerous, but this seems benign. For the moment.”

“So don’t kick anything shiny or suspicious looking.” I added, seeing the way her mouth curled at my sarcasm.

“I’m serious Kaius. There is considerable magicka here. I’ve never felt the like.”

“It might explain why this place is in such good condition.” Carefully, moving over and tying Trygve’s reins to a post hanging from the dilapidated stables I felt out with my mind and could feel a niggling sensation in the back of it. There was certainly something about the ruins that felt strange.

Dismounting from Ultrin, she too tied his saddles to a nearby post and looked about. “It’s too well looked after to be just magicka. My guess would be that someone has lived here recently. Although why they would live is such a hovel is beyond me.”

“Far away from cities, free from taxes and levies and without a boot of the nobility on your throat? Many people would and choose to live in places like this.”

“Sounds like this was the sort of place you would have been found if you didn’t get caught.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at her tone as I looked about the stables, poking my head into each but seeing little more than piles of dirt and the crawling forms of dead roots, creepers and mosses throughout. “It would have been, and I would probably still find myself in such a place. It would be peaceful living away from the towns and cities like this. I never intended on doing so alone though.”

“A family? A tiny herd of children scampering about? And perhaps some dull-minded wench with cow like eyes and boobs for better suckling infants?”

“For a moment there it sounded as though you were making an offer.”

Stepping over to the remains of the smithy and smelter, I could see where someone in the past years had turned the forge into a cooking fire, as everything that was of value had long since been stolen or scavenged. Viconia moved alongside me, looking about with distaste.

“You might want to retire to some shack in the middle of nowhere, but that life is not for me.”

“What would you like then?”

She shrugged, tucking her hair back over her shoulders. “A castle at a minimum, preferably a palace with as many servants as possible. I don’t ever intend on living a future where I have to cook my own food, let alone have to hunt or harvest it.”

“Takes all the fun out of it.” I replied simply. “The best meals are the ones you earn for yourself.”

Moving across the courtyard, we made our way to the other side where an obvious spire rose that doubled as a belltower as well as a tiny watch post. The doors to this particular building were more intact where someone had attempted to right them months or years before, and they creaked threateningly as we shifted them aside.

“Do you desire children?”

The question took me aback as we entered what was undoubtedly a small chapel and Viconia rolled her eyes as I turned to her. “That is not a suggestion or a request wael, merely a curiosity on my part.”
“Not right now at least.” I replied truthfully.

“But it is something that you wish in your future.”

“It was. I don’t think it is something I can achieve anymore.”

Her question went unspoken as I moved further into the room, looking at the collection of stone pillars set in even spaces along the walls. “Have you ever heard of any vampiric children or offspring?”

She shook her head.

“Neither have I and in a few books I have read there had been… let’s say experiments to determine whether vampires can breed.”

“Sounds like there have been a few surfacers who have had fascinations befitting the Underdark.”

“That might be the case, but as far as anyone has been able to determine vampires cannot bear children, nor can they impregnate mortals or each other.”

The silence that fell between us dragged out and I watched as she moved across to one of the walls, reaching up and wiping away the accumulated grime and dust of the ages away from a painted mosaic. “It has come to mind a handful of times over the past months how despite our, enthusiasm that nothing has eventuated.”

Stepping back she looked over the words that had been revealed, mouthing them to herself and scrunching her face with the effort. “Non furta… furtum facies… non erit…”

I caught the glance she gave me out of the corner of her eye and I stepped forward, squinting to read the letters. “Non furtum facies, non erit mundus cum tetigerit vos. Never steal, or you will be punished.”

“A warning?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “In its own way. It’s one of the Ten commands of the Nine Divines. Zenithar’s to be exact. Work hard, and you will be rewarded. Spend wisely, and you will be comfortable. Never steal, or you will be punished.”

“Finally, one of your gods with a worthy commandment. I think I prefer this to Be kind and generous to the people of Tamriel.”

“Not a fan of the god of Mercy?”

“Mercy gets you killed, or leaves an enemy alive to stab you in the spine later.” Turning away from the writing and looking at the nine stone pedestals evenly spaced through the tiny chapel, Viconia sighed. “It truly is simpler in the Underdark. Kill or be killed. Live or die. No real concerns on mortality or morality. I can honestly say that I have never desired much else beyond my station and these past months I haven’t been in the position to contemplate a future, but children or not, spending it with you would prove satisfactory at least.”

“Satisfactory?”

There was no way that I could doubt the carefree swing of her hips as she moved past, or the way that her fingers trailed up along one shoulder, caressed my jaw in passing and continued on with the merest flick of her wrist. “Of course. We certainly wouldn’t find ourselves living in a shack. Banish
such notions from your head lest I seek out some rich old count to seduce.”

“As you wish, Madame DeVir.” I said with a mocking bow and I couldn’t help but grin at the expression on her face. It was dark but there was humour behind the cold expression.

Moving into the central building we soon began seeing more signs that the building had been occupied in recent history. It had been abandoned for a considerable time though, creepers, vines, moss and fungi grew in places throughout, windows were broken and various animals, birds and vermin had made their homes throughout. A colony of bats seemed to have taken up residence in the attic, and bird nests could be seen on almost every perch or support beam. Some were old and falling apart, others were so new that the tiniest cheeping could be heard from their occupants as a new generation were being reared.

A pair of beds on the second floor had been crudely constructed from local trees, stuffed with mattresses made of straw and vegetation and pillows of plucked feathers. A cooking fire had been made in the enormous hearth on the ground floor that had been filled in with fallen soot and feathers from the birds’ nest built in the chimney. Everywhere we looked we could see signs of where one or more people had tried to repair or maintain the building. It was obviously built to contain several individuals; a dozen or more at least but time, scavengers and nature itself had eroded and destroyed most of the contents.

“It is increasingly likely that this is the priory that we seek.” I said simply, seeing Viconia’s nod in agreement as she gracefully moved down one of the staircases to the second floor.

“A mouldering ruin it may be, but that magicka is still here.”

“Can you tell where it is coming from?”

Her expression told me exactly what she thought of me for even questioning her abilities in such a way. “Of course. Beneath the ground, under the courtyard.”

“A basement.”

“Your words wael. Not mine”

It didn’t take long at all to find the stairs leading down, and like most buildings throughout Cyrodiil this one contained an extensive basement. The stairs lead to a passage that branched off into several rooms, each with their own purpose and each of various sizes. One was obviously designed as a larder of some description, large enough to contain food for dozens of people and another was an armoury despite the lack of weapon racks and armour stands.

The largest basement section though was an empty expanse half the size to the courtyard above, but made in such a way that it was obviously used for training as well. Stairs dropped the floor down another metre which allowed those within to wield their weapons to their fullest and in my mind’s eye I could easily pick out where training dummies would have been hung. It was in the exact same dimensions and design as the interior training rooms of Legion forts that were used during inclement weather.

“Mrannd’ssinss.” Viconia said softly as we moved into the training hall. “Over there.”

Following the direction of her arm, I saw the recessed portion of the wall and where an obviously sturdy door was set. While made of wood it was extremely well built, reinforced with steel and decorated with a single blood red diamond that covered a majority of its surface. Other than the grime of the years it was in perfect condition and judging with my first glance I would have sworn
that the surrounding stone walls would have been easier to batter our way through.

“Looks like we really are in the right place then.” I said simply, recognising the symbol of the Order of the Nine. We moved together, approaching the door and looking at the way the years had been unable to wear or corrode it.

“Magically reinforced and with wards of protection imbued into the materials. Whoever built this wasn’t taking any chances.”

“Powerful?”

Viconia nodded, scuffing her feet in the dust at our feet as I held a magical ball of flame in my hand to allow us to see. “I wouldn’t recommend trying to batter it down with brute force. The feedback from the energies would kill you quicker than a stab to the heart.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, but thankfully we know how to open it.”

“The ring?”

“The ring.” I replied, patting my way through the handful of pouches I still were and my pockets until I found Sir Amiel’s ring. There was a tiny recess in the very centre of the diamond, a circular crevice that looked very much like a lock. Putting the ring on my middle finger, I pressed the ring and my fist into the locking mechanism, feeling it click into place and allowing me to twist and rotate the lock.

There was a grinding of stone, the faint hints of metal clinking and groaning as the moving parts came free for the first time in centuries. There was no enormous shift into the floor or sliding away into a hidden recess, instead the door simply came loose on its hinges, shifting away into the void behind and allowing me to push it open.

“So far so good.”

“The door wasn’t the source of the magicka though.”

Viconia’s face was slightly pale and I looked between her and the darkened passage beyond the door. “It isn’t?”

“No. Something else through there is extremely powerful and enchanted, and I can’t tell what it is.”

“I’m hoping that it’s a relic.”

“I’m hoping it doesn’t get us killed.”

Chuckling darkly to myself, I lead the way, holding the tiny ball of magical flame in my palm like a lantern to allow us to see where we were walking. The passage behind the door was small, angling down a handful of stairs before opening up against into a room of similar dimensions to the training hall. This was not a simple, single rectangular room but a series of alcoves lining the walls around a central chamber. Each alcove was a couple of meters long and a metre or two deep, some laying empty but others containing what were obviously tombs.

Each of the tombs were sparsely decorated, each bearing nothing more than names and dates. Moving over to the left I stepped close enough to read the engravings, feeling Viconia’s presence at my back as I leaned in closer.

“Never allow the beauty of the world to be lost on your eyes.” My words were soft but sounded
extremely loud in the silence of the undercroft. “Gregory Arcio. Born, 3E96. Died, 3E124.”

“We’ve found them.” Viconia said softly and I nodded.

“Which means that with luck the cuirass is here also.”

“The far end.”

Aided with the ball of fire in my hand, I used my vampiric sight to peel away the shadows and I could see that in the direct opposite of the entrance door that another, smaller alcove was set where an armour stand was situated. It was tiny, purposely put out of the way and like the rest of the tomb it was devoid of ornamentation and detail. There were no extravagant signs of wealth and nothing to show the power and fame that the Order had once held two hundred years before. It would have been easy to think that their marble tombs were signs of riches but they were simply made, hand carved and from some kind of locally quarried stone. None of their titles were carved into or near where they had been laid for their final rests, and they all were made equal by death.

There were however only seven marble caskets in their recesses which left the undercroft feeling almost entirely empty. It was obvious that it had been constructed specifically to house dozens of fallen knights, with the option of further excavations to allow for many more. Of the original Knights only two did not lay within the undercroft. Sir Berich Vlindrel was buried somewhere between Counties Chorrol and Bruma, and Sir Amiel still lay where he had died in the flooded shrine of the Crusader.

My hesitation was obvious, and Viconia stood beside me as I made no attempt to move deeper into the undercroft towards the armour stand at the far end. “I might just be overly suspicious but does this seem all too easy to you?”

“It feels like a trap.” She replied simply, watching me carefully unclasp my cloak from around my throat and setting it and some of my travelling pouches on the floor.

“Exactly. Is the magicka still active?”

There was brief nod from her. “Yes. From the far end and it has been building slightly ever since we entered.”

I could sense the same thing. It was a building pressure growing in the back of my mind and I could feel it beginning to throb. Unlike Viconia I couldn’t sense where it was coming from but I could feel it growing. “That’s one thing I was afraid of.”

Carefully I began making my way forward, keeping my eyes looking about carefully and taking each step only when I was certain was wasn’t going to be setting off a pressure plate or engraved rune. Other than the series of perfectly smooth red tiles making an enormous red diamond in the middle of a sea of white tiles, there was nothing at all suggesting traps. Even with my vampiric sight and senses I couldn’t detect anything under the floor, above the ceiling or even in the walls except the building energies as I grew closer to the centre.

Carved into the series of support columns were a collection of tiny half-bowls where various flammable oils would have once been put to provide light, and as I reached the centre of the room they all suddenly, and spontaneously burst into ethereal flames. The blueish-white lights suddenly lit the room in an intense, but strangely soft and soothing glow that nearly made me fall backwards out of surprise.

“What did you do?!” Viconia growled from her position near the entrance. Her eyes were looking
about in all directions at the strange flames burning impossibly in bowl sconces, long since containing anything flammable.

“I didn’t do anything!”

“You did something, you triggered whatever enchantments are down here.”

Pushing through the sense of unease I began taking a few steps backwards, first moving as carefully as before and when I hadn’t been struck down by a magical bolt of energies I turned and began to run instead. I made it less than five paces before I came to a sudden and sickening halt as the air itself seemed to solidify and become as unyielding as the stone beneath my boots and I was left on my back groaning with blood streaming from my nose.

“What the fuck is that?”

“Magical wards you wael. You triggered everything down here.” Viconia moved back and forth, her hands outstretched and feeling along the invisible wall of energies that had been erected in the room itself. To my own growing horror as well as hers I soon realised that we were on opposite sides.

“Can you breach it?”

“Not without understanding how it is being generated or sustained.” She replied, the snap in her tone partially annoyance and the rest building alarm. “Spells like this should be short lived.”

“How short are we talking about?”

“Ten or twenty minutes.” A hand wreathed in glowing energies pressed into the invisible wall and I was left with after images of glowing lights as the entire length of the barrier was revealed for a heartbeat. It was solid and without a single breach, cutting the tomb in two and trapping me within it.

Viconia’s expression was one of growing concern at the way the barrier had reacted to her magicka. “Maybe longer.”

Out of the corner of my eye I suddenly saw the way the air was growing thicker, and I could feel the temperature beginning to drop as the magicka began sucking all the energies out of the environment itself. My breath began steaming and it wasn’t long before mist began wafting up from the floor, appearing to somehow grow out of the very tiles themselves.

“I don’t think that we have that long.”

She too saw the mist and nodded simply, her face growing tight with concentration as she began probing the magical wards for weaknesses. Even with the distance separating us I could sense the stabbing sensation in my mind as she drew her magical reserves into herself for the task ahead.

“Do you hear that?” I asked simply, catching what I could have sworn were whispers emanating from the coiling mist as it rose up around my ankles. There was a strange rumbling that could be felt through the soles of my feet and I was left watching with growing dread as the unnatural fog began boiling out of the tombs themselves.

As though being formed from nothing more than memories and will the shapes condensed out of the fog, growing some semblance of outlines as they moved in from all sides. I counted five, then six figures rising from their tombs and striding forward to face me on either side of the vault, until the seventh appeared out of the mist swirling in the centre of the wall and closest to the few stairs leading up to the basement. I was surrounded, and trapped but I couldn’t help but watch as the ghostly
figures gained more and more form until I began to recognise some of their shapes.

It started off slowly at first. A chain mailed forearm here, bonemold greave there, impressions of facial features growing stronger and thicker with more substance until I found myself standing face to face with seven armoured, armed and long-dead knights in all their finery. Surcoats and tabards were flapping silently in a ghostly breeze that I could not feel, armoured gauntlets and mailed fists hanging loosely by their sides and seven sets of eyes bore into me with uncompromising determination.

There were three standing to my right, and four to my left, all watching me and only me. I didn’t dare to move a single muscle, nor did I reach for Sunchild clasped to my hip lest they break their strange statue-like stillness of the grave and attack.

“Viconia?” I hissed between my teeth, not allowing my gaze to leave the sight of the ghosts.

“I’m working on it.”

Appearing from the armour stand’s alcove, the eighth and final ghost appeared, striding from the very wall itself and I noted how this one and this one alone didn’t appear directly from a tomb. There were seven tombs and seven tombs only and this knight, like all the others was dressed in all the accoutrements of war. A long sleeved chainmail habergeon hung down to mid-thigh, covering his entire torso including his arms and over this clung a surcoat of the purest white silk with a blood red diamond emblazoned on his chest. A broadsword was clasped firmly to his hip and a chainmail coif was resting firmly onto his head with the assistance of a simple nasal helm.

As he moved forward the other nine bowed, each bringing a fist to their lips in salute to their fellow warrior as he stopped in the direct centre of the undercroft.

“By the strength and guidance of the Nine,” the long dead warrior growled at me, eyes almost blazing with a combination of righteous anger and corpse-light. “who comes before us upon this sacred ground and dares desecrate it with their unworthy presence?”

Desperate to buy Viconia time to break the wards I straightened myself up, almost standing to attention and trying but failing to look the ghost in the eye. “I’m Kaius Desin. Knight of the White Stallion.”

The ripple of unease through the assembled spectres was impossible to ignore, as was the way they looked between each other and more than one hand flexed towards a weapon.

“A Knight… The world must have slipped far into decadence and chaos if a beast claims to be a knight. You are a creature born of sin and darkness. What make you think you are worthy to stand in the presence of the Cuirass of the Crusader?”

A strange tingling sensation was creeping up the back of my legs and growing from my fingertips and I resisted the urge to shake it away. Through the transparent being in front of me I could see the armour stand, and knew with utter certainty that what lay on it was indeed another Relic.

“Viconia?”

“Give me a minute…”

“I don’t have a minute. Show them the Helm.”

Without turning even for a second, I knew all too well that Viconia had stopped her probing and feverish investigating of the enchantments within the tomb and had pulled the helm from its bag. Judging by the reactions of the ghosts it was one of the last things they were expecting to see.
One of them, an enormous warrior almost a full head taller than me stepped forward in his resplendent plate armour. Every inch of it was covered in Nordic runes, and the claymore than he dragged from where it rested against his spine was almost as long as I was tall. “You dare defile a relic of the Eight?” he spat forcefully and I couldn’t help but flinch away at his building anger.

“Torolf! Hold!”

The Nordic wight stopped, greatsword held steadily in a gauntleted fist while the helm he wore turned between me and his commander.

“We did not come to defile or steal.” I said simply, trying and failing to hide the fact that my hand had fallen to Sunchild’s hilt without conscious thought. “We came here to unite the relics.”

“Why should we believe you, daedra-spawn?”

“If we were going to corrupt the Helm I doubt we would have dragged it all the way here to do so.”

“I think he is telling the truth.” Added one of the ghosts to my left. There was no mistaking the unique style of the bonemold armour that it wore, or the sharp boned features of the Dunmer who was wearing it. “Perhaps he seeks redemption for his nature?”

“Umaril is returning.” I said simply, still seeking to buy time for both Viconia and myself. “If he hasn’t already.”

At the Unfeathered’s name they all twitched and looked between themselves with significant hesitation.

“So you believe that with the darkness in your soul that you can unite the Relics and wield the artefacts of the Eight against their foe?”

I shook my head. “I am not worthy to wield them, and neither is my companion. There’s nothing stopping us from recovering them all for whoever is worthy though.”

Silence fell between us all and several of them were clearly deep in thought. Some, like Sir Torolf were itching to attack, to remove my presence from their final resting place at the end of their weapons. Others, like the ghost who had first spoken were standing in silence.

“No unworthy soul shall lay hand upon this sacred artefact without the leave of the Knights of the Nine.” He said after some time. “For the vows that we failed to revere in life, we shall uphold in death. You are tainted… Corrupt… A creature of pure sin and depravity and despite your supposedly noble intentions you have tainted one of the sacred artefacts of the Divines with your presence. We cannot allow you to pass without first testing you.”

Looking between the eight ghosts I tried my best to recognise them and their identities. Their deeds and accomplishments were legendary but none of the books had truly managed to capture their likenesses. Some like Sir Torolf who had been identified by his fellow knights were obvious, as was Sir Ralvas; the dunmer who had spoken partially in my defence. Their leader and the only ghost without a casket was Sir Amiel Lannus himself; his connection and faith to the order so strong that his spirit had come to rest hundreds of kilometres from where his body lay.

His face was set in stone, framed in chainmail and covered slightly by the metal bar of the nasal helm he wore. The ghost was not clothed in the ethereal flesh of a sixty-year-old man, but instead he looked as he had in his prime. If not for his spectral nature I would have guessed his age to be closer to my own, and it was the same for the others who had died later in their lives.
“I am ready for whatever test you deem necessary.” I said with a sinking feeling in my stomach even as the metallic ringing from behind me reached me. 

Viconia had been using Dragonbane to try to physically force a chink into the magical wall and it had slipped and dropped from her shock at my words. “Vel’bol?!”

“Within your flesh is a demon waiting to be released and the man who fights against it daily.” Sir Amiel said simply, ignoring the sudden bout of cursing that began exploding from Viconia’s mouth. “Prove to us that you are indeed a man and not a monster. Prove to us that you have control and strength of will worthy of your title and you may live. The Cuirass is blessed by Akatosh himself and the more you succumb or call upon your taint, the quicker you will die.”

“So be it.” I said simply, my hands moving away from Sunchild and my side and undoing the buckles and straps keeping my chest harness and pouches tight. As quickly as I could I shed everything that wasn’t Sunchild and my armour, even dropping the sword’s scabbard and belt harness to the floor with the rest of my equipment.

Viconia’s wordless scream of anger and frustration rippled through the room and I saw how some of the knights glanced in her direction. The surge of magicka from her left the air on the other side of the barrier howling as she exerted every ounce of her will into breaking the magical wards. With an implosion of power and a muted thunderclap the energies were sucked out of the air, throwing her back slightly as the wards dispelled her power and left the barriers fully intact.

“I am ready.” I said simply to Sir Amiel, who had taken his position in the centre of the hall and only a few metres in between me and the alcove containing the Cuirass.

“Very well.” He replied, looking around the collective group of knights who began surrounding me in a circle. “Prove yourself pure and human in victory, or be granted absolution in death.”

Silence fell in the room, and a strange stillness fell over me. Strangely enough I didn’t seem to feel fear of injury or death. From the burning, crawling sensation making its way up my spine I knew that the fear of Viconia’s wrath was entirely another matter.

The first sign of the fight commencing was the sound of metal on tiles, and the scraping of a blade against a sheath from right and behind me. I moved like quicksilver, my eyes narrowing slightly even as I turned on my heel and sliced out with Sunchild in a blindingly quick arc that made the sound of tearing silk. One of the knights, armed in his ghostly chainmail and surcoat lashed out with his long sword that seemed to be no more solid than he was. Instinct fuelled me even as I cut outwards with the turn, glancing out with my blade one handed and a tremor running through my arm as I feared the ghostly blade would merely ignore my own and cut into my flesh despite my parry. Instead there was a clash of metal on metal, my ancient Ayleid blade impacting against the knight’s and jarring my entire arm from the sudden, unexpected nature of the hit.

The ancient knight looked out from under his chainmail cowl had all the expression and emotion of a stone as he parried my cuts and attacked with his own. We locked eyes, barely even glancing at the flashing of our blades as we parried, dodged and cut at each other. Time and again I would strike out at a weakness that I perceived in his guard, only to find it had been nothing more than a feint to catch me out or to counter strike with either his sword or shield. I took a glancing strike off the edge of his shield across the back of my arm, and within moments I could feel it beginning to swell painfully.

Ducking under a sweeping strike of a shield, I lashed out with my fist in a move that took him by surprise and punched him in the inside of a thigh. There was a tiny intake of breath as he staggered slightly from my punch, and although it was short lived I used it to my advantage, stepped inside his guard and lashing out with Sunchild. The slice took the ghostly knight under the right armpit, cutting
deeply through his fog-like chain link and causing him to seize up in convulsions as the blade came
to rest where his heart once used to beat.

Shoving the long dead knight off my blade in a way that left a sticky trail of ectoplasm up its length
as his ghostly form clattered to the floor. There was no cry of pain, no sound from his lips other than
the strange murmur of my blade entering his ethereal form. Even despite the mortal injury he was
none worse for wear as the wound sealed itself up as though it had never existed.

“Sir Gregory, you are defeated.” Amiel said in a voice as deep as barrows dirt. “Sir Casimir, step
forward.”

And so the duel continued, barely even giving me any time to rest before the next knight stepped
forward and drew his own blades. Sir Casimir, similarly clad in chainmail rushed me with a curved
sabre of Redguard origin and sparks flickered through the air as it and Sunchild locked together. This
fight was surprisingly over quickly, lasting mere seconds even after trading dozens of blows.
Somehow I managed to slip my blade in past his guard and sink it into his ghostly flesh, punching
the tip into his chest and leaving his eyes boggling out of his skull as I forced the point deeper until it
jutted between his shoulder blades. With a rattling sigh he slipped to the ground like Sir Gregory, his
wounds healing even as he rose defeated.

One after another the Knights were called forward to fight me in honourable combat, and one by
one I somehow managed to defeat them in turn. Every tale and story I had read or heard about them
had done them no justice and each and every one of these men had been champions like no other.
They were as varied as their backgrounds and between them they hailed from almost every corner of
Tamriel that worshipped the Divines.

Both Sir Gregory Arcio and Sir Juncan Nirtke fought with sword and shield, but their techniques
were polar opposites. Sir Juncan fought in the style of the legion with his heater shield, using it to
fend off almost every attack I made until I managed to kick his legs out and cut his throat. Sir
Gregory; the knight who’s tomb I had gazed upon when we first entered the undercroft used his
shield as much as a weapon as his sword, deflecting and swinging it at me in powerful blows that
could have broken bones if they had struck.

Sir Ralvas Ulento had once been the famed weapon master of House Redoran and fought with a
pair of perfectly matched rapiers. His attacks were a flurry of movement, the dual swords
transforming into gleaming streams of silver that rippled and flowed through the air like water. Sir
Henrik Fenrhrsson managed to fend me off with a bladed polearm that was longer than I was tall,
swinging it about and using the steel reinforced haft as much as the blade to deflect Sunchild. His
glaive; the signature weapon of the Knights Mentor proved difficult to best until I managed to take
one of his hands off at the wrist before slashing his throat, and Sir Ralvas only fell when I managed a
lucky strike that chopped deep into a thigh through his ghostly bonemold armour.

One by one I managed to fight and best them, not receiving any respite between bouts for as soon as
one would fall, he would rise again, his flesh reknitting and a brother stepping forward to continue
the duel unabated. My lungs were on fire, my arms becoming increasingly leaden as fatigue and the
ringing impacts began to take their toll. They all fell eventually. Sir Caius Fulberia dropped as I cut
his calf muscle and was unable to rise as I pirouetted and stabbed his through the back of the head.
Sir Torolf Asanderssen finally being defeated as I ducked aside an enormous blow of his sword,
spinning away from the attack that would have bisected me from shoulder to hip and hacking his
head away, great helm and all.

As the Nordic knight rose again, his decapitated head dissipated from the floor and reformed itself
on his shoulders without even the slightest hindrance from such an injury. At that point I was
becoming envious of their deathless natures, as I was staggering and struggling to keep myself upright from fatigue and injuries I had sustained during the duels. Although I had beaten seven of the greatest warriors in the Third Era, I had undoubtedly paid the price for it. The blow from Sir Gregory’s shield had bruised my arm, as had the several strikes I had parried from Sir Ralvas’ dual rapiers on my forearm’s vambraces. The impacts had been so jarring that I somehow knew that even the bone was bruised as well as my flesh. At some point two fingers of my left hand had been broken despite the fact I couldn’t remember when or how, and each step I took was agony from the wounds I had received from Sirs Henik and Juncan. The enormous glaive of Sir Henrik’s had managed to catch me across the shin with the steel plated haft and nearly broke the bone, and Sir Juncan’s sword had sliced up and under the protection of my armoured faulds to cut into my hip. Judging by the warmth seeping into my underclothing and pant leg it had been a considerably deep cut, but thankfully not too deep otherwise I would have been dead already.

It wasn’t the physical injuries that I had sustained that were worrying me the most. I had fought with every skill, trick and technique that I had every taught or seen before, using skills that I never knew I had but there was no doubt that I would not have had survived if not for my vampiric nature. As much as it was assisting me, my darker nature was killing me quicker than the ghostly weapons seeking my vitals. Even before I had defeated Sir Gregory I was beginning to cough and feel a growing tickle in the back of my throat that was spreading into my lungs.

By the time that my third opponent had been struck down I knew that I was in serious trouble. Either the magical aura, the very nature of the priory’s undercroft or the proximity of the Curiass was ripping me apart. When the vampire leant its strength and speed to my sword arm or its agility to allow me to duck and weave away from blows, the wards hammered down hard. There was a strange tingling chill growing in my chest the more I used my darker abilities and halfway through the bout the cough had worsened.

“You show strength of will that I had not thought possible.” Sir Amiel said as I staggered to my feet with ectoplasm dripping from my blade. “You have stood against the Knights of the Nine and lived. However, the final test is upon you. Ready yourself… and face me.”

There was a pressurised roaring behind me and I had gone to great efforts not to look back at Viconia throughout the fight. If I was going to be honest with myself I knew that if I had looked at her I would have struggled to fight as well as I had, and the way the very priory itself seemed to be groaning from her magical onslaught was enough to know her feelings during the fights. She was exerting every bit of her considerable willpower and magical knowledge into breaking the magical barriers separating us even as I used all my will not to fall flat on my face.

As I staggered to my feet, staring down Sir Amiel the latest bout of coughing left me with a mouthful of blood that I spat onto the white tiles. It was not the first of my blood to have stained the undercroft. “Ready when you are.”

Sir Amiel’s broadsword found its way into his hands with a rasping of metal on leather, and he held it loosely in both hands high above his head. There was no fancy swordplay or twirling movements for distracting his opponent, just a casual professionalism and skill as he lightly gripped his sword’s hilt.

There was no warning for his attack, no subtle tells or twitches of a muscle or eye to announce where or how the blow was to fall. Like a coiled spring he moved quickly and precisely, transforming from the relaxed and patient swordsman into a whirling storm of steel and violence. Without my vampiric nature I knew that it would have been over in the first blow, and even as it was my reflexes were only just adequate to stop his sword from taking my head clean off my shoulders. His broadsword sung through the air with the sound of tearing silk, stopping only briefly as Sunchild
caught it in mid-air before he used the recoil to twist the blade into its next attack.

In the first second I knew that there was no chance for me to win against such an opponent. I may have been skilled enough to contend with some of the greatest swordsmen in the Empire and had been a minor champion in the Legion, but the Knights of the Nine had been led by a true master. Even if I had been fully rested and healed, and Sir Amiel had not been my eighth opponent in less than twenty minutes there had been no hope to beat him. I narrowly managed to parry three separate blows in just the first second of our bout and I knew that even if I was able to use my full vampiric abilities Sir Amiel would have won nonetheless.

Belarsarius and Alexi may have been able to contend with him but even those two unparalleled swordsmen would have proven unequal to the task. Even before his name had become a legend and known throughout the Empire he had been a prodigy and there had been a reason why he had been deemed worthy enough to wear the Cuirass of Akatosh during his time.

A neat slice opened a smile across my wrist above my gloves and below the protection of my daedroth scale shirt. Only my quick reaction saved me from having a deeper cut or potentially losing my master hand and Sunchild with it. In the first ten seconds of the fight we had managed to exchange two dozen blows, leaving my clothing and armour battered and gashed in several places while I hadn’t even come close to touching him.

During life and now in death, Sir Amiel was without peer in both worlds. He fought with moves that flowed into one another until he became a whirlwind of steel and blades, fighting with a seemingly untrusting ferocity but never overexerting himself. There was a strange economy of movement with his strikes and parries and despite being close enough to death to feel it’s cold breath on my face I couldn’t help but marvel at his skill.

Every strike that I managed to dodge or parry he never seemed to repeat, constantly changing his guard and attacks with a frightening regularity and I found it impossible to predict his moves. His bastard sword was perfectly designed for his fighting style, being fully capable of being wielded by one or both hands in a dizzying array of strikes, parries and counters and Amiel was almost fully ambidextrous, changing his grip and shifting his master hand from the left and right without any effort or pause. I struggled to even keep up, fighting with both hands purely out of exhaustion but I had reached the end of my limits.

My left vambrace, battered and dented from the past months and recent bouts against the Knights of the Nine suddenly came free of my arm as he somehow managed to slip the length of his sword between my forearm and the leather straps. With a simple flick of the wrist he cut them away, flicking the entire vambrace off to the side in a show of extreme skill that made me appear to be nothing more than rank amateur.

I was slowing, my fatigue total and I could do nothing to stop the flat of his blade slapping down again and cracking something in my forearm. Another downwards slice barely missed taking an eye from my skull that was more luck than skill on my part but there was nothing I could do to stop the way he twisted, gripping the blade itself with a mailed hand and ramming the pommel into my face.

Something broke beneath my eye and the world went partially dark, the sensation of splinters being dragged through muscle and flesh leaving me unable to defend myself. In the seconds I staggered backwards he had managed to close the distance between us, making me fall to a knee as he cut a tendon in my leg almost as an afterthought.

As quickly as the fight had begun it was suddenly over, and I was on my knees in front of him, looking through one eye with the other swollen closed, blood streaming from several deep gashes and the coldness in my chest growing more noticeable as the holy wards continued to make me bleed.
internally. I had nothing left to fight with, the last of my stamina from battling eight of the greatest warriors to have lived and everyone, especially Viconia judging by the howling vortex of magicka knew it.

The broadsword in Sir Amiel’s hand punched towards me, twisting in the air as he thrust it at my throat. Whether it was desperation or determination that possessed me to throw my left hand forward I didn’t know, but the point of the blade speared me through the centre of my palm without even any hindrance. The four-centimetre-wide blade sliced through my palm, travelling through and coating the entire ghostly edge with more of my blood before thudding into my ebony-mithril breastplate.

For the briefest of moments Sir Amiel finally showed some emotion, his eyes moving from mine to the way that my hand had been effectively pinned to my chest by the length of his sword. Almost the entire eighty centimetre length had punched through my palm until I was almost able to hold his hand with my own impaled one. If I hadn’t caught the blade in such a way he would have killed me, but instead it had struck the incredible protection offered by the ebony-mithril breastplate and the underlying daedroth scale-mail.

Sunchild flickered in my own hand, lashing out with the last reserves of my failing strength in a riposte of my own. It’s curved edge and wicked point reaching up high and slashing across Sir Amiel’s throat in a mirrored technique of his own with unfortunately just as much effectiveness. I no longer had the strength or stamina to remain upright, falling backwards and pulling him just out of reach of Sunchild’s caress.

He was left standing as the tiled floor seemingly rose up and tackled me from behind and the very last of the air was driven from my lungs from the impact. My hand pulled itself free from the full length of his sword and I knew that the lack of pain wasn’t a good sign. Sir Amiel was left standing, his sword still held in same position and a look of shock on his face after feeling Sunchild’s point lightly caress the chainmail protecting his throat. If it had been a one or two centimetres closer, it would have very well opened a smile under his jaw but instead had barely left a mark on the ghostly mithril he wore.

I no longer had the strength to rise, let alone defend myself as he twitched out of his surprise at how close he had come to defeat, and instead my blurred vision was blocked out by the sight of the ghostly knight standing over me.

“Do you yield?”

“Fuck… No…” I rasped, trying and failing to laugh as a blood filled cough made the froth drip from the corners of my mouth.

Of the reactions I was expecting, a nod was not one of them and the pressure in my chest lifted as something magicka related shifted. The stabbing sensation in the back of my mind also released its hold and before I know what was happening Viconia had come to a skidding halt by my side.

Both my sight and hearing was fading and I looked up at her expression of horror and terror as her eyes roaming up and down my body. Her lips were moving, lips twisting as she forced what appeared to be a combination of questions and forceful curses that was somewhat thankful I couldn’t hear. The coldness in my chest was still growing and I tried my best to smile at her even as my vision went dark and all light and sensation left my body in a rush.

Chapter End Notes
Kaius is really good at getting the crap beaten out of him...

The 'test of purity' to retrieve the Cuirass in game was a bit of a disappointment to me, as was the way the Knights of the Nine were portrayed. Despite their obvious differences in races and personalities, all of them were copies of each other. Only Sir Berich and Sir Amiel had any real character and as this chapter is one of my attempts to remedy this.

The duels in game, even with mods such as *Deadly Reflex* and with the difficulty on maximum were very... very *boring*. Hopefully this chapter was more entertaining... XD
Recovery

Chapter Summary

A short chapter to let everyone know that I'm still alive and writing. This was originally meant to be part of the following chapter "Nature's Fury" but I felt it deserved its own spot.

I am still intending on posting a chapter a fortnight but work and life has a habit of getting in the way. With luck the next chapter will be up by the 17th September.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I didn’t expect to wake up, or if I did I expected my next sight to be filled with the impossible vista of Molag Bal’s accursed realm of Coldharbour. Much to my surprise instead I opened my eyes to a dust and cobweb strewn ceiling, feeling cold and chilly to the very core and very much in pain.

It was dark and cold, the only light and warmth within the ancient and disused training hall from the tiny campfire a short distance away surrounded by the scatterings of Viconia’s and my travelling equipment. My armour was nearby, disassembled and laid out in a rough semblance of order and I could see the small collection of polishing cloths and scouring pads alongside it. I was laying on my sleeping roll and covered in one of the thin blankets we used to keep our steeds dry during the night and other than my undergarments I was entirely naked.

Viconia had been caring for me, but for how long I was uncertain but judging by the lived in feeling of the training hall it was obvious that it had been some time. For the moment she was nowhere to be seen which also including most of her equipment and armour. For a heart stopping moment I believed that she may have indeed abandoned me but if she had, she had been remiss in taking her own sleeping items and Ultrin’s saddle. The fire was well kept, burning with freshly chopped branches that had not yet turned to coals and I could feel its heat on my bare flesh and I struggled to rise.

I had suffered severe injuries before, but the latest collection was a lot more intense than those preceding them. Even the injuries sustained in the Mythic Dawn Caverns didn’t seem to hurt as keenly as those I had suffered at the blades and weapons of the Knights of the Nine. My left arm and hand were almost useless and heavily bandaged from where Sir Amiel’s sword had speared it and I was forced to roll over and use my right to prop myself up. Immediately I realised it wasn’t the smartest of ideas as the movement twisted and pulled at the significant stitching at my hip, and dropping back into the bedroll I groaned as my injured face and leg also made themselves felt.

Although healing, the bones in my face were still partially broken and I could feel something shift in my cheek that shouldn’t have been able to. As for my right leg, it was almost entirely dead from the calf muscle down if not for the agonising pain shifting its way up through it. I could remember all too easily how Sir Amiel’s sword had simply cut deep into my leg just above the protection of my armoured boots, and I found myself feeling lost and feeling hopeless at the sudden future of being a cripple. I had seen several injuries as such within the Legion, and almost without fail it ensured the victim remained an invalid for the rest of his life.
Before I could summon up the strength and willpower to shift through the pain to rise and check myself over, the soft sounds of footsteps reached my ears and I turned to look at the entrance. Viconia was slowly making her way down the stairs and the short corridor to the training hall where she had made our camp and she looked worse for wear. While not injured as myself in any sort of degree, she was weary and exhausted, her hair hanging freely and appearing somewhat dishevelled as she laid eyes on me and realised I was conscious.

“So… You’re finally awake.”

It wasn’t a question but a bitter statement despite the way how it wasn’t wholly directed at me. After so many months together I could detect the difference between when she was truly angry or simply annoyed.

“I am.” It felt like I had swallowed most of the dust that was lining the floor of the training hall and I found myself coughing. “How long have we been here?”

“Three days.”

She moved quickly over to me, giving me and my injuries a quick glance over before carefully helping me rise to a sitting position. The small bundle she had been carrying turned out to be a pair of rabbits with ropes tied around their throats to allow her to carry them. One was still alive and kicking, its beady eyes darting about everywhere as it twitched, while the other was well and truly dead, still smouldering somewhat with singed fur from whatever bolt of magicka she had used to kill it.

My hand moved to my hip as I sat upright with both legs outstretched and she slapped it away, lifting the bandages and studying the poultice that she had applied to it and the stitched wound. “You should count yourself lucky.”

“I do. I have you”

Her gaze flickered upwards to mine as I smiled at her and the expression of annoyance was mellowed somewhat. “And don’t you forget it. Especially after these past three days. The things that I do for you…”

“I don’t really plan on going out and getting injured Viconia.”

“It doesn’t stop you from going out and doing so.” Moving down my leg, she tapped my leg and lifted my wounded one gently, using her fingers to feel the injury and looking over the way it was healing.

“How badly hurt was I?”

“You should be dead.” she said simply and bluntly, having all of the bedside manner of a thrown rock to the face. “You lost a lot of blood, and not just from the few cuts they gave you. You were bleeding internally and for a while there I wasn’t sure whether you’d recover, let alone wake at all.”

The injury to my calf was terrible to behold and it cut from the back of my leg almost to the bone itself. Viconia had done her best to keep the wound clean and free of infection but the muscles had been severed entirely.

“Well. I guess my adventuring days are over.” I muttered and she twisted around and scowled at me.

“Not yet they aren’t,” carefully, she began unwrapping the bandages and prepare my leg for fresh ones. “It’s terrible, but you are healing slowly.”
“I’m healing… severed tendons?”

She nodded, dragging over one of the small ceramic containers she had pulled from our saddles that was filled with crushed up alchemical ingredients. Thankfully one of the many things I had taught her during our travels was how to identify useful herbs and plants and how to turn them into healing salves and poultices. “You are. You and I both know that your vampiric nature is capable of significant and accelerated healing, but this is definitely putting the limits of such to the test. If left alone it would have healed your leg as a mass of scar tissue and left it useless for the rest of your life. With my assistance its healing back together, although I’m uncertain how long it will take to get full mobility back.”

“Your assistance?” looking over the injury I noted how the wound on my leg wasn’t a simple slice across the back of the calf, but a clear cross that also ran down a good portion of the leg itself.

“I had to cut you open and use a bit of magicka to seal the muscles back together. You should be thankful that all those years in the service to Lloth has left me with an intimate knowledge of how a body goes together.” For a moment she went silent, her eyes blinking several times before she visibly shrugged the thoughts away. “I never thought the ability and knowledge how to flay someone alive would have other uses.”

Rubbing at my face and taking extreme care while probing the broken bones, I found myself realising that I wasn’t as badly injured as I was expecting. “I feel surprisingly well… All things considered.”

Finishing up the last of the bandage and tucking it where it wasn’t going to fall off or come loose, she fell even more silent and my eyes were drawn to the way that she was suddenly rubbing at her forearms, forearms that were obviously wrapped in bandages.

“Oh Viconia…” I whispered and she twisted to meet my gaze, glancing down to where I was looking and folding her arms and the bandages out of sight.

“You were dying.” She said simply, hiding the way that she had both wrists bandaged. “Just so you know, it is extremely difficult to force a mostly unconscious vampire to drink blood.”

My expression needed no translation and her expression softened, moving forward and kissing me very lightly before pulling away. “It was my choice Mrannd’ssinss. Be thankful and appreciate what I do for you.”

“I do.” I said honestly, trying to work out whether I felt sick, disturbed or dismayed at how she had cut her own wrists to feed me blood to keep me alive. If I hadn’t been unconscious I doubt that I would have let her do such a thing.

Feeling my facial injuries, I remembered all too well how the pommel Sir Amiel’s sword had smashed into my face and the way that it broke my cheek. What I was finding strange was the way how it felt like my jaw had also been broken, which was something that I truly didn’t remember occurring.

Viconia seemed to be seeking a distraction almost as much as I was, and the look of embarrassment that she was suddenly wearing was as obvious as it was rare. “For the most part you were unconscious the whole time these past days. Initially, once the wards had diminished and I managed to drag you out of there the vampire decided to take things into its own hands.”

“Did I try to hurt you?”
My shock and concern was obvious to her and she spared me a grin that was only slightly one of tense amusement. “Not after I rendered you unconscious.”

That explained the broken jaw, and I rubbed at it hesitantly, feeling totally and utterly lost with the situation and at what had happened. The silence dragged on between the two of us as we began looking everywhere but at each other, before Viconia’s sigh made itself heard over the quietly burning campfire.

“We can’t keep doing this on our own.” She said simply. “How many times these past months have we almost died or found ourselves in situations that we only managed to extricate ourselves from? Once is far too many times for me.”

“At least you haven’t been consecutively finding yourself injured all the time.”

“True, but if it wasn’t for my skill and your nature then we would have both died several times already. We can’t keep doing this, and I especially don’t want to find myself in the situation where I have to bathe and assist you in relieving yourself.”

My entire face burned red with embarrassment and she made no sign of how she felt about the past days besides the scowl she habitually wore. “I am serious though. We need help.”

“I’m open to suggestions.” I said simply, honestly meaning it even as I forced myself through the pain and wriggled the toes of my injured leg.

“We should re-establish the Order of the Nine.”

The silence this time was complete and all-encompassing and I looked at her in complete shock.

Before I could speak she had cut me off in mid breath, rearranging her circlet and going through the process of smoothing her long white-blond hair. “This place. This Order… had once been founded to recover all of the Relics of your Gods. They remained here even after death and even as skilled as they are, they couldn’t do what they did on their own. We need help, especially if we are both going to get through all of this alive and intact.”

She handed me a water skin and I began the slow process of washing the dryness of my mouth and throat away. “Who can we ask though? The Blades are busy protecting Martin and I don’t think that we’ll be able to get anyone from the Fighters Guild.”

“What’s the point of being Knights if we can’t call upon our own Order?”

“Good point.” I replied simply, glancing over to our saddlebags and the wealth that they still contained. “I… I don’t think that it would take much to repair this place and we have more than enough wealth to take care of that aspect.”

“Exactly. How many Knights pledged themselves to seeking out the Relics during that service in Anvil all those weeks ago? How many more have done so since? We won’t be short on manpower or ability if we can convince them of the value in doing so. We have retrieved two relics already, and I have been given leads for some of the others to the East and the South.”

“Leads? From who?”

“Amiel and the others of course. Who the vith else do you think I would have spoken to while you were sleeping?”

“You didn’t fight them did you?”
There was shake of a head and she sat down heavily next to me. “No. I think they considered it before I threatened to bury them in the rubble of the Priory if they tried to. Amiel says that my concern for you has proven my purity if such an unbecoming display of weakness is considered as such.”

“It’s not weakness Viconia.” I said, groaning and putting my healthy arm around her in a comforting squeeze. “I certainly don’t consider all that you have done for me as a weakness.”

“Well, we are both even at least when it comes to saving the other from dying.” She might have been trying to remain stoic but there was no doubting the way that her whole body shivered slightly as it relaxed into me. All the stress of the previous days had taken a toll on her in similar ways to my injuries. “It matters not. We have leads for all of the Relics barring the Greaves and the Sword, and three of which are in or near Counties Bravil and Leyawiin.”

“The Mace, the Shield and…”

“The Boots. The Boots are apparently near a shrine to your Nature God to the North East of Glenvar. The Shield is Western Blackmarsh and thanks to Henrik we have an extremely good idea in its location, better than anyone else in Tamriel I’d wager.”

Movement from the corner of my eye caught my attention and I snorted with amusement. “Our dinner is escaping.”

Viconia twisted around and caught sight of the live rabbit trying its best to hop away while we were distracted. Its efforts were significantly hindered by the length of the snare that was still wrapped around her throat and if Viconia’s curse was any more forceful it would have dropped dead on the spot.

“Those pair of lotha shu’n have been the only things I have successfully caught since we arrived.” Rising to her feet and strode over to it with a hand suddenly crackling with lightning and the ultimate fate of the other, slightly charred rabbit was clearly defined. “I’m sick of eating hardtack and our other rations.”

“Try not to kill it please.” I said simply, again feeling embarrassed as she looked between me and the tiny animal trying to hide in amongst the accumulated dirt and dust in the ancient priory.

“Why?” she asked simply, before glancing between it, me and her wrists as her magicka faded. “Oh.”

Quickly she plucked it from the ground by grabbing the end of the length of the rope snare and carried it over to me. “Enjoy your meal.”

The disgust at what I was about to do was obvious as I grabbed the tiny furred creature from her and I tried to ignore the fact that part of me was longing for it. “I seriously doubt it.”

Within a few seconds it was over, the sheer agonising pain of my face restructuring and forcing my broken cheekbone to realign and reknit drowning out the way that the rabbit suddenly began kicking wildly before becoming as still as the grave. I handed the limp body over to Viconia who had already begun preparing to gut and skin them both while trying not to make it obvious that she was watching me intently with a sickening degree of curiosity.

“We’ll have to stay here for a few more days before I will be confident in you being able to travel. You’re going to have trouble walking for weeks even with your vampirism.”

“I know it.” I replied, wiping my mouth on the back of my hand and catching myself in mid motion
of going to lick blood off it. There was no denying the way that the tiny amount of animal blood went some way towards slaking my thirst or the mere act of shifting slightly into my vampiric form had healed my face somewhat. “It’s going to be a long journey ahead of us.”

“Longer than normal at least. Southern Cyrodiil may as well be our home at this rate.”

Somehow she had pre-empted my request and handed me more water, this time in one of the travelling cups that we carried as creature comforts. “The boots are closer?”

She was watching me even more intently now and I gave her a light smile as I finished off the water. “Indeed. Once you are fit for travel we will journey to the Shrine and see how our luck goes this time. Its apparently one of the more publicly known Relics so it should provide us with a degree of fame if we retrieve it. It will be beneficial to recruit others to our cause.”

The strange tingling in my mouth made itself present and I found myself looking into the cup she had handed me with realisation dawning. Within seconds my body was beginning to feel like I was floating and I was quickly loosing strength in my extremities.

“Motherwort and Lady’s Smock?”

There was no way for me to mistake the predatory gleam in her eyes as she moved closer and helped me ease my back into the bedrolls again. My entire body felt as heavy as lead but also seemed as light as the clouds themselves as I began to struggle to stay away. “You taught me well Mrannd’ssinss. Now, go to sleep and get some rest so you don’t make a mess of all my hard work.”

“You’re such a bitch… I murmured, feeling her lips lightly press into mine and her fingers caress my face as once again I found myself falling into a sleep to rival the dead.

Chapter End Notes

Damage Fatigue poisons were one of my favorite poisons to use in Oblivion. Draining fatigue from powerful characters and then watching them fall down was always a fun way to end fights!

Motherwort Sprig and Lady's Smock Leaves are both ingredient you can gather in the West Weald around the Priory, which also for anyone interested means that Kaius and Viconia are both at least Journeymen level alchemists...
As I slowly limped and staggered my way into the priory undercroft I found my path lit by the still burning remnants of the bowl sconces built into the walls. Somehow the remnants of the energies that our presences had unleashed when we entered had been infused into the ethereal flames, and while they were noticeably dimmer it would be some time before they faded again.

Each step was agony and I struggled to pick a side to limp on as the sewn gash at my hip, and my sliced open calf muscle were on opposite sides and played havoc on my attempts to walk. Viconia was busy preparing our horses and while she was suitable distracted I had chosen to enter the place that had almost killed me.

Another three days had passed, and for the majority of that time I had lain in the bedroll, only moving under Viconia's careful gaze to bathe in collected rainwater and begin the long, arduous process of healing my leg. Viconia had been correct in that I was slowly healing even something as permanently crippling as severed tendons and muscles but it had been two days after I had awoken before she had even allowed me to consider mounting Trygve again. So, now that the opportunity for travel had presented itself with how slowly I was getting better, we had decided to leave and I had decided to speak to the Knights of the Nine.

Viconia hadn't forbidden me doing so, but she hadn't exactly been impressed when I told her that I didn't feel right leaving without speaking to Sir Amiel and the others. So while she was distracted I had hobbled my way down, assisted by the crude crutch that she had made for me and leaning against the walls after each dozen or so paces.

The tiny layer of dust across the floors was still almost entirely undisturbed from the centuries since the last living beings before us had entered, and other than the collection of boot prints, scuffmarks, and dried blood there was nothing to show for the fact that I had fought the ghostly Knights. It was obvious though that there was no trace of any of the ghosts at all, either where they had been standing or where they had moved about as they fought me. indeed, the only other boot marks within the entire crypt was Viconia's where she had rushed to my side, doing her best to stabilise me before dragging me out. The thin, long streak of blood clearly showed where she had dragged my bleeding, unconscious body.

As for the ghosts, while they didn't leave a physical presence in the world they were still present, each of them watching from the shadowed alcoves near their coffins in their faint, translucent qualities. They were all bare headed now, coifs and helms nowhere to be seen and it was hard not to feel the weight of their gazes as they watched me enter.

“You still live.”

“I do.” I replied, looking over to the alcove where the Cuirass sat in all of its glory and the glimmering shape of Sir Amiel awaited.

The ancient spectre gave a smile as grim as the grave and stepped forward slightly as I shuffled over to where the Helm still lay. As I had been defeated, Viconia had simply discarded the priceless relic without thought and in the week since she had not touched it. Carefully, and using a small clean bandage that I had carried with me, I reached down and picked it up from where it lay in the dust.
“You’re tougher than you look, even for a vampire.”

“It does have its advantages.” Carefully, and now hindered by the fact that I only had one arm to stabilise myself and my crutch I made my way over to the Cuirass, feeling the eyes of the other Knights with every painful step.

From afar the Cuirass was beautiful to behold, but proximity only seemed to enhance its incredible properties. For two hundred years it had lain under the priory and it had experienced hundreds if not thousands of battles without the slightest mark or blemish to show for it. For a relic over three thousand years old it was perfect in every sense or meaning of the word.

It also wasn’t technically a single relic as such. Unlike its name it was not simply just a breastplate but instead it contained each and every piece of armour a Knight or armoured soldier could or needed to wear. Each piece, from the forged breastplate and armoured back piece, to the flowing silken tabard as white as fresh snow with the blood red diamond of the Nine in the centre were peerless and free from the tiniest hints of dust and grime. Underneath there were hints of the white-silver chainmail that made mithril appear tarnished and if I didn’t know better I would have sworn that someone had only just finished buffing and polishing each and every piece until the leather belts gleamed and the metal surfaces shone like mirrors.

The chainmail links were so tiny I doubted anything larger than a sewing needle could have entered the gaps, and they hung down to mid-thigh under the faulds and lower protective plates. While the two pointed pauldrons protected the upper arms and were obviously designed to act as rerebraces to protect the entirety of the upper arms as well as the shoulders, it was painfully obvious that this relic was incomplete without the greaves and the gauntlets.

“I am glad that my death served to lead you here.” Amiel’s voice was deep and echoed from beside me as I lifted the helm and slotted it on top of the armour stand. “You completed the quest that I could not, and for the first time in centuries we all have hope.”

He gazed upon the armour with a mixture of sorrow and regret, not looking at me as he gazed upon the cuirass that he recovered and claimed as his own.

“The Order of the Nine,” He said, after we stood there in silence for some time, his voice echoing with a strange wooden quality from his ethereal nature. “was founded with the intention of safekeeping the Crusader’s Relics. In life, we failed at this task. In death, we seek to preserve what little we accomplished while we wait for one to come and finish what we began. In you and Viconia we see hope; a rare commodity that we have waited for an age to have once more. We all know that it is a long and difficult road ahead of you.”

“Viconia and I plan to restore the Order.” There was no mistaking the current that ran through Amiel and all of the other knights as they heard my words.

I could see that Amiel was momentarily lost for words, as were his long dead brother’s in arms but he finally managed to find his voice once again. “Where do you plan to find Knights?”

“There are dozens, maybe even hundreds of Knights, warriors and pilgrims on the trail of the Relics who have answered the church’s call to arms. There will be more than enough suitable to join us and assist us in recovering the Relics. Who knows, perhaps the other pieces have already been recovered?”

“Even the most faithful will question you, both in your actions and your motives. There will be some who despite their faith in the Nine and the sanctity of their quest will outright refuse to follow yourselves because they will believe you liars and fraudsters.”
“We know. That’s why we intend on first retrieving the Boots. It should be public enough that our deeds will not be questioned and I don’t think it would take much for others to join our cause.”

“The path is dangerous Sir Desin.” Said one of the other knights and I turned away from the Cuirass and Helm to look at the ghostly form of Sir Juncan. “I fell in the attempt to retrieve the boots and there isn’t a single one of us who doesn’t understand or appreciate what you are attempting to do.”

“Tell him the full truth Nirtke.” Rumbled the enormous, plate armoured form of Sir Henrik. “You took a bandit’s arrow to the eye a day’s journey from Kynareth’s shrine.”

All of the ghosts chuckled, including Sir Juncan. “That still counts as an attempt...” He muttered good humouredly.

Each of the Knights were wearing less of their armour when they had first appeared and fought me, and now they were all bareheaded and much more relaxed. I did find it somewhat disconcerting that the injuries that had ultimately killed them were visible in places, and Sir Juncan’s bloodied eye socket seemed to stare in all directions at once. The others for the most part had their injuries hidden under their now seamless armour but there were hints of blood on their leather, chainmail and steel. Sir Henrik had a deep gash into the side of his throat that made his bearded smile even more unsettling.

“In life we were the greatest warriors to walk the earth.” Henrik continued as the collection of ghosts moved closer to me and away from their final resting places. “But in the end, many of us found our fates at the hands of foes we could not slay in battle. Our greed, our hubris and pride were ultimately our undoing and is why we failed in our holy duties so resoundingly.”

“You did retrieve five of the eight relics in the space of two decades though.” I replied to them all and saw the pride and sorrow begin warring among them all.

“Yes, but look what happened afterwards.” This time it was the dark skinned Sir Casimir who spoke up, dressed in his ancient armour that spoke volumes of his Redguard heritage. “All those relics we claimed as our own are gone, lost or stripped from us. My entire lineage to this day still suffers the curse Stendarr bestowed on me. In my arrogance and after the darkness of the War I killed a beggar within the Chorrol cathedral; the cathedral of the God of Mercy Himself!”

Sir Amiel moved closer as the dark mood of the spirits surrounding me seemed to grow and he nodded to me and them at the same time. “You and Viconia are not us, and in that you may even be better than what we ever were.”

My laugh rang through the confines of the crypt and I looked at them all, making a point of fixing Sir Amiel with an incredulous gaze. “I doubt it. You all have faith and you all achieved so much.”

“And you have not?” Sir Ralvas rasped in his thick Dunmeri accent. “Taking a stand against the hordes of Oblivion? Saving entire counties from Vampires and werewolves and hunting the greatest beasts with the bounds of Cyrodiil? Those are worthy deeds.”

“I see that Viconia has been talking to you about more than just where we can find the Relics…”

“More importantly it is your lack of faith and lack of purity which puts you above us.” A raised hand cut off my snort of amusement and Sir Amiel continued. “It really is. We aspired to the be the greatest and to honour the gods with our every waking moment. We strived for perfection and fell utterly short. Our arrogance and hubris brought us low and we had a long way to fall. It was our arrogance that made us claim the relics for our personal possession, when in fact they were never intended for mortals such as ourselves. It was our greed that made us proclaim ourselves as the
greatest beings in history and it was our pride that made us all fail.”

“You however.” He continued, pointing directly to me. “You and Viconia are not seeking the relics out for yourselves whether it be corrupting them or claiming them. You and Viconia are not pure or blessed by the Gods but I doubt that will ever give you pause in your actions. You are corrupt and consumed by darkness and as a result you cannot fall to temptation or greed or desire the relics for yourselves because you know that it is impossible for you to do so. Unlike us, we know that you can and you will retrieve the relics, protect and safeguard them and only gift them to those who truly deserve them.”

“Never thought that being damned would be a good thing.”

They all laughed at my sarcasm and Sir Amiel nodded with a smile on his face. “Think of it this way. Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely, but if you are already corrupted then you have nowhere else to fall. The only way left for you is up…”

Looking over them all in turn I tried to give them all the best, confident smile I had but I was feeling uneasy and anxious at the task ahead. “Will you keep the Helm and Cuirass safe until we return?”

“We have protected the Cuirass for the past centuries, and we shall continue to do so until the breaking of the world.”

“Then let us hope that will be many centuries hence.” I replied, glancing back to the cuirass and to each and every one of the ghostly knights. “We shall return.”

Viconia and I left shortly after, almost as soon as I had managed to hobble my way up stairs to the ground floor, and drag myself into Trygve’s saddle. The door into the crypt was once again sealed with Sir Amiel’s ring and while the magical wards would not have anywhere near the same power as they had when we arrived, the Knights of the Nine would not return to their deathless slumber again. Both Viconia and I were confident in the fact that the Cuirass and the Helm were well protected in our absence but both of us had trepidation at the monumental task ahead of us.

The journey to Kynareth’s shrine in northern Bravil County took far longer than what we would have normally expected. My injuries, especially the wound in my hip ensured that I couldn’t ride for more than an hour or so without having to dismount and rest. Between the two of us we used restoration magicka sparingly, as these were injuries that needed time more than arcane talents to heal properly. Only a true master or expect in the arts of Restoration would be able to speed up the process so for the meantime I was forced to simply grit my teeth in the saddle, try to fight my way through the pain and ignore the way that every jostling movement that Trygve made was enough to send tendrils of agony through my body.

It was even more difficult due to the fact that I couldn’t even sit in the saddle properly. By the end of the first day when we made camp my back was locked and twisted from leaning to once side. My injured leg was completely incapable of being placed into the stirrups which meant that for the few hours’ travel I felt like I was going to fall out of the saddle with each one of Trygve’s steps.

My impatience was also reaching cataclysmic levels, and Viconia’s was growing as well. I was not used to my body being so weak and frail and I struggled to remain calm and in control. Viconia’s annoyance was in my fidgeting and constant squirming which lasted until the evening of the first night where she declared that if I didn’t relax or calm down she would knock me out and strap me across Trygve’s back for the rest of the journey. The threat of another broken jaw or spiked drink settled both me and my vampiric side momentarily, but I soon began ensuring that any game that Viconia managed to catch was drained of blood before cooking.
I couldn’t even hunt and finding myself solely reliant on her for everything that I naturally took for granted was grating my nerves much more than I had ever expected. Even without the full use of my legs I would have been able to use my bow if not for the terrible gash in my left palm.

For both of us it came as a relief as we finally made our way to the Shrine. The nights previous had found us staying in coaching inns and village taverns along the road which allowed us to gain full directions on where to find the shrine. County Bravil wasn’t the most travelled to begin with, but this region of the Niben Valley was especially sparse and vacant, dotted with thick, dense forests and the waterways clogged with mangroves. It seemed entirely fitting that the premier Shrine to Kynareth in all of Cyrodiil was located here in amongst all of the greenery and it wasn’t surprising to find it filled with dozens of pilgrims, worshippers and travellers.

A priory house for the attendant priests was heavily overgrown with vines and creepers but as far as we could tell when we arrived it was used more for storage than living. Many of the priests seemed to prefer living in well-crafted tents and in similar way to be closer to nature, and although it wasn’t by choice many of the arrivals were also living under sheets of cloth and tarpaulin. Dozens of the faithful were present, and there were neat rows of tents, and several horses tied up along the path leading through the forest surrounding the towering statue of the Goddess of Nature situated in the direct centre of a tiny clearing.

Dozens of people moved about, and everywhere I could see the darkened robes of priests of Kynerath scattered among their number, passing benedictions and praying in seemingly random positions throughout the clearing and nowhere near the towering statue.

Our arrival was not, and could not go unnoticed. The sight of our enormous steeds was enough to draw the eye even without our armoured forms sitting in their saddles. Between our ebony-mithril armours, Viconia’s coal black skin and white blood hair we stood out to the road-weary pilgrims around us. As I slowly slid painfully out of my saddle there was a slight hush around those closest to us as they caught sight of the stiff way I rode, and the brown-yellow bruising that covered most of my face where my cheekbone and jaw had finally set after the week’s journey. As I used Trygve to support myself while simultaneously cursing my injuries and being thankful I could walk without really needing a crutch one of the several priests began moving over to us, making the sign of Kynareth as she approached.

“Greetings Sir Knights. The faithful of the Goddess of Nature give you their welcome.”

Viconia’s expression of distaste was slightly obvious and there were looks of confusion from those around us as they tried to understand her reaction. Many for the most part were more interested in how obviously injured I was especially as I shifted my weight and bowed as best as I could to the priestess.

Watching with a careful eye, the elderly priestess took note of the two of us and the way that Viconia strapped Dragonbane to her hip in anticipation for a fight. “What brings you both to the Altar of Kynareth?” She said carefully, addressing us together as her expression changed to that of concern when she saw the bandages that covered me in several places and the mottled bruising of my face. “It seems that you have endured great hardships to come this far.”

“When brings you both to the Altar of Kynareth?” She said carefully, addressing us together as her expression changed to that of concern when she saw the bandages that covered me in several places and the mottled bruising of my face. “It seems that you have endured great hardships to come this far.”

“The road has been long but the hardships have been the usual affair for us. We have come for a place to rest for the evening and to retrieve the Boots of the Crusader.”

My eyes narrowed as I watched her reaction to my words, as it was not a look of surprise or guilt at my knowledge of the Boots location. Instead it was a look of pity and sorrow that wasn’t just from the injuries I had sustained already.
“Ah,” She said simply. “I feared as much. Your appearances say more of your reasons of being here than your words ever would.”

Turning and motioning for us to follow us through the small crowd of people that were gathering around us. “I am Avita Vesnia; high Priestess of Kynareth and I am afraid that it is quite impossible to acquire the boots.”

I hobbled after her, Viconia remaining by my side as we moved through the small number of people who were flanking us. “I am Kaius Desin, and this is Viconia DeVir,” I said to Avita, hearing the usual chorus from the people around us as they realised who we were. “and neither of us are under any illusions of their retrieval being simple.”

“We may be far from civilisation here but we know of your names. You may remain here for as long as you wish, but there are several things that you may want to consider before you attempt the trial to claim the boots.”

The tiny priory house, which was little larger than a shack was being put to use as a hospice. Within the house the windows were wide open and revealed a stunning sight of a rolling vista that opened up on the other side of the clearing to the road. The shrine was located within the rolling hills of County Bravil and from this secluded spot where could see several dozen kilometres away to where the rolling Nibenay valley was cut by the sparkling waters of the Upper Niben a day’s journey to the east.

As we had entered we had seen how two of the horses tied alongside the road were obviously chargers or military steeds like our own, and it was as Avita opened the door to the priory house that we discovered who their riders were. Even before I entered the tiny stone building, the smell of blood and torn flesh reached my nose far before I laid eyes on its source. Inside the building where they were out of the elements, the owners of the two warhorses were laid out on cots and were not in a good way. Some of the monks were huddled over them doing their very best to dress their injuries but it was obvious that there was little more that could be done other than to make them comfortable as they died. Both of them looked as though they had been mauled, their arms and torsos shredded and hidden under layers of bandages where what little restoration magicka had so far kept them alive.

“What happened to them?” I breathed, moving in closer and seeing just how bad their injuries were. It was almost like they had lost a brawl with a group of ogres before being mauled by a flock of cliff racers.

“They took Kynareth’s test, just as so many others have before them and paid the price of failure.” Avita said softly, sorrow filling her voice. “There have been many over the centuries who have tried to retrieve the boots but Kynareth’s creations guard her relic and only those who pass the test may be granted the boots. These two are among the lucky ones, as they still live and were returned. There have been countless others who haven’t.”

Three of the individuals in the priory house were not monks or priests and they looked up at us as we entered, knuckling their foreheads in salute before continuing their care of their masters. These injured men were knights and their squires were doing everything in their power to ensure that their charges lived.

Nodding to one of the squires dressed in his blood stained tabard I kneeled down over one of the wounded knights and looked over his injuries. His ribs had been crushed, an arm almost ripped from its socket and there were numerous other wounds across his body. It was obvious that he had been attacked by an animal, but whatever it was it had made a mockery of plate steel, peeling it open and tearing through the flesh underneath effortlessly. Even my first thought of werewolves had been quickly proven unlikely as Viconia picked up one of their breastplates that had been quite literally
shredded by claws that would have had to have been as thick as my wrist.

“They have been bitten,” Viconia muttered as placed the armour that was now little more than scrap metal on the floor and looked over the knight closest to her. “and their wounds are deep.”

I nodded, looking over ruined features of one of the Knights. The heraldry of the two Knights and their three squires were unknown to me and they largely ignored us in their attempts to keep their master’s out of death’s clutches.

“So the boots are here.” Grimacing as I shifted my weight off my wounded leg I turned and looked at Avita.

She shrugged. “No one really knows for certain as those who have attempted it have either never returned or have been left in such dreadful states. I would advise not attempting as far too many have tried and failed before you. Death is far too much of a price to pay for them.”

A crowd was gathering outside of the opened doors and a handful of the windows as the pilgrims and travellers came to gawk at us despite the insistence of the monks for them to go away.

“We would like to request to stay the night.”

She nodded, clasping her hands in front of her as she did so. “The faithful are always welcome here.”

Together, Viconia and I walked back through the camp, leaving the wounded Knights to the care of the followers of Kynareth and their Squires. Viconia’s mood was dark, as she knew already what was going through my mind and what I intended. It didn’t stop her from asking though.

“What do we do now?” She asked as we moved back to our steeds.

“We take this opportunity to rest up for the evening, and come tomorrow morning we try to retrieve the boots.” I replied, meaning every word. “Then, no matter the outcome we leave tomorrow by lunchtime for Leyawiin.”

“And what is stopping you from ending up like those two knights back there?” she asked angrily. “Just what makes you think that we won’t get injured or even killed from this? You’re not exactly at your peak.”

With I nod I began to unstrap my travel bags from Trygve’s side. “We have to try. I got these wounds from not being able to use my full strength and those two knights were injured by an animal. An obviously powerful animal maybe, but an animal nonetheless.”

“So you are just going to revert back to being a vampire?” She said with a lowered voice lest anyone nearby heard us talking. “Even after what great pains you went through to prove that you are human?”

I nodded, groaning with pain as the wound in my hip flared angrily at the way I twisted with a saddlebag over a shoulder. “When I spoke to the Knights before we left the priory they have been leaving me thinking differently about who and what I am. I’m going to be a vampire for the rest of my life whether I die in my sleep tonight or a thousand years from now. There’s no point trying to resist the very things that are making me strong.”

“So you’re going to go out biting everyone’s throats and satisfying your carnal desires with every whore in a dress who catches your eye?”
My grimace twisted the bruising of my face and I could feel my embarrassment growing even as she moved closer. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know you didn’t Mrimmd’ssinss.” She pulled in close and my arm wrapped around her for a moment. “You are however still as gullible and foolish as we first met and so, so easy to bait.”

The wolf yellow eyes gazed at me for a moment before she turned and began unstrapping her saddlebags and saddle from Ultrin. “I know that no matter what you will always have some core within you that you will never release and that is comforting… Especially after seeing what that core really is. Just… think before you decide to leap into an abyss. I’m not going to always blindly follow you.”

We made camp for the evening, along the edge of the collection of pilgrim shacks and lean-tos where we both would not be disturbed. Each night it appeared, those staying within the area around the shrine seemed to come together around the large firepit near the priory, and both Viconia and I found ourselves sharing spaces around the crackling flames with them. Everyone, ourselves included shared with each other our meagre collections of food and one of the pilgrims was an accomplished hunter and had managed to bring back a considerably sized boar that soon found itself on a spit. Those there with us were in awe of our presence and Viconia and I found ourselves the centre of attention as night fell.

The mood however was extremely sombre. One of the knights had died of his injuries and his death had been announced by his squire who looked as though his world had come to an abrupt end. In some ways it had, and the other two squires had also come to the realisation that their master would not live through the night. The injuries were too deep, too terrible to live through even if they had a master healer at hand.

The young squire, only just out of his teens had sat heavily by the fire as silence descended from a combination of sorrow and the fact that many present were eating. It took everyone by surprise when he started singing, a deep mournful chant accompanied by the rhythmic thudding of his hand on his chainmailed knee and most of us realised very quickly that he was singing the eulogy of his fallen master.

It was a tradition that I had seen several variations of amongst the Dumner, especially the Ashlanders when one of their number fell. They would recount the tale of the deceased’s life and accomplishments with their tribe and remember who they were. The young squire did just that, telling the tale of his master’s victories and home in faraway Highrock and the honours and glories he had achieved in the name of the Nine and his Order.

After the squire had finished, it seemed to have broken the measure of calm among the pilgrims and travellers who had also travelled so far to find themselves in the depths of Cyrodiil’s heartlands. Some had journeyed from as close by as the nearest village, others had come from every corner of Tamriel on a journey that had taken them months. Using the young squire as an example, some of them began to sing or tell tales of their homelands, of families and friends that they had left behind. Others spoke of old comrades both living and dead, and it wasn’t long before the tales changed and became jovial and humorous. Jokes were shared freely, some of the stories left many of us, myself and surprisingly enough Viconia laughing out loud.

One of the travellers pulled out a well-worn flute seemingly from nowhere, and another was a poor troubadour who returned to his tent and retrieved his lute. Their songs uplifted the spirits of all those present, but it wasn’t long before Viconia and I found ourselves pressed for tales of our exploits and journeys.

Viconia spoke of a land deep within the bowels of the earth, of deep caverns devoid of light and
filled and danger. She told of great battles between the Drow cities and while her stories were infinitely darker than of any surfer bard or poet I knew that she was toning them down for the benefit of the audience. In one such story she weaved a tale of how the great houses of Menzoberranzan banded together in a rare moment of unity to hold out against the illithid army threatening them, only to fall upon one another before their last foes were slain. Unlike some of the others she had little poise or embellishment to her tales, but everyone present listened intently even as some of them paled the stories of blood and death.

When my turn came I spoke of my time in the Legion, the skirmishes against Nordic Pirate bands and Ashlander insurgent parties, some of the more notable patrols I had been on before talking about some of the famous victories of the Legions during their long and colourful histories. I also spoke of our recent adventures from the siege of Kvatch, the daedric assault on Anvil, our encounter with the Vampires of Glenvar castle and even the way I retrieved the Light of Dawn. Neither Viconia nor I exaggerated with any of our stories but in many cases we purposely left out the full truth of our abilities and obviously my true nature. This did little to change the effect on our group of listeners, as they hung onto our every word, our own tales matching many of the stories that they had heard during one of the inevitable retellings and cementing their own ideas of our individual heroism.

The evening drew on as the fire began to dim and the wood turned into glowing coals our audience left, one by one or a few at a time until Viconia and I too left to sleep. Viconia soon curled into my side with an arm over me and while I was bone wearingly exhausted from the journey and my injuries I suffered through a night of troubled sleep.

When it did come, my sleep was filled with strange and alien dreams, filled with visions of the wild and of nature. Waterfalls cascaded down cliffs thousands of kilometres high and vanished within the rolling cloudbanks hiding their peaks from view. Grass swayed in the gentle breeze, refusing to be bent under the heavy tread of my armoured boots and caressing my armoured thighs as I walked. Despite the strange springtime like chill in the air, I could feel warm and comfortable under the sun but there was a darkness growing within this world of greenery and life.

A tremble rolled through the ground, as though a giant had taken his first step of an age and the land seemed to recoil from the impact. The strange sensation of sickness seemed to swirl through the land, being mirrored by my own feelings as the land itself seemed to lose its lustre and vibrancy to the growing sensation of wrongness. Something indescribably sinister was coming and even as I reached to the empty scabbard at my hip I knew that whatever it was I could not escape it.

Thundering through the air and ground, I could only watch helplessly as animals of all kinds and descriptions ran from the growing threat on the horizon, crushing dozens of their own kind in their panic and trampling the greenery into the ground. The growing sensation of wrongness had now reached the point of turning into a sickening level of fear as the wave of stampeding beasts vanished behind me in the growing cloud of dust in their wake. Around me the land was changing, dying at the surge of dark power that gripped and consumed it. My fingers ran through strands of grass that withered and turned to ash under my touch, the soil cracking and losing all moisture as the trees shrivelled under the corrupting influence and were dragged down into the earth by metallic tendrils of black obsidian and glass.

As the sky paled and turned into darkness so foul that I could not bring myself to gaze upon it, I could feel the growing presence behind all the desecration looming within my sight. There was nothing before me other than blackness and doom, but I could feel the eyes of the being watching and tearing my soul to shreds as a cat would toy with its prey. Through the timeless ages this being had waited to finish what it had begun so long ago, and now there was almost nothing between it and its goal.
I caught the flash of gold metal, seeing the ridged and spiked plate of a being using one of the most holy of colours and lustres to announce its sins and evil nature. A howling helm of golden blades and spear points consumed all light entering its soulless eye sockets, hiding the entity that wore it from view. I growled a challenge through a maw filled with vampiric fangs, tightening my fists even as I knew that there was no hope against such a being. This was an entity of hatred and desecration, of corruption and malice and such beings could not be defeated by others sharing their traits. As a vampire I could and had faced down countless beings that could slaughter through normal men and mer but this being could only be stopped by something of purity. Evil does not, and cannot truly defeat evil.

Just as the serrated gauntlet reached out to crush me whole, I found myself jolted awake and sweating profusely in the early dawn air. It was dark but the sun was slowly rising to the east and leaving the seemingly eternal twilight of predawn to light up my surroundings.

Despite the coolness of the air it took some time for me to stop sweating as much and I was deeply troubled by my dream. There was once a time where I regarded dreams with indifference and discarded them from my mind just as easily, but of late and fuelled by my vampiric side they had been gaining a more realistic quality and meaning behind them all. I knew that despite how I felt, there would be no more sleep for me that morning.

Carefully, so no to disturb Viconia I detangled myself from her embrace. As we normally did, we would fall asleep in a collection of limbs and flesh on flesh under our travelling blankets but as the night progressed we would shift into our own positions. There was a proximity and closeness to the way we slept together but there was also no denying the individuality we both shared. This mutual desire for our own space made it easy at least for either of us to rise without disturbing the other.

The dream and the many others like it I had suffered over the previous months were still playing through my mind even as consciousness stripped them of potency as I dressed myself. Soon I was prepared for the day ahead, both clad in my clothes and my armour and it was only when Sunchild was at my side once more than I felt some sense of comfort and security.

Fully dressed and armed, and with a momentary glance over Viconia’s sleeping form I turned and made my way through the collection of tents towards the towering statue of Kynareth. For a short time, I felt as though I was the only person awake as many of the travellers and pilgrims were still sound asleep within their own tents and lean-tos. The sun was only just peeking above the horizon as I reached the base of the massive statue, looking up into the carved representation of the Goddess Kynareth and feeling a strange chill course through me that had nothing to do with the morning temperatures.

For what seemed to be an age I stood there, looking over the age-worn marble and almost being able to count the centuries engraved into its form. It had been there for an incredibly long time, and despite the lack of attention and care that it had received from the generations of priests that had made the shrine their home it was still in good order. The goddess’ features were still clear and distinct, allowing me to see the motherly smile and the outstretched arms welcoming visitors to the area, but still holding a sense of godly power about her. Whoever had carved the statue had been a master stonemason.

Movement from within the lines of tents and from the priory house grabbed my attention and the shrine’s priests and priestesses were moving in a small group towards the edge of the clearing and the views of the Nibenay Valley. They moved slowly but with distinct purpose as they made a rough semicircle the east and the rising sun.

Their words were softly spoken as they murmured in prayer, their robes flowing in the slight breeze
and totally oblivious to anything or anyone around them. I watched as they stood there, almost swaying in time with nature’s own rhythm, softly chanting to themselves and I was suddenly struck with how much they resembled the Bosmer Rangers after the battle against Eregor and Graithlan. These were another group of individuals who had given themselves to nature they did differ from the invisible and secretive wood elves. There was sense of peace and connection about them as they praised the dawn, returning Kynareth’s blessings for the wonders of nature and welcoming the new day by pulling back their concealing hoods and feeling the warmth of the sun on their weather beaten features.

The ceremony was over quickly, and was surprisingly simple compared to many of the other religious ceremonies that I had witnessed before. There were no offerings, no sermons or grand speeches, just the simple acknowledgement of the wonders of nature and giving thanks.

As the priesthood broke up and the individual members moved away to conduct their morning routines and other activities that required their attentions, Avita came over to me where I was standing at the base of the statue. She smiled warmly as she got close, clasping her hands in front in greeting.

“Good morning Sir Desin. I hope that you and Madame DeVir slept well.”

I bowed slightly in respect and smiled warmly. “Viconia is still asleep, and I would like to say that I rested peacefully but I’d be lying.”

“Troubled sleep?”

My nod answered her question and she motioned for me to follow.

“Everyone is troubled, and I know and understand why someone such as yourself is. You have weight on your shoulders unlike many have ever experienced.”

“Saving the world tends to do that.”

She laughed and I couldn’t help but do the same. “You both have accomplished much, but now you find yourselves here, seeking that which has claimed hundreds, if not thousands of lives over the centuries. The Boots cannot be retrieved.”

“They have to be.” Her expression was quizzical but she let me continue, “The Whitestrake’s ancient foe is returning and the relics have to be reunited.”

“Do you truly believe that Umaril is returning?” Avita said softly, but it wasn’t fear or disbelief that filled her voice but a pained hopelessness that could only have been brought on by many similar conversations and arguments.

“I know he is. I also know that Viconia and I are the only two who have much chance of success in retrieving Pelinal’s relics.”

“Oh to be young and to have such confidence.” She said simply with less sarcasm than she probably had intended. “What makes you think that you can retrieve the boots. Better yet, what makes you think that you both will be the ones to wield them against Umaril.”

“We’re not the ones to wield them, and so far I doubt that anyone else has had as much luck retrieving the other relics as we have. The Cuirass and the Helm have already been recovered.”

Judging by her expression and the way she sat quietly looking at me she had initially believed that I had been lying or fabricating stories to increase our fame. There must have been something in my
manner that convinced her that I was telling the truth, and I could almost hear the way that her breath quickened.

“From all the stories that I have heard about the two of you I would have expected a lot more bluster and pride, not humility.” Carefully, her hands found their way in front of her and I could see the nervous energy that made her wring them together. “Just last week the Bishop from Bravil had come and told us all to ignore any calls for a crusade for the relics, that the call as such had been illegal and wasn’t sanctioned by the Church of the Nine. It hasn’t stopped us noticing that the number of pilgrims and faithful travelling here has increased significantly.”

There will be many more to come to try to retrieve the boots. Even if Viconia and I don’t succeed.”

“I know.” She admitted sadly. “I have been the High Priestess here for seven years, and have lived here for five more before that. During that time, I have honestly and ashamedly lost count of how many have tried and failed the retrieve the boots. So many knights and travelling warriors of great skill and equal renown arrive seeking glory and honour and so many of them don’t return from the grove.”

“Few like those two yesterday are simply found at the edge of the woods over there.” Her hand gestured to the far end of the clearing where an obvious path snaked into the forest where it was noticeably thicker and denser than the surrounding woods. “Kynareth returns only a few who attempt her trial, and I don’t remember any who lived anything more than a day or two after the attempt.”

“What is the trial?”

Moving over to one of the crudely carved benches arrayed like pews before the towering statue, she lowered herself into it and motioned for me to do the same. “I honestly do not know. When I first came here I too was seeking to test myself, but I could not bring myself to take those steps along the path. The day that I arrived someone else had tried, and failed. His body was found like all the others; horribly rent and almost torn in two, covered in wounds that I have never seen the like of outside of the worst of battles.”

“You have seen battle?”

Her smile seemed to lighten up her features and underneath the aging frame there were the hints of the strong woman she had been in her youth. “You could say that. I once served in the Legion.”

“You don’t look like a legionary.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. I’m not sure my honour could withstand being compared to one of those slow footed brutes.” She shook her head and lifted the loose sleeve of her monk robes to reveal an arm covered in sword scars and the legion brand on her bicep. “I was once Primus Lanceae of the 6th.”

“First Lance? Well you certainly outranked me, I only made it to Praefect in the 14th.”

“You’re a lot younger than I was.” The eyes glanced over my armour and clothing for a moment and narrowed. “Although you are very young to be retired from the Legion.”

The months since deserting and since my ‘official’ pardon had been sent to the Legion from Jauffre, I had spent a considerable amount of time considering my options when that question eventually arose. To leave the Legion was either old age, death or medical invalidity. I certainly wasn’t the first two options which had forced me to come up with an excuse that didn’t involve desertion or the
“Caught black lung during my service in Vvardenfell. It’s going to kill me one day but I couldn’t simply sit down and wait for my end to come.”

“So you started roaming the world and throwing yourself into Oblivion portals and getting a Knighthood as a result. I suppose from what I’ve heard of the Vvardenfell Legions, a portal to Oblivion is a holiday.”

“What about you then? You don’t seem to have reached retirement age.”

The smile I received from my half-disguised compliment turned into a laugh. “No. I still have a few years left before I would have reached that age. I too was deemed invalid, but not from a disease.”

The sigh killed the laugh almost as quickly as a sword stroke and her face softened at old memories. “I was thirty-nine and had been serving the 6th in southern Hammerfell for over twenty years. One day my Extraordinarii cohort were tasked in hunting down a group of brigands that had been harassing the local trade caravans. Instead of a quick and easy smash-and-burn I ended up getting unhorsed and in the fight I got kicked in the head by a hoof.”

Her fist rapped against the side of her head and the smile was grim and yet revealing none of the pain or sorrow she still experienced. “I woke up three weeks later and was told that my helmet had been crushed and had shattered my skull. Still got a chunk of metal in there. The first fits started a few weeks later and while they aren’t as common now, the Legion couldn’t afford having the Primus Lanceae falling off her horse in mid battle.”

“So you were forced to retire.”

“Indeed. I wandered around for a bit before finding my way here. I thought that if I did something like retrieve the Boots of Kynareth that the Legion would let me back in. Ha, if my skull had been as thick as my stubbornness I wouldn’t have been injured in the first place. Instead when I arrived here I felt… I don’t know, a connection of sorts that I can’t explain. Seeing the way that young adventurer had ended up was the last little nudge of common sense that I needed and so I stayed. Even became a priest.”

“We’ve both come long ways it seems.”

“It’s not the distance, but the journey that I’ve found that is long.” She motioned to my bruised face and the way that I had been limping before we had sat. “My role these days is a guide for those on their journeys, even if this place is the end of it.”

“You are not going to try to stop me from attempting the trial?”

There was a shake of the head and the sorrow appeared in full force. “I can’t. It isn’t my place to stop those seeking Kynareth’s Relics, only to guide them. When I became a priest here I swore an oath that I must fulfil, even if I know it will only lead to your death.”

She must have seen the way that I turned and looking back to where Viconia and I had set up our tent. Viconia was still asleep as far as I could tell and at that moment I felt more concerned about her reaction of what I was about to do than the act itself.

“I still have to try at least.”

“Alone?”

Wetting my lips with my tongue I nodded. “I can handle putting myself in danger, but not putting
Viconia in harm’s way. Besides, I have a suspicion that this is something that one can only do so alone?”

Avita nodded. “Many who have come had tried to go in together but the route to the grove is no simple path. Some who have entered together have emerged minutes later after being separated within the first dozen metres and only one of their number undertook the trial. It is clear though that whatever occurs, you must do so by yourself.”

“Is there anything else you can tell me about it?”

“The one thing that all of us here have been instructed through the generations of priests is that we are to remind everyone attempting the Trial to heed Kynareth’s teachings. Specifically, to ‘fear and respect Nature and all Her Creations.’”

“Fear and respect?”

“Indeed. Nature itself is Kynareth’s domain, all of its creatures are her wards. If you heed nothing else, then heed this.”

“Well then.” I said as I rose to my feet, checked how secure Sunchild was to my hip and tried and failed not to grimace at the flaring pain in my leg as it bore my weight. “Might as well do this while the morning is still young.”

Together we moved towards the winding path leading through the forest and as we got closer I saw just exactly how thick the trees, vines, shrubs and creepers were together. There was barely enough space for anything larger than a rabbit to pass through and for that fact alone, even without the strange tingling in the base of my skull I knew that there was something strange about this portion of the forest.

“As soon as you step onto this path the test will begin.” Avita said as I stood before it, looking down at how well-worn the dirt track was as it disappeared around a bend less than ten metres into the vegetation. “Kynareth may choose to guard you along the way; that is up to her. I wish you good luck Sir Desin. I hope I see you again.”

The tone in her voice was sad and I knew as well as she did that she didn’t expect me to survive, or if I did it would be in the same state as the two knights ripped to pieces in the priory house. The sights of how terribly maimed they were entered my mind as I looked between her and the path leading deeper into the forest and I gave her a smile before beginning to limp my way down it.

Within metres I could feel the closeness of the air and the way that the vegetation hemmed in around me. there was no choice but to follow the path as to attempt to do otherwise would have required one to cut and hack their way through and potentially get themselves lost within metres of leaving the path. Birdcalls followed me every step of the way, echoing up in the dawn chorus as thin beams of sunlight speared through gaps in the canopy. It was quiet, tranquil and calm despite the steadily increasing beat of my heart.

Reaching the portion of the path where it snaked away to the right, I paused for a moment and turned to look back at the entrance and Avita only to find that behind me the path had utterly vanished. It simply stopped within two metres at my back as though it had never existed and I found myself suddenly covered in a cold sweat.

“Okay… That’s a little concerning.” I muttered to myself, moving closer to the portion where the path I had travelled had been only seconds before, pressing my fingers into a tree wide enough that I couldn’t put my arms around it. There was no sign of the clearing, of Avita or anything around me
but the empty path that continued deeper into the forest.

Magicka swirled in the air around me, intangible and undefinable but I found myself remembering back to the night where I had met and assisted the Rangers. The way they had called upon the spriggans to claim the corrupted artefacts of Graithlan had the same ethereal quality to it as the forest I found myself in and I couldn’t help but shiver. There was no malign influence in the forest but I still found myself with my hand resting idly on Sunchild’s hilt as I proceeded onwards, casting suspicious glances at the closest trees as the sensation of movement tugged at my vision.

For several long minutes I continued through the track. Sometimes I was forced to shimmy my way through sideways where thick branches and vines as thick as my arm barred my way. Despite the urge to do so I didn’t draw Sunchild to ease my passage but rather wormed my way through the thickening vegetation. I was strangely calm, both my normal instincts of surviving and hunting in the wilds and my vampiric senses assuring me that I was not in danger. Birds sung in the trees, woodland creatures small enough to move about in the thick greenery scattered and scampered about at my intrusion but it was so peaceful that I could clearly hear my own breathing and the way that my chainmail, daedroth scale shirt and leather creaked and rubbed together as I moved.

There was no way for me to tell how long I limped and stumbled my way down the path, as I was certain that not only hours had passed but the sun had also somehow reversed its course several times while also not moving in the slightest. Several times I shook my head with frustration and the tingling that grew with every step, while at the same time marvelling at how crisp and pure the air appeared. Several times a fluttering would be heard in the canopy or within the foliage only a few meters away, leaving a rustling or a small tumble of twigs and leaves to fall before even my enhanced senses could pinpoint their source. There was no sense of danger though, even when the path suddenly turned a corner and I found myself stepping into a clearing large enough to contain a Legion fort.

The clearing itself was completely at odds to the rest of the surrounding forest. Where the surrounding vegetation was so thick that one could not travel through it without the aid of wings or by hacking their way through a metre at a time the clearing was completely devoid of all trees and shrubs. The lush grass rose only ankle height and far above me the skies were clear and pristine, a handful of clouds scattered about and promising a fine day to come.

Only the collection of moss-covered rocks in the direct centre filled the otherwise empty expanse. They were enormous boulders, seeming carved from the living ground and being slowly pried apart by the questing roots of a massive oak tree. If it was possible through magicka or through brute labour the rocks could have been carved to house a sizable family, and the tree itself capping them rose into the sky and would have taken me and a dozen others to be able to wrap their arms around the base.

It was quiet other than the cries of the forest birds watching my progress with some amusement from their perches. There was some strange feel to the clearing, almost as though Akatosh had simply forgotten to apply the laws of time to this place as it had a strange unearthly feel to it all. It was only when I started moving about the clearing, muttering to myself each time my leg flared with pain I realised what was truly wrong with the clearing.

It was being affected by all four seasons at the same time.

The ground underfoot was lush and green and in full springtime bloom but and the oak tree was mostly leafless except where they had turned the incredible golden-browns of autumn. The air itself was warm and comforting, with the smell of ripening wheat and storms building on the horizon as though summer had just arrived but on the side furthest from side that I had entered was covered in a thick layer of snow that was well over ankle deep.
“Of course it just has to be magicka...” My sigh was the loudest sound in the clearing until something metallic clinked on the armoured plate covering the toe of my boot. So drawn to the strangeness of the boulders and the other side of the clearing where the snow stopped as though cut with a knife, I had failed to notice that the grass I was walking through was littered with objects.

The particular object I had inadvertently kicked was an old rusted helm, horribly crushed and bent almost to the point of being unrecognisable. As I knelt down to inspect it and pull it from where the rains had been washing it into the earth I saw how it had been once a full helm of considerable make, but the entire faceplate had been crushed with even more effectiveness than a war hammer.

Nor was it alone. Within metres of where I painfully knelt there were dozens pieces of armour, tattered clothing and weapons and all in similar states of decay and ruin. Many were almost totally consumed by rust, nearly all were broken in some manner and a tingle of unease rolled up my spine as I realised just how many there were.

Swords where shattered and crushed into the soft black soil, shields had been splintered by blows of incredible force, spears and javelins bent and armoured breastplates torn asunder. All wore marks of combat I had only seen once in the snows of Vvardenfell where a squad of Legionaries had come face to face with a werewolf. Far too many of the items still lay attached to, or close to their owners. White bones poked out through the ground where they had been fallen and had been picked clean by scavengers and vermin. Clothing had rotted into the ground and their bodies had merely ensured that the ground had been richly fertilised. There were so many that I couldn’t even begin to count the number who had died in my vicinity. Some were not even whole, as I could clearly see the skeletal remains of an armoured warrior laying on its back about six metres away from where its legs lay in their rusted chainmail.

I felt the footfalls before I saw what they belonged to, the ground shuddering under the weight and making the impacts travel up my legs into my gut. Cautiously I rose from my crouch, looking about and watching as a bear wandered around from the snow covered portion of the clearing.

“You have got to be kidding me.”

It was enormous, having the appearance of a brown furred bear if not for the sheer overwhelming size. I had seen several of the creatures during the past months within Cyrodiil and had heard stories of the larger ones that roamed the wilds of Cyrodiil and Skyrim. This one was much larger than even the tallest of tales spoken in inns and taverns. Each leg alone was thicker than my shoulders, and it was even taller than me despite being on all fours. Most bears I had seen or heard of, while they could stand on their rear legs and tower over men and mer alike were at most three quarters of my height at the shoulder. They also would’ve only weight a fraction of the creature in front of me that would have easily weighed close to two tonnes.

My growing sense of trepidation continued to grow and my vampiric side was just as uneasy as I was. Even the Minotaur Titan of Nonungalo paled in comparison to such a creature and it moved with an almost lazy pace as it plodded about the clearing. If it wasn’t so overwhelming large and heavier than a fully grown minotaur titan I would have thought that it was merely going for a carefree stroll.

The bear padded forward on its trunk like limbs, casually strolling across its domain without any fear or concern. There was no doubt in my mind that this creature was the cause for the ankle deep death that I stood in the middle of, especially as I caught glimpses of the enormous scars and injuries that it had sustained. One eye had been plucked from its skull, an eye that would have fit in the palm of my hand like an oversized apple and for the moment at least it couldn’t see me from the side I was standing on.
Smelling me was a different matter and its snuffling and ambling stroll stopped in mid stride as it caught my scent. Within a second it knew that I was there and I watched with growing horror as it turned to face me, growling a deep and menacing sound the reverberated through the ground and up my legs with its intensity.

With a bellowing roar, it rose up high onto its rear legs, upper paws waving in the air as it shook the very earth and sky with its challenge. The sheer volume was enough to punch into my chest and make me stagger backwards from the intensity and even when fully lost to my curse, my daedric roars would have been like the mewling of a kitten to the creature. Every bird within earshot took flight and I would have been surprised if there had been any lesser creatures remaining in the vicinity of such a roar. It was the pure representation of nature itself in all its fury and strength, and despite my vampiric nature I suddenly felt extremely small and insignificant.

The way it rose on its hindquarters allowed me to see the mess of scars and injuries that covered its stomach and torso. The scarring was so thick and intensive that entire portions of its body were completely lacking in fur. Blades and axes had been chopped into its flesh, arrowheads and crossbow bolts had sunk deep under the skin where they remained trapped under the skin and pinched and twisted with every undulating motion that ran through its body. Spears had been snapped off and incredulously I could see where a Legionary’s pilum had punched deep before the bronze length between the wooden shaft and iron tip had bent and snapped away. Even if I had encountered such a creature outside such an enchanted place it would have been impossible to ignore the fact that it was no ordinary beast.

With a shudder that was sent rolling through the earth the bear dropped heavily to all fours once more and began to charge. For several seconds that seemed to last an age I was stuck rooted to the ground, my instincts taking over and preparing myself for what was to come. My face twisted into a vampiric smile as it leant its aid and allowed me to prepare and ignore the pain in my wounds before bounding out of the creature’s way with a surge of speed that seemed to leave it shocked and bewildered. With vampiric grace I rolled across the soft soil, my hand pressing into the ground for balance while ensuring that I did not cut myself open on any of the discarded blades or torn edges of metal littering the clearing.

Frustrated, and angry at my sudden movement, the bear seemed to roll to the side and change the direction of its charge with an agility that belied its enormous bulk. For a creature of such size it was absurdly quick and agile, as I soon discovered as I dodged and weaved several wild swings of paws that could crush me into paste, armour and all. The wind off its paws was as strong as a tropical cyclone, and I was almost knocked aside under each one.

My mind was racing, especially as I rolled in the direction of its blinded side to get out of the way of its enormous tower shield sized paws. Each of its claws were almost as long as Sunchild but it was as I came up from my roll that I saw the incredible sight of a rusted javelin sticking out of the base of its skull before it twisted and continued to come after me. There was no possible way that the steel tip wasn’t trapped within the confines of its skull and spearing its brain. It should have been completely and utterly dead but I would have bet all of Viconia’s and my collective wealth on the fact that the owner of the javelin’s remains was somewhere nearby.

This was no a test of arms as it initially appeared and I continued to use my vampirism to shift, duck and weave my way around blows that left the ground quaking with their overwhelming power. Several times I shifted into mist before the creature learned of that particular trick of mine and began alternatingly inhaling deeply and attempting to roar my mist form apart. Its intelligence, coupled with the fact that it was clearly impossible to kill left me wracking my brain for possible answers.

Centuries of adventurers, heroes and the greatest warriors to have lived had tried and failed to kill
something that clearly could not be killed. It was not some animal they could slay and instead I found myself thinking desperately of Avita’s words before I had entered the forest. Unlike the bear I was quickly beginning to tire, my hip and leg screaming in agony even with my vampirism forcing me through the pain.

“Fear and respect Nature and all her creations.” I laughed bitterly to myself, rolling across the ground and almost causing the creature to trip over itself in its attempts to follow my vampiric agility. “Pretty fucking hard not to be afraid of something like this!”

Something seemed to click in my mind as I again had to roll out of the way of an earth-shattering blow of a paw larger than my entire torso. Every single other person who had entered had immediately tried to fight the creature, but how many of them didn’t? My suspicion was that none had tried anything else as it was suicidal.

My leg gave out from under me and the scream of agony almost matched the bear’s as I hobbled, ducked a wild blow of a paw before exploding into a swarm of bats and putting some distance between myself and the monstrosity. It was quick to attack and could build up momentum but it was not fast by any measure. I used the distance that I put managed to gain between us to grin at the creature with a mouthful of fangs as I drew Sunchild for the first time.

At the sound of metal on leather, the beast suddenly hunched down lower and growled with its ears pulled back against its furred skull. It’s one good eye focussed on the gleaming metal edge of Sunchild gripped tightly in my right hand for a moment before exploding into a sudden and violent surge of motion even more shocking than its attempts to kill me before. Its roars shook the very earth at my feet and sent tremors through my body with their incredible power but this time I did not make to move out of its path. Instead, after a second’s hesitation I threw Sunchild point first into the soil off to my side where it speared into the soil, purposely disarming myself and closing my eyes in anticipation.

For a second I feared that I had made a terrible mistake, but even as it crossed the dozen metres between us with frightening speed I felt the ground shudder and suddenly it fell silent. There were no more trampling impacts through the ground, no more snarling or bellowing roars but instead I could hear and feel its breathing instead.

When my eyes opened I found myself looking up at a bear that outweighed me twenty times over, hunched down on all fours and yet still tall enough to look down on me. Dodging and fleeing from it had not truly allowed me to understand its sheer size or primal strength, but finding myself close enough to lead forward slightly and touch it with my face left me uncomfortably aware of how dangerous it was. Especially how its drooling maw, speckled with froth from its exertions was almost large enough to bite down and swallow me without the requirement of chewing first.

“I would kneel,” I said, trying and failing to ignore the way my face was tight and writhing with changes as the vampire struggled for control “but a ghostly knight saw fit to hamstring me last week.”

A snort splattered me with drool and bits of mucous and I tried not to gag at the stench of rotting meat on its breath. If it decided to bite down, there would have been no chance to avoid it but I stood as still as the stones and oak in the centre of the clearing. Carefully it sniffed, shifting its head and staring at me with its remaining eye, an eye gleaming with predatory intensity that seemed to be daring me to move or to run or do something to force it into action once again.

For several long moments we stared at one another, eye to eye and with barely any space separating us. It was so close I could feel its body heat and sense the strange tingling feeling of otherworldly powers from the bear’s proximity. Like a castle gatehouse, its jaws opened wide and
despite the new surge of adrenaline that coursed through me it did nothing more than yawn and turn away.

I watched without a single twitching muscle as it casually strolled away, its footsteps trembling through the earth as it moved to the other side of the clearing and sat down as heavy as an avalanche. Some part of me broke out in an enormous smile not only at the fact that I had somehow managed to survive something that thousands of others hadn’t, but also the way that the two tonne creature suddenly began rolling in the grass like a cub.

The trial was completed, and the sensation of eyes upon me grew even stronger as I realised that the bear and I were no longer the only creatures within the clearing. Humanoid shapes grew from the trees and soil around me and the grass lengthened and grew entire seasons in mere moments, coiling together like masses of snakes and forming limbs, torsos and heads. From the trees, creepers and vines others coiled into existence as the forest truly began to walk and move closer. Lights flickered and danced from the towering canopy and began swirling into the clearing around the spriggans as they pried themselves from nature’s grasp and moved towards me.

There were no sounds from spriggans and nothing more than a strange chiming sound from the dancing will-o-wisps as they surged around the central oak. They, like the immortal bear were representations of nature’s power and by extension of Kynareth herself. The entire situation was so similar to the night in Anvil County with the Ranger that I couldn’t help but shiver at the hints of the raw power that had been revealed to me.

The oak itself groaned, its leaves rustling and blooming into shimmering rolls of colour as new growth erupted along branches before they turned into their golden and red hues. Sinuously the entire tree shifted and writhed, branches sliding and wrapping around each other to form arms and the upper portions melded together to form an obviously feminine face. The golden leaves flowed and rippled down the enormous spriggan matron’s body like waist length hair and the face alone was as large as what I was. Unlike the other dozens of smaller spriggans surrounding me and it, legs did not form and it instead remained firmly rooted to the piled boulders, its ‘stomach’ as such merging into the rock mound.

Like uncoiled snakes the root system twisted and tore their way to the surface, squirming about and twisting the rocks under them with incredible power. A few quick glances about allowed me to see that all of the other spriggans swaying in time with one another, the will-o-wisps churning through the air around the towering spriggan’s roots and lending it their power. The bounders shuddered and groaned, almost refusing to be budged but slowly they were separated and showed what they had contained for millennia.

On a tiny altar, raised slightly above the ground in a natural cleft within the very heart of the mound lay the Boots of the Crusader. Just like the other relics they were perfect and despite the cascades of earth and stone as their prison had been pulled apart around them not a single clump of dirt marred their polished surfaces. For moment I gazed across their pure forms, looking down over the interlocking plates protecting the ankles from harm, and the sharply pointed ends in front of the toes that looked sharp enough to draw blood. They were engraved with murals of trees and animals, and were works of art just as much as what they were forms of protection.

Another thought reached my mind as the spriggans all turned to face me, and a true dawning horror left my soul cold as the grave and my body shaking.

“Viconia is going to kill me…”
In game the Shrine to Kynareth is located in the Great Forest west of the Imperial City. To reduce the amount of travelling that Kaius and Viconia have to undertake I have moved it to the North West of Bravil instead.

Avita Vesnia and the other canon characters are going to be receiving heavy makeovers from myself throughout the story. I especially don't want to have to fill the ranks of the Knights of the Nine with a collection of Non-Combatants with no fighting experience against the likes of Umaril the Unfeathered. I was also never happy with the way that both the new and the old Knights of the Nine characters were so shallow and 2-dimensional so I'm certainly going to fix that.

I would love everyone's thoughts on the Knights of the Nine questline so far! It's only just beginning... :-D
Viconia was not pleased that I had retrieved the boots on my own, but she was certainly thankful that I hadn’t come to any harm. As I returned to the camp with the boots in my possession she was obviously warring with herself whether she should render me harm or be overjoyed in the fact that not only was I no more injured than I had first left the shrine. Not that any of her emotions were visible to anyone else but myself. She had simply stood there near the entrance of the forest, arms folded and appearing to be doing little more than silently fuming at the way I casually strolled out with a pair of the most priceless relics of all Tamriel.

Of everyone present, it was Avita and the other priests who were the most surprised to see me, and the way that I had retrieved their goddess’s relics. Avita especially seemed to struggle to comprehend what I had done, simply congratulating me before vanishing from sight. I gaining the impression that she had been left incredibly shaken at my accomplishment and she wasn’t the only priest who didn’t know what to do.

Some of them even tried to claim the Boots in the name of the Church of the Nine and it was only their fellows and the collection of pilgrims and travellers that convinced them that it wasn’t the best of ideas. Others were busy trying to come up with some way that they were going to report such an event, and several times I heard the muttered exclamations and disbelieving comments of a ‘miracle’ from more than just the priests and monks of Kynareth.

Viconia promised that I would have to make up my impetuosity to her in the coming days, especially after I was told by several of the pilgrims and priests that as soon as she had realised what I had done she had dressed herself and rushed down the path herself. Each time that she entered she would simply reappear a few minutes later as the path simply ejected her from the forest and judging by the way the priests were acting around her I suspected that she had been preparing to use her magicka to burn the forest down or something of the like when I had returned.

Despite some of the misgivings and the slightly forceful requests by some for us to hand the boots over to their care, we left the Shrine and the priests behind before the sun reached its zenith. My encounter with the immortal bear-guardian had left me with a somewhat twisted leg and a pair of injuries that had split open slightly in the process but unlike the thousands of others I was still alive, and the boots were in a saddlebag.

Each night we stayed within the various taverns and coaching inns along the road south to Leyawiin, and somewhat unsurprisingly the word of our success was travelling much faster than what we could. One or more of the pilgrims at the shrine, or even perhaps the priests themselves sending word of the events that had unfolded during our short stay would have reached every corner of the Empire by the time that the towering fortress-monastery of the Knights of the Stallion came into view. The Order was well and truly aware of our success as not only did the gate guards identify us but one immediately tasked a squire to run and find Sir Ramauld. Even before we were able to dismount, a collection of knights, squires, and men-at-arms had surrounded us, providing us with their congratulations and all trying their best to catch a glimpse of the relics that we kept securely contained in a saddlebag.

As we managed to make our way into the fortress proper we encountered Sir Ramauld and several other ranking members of the Order. Despite my attempts, I hadn’t managed to catch sight of Alexi and was left wondering whether I was healed enough to be able to spar the sword champion during
Sir Ramauld was cheerful and commanding in equal measures and picking up a giggling squire no older than eight years’ old who failed to move out of his way fast enough. The robes he wore covered his body like a surcoat, and left his forearms bare and easy to see the dozens of scars and injuries through a lifetime’s training and combat even before he became head of the Order.

“You both have seemed to be keeping yourselves busy since you last strode these halls.” He said as he shifted his way through the press around us while making gestures to send the majority back to their duties. “Again it appears congratulations are in order.”

“Thank you, sir.” I replied as the collection of knights and other members of the Order obeyed Sir Ramauld’s gestures to disperse. He motioned for us to follow him towards the dining hall away from the entrance.

“I hope you realise that there is only so much glory to go about and you might appear selfish in hogging it all?”

Viconia and I looked at each other with our grins growing larger by the second. “Wait until you hear the rest sir.”

“Should I be seated for this news?” he asked humorously.

Viconia chuckled darkly and placed the saddlebag on the table as we moved over to it. “The boots are not the first of the Relics were have recovered.”

The grin on Ramauld’s bearded face grew even larger even while he began shaking his head. “Of course not. Never let anyone say that anything is impossible as you two will go out of your way to prove them wrong. Which others have you retrieved?”

“The Cuirass and the Helm.” I replied, taking note of the way that his eyes looked over the two of us for any sign of the relics in question. “They are currently contained in the old Priory of the Nine in the West Weald.”

“They are well protected I hope?”

“By the original Knights of the Nine. Yes.”

The silence and his stupefied expression almost made me laugh as he struggled to find words. “But they died…”

“Two hundred years ago, yes. Rest assured that they are still quite capable of defending the relics and themselves.”

Viconia nodded to me and the way that my limp was still noticeable. “They nearly killed Kaius when we first reached the priory.”

“Let’s just say that Sir Alexi may be able to face Sir Amiel Lannus and have an equal chance in winning.” I added.

The grin on Sir Ramauld’s face grew even larger and revealed most of his teeth. “I’ll tell him that when he gets back tonight.”

“He’s not here?”
“No. He’s in Leyawiin conducting business on behalf of the Order. Knowing him though he’ll be attempting to claim the Mace of Zenithar again before he returns. Speaking of which, I assume that you both have come for the Mace yourselves?”

I shook my head, much to his surprise. “Not immediately. We have leads on other relics but we came here to request assistance from the Order.”

“Assistance? From us? Wonders will never cease when the Heroes of Kvatch claim three of the Eight Relics on their own and yet come to the Order of the White Stallion for help.” There was an increasingly jovial nature about him as he motioned for the two of us to seat ourselves at the table as he lowered himself into a bench. “The Knights of the White Stallion are at your disposal.”

“Through the Knights of the Nine we have been given sufficient clues on the location of the Shield of the Crusader but our journeying over the past months have shown us that we can’t do everything on our own. We are going to need help.”

He looked between me and Viconia as I spoke and the sense of respect from him seemed to grow. “It takes a lot to admit something as simple as such, especially from ones such as yourselves. What sort of help do you need?”

“We seek to re-establish the Order of the Nine, recruit knights and soldiers to our cause and arrange an expedition to Fort Bulwark to retrieve the Shield.”

“Where is the fort located?”

“To the east.” Viconia added. “On the other side of the border to Blackmarsh.”

“That’s no simple task.” Sir Ramauld sat quietly for a few moments thinking. “most of the region is inhospitable and can only be traversed by boat. For the most part it is nothing more than kilometres upon kilometres of swamps and marshlands.”

“We know. That’s one of the many reasons why the Shield hasn’t been recovered. We have a rough idea where it can be found but we will need guides, and would prefer if we weren’t the only one’s going.”

The nod we received was short and succinct. “I and the order can help out in all these regards. Re-establishing the Order of the Nine will not be something that will happen overnight. It’ll have to be raised and ratified by the Elder Council before it becomes official but between my authority and the Count’s influence it can be done.”

“Will Count Caro support such a thing?”

Ramauld’s barrel chest rumbled as he laughed loud enough that it echoed through the mostly vacant dining hall. “What do you think he’ll do once I go to him and tell him that the latest two individuals that he Knighted have retrieved three of the Relics of the Crusader, are seeking the others and intend on re-establishing the Order once dedicated to protecting said Relics? I’ll probably walk out of the castle with several wagons loaded up with the County’s entire treasury.”

“Finances are not going to be an issue and I believe we will have more than enough to fund the restoration and supply of the Priory and the Order. We will need manpower and skilled labourers.”

“The Order’s stonemasons and some of our craftsmen will be at your service until the priory is repaired, and as for manpower I’ll announce this evening during dinner that anyone willing to join your cause can do so once the reestablishment is ratified by the council. I’d wager that a number of the Order will be willing to join.”
“You would let other members of the Order change their heraldry?”

He turned and looked at Viconia and nodded. “Of course. Some of the more pious in the ranks would join you even if I didn’t give them the authority to do so. Besides, who do you think the Count is going recommend take command of the New Knights of the Nine? By the end of the month I am expecting you both to be my equals in rank, and besides that it won’t just be Knights of the White Stallion who will join you. Many have come to try to claim the Mace.”

I nodded in agreement. Ever since we arrived and even during the journey south we had seen or passed several traveling knights from Orders throughout the Empire. The word of the crusade to recover the relics had spread far and wide and despite its illegitimacy there were many who were responding to the call. Even from where we were sitting, the fortress was playing host to a handful of these travelling Knights in their various heraldry’s and standing out amongst the white tabards and surcoats of the Order.

“Wun l’kaaas d’Shar!” Viconia suddenly spat and I recognised the urgency in her voice as she invoked the name of her deity. “Errdegahr!”

Seeing the way that she had begun to rise and draw Dragonbane at the same time, Ramauld twitched and spun in his seat to see what had drawn Viconia’s attention. Unlike my own reaction of astonishment and instinctive fear, his reaction was one of welcoming as he regarded the enormous being in black walking into the central hall.

“Ah, Sir Gaz’kern! You have returned?”

Viconia’s initial reaction and way she identified the being as a daedra was not entirely unfounded as the towering figure turned to face Sir Ramauld. He was truly enormous, clad in a pure ebony plate armour that was a dark as a moonless night. Unlike the other plate armours throughout the empire, this one was fluted and curved, each graceful line in sharp contrast to the bulky steel plate or the segmented cuirasses of the legions. It gave me the strange impression of the pleated clothing that I had seen on occasion during our brief stay in the Imperial City but for the moment I was struggling to comprehend the sheer size of the man wearing it.

He was huge in a way that I had only seen orcs. In fact, he would have easily out muscled every single other being I had ever laid eyes on, including every legionary champion. Each arm under the armour plating was as thick as my thighs, hands large enough to grasp my entire face and even when I rose to my full height I didn’t even reach his shoulders. The term gigantic wasn’t enough to describe him, especially due to the fact that the armour alone would have weighed just as much as tournament plate and he moved about in it as though it was made of silk rather than ebony.

“I have. The Mace remains elusive.” He said simply, his voice a deep growl that seemed to vibrate my stomach. There was truly a daedric quality about him until he removed his helmet. Without it he was well over two metres tall, but the pair of winged horns jutting from the top of his full helm ensured that he stood at two and a half metres when fully dressed. “Unfortunately I must rely on your hospitality for a while longer.”

I knew my jaw was hanging open, as was Viconia’s. The dark skinned Redguard wearing the suit of armour was too enormous to appear to be a mere mortal but the humanity in his features was undeniable. With the quickest of glances, I estimated that his plate armour alone was sixty to seventy kilograms, and the man himself was closer to two hundred. Even if fully dressed, I would have only just weighed half as much as he did and this fact was not lost to me as he crisply bowed to Sir Ramauld, pressed his fingers to his lips and turned and walked away with all the power of tectonic plates.
“Well. That, was Sir Falid Gaz’Kern.” Sir Ramauld said as he turned and regarded our expressions of astonishment.

“Is he a titan, or was mother a giant?” Viconia stammered.

“Nothing of the sort. At least nothing that he’s admitted to.” Ramauld replied in good humour. “He’s from a tiny order of Knights dedicated to Talos near Rihad.”

“Didn’t think that the Redguards were big on Talos worship.” I replied, watching as the towering colossus of a man walked towards the stairs leading to the living quarters. There was a sword strapped to his spine that was as large as what he was; a greatsword as long as I was tall with a handguard the length of Sunchild’s blade. Only with my vampiric nature would I have been able to wield such a weapon but I doubted that I would have had any skill with it.

“They’re not, but some of them seem to consider that Talos is merely a different face of their god of war or some such. It’s so difficult to keep track of all these different gods and religions but Falid is certainly not one to cross.”

“Did he come for the Mace?”

“Indeed. He and his Order are big on retrieving and protecting relics of the gods, the Nine included. There’s not many of them from what I’ve heard but they are all supposed to be huge, powerful warriors.”

“He certainly looks like it.” I replied as he vanished from sight.

Turning back to Sir Ramauld, he was still grinning and I knew that he enjoyed witnessing everyone’s reactions at seeing Sir Gaz’Kern for the first time. “But back to our previous discussion, the Order can certainly help you out. No one will be able to join until the Order of the Nine is made official again but we can certainly start on the restoration by sending builders and craftsmen to the old priory. You’ll just have to show where it is exactly.”

“As for finances.” Viconia added, unclasping one of the pouches of gemstones and money she had that we had agreed to use. “This should be sufficient in starting the repairs. We will have to travel to the bankers in Skingrad for any further amounts.”

Sir Ramauld caught the flung pouch in a meaty hand and it was his turn for his eyes to widen at the sight of a king’s ransom of jewels in the fist sized pouch. “Ysmir’s breath, I didn’t think you were quite this wealthy.”

“When you go diving into ancient ruins every second week you tend to accumulate wealth quickly.” I replied simply.

“Only if you make it out alive.” Nodding, he closed the pouch and tucked it to his belt. “I can also assist with guides into Blackmarsh. There’s an Argonian couple who live here in Leyawiin that the Order has used on occasion to guide us through the eastern portions of the county. They may have been born and raised here but they’ve spent more time in Blackmarsh and the area than many of the lizards who currently live in there.”

“Trustworthy?”

“For the most part. Weebam-na is a bit of a scoundrel but he’s loyal when you pay him well. I trust him and his mate enough to leave the lives of my knights in their claws when they are on long distance patrols, so you won’t have any issues with them.”
“When can we meet them?”

“Tomorrow I expect. I'll send for them in the morning and tonight at dinner you can make the
announcements of the renewal of the Knights of the Nine and your quest to Blackmarsh. How soon
are you planning on leaving?”

“Within the next few days. We’ll gather supplies and ensure that the farriers and hostlers have what
they need to care for our horses. I doubt that where we are heading is any place for horses.”

“You are correct. If the fort isn’t near any Imperial highways, then they are better off staying here.
They will be looked after well in your absence.” Looking between us both thoughtfully he nodded at
his thoughts. “I will speak to the Count this afternoon in regards to your intentions and I should have
some form of response by dinner. In the meantime, unless you have other business I suppose we
better start making preparations.”

Leaving us with a grin on his bearded features, Viconia and I were left to our own devices and we
began settling in for a short stay within the Stallion Lodge. Our rooms had been left untouched
barring some mild cleaning by the Order’s servants and we were quickly able to change out of our
armour and travelling clothes for something more comfortable for our surroundings. We did take the
opportunity to deliver some of our equipment to the Order’s smiths and leatherworkers for repairs
and other maintenance we couldn’t undertake on the road but otherwise there was little to do but
wander the lodge and wait for the evening meal.

After we were Knighted and before we left, Sir Ramauld had made mention that he had sent recall
notices to every member of the Order. I don’t think that I really considered the numbers that were
contained within the Order’s ranks until they all began assembling for the evening meals. A dozen or
more roasting spits and an entire kitchen of ovens were required to feed the sheer numbers of men
and mer who served the Order. The number of fully fledged Knights alone equalled more than three
full cohort’s worth, and then there was the collection of Men-at-Arms, servants, craftsmen and
specialists required to equip, supply and simply feed them all. Unlike a Legion Casta which was
comparable in numbers, a Knightly Order was a specialist fighting force and required even more
assistance and logistical skill to maintain. While the Legions did have cavalry in the form of
Extraordinarii, they certainly didn’t make up half the numbers of each Legion.

Almost all entered the dining hall, and to my surprise especially there was enough space for every
member to sit at the dozens of tables arranged in an enormous double-U shape. Sir Ramauld and the
other commanders sat at very head of the table with Viconia and myself taking our places to his right
and the rest of the Order simply found places wherever they liked. There was a semi-formal
arrangement in place but that only arose from the fact that the three Lances that acted like the Order’s
Cohorts had their own innate familiarity but it certainly wasn’t set in stone. What did surprise me was
that the overall feel of the Order at rest was much closer to the rough camaraderie of the Fighters
Guild, rather than the rigid, indoctrinated style of the Legion.

As the food was served and the Order began the evening meal, there was an obvious stirring
amongst the members, especially due to the fact that the Boots of the Crusader were sitting at the
place of honour on the head table where they, and their unique nature were clearly visible. Heads
would turn almost in waves of movement, each and every individual turning and looking and staring
at the Relics as though trying to convince themselves that they truly did exist.

Sir Ramauld gave everyone time to finish their meals but the word had gone around that an
announcement would be made and there was an obvious air of expectation through the enormous
hall. He almost didn’t even need to rise to his feet, grasp one of his gauntlets he had purposely left on
the table for just this purpose, and rap it three times on the wooden surface for quiet to fall.
“My brothers and sisters. Tonight, for the first time since our founding we can truly say that the Order of the White Stallion have been gathered under one roof. Tonight not only do we acknowledge the return of the two newest members of the Order and raise toasts to their deeds, but we will also be looking forward to their futures that we will share in. You all know me well and that I am not one for grandiose speeches, so please welcome back our brother and sister, Sir Desin and Madame Devir.”

There was not an overly boisterous applause or shouting, instead a rolling thunder and clapping as the members of the Order either brought their hands together or slapped their palms on the surface of the tables to acknowledge us. there were quite a few flagons, mugs and glasses raised in toast to us and the Boots and I found myself considerably ill at ease at such attention. If Viconia seemed nonplussed she certainly didn’t show it as she simply grinned devilishly at the crowded hall.

Sir Ramauld nodded in our direction and I silently cursed to myself as I hoped that he would have spoken for longer and bought me more time before it was our turn to speak. Carefully, I raised myself from the bench where Viconia and I sat alongside the Nordic Knight Commander and looked over the hundreds of pairs of eyes making note of my every move. I certainly hoped at that very moment they all couldn’t see the way that I kept my left arm down by my side, my fist so tight that it was going numb in an effort to crush all my nervousness into that one extremity

“My greetings to you all.” I said simply, projecting my voice as I had when I still served the legion and had to train some of the Hastati. As I tried my best not to look at any of the assembled men and women of the Order, I couldn’t help but notice that not all present belonged to the Knights of the White Stallion. There was a collection of other individuals in differing heraldry and coloured tabards and tunics from other orders, all obviously travelling knights seeking out the Mace of the Crusader and enjoying the hospitality of the Stallion Lodge.

“Madame Devir and I have joined the Crusade to recover Pelinal’s Relics and we have been incredibly successful in our quest thus far. The Boots are but our latest, public success as over the past two months we have also retrieved the Helm and the Cuirass.”

The ripple of excitement and surprise washed through the room and it prickled at the back of my neck to hear that there were some who doubted our claims and voiced their displeasure openly. Some would have been speaking out of hurt pride having failed their own attempts in retrieving some of the Relics, but for the most part it was simply shock at hearing such an announcement.

“The Helm and Cuirass are safe for the moment and while we intend on re-establishing the Order of the Nine to safeguard the relics we currently seek the others. The Mace, Shield, Greaves, Gauntlets and Sword are yet to be recovered and we both know of the Shield’s whereabouts.”

“You do not seek the Mace?” called out one of the knights seated closer to our table and I shook my head.

“The Mace has been within the Cathedral of Zenithar in the City for thousands of years. How many of you have attempted and failed these past days, even past years in some cases and have been unsuccessful?” Judging by the way that many of those present; Knights and servants alike lowered their gazes or looked otherwise downtrodden I doubted there was a single being in the entire hall who hadn’t tried at least once. “The Mace, for the moment is safe and secured, protected by the city and the dozens of pilgrim warriors attempting to retrieve it. It will remain there, but every moment that passes is another moment that the Shield remains unsecured from the faithful.”

While I had the appearance of looking each and every person present in the eye, I was using an old trick and looking just above everyone’s heads, seemingly looking everywhere and at everyone at the same time. I would also turn and look at those seated at my own table, looking over Sir Ramauld and
his senior commanders seated on the opposite side to Viconia and I. Although I struggled to hide my smirk as Sir Alexi managed to catch my eye and winked in my direction.

“We will instead seek out the Shield. We know roughly where it is but it is not a simple journey. So far we may have been successful in claiming three of the eight Relics but we will need help finding the others. In the coming days Viconia and I intend on journeying towards the East and seeking the Shield in the western bounds of Blackmarsh. Anyone who is willing to join us is welcome.”

This particular statement had all the effect that I expected it to have. The room would have fallen into a crashing silence if not for the crackling of cooking fires arrayed the far end of the hall. Every being before me had long since lived in County Leyawiin and there was not a single one of them who didn’t understand the dangers such a simple statement contained. Blackmarsh was notorious for being the death of whole armies and for most of the past four thousand years it had been an untouched wilderness. The Legion under Tiber Septim had conquered it through a combination of military might and diplomacy but it was still notorious for killing thousands of non-Argonians through a combination of disease and plagues. Many of which only the Argonians could resist and ensured that other than the cities the rest of the province was mostly devoid of civilisation.

Many of who sat before me knew this better than most. The Order of the White Stallion, in its geographical proximity to the boundless marshes, swamps and mangroves that consumed the land to the East was well versed in the region. It had been these men and mer sitting at their tables who had scoured the lands free of bandits and outlaws and knew all too well just how dangerous the undertaking I had announced was going to be.

As such it wasn’t a surprise when no one moved at my announcement. There was the shuffling and the series of uncomfortable coughs as many turned and spoke to their companions or outright refused to look in my direction but neither Viconia and I were truly surprised. To anyone in the Empire, the mere mention of such an expedition into Blackmarsh would have garnered the exact same response as the life expectancy of anyone was going to be low. Between the monsters that dwelled within the darkness of the swamps and the numerous diseases that rotted the flesh and mind there was almost no better place for a Relic of the Gods to have been hidden for so long.

What Viconia and I didn’t expect was the loud smack of a flagon on a polished wood surface as one of the hundreds present rose to his feet. Short but well built, one of the travelling Knights wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and turned to face me. “I'll go.”

My grin was heartfelt and I nodded my thanks to the man as felt his scrutiny. “Your name Sir?”

“Detane Acqunax.” He said simply, and I heard the way his words flowed with an obvious accent from far away Highrock as he pronounced his name as De-tan-ay. “I will journey with you on this quest.”

The shuffling to my side opposite Sir Ramauld caught my attention and I felt my jaw drop as Sir Alexi rose to his feet. Ever since the Knight Commander had sat down to allow me to speak, the sword champion had been whispering in his commander’s ear and the smile on the red head’s face was enormous.

“I will also join you. The gods know that you will need someone of skill and grace to make up for your obvious shortcomings.” There was no mistaking the ripple of amusement throughout the hall as Alexi did an elaborate and theatrical bow. “My sword is yours Sir Desin.”

“As is mine.”

The deep, baritone voice cut through the air as effective as a thunderclap and as one the hall
stiffened and turned to the enormous armoured figure striding from the main hall. Everyone within the
dining hall, barring the two senior Knights tasked with guarding the Boots were dressed in little
more than pants and tunics but the black armoured figure striding through the midst cut an even more
impressive sight than he normally did. Sir Falid Gaz’Kern had been the only one who had not
partaken in the meal and had instead been outside of the dining hall whether mediating as he had
done through the afternoon or on some other errand. At my proclamation he had appeared like an
armoured reverent of destruction, striding up between the tables before stopping and bowing with his
helmet with its giant winged horns tucked into an elbow.

“The Sacred Order of Talos’ Black Knights will assist you in this quest Sir Desin.” He said and I
struggled not to feel as small as an ant even with more than ten metres separating me from the titanic
Redguard warrior. “Together we will retrieve the Shield.”

“I… Ah. I thank you Sir Gaz’Kern.” I stuttered, hearing not only the series of muttered exclamations
through the entire hall at his appearance and announcement but also the way that Viconia sucked in a
breath through clenched teeth at the sheer intimidating quality of the Knight before us. “We welcome
your aid.”

Thudding a fist almost the size of my head to his chest with jarring force, he bowed again and turned
and strode off as quickly and decisively as he had appeared. His presence and announcement had
dulled all conversation and murmurings from the rest of the dining hall and despite asking if there
were any more volunteers there were none. The mood was left sombre and yet there was still an air
of expectation and celebration left in the wake of the Black Knight’s departure but the dining hall
emptied very quickly nonetheless.

It was difficult not to feel confident with the likes of Sir Gaz’Kern and Alexi choosing to join us on
our trip to Blackmarsh. Viconia especially seemed amazed that not only had we gained the assistance
of such a warrior as the towering Redguard, but also one of, if not the greatest swordsman in the
Empire. Detane was unknown to us, but we were also yet to meet our two potential guides which
ensured that when we retired for the evening we were still somewhat anxious about our coming
endeavours.

When morning came we found ourselves within Leyawiin itself and meeting the two individuals
who had been recommended by Sir Ramauld as our guides. Weebam-Na and Bejeen were a pair of
locally born Argonians who had made their living as hunters and trackers throughout the swamps
and mangroves to the east of the City and had established themselves with the Order as being a
couple of the handful of trackers reliable enough to help the Knights deal with the occasional group
of bandits. Within seconds of meeting the pair and shaking Weebam-Na’s scaled hand I had
immediately realised that Sir Ramauld was indeed correct at them being a pair of scoundrels. They
had that certain air about themselves and the subtle traces that all their possession may not have
originally been theirs to begin with.

Weebam-Na especially was a twitchy, but likeable fellow. The appearance of Viconia and myself at
his door had originally sparked a strange kind of concern from the lizards but they were also equally
as quick in relaxing and getting to the point of our meeting. Within a few minutes and turning down
a somewhat cooked meal of roasted swamp rat they were having for breakfast the four of us were
seated at their dining table hunched over a map I had gained from the Order that covered the entire
region from Leyawiin to Stormhold near Morrowind’s border and Greenspring towards the centre of
Blackmarsh itself. It covered a majority of Blackwood in considerable detail, but it was obvious that
no surveyors had truly succeeded in mapping anything more than a few kilometres from each of the
major roads and trade routes that crossed through the province like a thinned spiders web.

“You certainly weren’t kidding when you said you needed to go deep into the Black, that area is as
remote as they come.”

“Populated?”

The Argonian hunter shrugged, his muscles coiling under his scales and I could see the various scarring where some… thing had left its mark in the past. He didn’t have the build to be an archer, but judging by the rack of various spears arrayed against the wall and the fact that the environment to the east wasn’t suitable for bows I knew that he wasn’t the sort for killing his prey from far away.

“Not really. A few scattered tribes and maybe the odd marsh village or two but otherwise that region is deserted. And for good reason.”

“Dangerous is it?” Viconia asked simply.

Bejeen hissed softly to herself in amusement and I immediately thought of a pot coming to boil. “No. At least no more dangerous than the rest of the marshes. No one really lives there because there is nothing there of any worth.”

“Might be the odd few escaped slaves or other outcasts but nothing that should give us any troubles.” Weebam-Na’s grin was almost crocodilian as he bit down hard on the meat covered bone that he had been gnawing on since our arrival and worried a strip off. “How many are coming?”

“The four of us, and three others.” some kind of sick curiosity made me watch him eat the chunk of meat by simply tearing off a strip and swallowing it whole. Despite my few experiences with Argonians I couldn’t get used to how they couldn’t chew. “I don’t think that we will have any more.”

“Good. Simpler for food and water. Also cheaper for passage to Rockguard.”

“Passage?”

“We’re going to need to catch a boat from here to a settlement closer to this fort of yours.” A scaled finger tipped in a short claw tapped at the nearest major settlement marked in the region we intended to travel. “It’ll be a month’s or more journey otherwise just to get there. The two of us scalies would get there fine but we’d have to leave your corpses in the Black. There’s a hundred kilometres of ogre and monster infested bogs and marshland between us and where you want to go. We’ll travel by boat from here to up the Panther River until we reach Rockguard. From there we’ll have to go by canoe or the like as it’s not going to be shallow or easy going.”

“Fair enough. How much for your services?”

Another chunk of meat was peeled away from a bone and he made the act of thinking it over. “Four hundred gold for a month’s passage. This doesn’t include supplies though; those you will have to get yourselves. Where you want to go is too dangerous for anything less.”

Inwardly I grinned as I had guessed the amount he was going to suggest and had already prepared for it. Several more of our gems had been evaluated and exchanged in the city before we had arrived and the solid thump-jingle caught both their attentions as I dropped it in front of him.

“Two hundred and fifty gold. You’ll receive the other two hundred and fifty once we get back.”

A clawed handed plucked the pouch full of coins and felt its weight. While inhuman there was a gleam of satisfaction in the both expressions of the two Argonian hunters and Weebam-Na grinned even wider with pieces of flesh dangling from between teeth. “You know how to bargain smoothskin.”
“I used to be a forester in the Legion. I know better than anyone that good guides are worth their weight in gold and only a fool doesn’t listen to those who know the area. Sir Ramauld recommended you both and I trust his judgement.”

“Gailer has always been an agreeable employer.” He replied simply, rolling a few of the coins in the palm of his hand. “Very well, you have your guides. How soon are we leaving?”

“How soon can you be ready?”

“Ha! For five hundred septims we could start walking there right now, but for a group of landstriders we will not leave until we know that you are all prepared. Pack light but remain armoured, and bring as many spare waterskins as you can carry as I’m uncertain how we’ll go for fresh water once we leave the cities. Food won’t be as much of an issue but I’d prefer to get you back in one piece and not shitting yourselves to death. I’ve never met a dead man who can pay me what he owes me.”

“And I’d certainly be happier being alive to pay it.”

We shook hands again and this time I felt the way that his scaled fingers clenched harder than before as he subtly tested me. “Unless you have any objections we will leave the day after next. It will give you time to acquire supplies. We will make arrangements for the boat.”

Allowing the vampire to rise to the surface slightly, I found it amusing the way that he kept his face carefully blank in the attempt to keep his surprise at the way that my hand felt as solid and unyielding as steel. After a moment’s pause, I nodded, letting him go and allowing him to salvage something from our little test. Judging by Viconia’s expression, she knew all too well what I did and I could almost hear the sarcastic comments that she was going to provide during our return to the lodge.

But other than the few sarcastic quips about proving the girth of my manhood, our return to the Stallion Lodge was short and noon was almost upon us. before we had all retired for the evening Viconia and I had arranged to meet the other members of our party to organise the journey ahead of us. By the time we walked through the gatehouse, the trio were already waiting at the steps in front of the towering fortress-monastery.

“Success?” Alexi said as he watched us walk over to them from his position leaning against the stone walls. 

“Indeed. Weebam-Na and his mate agreed to take us. The day after tomorrow we’ll leave by boat to Rockguard and make our own way from there.”

His grin was contagious. “Excellent. I love it when a plan comes together.”

Returning his smile I looked over the other two members of our party. Falid was dressed in his amour that he never seemed to take off, towering over us all and emphasising just how short the last member of our group really was. While anyone appeared tiny to the enormous Redguard, Detane was by far the shortest of the group with a couple of fingers of height between him and Viconia. She may have been average in height compared to other elves such as the Bosmer and Dunmer but the Breton was shorter again. Although he was far from weak or frail, his was body extremely well-proportioned and solid.

There were several things that were extremely striking about his appearance, and while Falid’s presence drew the eye, it was Detane’s that truly kept it. His face was hard boned and almost reaching the point of malnourishment with well-defined cheeks that looked permanently sucked in as though everything around him displeased him. There was a hardness about his expression as he
looked upon the world with cold, uncaring eyes; they were the eyes of a warrior or a killer but the
scars across his face quickly distracted anyone who looked at him. While Alexi, Viconia and myself
all wore our knighthood scars proudly, Detane’s face was a mass of ruined tissue. While a brief
glance would give the impression of someone who had either suffered grievous wounds in battle,
upon closer inspection it was obvious that the wounds were arrayed in a grid like pattern that had
been purposefully inflicted.

His armour too was an oddity. Between Falid’s enormous ebony plate and Viconia’s and my unique
armours his was a shambles. A cheap brigandine covered his torso, the leather layers sandwiching a
layer of steel bars as wide and as thick as my finger woven throughout and for the most part it was
tattered and rusting. In several places many of the metal pieces were simply gone, cut or gashed
away in combat and never replaced. Others hung loosely where the leather had been ripped or
shredded and it simply appeared as though he didn’t care about the state of his equipment. That was
except for the thin bladed rapier at his hip that hung like a piece of artwork, the blade meticulously
polished and gleaming where it hung in a simple metal loop attached to a fading belt. If it wasn’t for
the fact that he had proven himself as a Knight to be allowed accommodation in the Stallion Lodge I
would have simply assumed that he was an adventurer or member of the Fighter’s Guild down on his
luck.

“We are travelling to Blackmarsh very soon indeed.” Detane muttered, scratching at his jaw where
several days of stubble grew. Everything about him appeared ill-kempt except for his waxed
moustache and sword at his hip.

“We all have the rest of today and tomorrow to prepare. Viconia and I will source most of the food
and other supplies for the journey but it will be several weeks before we will return.”

“I have everything I need right here.” A gloved hand tapped on the moth-eaten bag that was
attached to his back and Datane shrugged. “I travel light these days.”

“I also have everything I need Sir Desin.” Growled Falid as I turned to look at Alexi.

His grin remained as large as ever as though he was joking at the entire world’s expense. “I suppose
I better throw a few things into a sack and drag it along. Should I bring my nightwear?”

“You are in an awfully good mood.” The growing smile on Viconia’s face was also one of hidden
amusement and for most people it would have left their blood running cold.

“Of course. To tell you the truth I was getting bored being cooped up in the lodge. You can only go
so long looking at the same four walls before you begin worshipping Sheogorath. If Gailer kept me
here for any longer, I would have thrown my lot in with some daedra worshippers just to find a nice
Oblivion portal for entertainment.”

“That sounds like you.” I replied. “Good thing you’re with us so we can keep a good eye on you.”

“Hey!”

Behind me and Viconia, the voice cut through our small talk and drew the attention of all five of us.
It wasn’t a subtle yell either, but a few decibels softer than a battle cry to cut through the noise of a
group of knights moving towards the gatehouse to take their steeds for a ride.

The sight of the orc strolling into the Lodge grounds wasn’t an unusual sight as such. Several
members of the Order and a large number of the Men-at-Arms were greenskins but this one didn’t
belong to the Knights of the White Stallion. Sauntering across the cobbledstone square in front of
the main doors, the appearance of the fully armoured greenskin drew the eye from sheer size and force
of personality alone.

It was Viconia that picked up the crucial detail that I had initially missed, as her eyes widened and jaw clenched in an effort to keep her reaction hidden. “By Shar… It’s female.”

I had never met anyone before who was as tall as the Black Knight of Talos standing just to my rear, but I was used to most orcs towering over me. This one was no different and I had to tilt my head back slightly to look her in the eye. Like any decent armour, the orichalcum plate she was wore was sexless and mostly hid her body from view but there was no denying the subtle femininity she possessed. It made the fact that her shoulders were almost as wide as Falid’s and that she appeared to have the strength to pull my arms off even more incredulous.

“Youse those knights headin’ to Blackmarsh on that fancy holy quest thingy?”

“Yes. We are.” Alexi said carefully, giving the orc a quick look up and down and chuckling to himself. While not small man himself, she was well over a hundred and fifty kilograms of muscle and out weighted all of us bar Falid.

“Good. I’m comin’ with ya.”

The silence that fell between all of us was only for a moment as I shared an expression with Viconia and Alexi.

“Well. This is unexpected.” Laughed Alexi. “Why do you want to come with us to Blackmarsh?”

“I have business to the east. I heard youse lot were headin’ there so I thought I would come along.

I looked over the way that her armour was heavily battered and had seen a significant amount of fighting. The mace at her hip and the shield slung over her back were also well used and while well looked after there was no doubt that there was only so much cleaning could be done before the blood and stains were permanent. “What’s your name?”

“Mazoga gra-Ornim.”

Viconia looked confusingly at the way that Alexi, Detane and I fell silent at her name and I carefully licked my lips. Although I didn't know much about the orcs outside of the few I had served with during the legion, I knew enough of their native tongue to translate.

“Mazoga… the-Orc?”

At my query she simply sighed loudly, put her hands on her hips and rolled her eyes. “Yes, I’m an Orc. I was born under a rock and I have no parents so I don’t need a family name. Is that going to be a problem?”

“Yes.” Detane’s sneer was as sharp as the sword at his hip. “We don’t need a daedra worshipping pig with us.”

The temperature of the courtyard dropped by several degrees and I saw the flush of anger rise up from Mazoga’s collar and darken her features. Detane’s expression remained unchanged except for the fact that it became noticeably more challenging.

“Careful little man.” Mazoga’s voice lowered itself almost to a whisper that threatened the worst kind of death imaginable. “I’ve dropped turds larger than ya…”

“Really?” Detane stepped forward and before any of us could react or understand what he was
doing, his sword had appeared in his hand like magic and the very tip of it was pressed into Mazoga’s cheek. Even Alexi was stunned at how quick the diminutive Breton was and the overwhelming control that he had with his blade. “This… turd is more than equal to the task of cutting filth like yourself down to size.”

The surprise at his actions was absolute. While both I and Alexi had reacted swiftly there was several seconds before our brains reacted to the way that Detane had drawn his weapon against a being he had only just met. We were both slow in comparison to Falid as a midnight black gauntlet suddenly clasped itself shut around Detane's forearm with all the unyielding pressure of a beartrap.

“I believe that there are laws disallowing violence and assaulting others Sir Acqunax.” The Black Knight growled. There was silence between us all and other than the sudden paling of Detane’s face at the overwhelming pressure being exerted on his wrist. I was the only one with hearing sufficient to hear the way that his bones, and the armour plate protecting his forearm began creaking under the strain.

Mazoga for her part remained still, grinning and staring at Detane with an expression positively oozing challenge despite the way a trickle of blood began making its way down her cheek. The show of his skill was impressive, as was her determination not to give an inch.

“Release me.” The rasp in his voice was the only sign of Falid’s grip on his arm. Even if he wanted to, he sword wasn’t budging a millimetre and it may as well have been entrapped in a boulder.

“Not if you are going to continue assaulting every person we encounter.” For a moment Detane’s eyes moved to mine as I addressed him directly, before they returned to the amused expression on Mazoga’s face. “Which is even if we let you come with us after a stunt like this. You are meant to be a knight Sir Acqunax. Just because you pledged yourself to us doesn’t mean that we want you.”

“I’m not a knight. I’m a chevalier.”

Alexi snorted loud enough for everyone to hear and his customary grin had returned. “Disenfranchised eh? Let me guess; it was because of your wonderful people skills and unyielding spirit of cooperation?”

Detane’s face became flushed with anger and I stepped forward, spearing everyone with an expression I had last used against a group of fresh legion recruits. “That’s enough from everyone. Detane, whether you belong to an order or not doesn’t matter to me. You pledged yourself to Viconia and I and in doing so pledged yourself to recover the Shield of the Crusader. Now there is nothing in this world or beyond that means that we have to necessarily take any of you.” My eyes met each of them in turn and I ensured that all of them present knew that I wasn’t just talking to the Breton with his hand engulfed by a black gauntlet. “Viconia and I have already recovered three of the relics on our own. I have confidence that we would succeed in the fourth but as I have nearly died in the process I especially would prefer if we had some help. But… if we don’t work together then I will leave you all here without a moment’s hesitation.”

Carefully, I turned and looked between Dartane, Mazoga and the towering Falid. “Do we have an understanding?”

Detane’s expression soured as though he had bitten into something rotten before carefully nodding. Alexi and Falid did the same as the Black Knight released his grip on the batted vambraces on the Breton Chevalier’s arm. As the blade lowered itself from where the point had dug into green flesh, Mazoga was grinning ear to ear with immense amusement.

“Not even a knight. Pah! Even I’m a knight!”
“The same goes for you Madame Mazoga.” I said, rounding on her with a snap in my voice. She started at the sound of my voice and the way that I had taken a few steps towards her, looking over her armour for any traces of heraldry or markings. “What Order do you belong to?”

“None.”

The silence that fell was deafening and I squinted in confusion as I looked at her. A tenseness that filled her and for those few seconds her eyes were moving everywhere but meeting anyone’s gaze.

“Who is your lord then?”

She sniffed loudly, rubbing at the shallow cut with a crude but heavy gauntlet that smeared the trickle of blood into her cheek. “I’m a free knight. I don’t have or need a Lord.”

As he had shown before, Detane had snapped at her proclamation and his face had contorted with rage. “There is no such thing as a knight without a Lord!”

“Detane, shut up.” I hissed and he quietened again as I turned back to Mazoga. “So I’m guessing that you haven’t been officially knighted?”

There was a shake of a head, minute but still enough to leave the dozens of ponytails and braided decorations jingling together.

“Well then. I’m sorry to say that you aren’t technically a knight.” Her expression darkened and I could sense the building anger at my words and the insult they implied but I ignored it. “But it is highly likely that over the coming days that Viconia and I will be recognised as Knight Commanders which means that we will have the opportunity to do something about it. Whether you are a knight or not has no effect on your fighting ability so you are more than welcome to join us.”

The strangulated sound from Detane’s throat was clearly audible even as the hints of a smile creased Mazoga’s face. I turned and looked at him as well, nodding in his direction. “Same goes to you Detane. Disenfranchised or not doesn’t matter to me as long as we all work together. We are heading into the most dangerous of regions in all of the Empire where two in every five Legionaries die in the first year of serving. We cannot and will not abide anything that will threaten our chances of success or survival as we can’t afford to. If you don’t agree to this, then this is where your part in this quest ends.”

Again I ensured that all present were aware that I wasn’t just speaking to Detane and I smiled grimly at the expressions on Alexi’s and Falid’s faces. I gained the feeling that I had earned some favour or respect from the red headed swordsman and the towering Redguard which went a long way to soothe the hammering of my heart at the responsibility that had found its way onto my shoulders.

Thankfully I wasn’t truly alone and Viconia made her presence felt from where she had been sitting back watching everything that was unfolding with the utmost amusement. She moved over to my side, flashing a mouthful of white teeth at the small group before us with enough intensity to make them all look somewhat uneasy.

“Al’t’yin. Now that Kaius has said his piece, perhaps we might all start considering just how we are going to dive head first into a million kilometres of stinking marshland?”

Chapter End Notes
These next three or so chapters mark the last of my "re-written" work from 2011 before I have to start writing from scratch.

These characters (Especially Falid, Alexi and Detane) existed in these chapters and have remained unchanged besides a bit of polish.

Falid may seem excessive as a character, but I was basing him off the Australian Wrestler/actor Nathan Jones (ie the massive Greek warrior who Brad Pitt/Achilles kills in the opening scenes of Troy)

Falid is my (not-so-subtle) nod to the old Reymon Ebonarm: the Yokundan God of War from previous TES titles who has since been retconned out of the universe.

Talking numbers, the races in Bloodtide Rising are roughly as follows:

Imperials, Redguards, Argonians average 180cm in height, 80-90kg in weight

Nords: 190cm, 90-100kg

Orcs: 180-200cm, 100-120kg

Altmer: 190-200cm, 80kg

Bosmer and Bretons: 160-170cm, 60-70kg

Khajiit... everything from a housecat to a sabretooth tiger... haha

Falid in comparision is 211cm, and 186kg! Massive and potentially excessive as a character, but very easy to compare to Nathan Jones (206cm, 152kg) and...

***Drum roll***

_Hafþór Björnsson;_ the Icelandic strongman and actor known for portraying _The Mountain_ from Game of Thrones... (206cm, 180-200kg!)

So, Kaius and Viconia are now joined by the Black Knight, Tamriel's greatest swordsman, an orc on a quest for vengeance... and Detane... haha.
Chapter Notes

There doesn’t seem to be much real lore of the Argonian culture, language or how they live within Blackmarsh, at least not much that I could utilise in creating this chapter.

So I came up with my own headcanon. :-D

We left the following morning before the sun had even reached its zenith. Weebam-Na and Bejeen had made arrangements for our passage via the rivers on board one of the several trading vessels. These ships used the Panther River to reach the more inland settlements and so for the first five days we did little but wander the decks of the massive river carrack while trying to keep out of the way of the crew. Like many of the ships that headed north past Leyawiin, these ships were designed for use in the potentially shallower waters of the Niben and as such did not have the size of their larger, ocean going counterparts. While advantageous, these river vessels were unable to traverse the oceans and were mostly limited to sailing very close to the coasts, or in the case of the Sparrow; restrict themselves to a single trading run from Leyawiin to Greenspring in the heart of Blackmarsh.

From all accounts it was a profitable run for the captain and crew despite the fact that the ship was technically sailing up river and against the wind. My boots had always tasted soil, and maritime matters were a mystery to me but it was impossible not to notice that one of the crew, an Altmer by the name of Raveumaire was a skilled Alteration mage. It was her role in ensuring that the sails, no matter the direction or strength were always filled with the wind. It was a potentially boring role, but one that paid exceptionally well for one of her talents.

The first days of our journey into the depths of the Blackwood were almost overwhelmingly calm, peaceful and in my opinion exceedingly dull. So used to the freedom and ability to choose my own path and wander the lands, being stuck on board a single ship less than fifty metres in length was excruciating. Even more so by our new companions.

Alexi was bar far the most welcome of the group, and surprisingly I found myself with a considerable amount in common with Weebam-Na and Bejeen. As Tamriel’s premier swordsman and a pair of hunters with backgrounds and experiences similar to my own respectively, we spent a considerable amount of time chatting or sparring in Alexi’s case. There was no possible way short of full vampiric transformation that would allow me to contend with his overwhelming skill, and the more we practiced the more I struggled to decide who would have been greater; Alexi, or Amiel Lannus.

Other than meals or during our own practices I saw little of Viconia. She busied herself with exploring and learning as much as she could about the ship and how it sailed and the life of those on board. Her and Raveumaire spent a lot of time together whenever the mage wasn’t busy with her duties discussing the finer points of magicka and enchantments, and on one very brief occasion I witnessed the Altmer allowing Viconia to weave the magicka infusing the sails herself. Both of us shared the similar passion for learning and understanding, but Viconia’s tastes were in the arts of Magicka while mine were more direct and focussed on the art of the sword.
Our other companions were not as easy going, nor were they as sociable as the rest of us. Falid would stalk the decks of the ship in full plate and for the most part he spent a considerable amount of his waking hours training, mediating or praying. He was concerning for our expedition but in a different way to the others as his appetite was almost equal to four others combined. However, his enormous strength lifted a considerable amount of our concern as he was more than equal to the task for any heavy lifting. Especially when we witnessed him training below decks using a ballast stone that weighed more than I did. Although it was difficult to decide what was more impressive, the fact that he was picking up the stone and conducting lifting repetitions with it or the fact that Mazoga was soon seen taking part as well.

Mazoga was more an enigma that most of the others. Her unusual name aside, there was no doubting her determination, drive and especially strength as she out muscled all of us by a considerable margin with the exception of Falid. Again, the only way that I could contend with either of them was if I was fully transformed and against the likes of Falid I knew it wouldn’t have been as simple as it should have been against mortals. Both he and Mazoga were brutes of individuals in term of raw strength, but both knew their limitations which made them dangerous. Falid’s enormous two meter greatsword had the utter advantage of reach and when wielded by an expert like himself allowed him to contend with the likes of Alexi’s skill. As for Mazoga, her mace was simplistically brutal but when wielded by someone with her physical prowess, meant that even shields and the best armour would amount to nothing. One hit from any weapon, whether it be a simple wooden club or her flanged orichcalum mace would shatter bones, pulp flesh and crush armour into scrap.

There was one individual that we didn’t see for most of the journey. Several times we had even suspected that Detane had simply skipped ship at one of the several minor river towns we docked with along the journey but just as we thought he was truly gone, he would simply reappear. The rest of us had signs of gaining familiarity with one another but if anything, Detane was going out of his way to ignore or otherwise distant himself from the rest of us. He spent most of his time in the quarters that had been allocated to him, door closed and silent and other than appearing for meals he would only appear on deck once or twice a day at most.

It was very quickly obvious that he was certainly no slouch in combat. One of the nights that the ship lay at anchor, Viconia and I found ourselves on deck and witnessing Detane going through some of his own training. For those few minutes that he practiced with his rapier, both Viconia and I were muttering between ourselves at his level of skill. The way that he had drawn his blade within seconds of meeting Mazoga had proven that he was extremely quick and had a high degree of control, but after that short time that he practiced before he realised he was being watched we had both realised that he was easily our equals. His armour may have been excruciatingly poor but his ability with the sword was immaculate.

After a brief stay at Rockguard where we bid our farewells from the Sparrow and its crew and disembarked for the final time, we began our true journey. While relatively close to the border between Cyrodiil and Blackmarsh, the region we were throwing ourselves into was among the least populated and remote within the Empire. Little in the way of resources worth journeying through the marshes and swamps or simply too difficult to traverse, the whole region was void of major settlements and only the odd town or village could be located within its depths.

In my mind, the clearest fact to the worth or value of the region lay in the fact that no two maps had the border located in the same place. Depending on the year, century or simply by the personal opinions of the cartographers the borders shifted and moved. In other regions this was more than enough excuse for regions or entire provinces to go to war, and there had been more than one time that the Legion had to step in between the great Dunmer houses when one map or another showed the border shifted as much as a hundred metres in either direction. Here instead there was the
opposite, where neither the authorities from Cyrodiil or Blackmarsh really cared too much, and those who chose to live there could do so outside of those who would otherwise be considered their rulers.

Sir Henrik had truly chosen the site for the Fortress protecting the Shield of the Crusader well. Rarely travelled, sparsely populated, remote and entirely lacking in exploration and governance, it was the perfect concealment. Only through the notes and rough maps that Viconia had sketched during the time at the priory while I was recovering did we have much chance at all. The directions were mostly vague, but between his directions and Weebam-Na and Bejeen’s local knowledge we knew the best places to look.

We were forced to outright buy a collection of canoe-like boats after the original owner refused to hire them out to those he considered ‘dead-men-walking’ for considering journeying into the Blackwood. After replenishing our supplies and loading our tiny vessels, we began the arduous journey away from civilisation. Splitting ourselves into pairs we all had to paddle down the steams and smaller tributaries that threaded from marsh pockets to mangroves, to flooded rainforests and minor lakes. It was brutal, back breaking work and after the first day I simply crawled into my bedding and slept like the dead until morning. So used to marching and walking for hours on end, there was no way that I could have been prepared for paddling for half a day or more at a time, especially in the noticeably hotter, humid climate that made up the majority of the region.

Every evening it rained and throughout the day when the sun was visible through the canopy the temperature rose dramatically and left the air so thick with moisture that we almost needed our blades to cut a passage. Three hundred kilometres to the west and the north west and in our rough direction of travel back towards Cyrodiil, the temperature Niben beckoned with its sunny days and pleasant nights. My own experience with Vvardenfell was one of cold and snow, of dry heat in the summers and storms consisting of sleet, hail and snow. The Blackwood in comparison was hot, sticky and leaving more than just myself with sweat drenching every scrap of clothing we wore as we left the majority of our armour and equipment in the bottom of our boats.

Despite the climate that I and most of the others found immensely disagreeable, there was a strange beauty to the marshlands. Strange flowers grew from the trunks and roots of the hundreds of trees that grew whether they were in water or not, and everywhere life seemed to swarm and multiply around us. This was the home of reptiles and insects and everywhere they could be seen moving through the air and water almost totally oblivious to the collection of humanoid moving through their home. Dragonflies the size of ravens buzzed through the air, humming across the surface of the water almost faster than the eye could see and resting upon the dozens of roots jutting from the still surface in a riot of colours and shapes.

What little beauty could be found was soon drowned by the hostile environment of the region. Clouds of biting flies and other varieties of insects swarmed around us, burrowing into exposed flesh and sucking blood at every available opportunity. Under the guidance of Weebam-Na and Bejeen, we quickly learned how to keep the various parasites at bay by smearing a layer of tree sap taken from specific trees across our skin and despite the foulness of the substance, it was infinitely better than the dozens of bites and stings that covered us by the time we all had found enough of the plants. We were all warned not to enter the water if we could help it, as many of the things dwelling within it were dangerous to non-Argonians. Several times we saw the dark looming shapes of oversized creatures and carnivorous beasts inimical to our presence dwelling beneath the surface of the water and it was more than one occasion that we were left feeling uneasy as a shadow moved through the muddy waters.

Through the regions of solid ground, we saw shapes of prowling jungle cats; dark furred beasts of size and ferocity that ensured that several times we remained in our canoes rather than stopping to
rest and stretch our legs. In other places we came across flat patches of seemingly solid ground, but Weebam-Na showed us that looks were deceiving by throwing a rock the size of my fist into the soil and watching how it sank into the thick muck under the layers of dead leaves.

Even the plants in Black Marsh were deadly to outsiders, as we were told that the further south we headed the more dangerous and outrageous species existed where plants could prey upon the natives and could even reportedly move under their own will. I watched at one point where a large area of ground had been consumed under a layer of creepers and thick green vines with flowers the size of shields. At Bejeen’s urgings we kept a considerable distance from this portion of the shore, but I still managed to see one of the flowers move with a sudden shocking speed and close up around the wriggling form of a small mammal who wandered too close.

Despite the dangers, I was strangely surprised to find that the area wasn’t as thinly populated as I had imagined. In the region we were searching dozens of Argonian tribes could be found and every couple of days we would come across one. I certainly wasn’t surprised to hear that it was possible that many were so remote that they had never even heard of the Empire, nor had met any non-Argonians in generations. Further into Blackmarsh itself there were hundreds, if not thousands of smaller tribes, some perhaps only a dozen or more in comparison to the larger settlements such that were a match of any other city within Tamriel. It also wasn’t just Argonians who made Black Marsh their home. Clans of cannibalistic bog ogres waged war on all those who crossed their paths, and it was from this dark land where the migrating clans of Goblins had swarmed into eastern Cyrodiil and reached as far as Skingrad in their exodus. Even those looking for riches and other commodities could be found plying the northern swamps. Dumner slavers constantly braved the Marsh’s dangers to bring back their captives to Morrowind and Vvardenfell despite the ban that had been enforced since the Nerevarine’s return, as did smugglers of all descriptions attempting to get their goods into Cyrodiil and dodge the Tax Agents.

Despite all of this, we found three villages scattered about the marshes. Each were relatively tiny, one little more than a pair of families huddling together in their wooden stilt-houses, and the others closer in approximation to towns. Each, for the most part allowed us the opportunities to rest and recover, especially how one night we had spent sleeping in shifts in the bottom of our canoes due to the utter lack of stable, safe soil to camp on. After that restless attempt of sleep none of us were looking forward to do the same again.

By noon on the fifth day we had turned our course slightly north by Weebam-Na’s suggestion, as he told us that both he and Bejeen had been tracking signs of Argonian habitation the further we travelled. We continued onwards where the trees began to thin out slightly, and I saw how Weebam-Na was becoming more and more wary the further we paddled along the small waterway. Carefully, and with silence falling over our small collection of canoes we moved ever closer together, keeping our eyes open and our hands ready to drop our paddles and grasp weapons and shields if required.

“Is everything all right ‘Bam?” I asked him, calling him by his nickname that he acquired from Alexi.

“So far,” His voice was a low hiss as he turned his head from side to side, tasting the air and blinking slowly and steadily with both his inner and outer eyelids. “The village is nearby. Just a little up further upriver.”

“Like the others?” I too was looking about for potential ambush, keeping one eye on the encroaching foliage and the other on my bow in its protective covering.

“Similar in size unless I’m mistaken. There are tribal signs marked along some of the trees on our left,” With a head turned he flashed his fang filled mouth. “and one of their sentries have been
following us for the past two hundred metres.”

I frowned, looking around and carefully drawing upon the vampire in me to detect where the Argonian happened to be hiding. There was nothing that gave me any hint that we were being followed, but I knew better than to question Weebam-Na’s instincts and skills. I had learned very quickly that while my vampiric senses were incredible, I had significant difficulty detecting anything or anyone under the surface of the water.

The portion where the village was located was in a section where the forests, dense marshes and the trees that grew out into the waters had been cleared away over the course of generations. While there was solid ground scattered about everywhere, this particular portion was by far the largest unbroken section for dozens of kilometres around. In addition to being the only stable section of ground, it was also surrounded by natural defences in the way of exceedingly thick vegetation. I would have easily bet that the forests around the village had been cultivated by the locals as a curtain wall of sorts. Even this section of the river had been chosen as anyone approaching by river would be bottlenecked and stymied in any attempts to attack or raid it.

As for the village itself, it was little more than a small collection of mud mounds, barely even huts at all with only the barest amount of marsh tree wood for roofs and supporting. Unlike some of the other villages and settlements we had come across, this particular village was more traditional in design and architecture. Each of the mud-brick huts were built close together with no more than a few metres separating them and their neighbours. There were only two or three dozen at the most clustered about the highest portion of their jungle surrounded island where a single tree spread its branches high.

“Well. This is interesting.”

“Bam?” As we slowly made our way towards the nearest portion of solid ground, I could feel the sensation of eyes upon my flesh.

“Well, this village has its own Hist. That is unusual for its size.”

“One of your spirit trees? This place must have been important.” I said, my aching body lending strength to my sarcasm despite my intentions.

Weebam-Na hissed but it was more of amusement that annoyance. “Don’t mock the Hist, at least not where one can hear you. This village may have been larger and more important some time ago but that’s not the most interesting thing about this place. This place reeks of fear.”

I look a slow and careful look the clearing containing the village but was unable to see any signs of disturbance other than the eerie lack of life itself. Smoke rose from a handle of fires no larger than a typical campfire but unlike Weebam-Na, my own senses were unable to detect any strange smells.

“What do you mean?”

He nodded towards some of the closest huts as we paddled up to the collections of duckboards reaching out over the water in the centre of the village. “I mean that we all should be wary here. We don’t want to force anyone to act rashly.”

At his nod I looked closer at the buildings, seeing how their windows and strangely curved doorways had been crudely barricaded with boards, logs and stones. It was obvious that they had only just been barricaded and I could’ve sworn that a clay pot in the nearest doorway was still
shaking slightly after being placed just as we brought our tiny boat in close to the bank.  

“Keep your hands from your weapons, unless things go to oblivion in a hurry.” Weebam-Na murmured, making a few short gestures to the others in the boats close behind us.

As he or Bejeen had done when we had arrived at the other villages, he climbed carefully out of the boat and purposely left his weapons behind. The other villages that we had arrived in had been nervous at our presence and their lack of familiarity with non-Argonians but this settlement was appearing almost entirely desolated. While we had only know each other for a short time, I knew him well enough to notice how he was treading very carefully along the path leading from the collection of fishing piers and jetties towards the nearest buildings.

Like the other times, he had simply begun making a clicking noise, standing tall and turning slowly as he made a series of strange calls that rose the hairs on the back of my neck. The limited number of Argonians in the Morrowind Legions had left me unaccustomed to their true culture but I still couldn’t help but chuckle lightly at the image of Weebam-Na as a tall and wingless bird as he called out to the village.

His clicking and hisses continued for several moments and somehow his strange warbling cry seemed to echo through the entire area. For a few moments it did appear that the entire village was deserted, but my vampire hearing allowed me to hear the return cry emanating from within one of the buildings. Weebam-Na merely tilted his head, looking into one of the doorways as the crude barricade was carefully dragged out of the way.

While the local was indeed an Argonian, they shared little similarity with our guides. Where Weebam-Na was tall and strong, his hide rough from a lifetime of hunting within the bounds of County Leyawiin, this new Argonian appeared almost stunted and deformed in comparison. There was however a strange strength to it as it moved out into the light outside of the rough hovel, looking up into Weebam-Na’s features with a tilted head and tasting his scent on the air. The two of them stared at each other, trading words in their strange chittering tongues loud enough that it soon drew the rest of the village’s inhabitants from every doorway and shadow.

After several minutes of clicking speech, Weebam-Na looked back at us, providing a brief nod before continuing to chitter and hiss away with the other Argonians. With the simple gesture, the rest of us quickly disembarked, attempting not to fill our boots with river water and muds as we had on the previous times before dragging the boats up the side of the bank. It was a routine that we were all becoming increasingly familiar with and within a few minutes the boats were secured under the curious eyes of the villages inhabitants.

There were dozens of them, of all shapes sizes and ages. Some were old, hunched from age and covered with overgrowths of scales and parasites. Others were young hatchings, barely standing up to waist height and not even having shed their first skins, but no matter their age they all wore rough leather harnesses and belts made from netch and crocodile skins and little else. Unlike the other races, the Argonians didn’t truly need clothing or armour to protect themselves from the elements and they used it more for decoration and utility.

The crowding mass of the village’s occupants parted as Weebam-Na and the first Argonian who appeared lead us into the village. There was a considerable gap between us and the nearest locals as they all kept their distance. While we were all armed we moved carefully and without any outwards signs of aggression as trust was a rare commodity within the Black. Some of the younger, more curious ones moved forward but scaled hands from their parents would reach out and dragi them all to safety behind the shifting wall of scales and leathery hides.
“Is it just me, or does this whole place feel… off?” Alexi commented offhandedly as we moved through the tiny crowd. “I thought that Argonians were resistant to diseases and such but this lot looks very sickly.”

“We are resistant.” Bejeen’s reply was short, but she too looked uneasy. “There are some sicknesses that can claim us but these people are starving.”

I caught Viconia’s glance around all of us from where she was walking by my side. Her face and mine were flushed with heat and I especially was suffering from an increasing sweat rash from the tropical humidity. “How are they starving? We have had no problems catching game or food on our way here.”

Towards the back, the weight of Mazoga and Falid was making itself felt through our boots and the layered stones that had been built between the huts. Mazoga simply grunted, gestured with an enormous gloved hand at those clustered around us and shrugged. “They have no warriors. There ain’t any who ain’t very young, or very old. It don’t look like there is a single one of fighting age in the lot of ‘em.”

“Out hunting maybe?” I suggested, seeing the expression on Bejeen’s face and the way she shook her head.

“A village would never willingly send all their warriors and hunters out at the same time and leave it defenceless. I caught a glimpse of their nursery back there and its defended by a pair of middle-aged hatchlings. That’s a job for the largest and most experienced males.”

“Plague?” Growled Falid. His voice as ever was deep and purposeful and he was able to simply look over everyone’s heads, providing him with a clearer view of the entire settlement.

“No.” Bejeen looked around at us and I could tell by her body language that she too was uneasy with being here. “If there was a plague or some form of sickness then we’d only be seeing the healthy and the young, rather than the sick and the old. Something else has happened here, and I would put money on some form of conflict.”

The centre of the village was a large circular space built around the towering tree growing in the very middle of the all the huts and buildings. It was as tall as an oak, the branches twisting and spread out like the dozens of other species within the marshes and yet its leaves were somehow spined like a pine but as supple and bending like swamp grass. There was something distinctly wrong about the tree that I couldn’t quite put my finger on and with a glance around the group I knew that I wasn’t the only one who felt a similar way.

Standing before the tree were a small collection of individuals, two of which standing out of the rest of the village by their appearances. One stood half my height and if he had been human I would have assumed that he had been a young boy barely in his teens, while the other stood half my height due to the fact that it was hunchbacked and bent. The younger Argonian was dressed in a collection of leathers that had obviously been made for a being much larger than himself, and in a mildly comical way wore the bottom jaw taken from a crocodile or other great lizard of the marshes. On a full grown Argonian it would have sat under the jaw almost comfortably and have provided the appearance of an enormous under bite but on this middle aged hatchling it was obviously awkward and very ill fitting.

The other being was one that none of us wished to move closer to within seconds of laying eyes on
it. While much, much older than the jawbone wearing youngster, this Argonian was filled with a strange maniacal energy as it twitched and writhed this way and that. So jerky and uncoordinated were its movements it almost appeared as though it was suffering a fit and unlike the rest of us or the villagers it turned and moved in very quick, very precise movements. It seemed entirely incapable of performing a slow, steady motion with any part of its body and the way that its head jerked and stared at us as we approached made us feel even more wary.

What was worse was unlike all of the others it almost appeared to be clothed. Great sheets of leather taken from all manner of creatures and beasts hung down over it like an ancient, crumbling cloak of hide, and somewhere in its mass it had inserted branches, horns and talons to prop its horrid garments in seemingly random places. In a stark contrast between it and our two Argonian guides, the bits of flesh that we could see under the leather was tainted and sporting vast swathes of fungus and moss growing over its scales as though it was a partially submerged stone. The thickness and the sheer quantity of the surface of its skin that had been covered showed that it had been carefully cultivated over years, if not longer to reach that current state.

Moving into a rough, curved line on the semi-paved path looping around the base of the ancient tree, we all came to a stop facing the two individuals and their assorted followers. The tribe was still exceedingly wary of us but it was more and more apparent that they were entirely lacking in males, and most females in their middling years.

To my surprise, the younger Argonian stepped forward and began to squeak and hiss at us, the seemingly enormous jawbone rattling in the movements while struggling to remain locked to his own jaw. He continued for a few minutes, before stopping and looking over us all as the silence dropped heavily over the village.

“Well?” I said simply, looking over to Weebam-Na in expectation after he replied and made the show of baring his throat to the young Argonian. He had explained in the first village that we had come across that a gesture was a sign of respect to those in positions in power and such an act from himself would show that he was to be trusted. After all, showing one’s throat and offering someone else the opportunity to rip it out was about as unsubtle as one could get to show that they weren’t there to cause problems.

“Wuleen-Tulm Kaysareeth welcomes us to his village. He has just formally introduced himself and Greejan-Ze. Greejan-Ze is the village’s Tree Minder; what you all would call a shaman.”

In front of us all the moss and leather covered shaman was shifting and moving about, stepping down onto the rocky path in such a way that seemed more insect that Argonian. His motions somehow hurt the eye and as he moved closer I could help but shrink back in his presence. The sheer overwhelming aura of his power was almost as potent as the rotten, musky stench that emanated from his being While used to mages and being in Viconia’s presence there was something very strange about the power that the mage commanded.

The young chieftain also moved closer, his tongue flicking out of his mouth with each step as he took his time to regard each and every one of us. Despite my unfamiliarity with Argonians in general it was difficult not to see the trepidation and uneasiness he was showing despite his best efforts not to. His position and the head of the village meant that he could do nothing else but show power and control and a lack of fear, which when facing beings such as Mazoga, Viconia and especially Falid was quite difficult to do. Falid was easily three times his size in height alone and weighed as much as five or six of the members of the tribe combined.

It was when he stopped in front of Viconia and me that his interest, and that of the tribe in turn
seemed to stay. As the leaders of our expedition we stood in the centre, but it was our armour that seemed to have their attention rather than who we were. In the heat and moisture and while paddling our boats we all ensured that we were stripped down as much as possible but the dangers of the marshes ensured that we weren’t entirely unprotected. Each and every one of us wore our armoured under-layers, which for all bar Detane with his brigandine meant chainmail. Falid’s chainmail was as black as the rest of his armour, Alexi wore a thin shirt that would have been laughable if not for being made from Mithril and Mazoga’s was thick and durable and made from orichalcum. In contrast Viconia’s and mine were very noticeable, especially with the hundreds of individual daedroth scales that covered us from thigh to neck and our arms down to our wrists.

Our shirts were of great interest and for several minutes the young chieftain looked over them, taking into the way that the different scales were overlapped in such a way to maximise protection. After some time, he had simply stopped, looking between the two of us and hissing in his native tongue.

“Wuleen-Tulm is asking what manner of creature your armour is made from.” Weebam-Na translated for us.

“Tell him that it was taken from a pair of creatures that we killed months ago. Is there a word for daedra or do they have understanding of Oblivion?”

Chittering in amusement, Weebam-Na laughed lightly and nodded. “They do indeed.”

When he translated my words, there was a noticeable ripple of surprise through the assembled mass and the young Argonian in front of us struggled to remain stoic and entirely impassive and almost succeeded. He turned briefly and laid eyes on the hunched figure hanging back between him and the tree, speaking briefly and giving a nod.

“They don’t trust us, and so he just instructed the shaman to consult with the Hist and their ancestors about our purpose here.”

“Stupid misbegotten peasants.” As always, the odd times that Detane spoke his voice was filled with loathing and bile. “The heretical beings should kowtow to their betters rather than questioning them.”

“This isn’t the time or place Detane.” Alexi warned. “Let them have their little superstitions and rituals. Maybe they’ll let us stay the night.”

Viconia, standing by my side muttered under her breath for a few moments before looking about the village. “Ka Shar zhah kaliath. Drag me out of here if you must but I will not be spending another night in one of those damn canoes.”

I watched the shaman with interest as he scrambled back towards the tree, moving over to where a curious arrangement of hanging clay bowls were suspended from the branches to collect the thick sap where it dripped from the bark. There was a handful of similar arrangements scattered about in the branches, some so high up that only an experienced climber could reach them. Most it appeared had collected a significant quantity of sap that had the texture of honey and yet flowed as sluggishly as tar. It was one of these bowls that he acquired as carefully as he could with his erratic movements before turning and moving back towards us all.

Whatever ritual I was expecting, it certainly wasn’t the shaman dipping his head over the bowl of sap and taking an enormous lick of the strange material. The effects were also unexpected and he twitched so hard that I was surprised that he didn’t break bones, his eyes writhing about in his skull until they were looking completely different directions and shuddering like he was suffering a stroke.
Rapidly hissing and chittering in their native tongue, the words if they could be called as such began pouring from him in an obvious rush that struggled to escape him quickly enough. Weebam-Na, Bejeen and the other Argonians were all standing as though entranced and we all were left looking between them and the shuddering, spasming shaman.

“He says that eight have come seeking wisdom and nine will return.” Weebam-Na translated for us helpfully, waiting a few seconds between sentences to listen and hear what the shaman was saying. “Death, doom and destruction walk in their paths but only to those who seek to hinder or to stop them. We are great warriors, hunters and slayers of the mightiest of beasts. Our paths may be dark, but we somehow provide our own lights and lights for others.”

There was considerable consternation amongst the villagers and there was a surge of what could only be described as excitement at the shaman’s words, even as he collapsed at the end of whatever visions that had consumed his mind.

Forcibly spitting on the ground, Detane looked about the village and sneered with even more force than his customary nature. “Parasite riddled, brain addled animals.”

“They know about the shield.”

“Looks like it.” Replied Alexi and I felt a measure of surprise as I thought I had been whispering my words too quietly for the others to hear.

“Pagan superstitions and heretical rituals, that’s all that was.”

I turned and gave Detane an expression of annoyance even as I rolled my eyes. “He specifically said that we have ‘come seeking wisdom.’ The shield is the artefact of Julianos. You know? The God of Wisdom.”

The villagers were shifting closer to us as the shaman picked himself up from where he had fallen and had started a serious appearing conversation with the young chieftain and Weebam-Na hissed in agreement to my words. “Kaius is correct. He spoke of wisdom not as a thought or knowledge but as a physical thing. I believe this is the place we seek.”

“How certain are you?” Viconia asked.

“Very. We are in the right area by your maps and directions and there won’t be many other villages nearby.”

Bejeen also nodded “I agree. There won’t be any other places such as this. It will give us time to rest even if we aren’t right.”

Turning back to us, the young Argonian and his oversized decorative jawbone looked between us all and nodded, hissing and clicking to Weebam-Na and waiting with an air of expectation as our guide translated.

“We have been granted permission to stay as long as we need, and Wuleen-Tulm has also granted us use of the communal hut for a place to stay. He makes apologies for being unable to provide much in the way of supplies but they will assist us where they can.”

“Excellent.” I gave a light bow to the chief, patting my fist against my chest in a legionary salute that
seemed to startle him slightly before he realised it was a sign of respect. “Bam, find out where this hut is. We’ll secure the boats and shift everything into it for the night. While we are getting settled I want you and Bejeen to ask about and find out what the village knows about the Shield. Also try to find out exactly what is going on here too because I have a bad feeling about this.”

“You aren’t the only one.” Viconia muttered, looking about the village again and trying not to visibly shy away from the locals as they shifted forward now that their chief had allowed us to stay. Most, now that they were closer were obviously thin and malnourished and several, especially some of the older villagers had ribs clearly defined in their chests.

There were a number of them, well over a hundred living within the several dozen huts in communal groups. There was a strange order to the place that seemed at odds with the way how one out of every three of the locals were emasculated to the point of death, and despite their resilient hides there were some that were struggling with clusters of parasites and other marshland creatures. In the process of returning to our boats and beginning the process of unloading them, I even saw one group of hatchlings being cared for by a slightly older Argonian who was using the glowing tip of a burnt stick to sear away the wriggling things that had clustered in an armpit. It was a sight that we had not seen at the other villages we had passed through, and it was obvious that this place was much poorer than any that I had ever seen before.

Leaving Weebam-Na and Bejeen to wander the village talking to the locals and making arrangements, the rest of us unloaded and retrieved everything of value from the boats and stowed them in the hut allocated to us. in a village such as this, anything of value was everything that wasn’t the boats themselves, right down to the mooring ropes and the paddles. Briefly I even considered seeing if the seats nailed into the hull were worth attempting to be retrieved but thought against it only because of the time it would take to remove them.

The communal hut itself was large and accommodating, surprisingly so for a village of this size. Even the floor to our surprise was actually stone, and while lacking in mortar was clean, solid and so well built that any of us would have struggled to slip a dagger between the cracks. It was unusual to an extreme, especially how the rest of the village didn’t appear to have been the sort of place for such skillfully made masonry but we were not begrudging a place to sleep that was dry and not moving about underneath us.

There was more than enough space within its baked-mud walls and marsh wood roof for two, possibly three dozen individuals to live comfortably and we all put the fire pit in the centre to good use almost before we had finished moving inside. Our water stocks had run out quickly and while this had been something we had expected it took considerable time to prepare fresh supplies. Weebam-Na and Bejeen were able to drink directly from the rivers but for the rest of us with perhaps the exception of Mazoga who appeared to have a stomach made of iron, we had to boil every drop no matter whether it was for drinking or bathing. Every meal that we prepared, every time we took a drink, it was from carefully prepared sources that took much longer to prepare than it took to consume.

Our equipment too required much more maintenance than it had previously, and our days whenever we hadn’t been in our boats had been repairing and cleaning everything we owned. Mud and muck accumulated on every surface, clinging with a grim tenacity and threatening rust and decay on almost everything we owned. Only Alexi’s mithril chainmail, Falid’s ebony armour and Viconia’s and my swords seemed immune to the creeping filth and rust which meant the rest of us were kept busy throughout our waking hours. In a strange turnabout, the only person who didn’t need to spend much time repairing and cleaning was Detane as the poor quality of his equipment meant that further rust and grime did little to further affect his possessions. His sword and scabbard however were lovingly
maintained and kept to a razored edge that matched Sunchild’s.

“At least this place is cosy.” Alexi said with an ever present cheer that seemed utterly indefatigable. He could be buried up to his neck in a latrine and would still smile and comment about at least his face wasn’t covered.

“It could be an upper class tavern in the Imperial City compared to another night in the boats. I think my spine is bent in three separate places.”

Smiling while rubbing his polishing cloth over the surface of his armour, he briefly looked up at me before turning his attention back to the demi-plate armour carefully laid out in front of him. As typical for his level of skill, whenever he wasn’t mounted on his horse he wore a significantly cut down plate armour that didn’t hinder his agility or speed and only really protected the vitals. Much like Viconia, he was a duellist and relied on his reflexes and not being hit in the first place rather than armour.

“I would have thought that a man such as yourself was used to sleeping rough? How many times has Viconia kicked you out of bed of a night?”

“Only the times that he has failed to live up to expectations.” Viconia added with a grin that was simultaneously blood chilling and amused.

“So… Every night then?”

We all laughed and he barely looked up to catch the wadded up ball of cloth that I threw at his head.

“If only your abilities within the bedroom were as gifted as your skills with a blade.” The tone and words in Viconia’s voice was nine tenths challenge and one tenth teasing and Alexi sighed, leaning back with an expression of fake sorrow on his face.

“Both are satisfying in their own ways. Although if I was to be as skilful with a blade as I am in bed then I’d have to get a bigger sword.” using his polishing cloth, he pointed in the direction of the far wall where the enormous shadow of Falid sat as still as the mud walls themselves. “I’d have to start wielding that hunk of raw iron that Falid has over there…”

Falid sat quietly, legs crossed and hands resting on his knees with his armour arrayed neatly next to his and his enormous greatsword resting with the tip facing him. It truly was a monster of a weapon and while not much larger than other greatswords it was incredibly made. Without my vampiric strength it was too cumbersome, the hilt alone as long as Sunchild and with a pair of wicked hooks set thirty centimetres above the crossguard that Falid could use to catch other blades and twist them out of their owner’s hands.

With his eyes closed, the only motions that separated him from being a colossus of a statue was the steady rise and fall of his chest as he mediated. “Strive not to be a success, but rather to be of value.” He rumbled without opening his eyes for a moment.

Even sitting the sheer size of the Black Knight was humbling and it was almost incomprehensible that such a big man could move as smoothly or gracefully as he did. What was even more unusual was his ability to sit as still as a stone for hours on end, doing nothing more than controlling his breathing, mediating and praying.

“There are many women throughout Cyrodiil who value my… Swordwork.” Alexi said specifically to Viconia.
“All flash and no staying power. Those painted damsels who are so easily swayed by gracefulness and a smile never know what it is like to have a true man under their power. Say what you like about Kaius however, but there is no denying a legionary’s stamina.”

My expression must have been obvious despite my attempts to hide it and while Alexi was obviously enjoying my sudden embarrassment, Viconia’s amusement was hidden to all but myself. Her eyes though did move about the room to our other companions; Detane meticulously running a whetstone along the edge of his rapier to keep it sharp and well-oiled and Mazoga who was sitting closest to the fire pit with her boots off and plucking the fat bodied leeches from a leg. The golden eyes came to rest on Falid and there was a look that I knew all too well came across her face even if it was in jest.

“Sometimes I miss the customs of the Underdark, like the breaking in of new pleasure slaves. The largest and strongest were the hardest to break, but they were the most rewarding...”

Falid briefly cracked an eye in Viconia’s direction, before shutting it again and continuing on with his meditation and showing no sign of her words. Alexi however suddenly looked a little uneasy if still highly amused. “You know… You terrify me sometimes Viconia.”

“How do you think I feel?” I replied. “In these past months I have fought vampires, werewolves, daedra and have jumped headfirst into Oblivion on two separate occasions and she scares me more than all those combined.”

“Behind every great man, is a woman that scares the shit out of him.”

White teeth flashed in her face and there was immense amusement in her expression and the three of us were left laughing much to Detane’s annoyance. In a partially concealed attempt to change the topic Alexi ended up grimacing and gesturing to Mazoga where she sat close to the fire removing the leeches and other parasites that had attached themselves to her.

“You know there is an easier way to get rid of them, right?”

We had all suffered attacks by the blood thirsty creatures as well as the varied collection of fish and insects that all seemed intent on feeding upon our flesh. Like the others I was also covered with dozens of mosquito bites wherever my flesh hadn’t been covered by my clothes although I had an increasing fear from the fact that I hadn’t needed to deal with leeches. No one else had noticed yet but I had not had to remove one at all, as the black worm like creatures had a habit of dying within minutes of latching onto me. Whether it was my vampirism of daedric blood I was uncertain but so far no one had seemed to notice such a discrepancy.

She looked up at Alexi, down to her enormous green leg where the last surviving pair of leeches sat hungrily feeding away and shrugged. “Eh. This is quicker.” Pinching one of the leeches, she simply tugged it off her leg and ignored whatever pain she must have felt and the blood streaming down her leg from where it and the others had been feeding. The crushed remains were tossed into the fire, and she continued on with her hunt without even a flicker of emotion.

Shifting at the sudden appearance of Argonians walking through the opened doorway, we all saw the familiar sight of Weebam-Na and Bejeen as they returned from their walk through the village and speaking with the locals. They had a small collection of dried fish, and behind them a trio of younger hatchlings were bringing in a handful of gourds and clay pots that appeared to be filed with fresh water. Without a word, the younger Argonians placed them down in a pile near where Mazoga sat, turned and simply left the hut.
“Find anything interesting?”

“Not really.” Bitterly dropping the fruits of his labour down into one of the empty cooking pots for storage, he also leaned his spear against the wall next to Bejeen’s. “The whole village is quiet and none of them are willing to talk to us about much at all. Every time that we try to talk about the Shield, the local area or recent events they clam up tighter than a caiman’s jaws. It was hard enough to barter for dinner.”

“These scum probably have already plundered the shield and seek to hide it from us.” Detane snarled, his whetstone stopping mid blade. “I say we tear this place apart and find it.”

“They have no need for trinkets or relics such as that.” Weebam-Na explained, showing his hunters patience as he stared down the Breton chevalier. “They value the Hist and not much else. Something is going on here and my sniffer is telling me that we need to find out what.”

“Addicts and inbreds the whole lot of them. The only redeemable feature about them all is that least they aren’t pigs.”

As she had several times during the long days travelling, Mazoga simply couldn’t resist the bait and glared at him. I knew most Breton’s had a racial prejudice against the Orcs but Detane took it to an extreme. “At least they aren’t Breton’s with their heads stuffed up their arses!”

“Big words from you Greenskin. You almost reached three syllables there.”

“That’s enough from you Detane!” I snapped, and both he and Mazoga turned to look at me from the growl in my throat. Like the rest of them I was tired and sore, but unlike the others the responsibility of leading the group had fallen to me. Despite herself, Viconia had been content on taking a step back and following along, doing what she described as ‘leaving this manure fire to someone else to contain.’

“Can we not go a single day without you two going for each other’s throats?” Next time either of you say anything to the other, I’ll throw your arses in the swamp for the night.”

Mazoga looked at me like she had done over the previous days as though she was trying to calculate whether I had the strength necessary to make good of my threat but in the end she relented. As for Detane, he simply scowled even more deeply as though his facial muscles were going to crush his skull and returned to what he was doing.

I turned to Weebam-Na who was looking highly amused, his reptilian grin enormous as he too didn’t get along with the short Breton. “You know that you had someone following you?”

His head twitched and he looked confused for a second before a scratching at the door announced a visitor.

“I keep forgetting that you have better hearing than me.” Turning on his heel, he moved back to the door, looked out and stopped in place. “Ah. We definitely have a visitor.”

Stepping back from the door, he shifted slightly and allowed the new arrival to enter. Of the locals we were not expecting the sight of the hunchbacked and leather clad shaman to come shuffling in.

Almost as a united group with the exception of Falid who continued to sit as still as a granite statue,
we all shuffled in place to put distance between us and the unnatural visage of the village magic user. In the confines of the hut his stench was almost overpowering, smelling like a sickly-sweet combination of vomit, rotten meat and decaying plant matter and yet again I found myself cursing my vampiric senses.

Hissing and chirping in a manner that I could only describe as slow and purposeful, the way that the Argonian spoke was at odds to the customary tics and spasms that rocked various limbs at random. He looked about the room under his cowl of leathery hides and layer of moss, speaking to us all at the same time.

“Greejan-Ze apparently has several things to tell us that we will find of interest.” Weebam-Na translated. “But firstly he recommends that we do not drink or otherwise use the water that we were just provided.”

Mazoga was in mid motion of reaching for one of the gourds to help scrub the blood off her leg from the leeches and paused. “Why?”

Hissing back and forth Weebam-Na suddenly looked a lot more nervous. “Because the water has been poisoned.”

“I knew it. these filthy lizards mean to kill us!” Detane snapped, looking pleased with himself for being proven right.

Talking to the shaman, Weebam-Na shook his head. “It doesn’t sound to be that simple. Apparently they were instructed to poison any travellers who came here for any reason and dispose of the bodies.”

Viconia’s brow furrowed and there was no doubting the way her hand was gripping Dragonbane’s hilt. “Instructed by who?”

There was another collection of hisses to Weebam-Na’s question and if he had been human he would have paled. “Uh oh.”

“Uh oh?”

“We… ah, may have stuck our heads into a flamestinger nest.” They continued chittering for a few more minutes which left Weebam-Na leaning against the wall and Bejeen looking just as concerned as he was. “It appears that the reason why none of the hunters or warriors of this village are present is that they are all dead. This village, and a handful further up river are all under the control of a group of bandits that arrived in the area a few months ago. They killed everyone who resisted and are taking whatever food and supplies they can.”

“Shit.” I murmured, and there was a sudden pall of unease and concern filling the room.

“Yeah. Wuleen-Tulm is the son of the previous chief who tried to stand up to the bandits. As he’s now the chief you can understand how well that worked out for them at all.”

“So why is he telling us all of this?”

“Because he has been instructed to do so by the Hist. The bandits have for all intents enslaved all the Argonians within the area and have threatened to burn the Spirit-Trees and kill every last villager if they are betrayed or otherwise crossed.”
“A tree told him that he is to help us?” Detane asked incredulously and found himself partially surprised when Viconia and I seemed to share his disbelief.

“The Hist aren’t normal trees.” Weebam-Na explained. “To you smoothskins they might appear to be so but they and the Argonians exist together in harmony. They have power unmatched by anything in existence whether you believe it or not.”

“So now we are being aided by a stack of sentient firewood.” Despite her bitterness, Viconia was smiling and almost laughing to herself. “I’ve seen stranger things in my time.”

“So obviously they want our help in kicking their arses out of the area?” Alexi asked, beating me to the most obvious question of them all.

The hissing and chirping was renewed and left Weebam-Na scratching at his jaw in frustration. “It appears so, but unfortunately for us this is definitely the village we were seeking. Greejan-Ze says that he knows how we have come for the shield and knows where it is located. The really bad news is that the old fort we seek is where these bandits have set up their home.”

The wave of despair and defeat that suddenly flooded the room was almost a physical thing but only a few of us were unaffected by it. Falid, still sitting quietly in the same position he had in the past hour simply opened his eyes.

“They will not have the shield.” He rumbled. “If they had, they wouldn’t be staying here. They would be closer to civilisation trying to bargain or ransom it.”

“There is still hope then.” I turned my gaze from the giant Redguard and back to Weebam-Na. “How many are there?”

Having obviously already asked the question, Weebam-Na shrugged and gestured hopelessly. “They are uncertain as they have never been here in a single group but there are at least forty, easily a lot more.”

Of all the typical reactions throughout the room, it was Detane’s that caught my attention. While everyone else looked extremely sober by the number we were facing, Detane had somehow relaxed, an expression of contentment consuming his usual sneer until he was as relaxed as Falid. It was not an expression that I found comforting in the current situation.

Mazoga however was busy using the fingers of both hands to calculate the number, her brow and tusked jaw tightening as she counted, lost count and began recounting before shrugging and losing interest.

“Viconia and I have faced worse odds.” My exclamation was more concerning that it wasn’t a boast and I wasn’t entirely sure how I felt about that fact.

“So have I.” Alexi replied, and he smiled as he caught my gaze. “Okay, fine. I haven’t, but I didn’t want to admit so in the presence of the Heroes of Kvatch.”

“What now?”

Rubbing the rough stubble on my jaw in thought, I glanced at Viconia before looking at the others in the hut. “I’m not sure. What does Greejan-Ze say?”
Weebam-Na gestured to the water that we had been provided. “The bandits usually come once or twice a week for their tribute, but their scouts keep a close eye on the villages under their control. By now word of our arrival will be going back to their camp and he said just before that the last time that they had visitors a group of them came during the night. The village had initially refused to poison them so when the bandits came there was a fight. The next day they killed some of the hatchlings as punishment. They don’t have anyone strong enough or the numbers to be able to fight them off and they are too scared of retaliation to stand up to them. Too many have died already.”

Detane’s expression soured again and changed from the relaxed expectation that he had worn the second before. “So they expect us to fight and bleed for them instead. Pathetic.”

“How many are they expecting to come tonight?”

After a brief hiss, Weebam-Na nodded to the shaman. “Last time there was three to four dozen who came to secure the town while they checked on the visitors. The merchant or whoever it was managed to kill or wound a couple of them before he and his guards were killed.”

The slow crawl of a plan started to form in my mind, and I clenched my jaw at the thought of what awaited us once the darkness fell. Taking my time to look about the group, I blew out a long breath clicked my tongue. “Everyone’s thoughts?”

“We retrieve the Shield.” Falid said simply, and Viconia, Alexi and Mazoga nodded in agreement.

“What about you two?” I asked Weebam-Na and Bejeen.

“You have only paid us for half the journey, which means that we need to get you back to Leyawiin to get the rest of the coin.” The gleam in Bejeen’s eyes was not entirely the lust for gold.

“And it’s either facing death here, or death in the marshes. This lot coming for us will know the area between than myself and Bejeen. We have a better chance surviving if we stand and fight here.”

“What about you Detane?”

The Breton’s scowl was in full force but somehow the prospect of a fight and potential death was calming his otherwise bitter tongue. “I will fight. Banish your thoughts to the contrary Sir Desin.”

“Well then.” Turning back to the hunched shaman, I looked him straight in the unusually mismatched eyes and gave him a single nod. The way that his mouth opened slightly in what I assumed was a grin left me remembering the enormous crocodile that we had encountered a few days previously that was longer than our boats. “I guess we better work out how we are going to pull this off.”

“Well, you know what time it is then Sir Desin?” Alexi said, picking up his custom made duelling sallet and fitting it down over his head.

As I turned and looked his grin entirely matched the Argonians in size as he was struggling to contain his laughter. As he slapped down the visor that hid all but his eyes in the three centimetre gap between the face plate and the helm itself his voice became muffled and slightly muted.

“It’s Knight time.”
My groan at the pun was matched only by Viconia and our Argonian guides while Mazoga looked confused, Detane looked gravely insulted and Falid’s eyebrows marginally raised.

“Isto’sunduiri ssliq’ne uns’aa dal waelen.” Muttered Viconia bitterly while fingering the hilt of Dragonbane. “Surely he doesn’t need his tongue in this endeavour?”

Chapter End Notes

The Chosen of Eilistraee site that I use for Drow and translations is currently not working so I have had to resort to other sources. I apoligise if some words, grammar or syntax changes slightly as a result.

Ka Shar zhah kaliath - If Shar is merciful
Isto’sunduiri ssliq’ne uns’aa dal waelen. - Nightsinger protect me from fools
The Black Bows

Chapter Notes

Ugh. My writing isn't flowing like it should. I'm going to take a brief hiatus from Knight for a week or two and work on the next chapter or two of Sos do Dov. I have got the next chapter compete though but it needs a fair bit of proofreading before I'll be happy with it.

Until then, I hope everyone enjoys this latest chapter. :-)
They shuffled about and I slowly closed my eyes as one moved in my direction. Our particular trap had been set with an attention to detail and I hoped that they didn’t look too closely to the way we were all sitting or lying down or notice how we were all fully dressed in our armour. To help with my own illusion, my dagger was unsheathed and sitting in my lap with my hand lightly resting on it, and the other was loosely laying on the ground by my side with my whetstone only a few centimetres away. The others were in other similar states of appearing to have died in the middle of eating or looking after our equipment.

“Looks like we’ve hit a payday here lads. Their stuff is worth more than the usual flea-bitten villager. The swords alone are worth a lot of gold.”

“You really think that Brugo and the others are going to sell any of these once they get their hands on them? Fucking idiot.”

I could feel the one closest to me by the warmth of his body, the way he stirred the air as his moved and smell the way that he had been a long time without a proper shower. Even without my vampiric senses I could hear the shuffling of fabric and the creaking of leather as he knelt down over me.

“Well, what they don’t know won’t hurt us.” the nearest bandit said, and I felt a pair of hands start patting down the pouches I wore over my armour. His greed was making him blind to the simple fact that I shouldn’t have been wearing armour in preparation for bed.

“How many of these dead’uns are in here?”

“Nine?” commented one helpfully and there was a crack as one of his comrades hit him.

“Since when can you count Depuyon? Someone else give me a count.”

My heart began racing even as the bandit riffling through my mostly empty pouches began swearing at the lack of anything valuable. One of the other bandits in the room had begun counting, loosing count briefly as he struggled to remember his numbers before reaching the total.

“There’s only seven in here Rodethe.”

“Count again. We’re missing one.”

“I did! I used both hands and everything!”

“There’s supposed to be eight! Find it!”

The nervous energy that was building within the hut reached a crescendo as the group of bandits began looking about frantically. This was the one portion of the plan that was the most dangerous but as they were beginning to panic I opened my eyes and stared at the bandit admiring the Stallion Ring on my hand.

I could almost feel his breath on my face as we found ourselves staring into each other’s eyes and I found myself mirrored in his expression of astonishment. The second of dawning realisation lasted longer that what seemed possible, especially when the sound of choking and a body falling could be heard from the direction of the doorway.

My assailant died almost before he had fully realised what was happening as the dagger in my lap was buried to the hilt in the bottom of his jaw. The point was somewhere in his skull and I twisted and threw his body to the side as utter chaos erupted in the confines of the hut.

Viconia had been the only one not physically present inside, and had been the one that they had...
missed when they entered. Expecting to find nothing more than poisoned corpses they hadn’t bothered to check the wood and thatch roof for anyone that had been waiting for them and the sound of choking had been as a result of Viconia leaning down and stabbing one of the door guards in the neck. Within a split second of her attack I had stabbed my own bandit, and the others had also thrown away any pretence of surprise and attacked.

A rapier and broadsword flashed and two bandits went down without the chance to scream as Detane and Alexi cut them down. The bandit acting as the group’s leader was ripped off his feet by an enormous green paw before there was a crunch of bone and cartilage as she simply punched him in the face. To my right the bandit who had been hunched down over Weebam-Na had been saved from the vicious knife thrust by nothing more than superb reflexes, but it didn’t save him as a reptilian maw snapped closed on his throat and he was borne down by ninety kilograms of Argonian.

The entire group died in less than three seconds, their surprise complete and all of them entirely capable to stave off the end. Falid killed two by the simple expediency of grabbing one by the throat and simply squeezing with the sound of someone cracking their knuckles, and grasping the other by the back of the head and slamming it into the wall with enough force that I wasn’t sure was shattered worse; the wall or the bandit’s skull. As I leapt to my feet I saw the darkened shadow this was Viconia drop from the roof through the hut’s doorway, wrapping her legs around one bandit as though he was giving her a ride on his shoulders and jamming a knife into an eye before they hit the ground.

“Well, that’s a start.” Alexi muttered as he too rose from where he had been sitting.

Trying not to listen to the chorus of shouted questions throughout the village as they heard the scuffle, I looked about the room as the way how it was filled with death. “Any of them left alive?”

“I think this one is.” Mazoga replied, grabbing the bandit she had pulled off his feet by the collar. Judging by the way his nose was crushed and face covered in blood, her punch had broken his nose and possibly knocked out teeth. “He might be a bit broken.”

“Good. We’ll come back for him.” The comatose body of the bandit slapped wetly onto the stones as she simply released her grip on his clothing and armour. It was partially impressive how she had lifted a fully grown man to waist height with a single hand but we had more pressing concerns.

Our plan was so simple it was almost ridiculous and relied entirely on the assumption that like most other bandits, the group we would be facing would be ill equipped, poorly trained and more used to shaking down defenceless villagers and travellers. Those who had entered the hut had proven my assumption correct for the most part, as they were dressed in little more than a collection of mouldering rags, their armour consisting of little more than boiled leather and padded gambesons that had gone far too long without tailoring and weapons were scrounged together from whatever they could find. In the room I caught glimpses of a handful of bows, the usual assortment of daggers and knives and the odd one or two mallets and repurposed tools and farming implements. They had no chainmail and very little iron and steel armour besides brigandine and rusting breastplates that made Detane’s equipment look polished.

We were also relying entirely on surprise and the fact that they bandits would not have been expecting resistance such as what we would provide. They definitely had the numerical advantage but they also had the issue where they had to secure the entire village which meant that as long as we struck fast, struck hard and caused as much chaos as possible they would fall to us.

At least that was the plan. As a group we stormed out of the hut with Mazoga and Falid leading the way in their thicker armour. Within seconds of bursting from the entrance a pair of arrows flitted past and a crossbow bolt lodged deeply into Mazoga’s shield. One of the arrows hit Falid in the shoulder
but the incredible ebony plate that he wore left the arrow shattering into splinters as he turned and began to charge the archer who took one look at the towering Black Knight and ran without hesitation.

Alexi and I paused very briefly after we exited the hut, turning and putting our backs to the wall and boosting Weebam-Na and Bejeen onto the roof. Viconia had already vanished in the darkness and without my vampiric senses there was no hope in following her as she flitted from roof to roof in pursuit of the dozens of bandits scattered throughout the village. For the most part they were clustered together in small groups of two or three, half a dozen at the most and it was this that we had use to our advantage.

With a portion of our group on the roofs causing chaos with thrown bolts of magicka and spears, the rest of us scattered in every direction. We had to move fast, and within seconds of separating from the others I began to allow the vampire to assist.

I twisted through the buildings, finding myself thankful for their closely built nature and the cover that they provided. There was a building amount of noise within the village as screams and cries of pain joined the questioning shouts and bellowed orders as the others encountered the scattered bandits. Our discussions in the afternoon with Greejan-Ze had left us in the knowledge that the villagers were unable to help in their conditions and would remain in their homes until it was over in one way or another. This provided us with the ease of knowing that anyone outside of a hut was an enemy and reacted accordingly.

Ducking around one corner into the wider ‘street’ that passed between the huts in the direction of the Hist, I almost ran full tilt into a bandit dressed in mouldering leathers. “Araonriel! The scalies have betrayed us! The fuckers aren’t-”

The way my darkened form seemed to grow from the shadows left him reacting with instinct alone and cutting his shout off in mid breath. His eyes widened in realisation as the torch in his hand began falling but before it hit the ground Sunchild erupted from his back and made him grunt from the intrusion of the blade impaling him through the heart.

A few metres away his comrade stood with a strung bow in hand and arrow gripped tightly by the fletching. Whether it was the Araonriel that my victim had been calling out to I couldn’t know, but the thin featured bosmer gaped as I began dragging my sword free from his dying comrade. At such a distance and with adrenaline rushing through the two of us, there was no time for me to pull my sword clear and rush him in time. His bow was already rising, arrow nocked and the string being pulled back with only my vampiric reflexes between me and death or injury.

From the shadows above the feeble torchlight there was a sudden whistling of air and before either of us could react a length of wood thudded into the bandits chest and pinned him to the wall. All two metres of the spear had transfixed him neatly through the chest, throwing him backwards and sending the half drawn arrow to flit away into the night. There was a second or two of silence, a strange scuffing sound of clawed feet on thatch and a fleshy thump and one of our Argonian guides leapt between two of the huts before vanishing similarly to the arrow. Even with my vampiric senses I couldn’t tell whether it had been Weebam-Na or Bejeen who had thrown the spear but the adrenaline thundering in my veins left me uncaring despite my determination to thank them later.

Meanwhile the sporadic fighting was spreading throughout the village and the collections of raised voices and shouts of those not yet faced with a member of our party were growing louder and louder. Expecting a simple occupation of the village and the chance of acquiring tinkets from our bodies, they were unprepared for our attack or the rising screams of pain and cut off exclamations of the dying. They were suddenly left unsure of themselves, scared of the unknown and the chaos we were
purposely sowing and as we had also expected they began banding together where their numbers fortified their resolve.

Led on by my increasing blood thirst and vampiric urgings, I rushed towards the nearest group. Their panicking heartbeats was drawing the darkness of my soul towards them like a moth to a candle even as they began to react.

“Fuck this…” I heard one of them stammer as a particularly loud scream was cut off by the thunderclap of magicka and a chilling elven laugh echoing from the rooftops on the far side of the village. “Torch the place! Burn everything!”

This was also expected but other than killing them all there was no real counter to such a reaction. The particular group was almost a dozen strong and I couldn’t tell how close the others were even with my vampirism. With so much death and increasing carnage around me, the vampire was becoming distracted and it was taking most of my willpower to simply hold it at bay. At that point there was nothing that I wanted to do more than be unleashed as it had those few times before and utterly destroy every single one of our enemies. I couldn’t smell my companions over the amount of spilled blood and with the bandits and the villagers huddling in their huts I couldn’t differentiate between my companions, the locals and those we needed to kill as the vampire considered them all to be little more than prey.

Some of the lit torches suddenly began sailing through the night as those holding them tossed them onto the nearest huts or raised them to ignite the semi-damp thatch roofs. Our only saving grace was like it had every afternoon we had spent in the marshes it had rained and ensured that setting the village ablaze was not an easy task.

Defeating the bandits was unfortunately just as difficult despite their poor equipment and dispositions. Almost to a man, they were equipped with a varied collection of bows and my darting figure was unfortunately too easy to spot within the shadows of flickering torchlight. Within the first seconds of bursting from cover and sprinting towards them as fast as I could, I found myself facing down at least two of the bandits drawing back hard on their bowstrings. A poorly thrown torch sailed through the air and bounced off the wall nearby and even if I wasn’t fearful of discovery of my true nature I was suddenly unable to call up my ability to merge with the shadows. I was also illuminated which ensured that when I roared and urged my body to even greater speeds to attempt to cross the twenty metre gap between me and the group.

An arrow buzzed past me and despite myself and my battle cry I winced at how close it had come to hitting me in the chest. A second followed the first in close succession and despite myself I managed to twist to the side and narrowly dodged its owner’s better accuracy. by now the skin and flesh of my face was tightening under my mask and I could feel my fangs sliding from my gums even as I mentally beat and thrashed against the growing shadows seeping from the core of my being.

Before I could finish crossing the distance between me and the band of cutthroats there was a darting figure appear from one of the rooftops to their rear who dived, struck the ground as lightly as an acrobat in a tight roll in their midst and came up with sword in hand. To my left there was an earth shaking roar that was as solid as a punch to the stomach, making itself felt from its primeval intensity and startling the bandits even more than myself and the rolling figure in their midst did.

As I rushed to join the sudden melee that had erupted in the packed street I saw how one of the bandits dropped with his throat cut away with a single contemptuous slice. Another lost a hand before being stabbed in the heart, his dagger being ripped from a sheath on his chest as he crumpled and being thrust into a shrieking woman’s groin as she tried and failed to strike the nimble opponent slaughtering them. One of the bowmen screamed as he turned with a drawn bow only to have it cut
in half with a slice of a thin bladed rapier that also severed the bowstring and his fingers without any effort at all.

Detane killed with all his usual scorn and disgust for everything and everyone around him and he was killing the bandits without mercy or hesitation. At some point in the few short minutes since we had burst from the hut he too had clambered up onto the huts and had used this height to outflank the group that we now faced. Without any hesitation on his part he had made the leap from the roof to the ground, rolling as skilfully as Viconia could and proving that beneath the poison of his personality was an extremely capable fighter. His sword flashed in ways that had only been hinted at during Viconia and my brief viewing of his training and none of the bandits were equal to the task of killing him.

The bellowed roar from the other direction announced the towering Falid purposely stomping his way down the street with the inexorability of a landslide. Unlike the rest of us he was incapable of jogging or running in his armour, at least not quickly and had to settle with a fast paced march. Although with how large his stride was, it ensured that he walked almost as fast as I could jog. He was enormous, undeniably powerful but what none of us were expecting, myself included was just how intimidating he was in battle.

His size and bulk, combined with the way that he stood a full two and a half metres tall in his winged helm was terrifying enough but now he appeared as though spawn from the depths of Oblivion itself. Smoke was billowing out of every gap and seam in his armour and a burning flame licked and swirled out from every joint and from within the darkness of his helm. It was as though the towering Redguard had somehow channelled the burning fury of a flame atronach into his very flesh, igniting his skin and leaving his armour filled with the roaring embers. It illuminated him from within and turned his visage into a truly horrifyingly daedric one.

Those who looked upon the towering Black Knight striding towards them lost themselves to fear and more than one attempted to turn and flee from him. Instead they found themselves trapped with a pair of master swordsmen in their midst and armed with nothing more than mallets, bows, daggers and spears they were completely outmatched even without our skill. I killed three before Falid managed to get them within reach of his sword, and Detane was killing with impunity despite being in the very middle of the group.

I caught one hand holding a military pick as it swung toward my chest, spearing the owner through the chest and blocking the only shortsword in the group as it tried desperately to cut my arm. One of the bandits shrieked in terror as the flame wreathed visage of Falid lifted his sword high above his head and brought it down with earth shattering force, cleaving him in two in a way that only the Light of Dawn could match. Detane twisted aside from a blow of a mallet that would have broken every rib in his chest and almost contemptuously cut the woman’s throat as easily as breathing before she could redress and attack again.

One of the last surviving bandits, terrified at the prospect of approaching death had taken advantage of Detane’s attention being drawn away from him and thrust forward with a steel tipped spear in a last do-or-die attack. Against someone like myself or Falid it would have been wasted on armour unless it penetrated a joint or seam, but against Detane in his rusting, decaying armour it was a mortal blow. With the vampire thundering in my veins I slipped my sword out of my own dying foe, grabbing Detane by the shoulder and wrenching him backwards in a way that almost pulled him entirely out of the way of the spear.

Instead of smashing in the centre of his chest and impaling him through the sternum, the wicked point ripped through the brigandine along his side. Several of the armoured plates were torn free, chiming as they stuck the ground but instead of tasting flesh and blood the spear didn’t even cut the
tunic he wore underneath.

The bandit had just enough time to realise that he had failed before one hundred and sixty centimetres of ebony blade chopped down hard and bisected him from shoulder to thigh as easily as he had been a strip of bacon. The spear clattered to the ground, the wooden shaft splintered as a result of Falid’s blow but the tip with its metal prongs were left trapped in Detane’s leather.

Gripping it tightly and twisting this way and that, the diminutive Breton began swearing with such violence and emotion that it put most legionaries, and many sailors to shame. After a second or two of infuriation he managed to rip it free and he turned in rage.

“Don’t you ever deign to touch me again!” he snapped, using the tip of his rapier to underline his words as he pointed it at my throat.

Stepping back as though I had been slapped I too felt my anger rise “I was helping you out, you arsehole! I didn’t think that you were going to appreciate a spear tickling your lungs!”

The anger remained but there was a sudden and inexplicable shadow that passed his eyes so quickly that I was left wondering if I had seen it in the first place. He spat on the ground near my feet, sneered with a potency that even put Viconia to shame and ran off without a further word towards the sounds of further fighting. There was a feeling that I had just seen something that I should have had more understanding of and I found myself playing the snatches of the fight in my mind as it tried to make sense of the usual post battle confusion.

A gauntlet almost as large as my head came to rest on my shoulder and snapped me out of my jumbling thoughts and the pounding of blood and adrenaline through my veins. Falid stood at my shoulder, his armour no longer smoking and a pair of glints in the depths of his visor that were no longer consumed by flame.

“Are you hurt Sir Desin?”

“No. I’m fine.” Feeling the tingling in my teeth and the growing metallic taste in my mouth that was not of blood at his presence, I gave the towering knight a quick glance. “Illusion magicka?”

“An enemy broken by fear is an enemy already defeated.” Came the deep, yet muffled reply from the depths of his great helm. “Come. Further foes await.”

Following in the pounding boots of the giant in midnight black plate, I felt strangely uneasy at Detane’s actions and reaction. Before we were jumped by a trio of terrified and desperate bandits I was left wondering at the strange way how a man of such skill had turned to face the onrushing spear front on. He had demonstrated an incredible ability with the sword, and reflexes that easily matched my own and Viconia’s and yet it was almost as though he had purposely let the bandit’s attack to succeed.

Further thoughts were quickly pushed out of my mind as the fighting in the centre of the village took all of my attention. Our two Argonian guides and Viconia had been forced to climb off the roofs of the huts as the bandits began using their bows and loosing arrows at anything that moved. Over half of them had already been slaughtered in the village but the others, having been forewarned of the threat we posed were doing their best to extricate themselves from the situation. As carefully as they could they were trying to fall back through the narrow streets and finding themselves stuck and crowded by their own numbers. This was a situation that the members of our party were pressing to our advantage which in turn made it even more difficult for them to flee.

“Kaius! Glad to see that you made it to the party!”
An arrow flicked out and punched into the wall near where I stood and I hurriedly ducked around a corner of a hut as another two joined it.

“Seems a little too excitable for my tastes. I wish to complain to the organiser.”

Alexi’s laugh was loud and audible over the shout and cries of pain and the sudden thunderclap that echoed through the village as Viconia threw a bolt of magicka in the direction of the remaining bandits.

We were in the centre of the village near the towering Hist but on the side opposite to the river. Now whittled down to the last dozen or so, the band of cutthroats were trying their best to move through the confining streets in the direction of the forest. Every step they made was being hampered not only by ourselves but by the rocks and other objects being pelted at them from the handful of villagers that had gathered the courage to strike back. Their need to continue to loose arrows in our direction to keep at us bay, while effective was also keeping them almost entirely stuck in place.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the hunchbacked shaman cavorting about the enormous tree in the centre of the village, hissing and chirping and otherwise acting as excited as a skooma user after draining an entire bottle. He was completely oblivious to the handful of arrows that buzzed angrily through the darkness in his vicinity and instead seemed utterly focussed on pulling down as many of the bowls from the branches as possible.

“What in the gods’ names is he doing?” I called out, seeing the way that Weebam-Na twisted his head in the direction of my gaze before turning back and shrugging.

“He said something about ‘asking for help’ before running over there. Your guess is as good as mine.”

Another thunderous crack of magicka and proceeding shriek of agony ripped through the night air as Viconia loosed another blast in the direction of the archers. She was alternating between swearing bitterly and mumbling the words needed to call upon her magicka but she had enough breath to spare me a withering glance.

“What’s your bow?” A ball of lightning flickered into existence in the palm of her hand and she threw it in the general vicinity of our enemies as quickly as she could.

“Back in the hut. It wouldn’t do any good as getting into a two-way archery contest isn’t a good thing when you’re outnumbered.”

There was another collection of drowish curses, but as she threw another blast down the street a collection of arrows punched into the corner of the wall that was providing her cover and a handful more flickered down the street.

“Iblith! That was a little too close for comfort.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the shaman continuing to prance about at the base of the Hist but my attention was dragged in its direction. The bowls that it had pulled down were filled to various levels of the sluggish sap but as I watched he proceeded to tip them all into a much larger urn shaped container. Earlier when he had used the sap to ‘commune’ with the Hist the sap had been thick and vicious like tar but now it flowed as easily as water which was something that made me feel strangely concerned.

“What in Oblivion’s name is he doing now?”

Weebam-Na had been standing with his back to a wall of the building across from where Alexi,
Viconia and myself were standing and he turned his gaze back at the shaman. First there was confusion on his face, and then an expression of horror as the other Argonian picked up the urn and proceeded to dump the entirety of the sap over itself.

“This could be bad.” He called out, flinching away from the storm of arrows that filled the air and left the corners of our buildings growing small clusters of feathered shafts.

“How bad is *bad*?”

Unlike when he had simply consumed a small amount of the sap, the sheer quantity that Greejan-Ze was coated in was overwhelming. He immediately fell onto his back, thrashing about with such force that droplets of sap were thrown as far as the surrounding path and walls of the nearest huts.

None of us were expecting to see him rise again, but we certainly weren’t expecting to see the way that his body was shifting unnaturally as he did so, or the sheer power that throbbed in time to his racing heart emanating from him. All of the previous tics and shakes were gone and instead he rose up to his full height with the hunch in his spine straightening as though it was a heat softened wire. There was nothing else that revealed the indescribable magicka that he suddenly had under his control but we could all feel it, a crushing pressure unlike anything I had ever experienced before.

The buzzing that reached our ears was first thought to be a result of his magicka affecting our senses but we were all left in awe at how the moonlit night thickened and a horde of flying insects began streaming down from the sky. Mosquitios, flies, enormous dragonflies and moths all twisted and swirled in a horde numbering in the tens of thousands. Underfoot and between the rocks set in the semblance of a makeshift road, squirming things began digging themselves free from the earth’s embrace. Frogs, lizards, crickets, centipedes and even the odd snake or two began wriggling and pulling themselves into the moonlit night. The sheer numbers were dumbfounding as the ground began heaving from the swarm, and swearing and invoking the names of our various deities pressed ourselves into the walls of the huts and as far away from the rolling tide as we possibly could.

While not many of us saw it, I at least could feel and hear the way that something burst from the river, dragging itself along the ground on the far side of the village. I caught glimpses of the reptilian thing that heeded the shaman’s magical commands with my vampiric eyesight and was left with the impression of something that while looked like one, put daedroth to shame in size and power.

This horde of insects, spiders, snakes and reptiles streamed past us without as much as a sideways glance and within seconds the bandits’ shouts and battle cries were exchanged for shrieks of pain and terror. The entire group became the sole focus of the magical summons from the village shaman and were borne down to their deaths. More than one ran screaming as the cloud of biting and stinging insects fell upon them so completely that they were little more than darkened shadows in the midst of the swarm. Others simply keeled over and died as the dozens, if not hundreds of venomed fangs and spines punched into exposed flesh and we were all left staring in absolute horror as one of the bandits rushed right at us, choking to death on the writhing mass of tiny amphibians that were crawling over his entire body and forcing themselves down his screaming mouth and throat.

As quickly as it had begun, the magicka died and vanished and the shaman fell flat on his face as he was suddenly released from the strange powers of the Hist Sap. The buzzing swarm dissipated into the shadows, the giant river lizard stomped back to the waters while messily feasting on an unlucky bandit and the ground was left littered with wriggling and hopping beings no larger than my fingernail as they all attempted to return to the forest or the ground.

“So why didn’t he do that sooner?” Taking a look around the village as dozens of scaled muzzles began poking out of darkened doorways, Viconia shuddered and flicked the frog clinging to her arm in utter disgust.
“Hist sap is toxic in large quantities.” Weebam-Na explained as he moved forward in front of the rest of us while checking for signs of life from the bandits. “That amount probably killed him, and is several years’ worth of harvesting at least.”

Surprisingly, the shaman wasn’t dead, but he certainly wasn’t in a good way after such an experience. The Sap that he had poured over himself had changed yet again from the honey like substance and now was flaky and dry and falling away in slivers as though all semblance of moisture had been removed. With the bandits utterly defeated the rest of the village was appearing from the safety of their homes, battling the few fires that had begun to burn a hut or two or shooing the various animals and creatures that were attempting to flee into their homes. A few had rushed to the aid of the shaman who was struggling to rise at all, hissing in pain every time that one of the villagers touched him.

Whatever power the sap had provided him was gone and there was no longer the terrible throbbing energies being directed from within his soul. As a group we ended up looking over him and the others attending him and seeing the way that his hunch had grown ever more pronounced, his hands twisted as though he was suffering a crippling arthritis and his eyes were now incapable of looking the same direction. Blood was puffing from his mouth with every cough but he managed to look at us all with an amused grin and gratitude at our actions.

“He apologises for no longer being in the condition for taking us to the fort.” Weebam-Na translated as the shaman painfully wheezed. “But once we are ready he will instruct a member of the tribe to take us there.”

“We better go and have a chat to our friend.” Wiping the blood off his sword, Alexi returned it to its scabbard until it clicked. “If he’s still alive at least.”

“You are bleeding, orc.”

Mazoga shifted, looking over her shoulder to the sneering Detane who looked even more disagreeable than usual. At some point during the battle an arrow had lodged deep into her back in the gap between the pauldron and breastplate. The fletching twitched in the wind as she tried to turn to look at it, twisting one way and then the other in full circles before sighing loudly and giving up. “Can someone help me with this thing?”

Moving over to her, I regarded the fact that she had an arrow in the shoulder and seemed annoyed more than hurt. Blood was pulsing slowly around the wooden shaft where it had broken the underlying chainmail but I had seen grown legionaries rendered invalid from the pain of such an injury. My own shoulder pulsed in sympathy where a Mythic Dawn Cultist had been lucky with a crossbow so many months before as I quickly looked about the injury and drew my dagger.

“Just pull the damn thing out. It tickles.”

Muttering ‘orcs’ under my breath I wriggled my dagger alongside the length of the arrow’s shaft where it had punched through armour and flesh and dug about with the point. Other than the way she grunted as I used the knife to dig the trapped arrowhead free she seemed to ignore the pain and sensations. After a few moments I pulled the arrow free, handing it to her before sealing the wound with a small burst of magicka.

Snapping the bloody arrowhead away and pocketing it, she flicked the shaft and fletching away into the night before prodding at my handiwork. “You’ve done this before.”

“More times that I probably should’ve.” I replied as the others turned away from where the curiosity had been holding them. “A forester in the legion is a scout first, an archer second and a field medic.
“So you fill people full of holes and then save their lives.”

I laughed out loud. “Not really. A surgeon or healer saves lives. A medic simply makes them comfortable while they die.”

Her own snicker was loud and drew an annoyed stare from Detane as we moved back to the hut, moving past the bodies that we had left strewn throughout the village even as the locals wasted no time in stripping them of anything that could be of use. There were cries of the handful of wounded that we had left scattered about the village even as the locals wasted no time in stripping them of anything that could be of use. There were cries of the handful of wounded that we had left scattered about the village but none of us were expecting them to survive the wrath of the villagers now that their grip on the village had been broken. The only bandit who was in any healthy condition was the one who had become extremely well acquainted with Mazoga’s fist.

He was conscious as we entered, sitting with his back to the wall with his nose horribly broken and at least one tooth missing and he eyed us all suspiciously and in a growing terror. At our presence, covered in mud and blood of his fellows he grew increasingly anxious but there was no mistaking the way he was more concerned of the handful of Argonians that had entered our hut to begin stripping and removing the dead.

“Good evening.” I said as I moved closer to him, feeling the way that his eyes darted from mine to the others with me. The way that he gritted his teeth in fear and eyes widening as he had to tilt his head back to look Falid in the eyes was all too obvious until he took off his horned helm. But as it had been expected, he remained entirely silent and pressed himself further into the wall, grimacing at the pain in his face that made his eyes water.

“We’re going to ask you a few questions. Give us satisfactory answers and you might live to see another sunrise.”

A mouthful of blood splattered over my boots and was lost in the congealing amount already covering them. “Fuck you.”

“That’s not very nice.”

“I don’t give a fuck.” Anger was building into his voice and I knew that it was his way of dealing with the situation that he had found himself in and the fear that accompanied it. “The rest of us are going to have fun with you lot.”

“And just who are you lot?”

“They are the Black Bows.” Alexi answered, glancing between the rest of us as we turned momentarily to look at him.

He shrugged his shoulders and gestured to the injured bandit while picking one of the fallen bows from the floor and handing it to me. “They used to be the biggest bandit group in all of Leyawiin county until a few years ago. One of the primary duties of the Order of the White Stallion was hunting these bastards down. Obviously it appears that we didn’t finish the job.”

Turning the strung bow in my hands, I saw how the wood had been painted with a black paint many, many months before and had a lot of ash rubbed into it to stain it into their namesake. What I also noted was that the bow was of poor quality, barely larger than a teenagers training bow and showing clear signs of rot and poor maintenance as the humid conditions of the region slowly destroyed it. My experienced allowed me to guess that in less than a month or two it would have been little more than kindling, and only if the owner had been exceptionally lucky.
“So you know a lot about them?”

Again shrugging, he gestured to the bandit watching us all warily. “Used to. It’s been a while since anyone in the Order encountered them. Guess we’ve found where they have been hiding.”

“Still good to know.” I replied, stepping closer and keeping an eye on the wounded man as he sat there trying not to look like he was threat. “So, how many are there of you and your merry band?”

“Choke on a cock.”

My hand smashed across his face and he was left howling and grasping at his injured face. It wasn’t anger or insult that had forced my hand to move but intent. I also had ensured that I hit him in such a way that would create pain but not knock him out or otherwise incapacitate him.

“Not nice. I’ll ask you again, how many of you are there?”

“Fuck… you…” he hissed through clenched teeth and eyes streaming with tears.

Behind me I heard Viconia’s customary sigh as she stepped forward. “We’ll be here all night at this rate and I don’t have the patience for fools.” She tapped me on the shoulder and gestured for me to step out of the way, looking down on the bandit like he was something foul she had stepped in.

Turning his gaze from me to the Drow who carefully knelt down over him, the bloodstained grin grew wider even with the way he was clutching at his face. There was amusement in his eyes behind the tears of pain that didn’t seem to take into account her cold, dark expression.

“You lot need a woman’s help eh? Going to sweet talk me?” For a second he chuckled wetly before spitting another mouthful of blood. “I’ll tell you what, how about you wrap those pretty little lips around my co-augh!”

The flash of silver was the first sign of Viconia moving and not once did she take her eyes away from his as her dagger sunk to the hilt in his thigh. Shrieking and the pain in his face forgotten, he was left scrabbling at her hand and its iron like grip on the dagger as she slowly twisted it in his flesh.

“Aaah! You fucking whore!”

“How many are there in your group?” She said very simply, her voice cold and completely oblivious to the way that more than just myself were wincing at her actions.

“I don’t know!”

Slapping his hands away from the dagger, there was a burst of magicka and the blueish glow from her free hand as she pressed a finger against the metal pommel. There was a crack of lightning, the smell of burnt hair and the bandit began truly howling.

“How many?”

“Fuck you! I don’t know!”

Another tiny crack of thunder and he continued shrieking as she electrified the dagger buried in his flesh. He was crying now, sobbing and begging as the cold yellow eyes stared into his without the slightest hint of emotion. I was left feeling strangely concerned but not by how Viconia’s nature and past was being shown but by the fact that I somehow didn’t feel shocked or discomforted by the acts. Alexi was trying his best not to look sick, Mazoga had changed to a different shade of green and both Weebam-Na and Bejeen were busying themselves with their equipment to take their minds off
Viconia’s actions. Only Falid and myself looked disinterested and unconcerned, and the way the towering Redguard had appeared during our journey I doubted that anything short of an Oblivion Portal opening and disgorging one or more Daedric Princes would have elicited a response beyond a mild shrug.

Even as I watched her torture our prisoner I couldn’t bring myself to feel disgust or anything of the sort. It was this fact that left me feeling deeply troubled but not as much as how I was trying my best to ignore how I was somehow enjoying it. Her actions were speaking to me on a much deeper level and similar to the way that I enjoyed dominating and feeding on people, the vampire was enjoying the way that she commanded pain itself in the bandit.

As she went to electrify the dagger again he began weeping, pleading wordlessly and trying desperately to stop the hard faced dark elf inflicting pain on him with as much emotion as brushing her hair.

“Going to talk now?”

There was a nod, shakily and leaving tears and blood from his nose dripping down the front of his leather armour. For a moment she seemed to hold herself in place as though struggling to resist the lure to continue but she drew the blade out of his leg, healed the wound with a quick burst of magicka and rose to her feet.

“How many?”

“I… I don’t know exactly, but there’s about a hundred of us.”

“Been recruiting have we?” Alexi asked, trying his best to retain his composure and to move away from Viconia as she stood up from the bandit. without appearing to do so.

Shaking his head, the bandit spat a wad of pink stained drool that hung from his nose and mouth in several long strands. “Not really. Greagious managed to get a couple of other groups to join up with us. Promised loot and somewhere to get away from the local guards.”

If Alexi managed to inject any further sarcasm into his voice it would have been able to cut with a knife. “And I see that it has been working wonderfully for you so far.”

“Greagious?”

“Used to be captain of the guard in Leyawiin.” There was anger in Alexi’s voice as he answered my question, which seemed extremely unusual for a man with his sense of humour and optimism. “A real piece of work. Quite a few years ago, well before the Order was founded he was caught with the Count’s daughter but somehow got out of the castle before he could be brought to justice.”

“The count’s daughter? I didn’t know that the Count has children.”

“He had a daughter.” Weebam-Na added from behind us all. “From his first marriage. The little girl never recovered and the Countess threw herself off the castle walls in the months after the funeral. Alessia Caro is his second wife.”

Rubbing my jaw and the stubble I suddenly found myself wishing that this Greagious was under Viconia’s knife instead of the hapless bandit in front of us.

“How well do you lot know him?” Viconia’s voice was still cold as ice off a Skyrim glacier without the slightest hint of emotion.
“You could say extremely well.” There was no mistaking the way that Alexi’s hand had found its way to the hilt of his sword or the way he clenched his jaw. “He was one of the several sword masters who taught the original Knights of the White Stallion. After he fled, he united a handful of the bandit groups in the county and practically declared war. Count Caro might have a thing for the military but he also founded the Order to deal with Greagious and his Black Bows.”

Now wishing to be helpful in an effort to stave off Vicona’s attentions the bandit nodded. “I was part of a group near Border Watch when he grouped us all together and came this way. Said there was better plunder and that we were going to have some space away from the likes of you.” He flinched as Viconia’s eyes narrowed and stammered something that could’ve been an apology if not for how quickly and fumbled his words were in the effort to force them out. “Mogens said there wasn’t going to be enough coin if we stayed in the County.”

It was Mazoga’s growl that caught us all by surprise and the way she shifted forward like a jungle cat on the prowl. “Mogens? Mogens Wind-Shifter?”

The confusion in the bandit’s face was overwhelmed by his fear of the orc moving towards him threateningly. “Y-Yes.”

Despite not understanding the language, the guttural and explosive orchish that ripped from Mazoga’s throat did not need much translation as she turned and stomped out of the hut. That she was angry was easy to see, but she was somehow pleased with the answer despite all of us not understanding the relevance of the bandit’s words.

“Uh… Maybe someone should go after her?” I said hesitantly.

Almost as a single entity, the others looked amongst themselves before turning and looking at me.

“You’re the commander, commander.” Smiled Alexi, nodding in the direction of the doorway.

“Fine. You lot stay here and babysit this one. I’ll go find out what her problem is.”

Giving only a momentary glance to our terrified prisoner as he flinched away from how Viconia began grinning in his direction, I quickly made my way out of the room in Mazoga’s footsteps.

The night, while quieter than it had been during the last hour was still full of activity. The spotfires had been put out where the bandits had attempted to burn homes and the locals were hurrying about to clear the dead and wounded from the village. If the previous days had been any indication I certainly didn’t want to find myself in the village during while the sun was up as the heat and humidity would make short work of the corpses. It was uncertain where the Argonians were taking the bodies as the few I saw were simply dragging them and the various pieces towards the outskirts in every direction. I also couldn’t see what they were doing to the rare few who still lived despite their injuries we had inflicted on them.

Mazoga was very easy to find and not just because her stature put her head and shoulders above everyone other than Falid. Her voice also carried in the night and I quickly caught up to her where she was gesturing, pointing and almost shouting at every villager that she came across to stop what they were doing and take her to the fort.

“Mazoga!”

Her tusked mouth was twisted into a snarl of annoyance as she twisted in my direction and away from the elderly Argonian that she had approached. With both hands gesturing and hissing away like a pot coming to boil it was obvious that he had been trying to either tell her that he didn’t understand
her, didn’t want any trouble from her, or both.

“What?”

Trying not to similarly flinch away from a hundred and sixty kilograms of orc who was obviously frustrated and struggling to contain her race’s legendary anger, I strode over to her while trying to appear as relaxed as possible.

“Planning on going somewhere?”

Narrowing into slits, her eyes burned into me before she shrugged and gestured to the Argonian who was trying to pick up what looked to be the upper torso of a dead Dunmer. “I’m going to the fort.”

“Alone?”

“If I need to, then yeah. I will be.”

“Because this Mogens is there?”

There was no mistaking the sudden spike of tenseness that ran through her body like she had been on the receiving end of Viconia’s magicka. This time when she turned her attention was fully drawn to me. “Yeah. That’s my business though, not yers.”

“Maybe. I just thought that you might have preferred some company before you go charging head first into a group that could be two or three the times the size of this lot.”

The silence between us dragged out and she stood as still as a statue or as still as Falid did while he meditated. “Mazoga… Are you a knight?”

My question seemed to shock her and her mouth fell open as far as it could with the pair of tusks growing up from her bottom jaw. “Detane said that there aint such a thing as a Knight without a lord. Yer also said that I aint a knight.”

“What do you think though?”

Frowning at me and at the questions she shrugged. “I’m a knight. I swore a knight’s oath so that makes me a knight.”

“Last time I checked, whether you are a knight or not doesn’t make any difference to whether you can fight or whether you are good or not. Look at Detane, he used to be a knight but that obviously didn’t make him a good person if he was the same back then as he is now.”

“He aint a knight anymore.”

Chuckling softly, I nodded. “Probably not the best example, but the point I’m trying to make is that whether you are a knight or not doesn’t make a scrap of difference. What makes a difference is whether you choose to do everything alone or work with others.”

“It’s been a long time since I had someone watching my back.”

“Well, you have people watching your back now.” My attempt of a friendly slap on the arm felt like I had struck a boulder, and probably wouldn’t have made much difference whether she had been in her orichalcum plate or not. “Now whatever business you have with this Mogens, you can be confident that you won’t be having to doing so alone.”
Her grin this time was fierce, but I could tell that she wasn’t entirely convinced. She was convinced enough to follow me back to the hut where the others awaited, checking their weapons and equipment with the pale faced bandit sitting against the wall looking as though all the blood had drained from his body. He was looking terrified but thankful that he was still breathing for the time being.

“What did you all find out?” I asked as I entered the communal hut with the towering green shadow at my back.

“Other than he can be very talkative with the proper persuasion?” Alexi replied with his usual cocksure expression but it was obvious that he was still concerned with how easily Viconia had thrown herself into her ‘interrogation’.

Standing against the wall holding her dagger that was now gleaming and blood free once more, Viconia grinned but unlike Alexi it was not from optimism or a cheerful personality. “We’re potentially facing anywhere between fifty and a hundred bandits, most little more than the usual assortment of thieves and cutthroats with no training and little equipment. They’ve been holed up in the fort for the past months and somehow Greagious knows that the shield is there.”

The breath I blew out was long and I rested both hands on my head in exasperation. “What’s the bad news then?” I asked with sarcasm dripped from every syllable.

Alexi and Viconia looked at each other and Weebam-Na chuckled from his position on the floor where he was busily resharpening a collection of spears to replace those that he had thrown during the battle.

“That was that bad news.” With a curt gesture to the bandit sitting quietly on the wall, idly rubbing his bloodstained pants where Viconia had stabbed him Alexi continued on. “These lot are about a quarter to a third of their total strength, and we have until early morning before they are going to be missed.”

I caught on his meaning immediately. “Which means that if we are to have any chance we need surprise on our side. We have to attack them now, if not sooner…”

“You got it.” His cheerful disposition finally won out over the situation that we found ourselves in and his sarcastic giggle was infectious. “We have to rush into a ruin teeming with bandits in the middle of the world’s largest swamp in the middle of the night in the off chance that they will mostly be asleep and unprepared for us. This is after paddling through said swamps for a week and already being tired from a battle.”

Strapping his enormous greatsword to his spine Falid rose to his full, impressive height and grinned. “The more difficult the path, the higher the calling.”

“With words like that to inspire us along our journey how could we possibly fail?” Alexi checked his blade, gave it a few experimental twirls and slid it into its sheath almost without needing to touch it.

Nodding and feeling my heart begin to race as it always did with the prospect of violence, a gave a smile of my own that I hoped appeared confident. At that point I was trying not to wonder who out of our group would still be alive when the sun rose once more. Judging by the shadows creeping into everyone’s expressions I wasn’t the only one.
The cold, brackish water soaked through my armour and left my flesh crawling with goosebumps as I felt it rise up to my chin. Despite the temperatures during the day the Blackwood rapidly cooled during the evenings and at such an hour mists were beginning to form. While heated by the sun during the day, as soon as you breached the upper layers it turned frigid from where the mud ensured that light never truly penetrated its depths. Every scrap of my clothing was immediately saturated, my armour waterlogged and heavy and yet it was the way that my boots filled with chilled water that truly left me uncomfortable.

It had not taken us long at all to prepare ourselves after the battle in the village, and with a haste brought about by the prospect of further fighting we began making our way in the footsteps of the Argonian guide. Barely old enough to be classified in her teens, the young villager had been chosen by the crippled shaman to lead us to what they called the ‘stone nest’. While relatively close by, the late hour and the all-consuming darkness from the encroaching vegetation combined with the soggy marsh soil in our path ensured that it was several hours before we came in sight of the ancient fortress.

Unlike the portion of land that we had been travelling across for the better part of three hours, the fortress was set off on its own tiny island that was barely larger than the walls themselves. It wasn’t as large as a legion fort, but it was still impressive in its own way with walls easily six metres in height, a handful of roofed towers at the corners and near what appeared to be the remains of a gatehouse and a central keep barely large enough to be a mess hall. It was small, unassuming and almost unexpected to be the home of one of Tamriel’s most holy of relics.

At a first glance it appeared to be nothing more than an ancient watch post or border station abandoned to the shifting politics and administrative morass that was the local area, but the more you studied it the more that you were able to discern. The walls were exceptionally well built, surviving two centuries of tides, floods and the very land itself being considered extremely poor for building upon. Only the collapsed gatehouse appeared to have been the only broken portion, which appeared to have sunk into the marsh just a little too neatly to have been the result of erosion.

There was a strip of land, barely wide enough for a cart to be pulled along that ran from the ‘mainland’ to the fort itself but it was waterlogged and soft despite the thick grasses growing on top of it. To make matters worse, this strip of land was easily watchable by the collection of bandits within the fort as what little moonlight penetrated through the surrounding canopies was more than enough to show anyone approaching.

This left only one option. One or more of us would have to brave the fetid waters surrounding the fortress, infiltrate it and clear the lookouts stationed on the rubble of the gatehouse or otherwise create a distraction to allow the others to cross without exposing themselves to fifty metres of open terrain. As most of our group were almost entirely incapable of stealth, let alone swimming across the swamp with their equipment it had fallen to Weebam-Na, Bejeen, Viconia and myself to make the crossing.

If I was being entirely honest with myself it was the idea of swimming through a swamp, especially a Blackmarsh one that was threatening my calm. Weebam-Na had helpfully declared that all the things that we needed to watch out for in water slept through the night, but he certainly didn’t help when he quickly added “I hope” at the end of his sentence. If it wasn’t for my vampiric nature I wouldn’t had heard him at all which left me once again hating my curse.
Thankfully enough, the water wasn’t entirely deep and while it was slow going as we felt along the bottom for holes or submerged stones and logs it was better than trying to swim with all our additional equipment. Neither Viconia or myself had reduced our armour by much as once battle was joined we were going to need every link and plate. Unfortunately, this weight also ensured that with each step I sunk half way up my shins into the soft mud and I could feel it slithering into my boots and around my feet even before I made it more than a metre from the shore.

At least… I hoped it was mud.

The main dangers of the swamps; those that we all were hoping were asleep seemed to be entirely absent as I slowly and carefully made my way towards the towering walls. It was a darkened mass in the night, illuminated by the handful flickering lights of lanterns, braziers and torches arrayed along the walls. The whole fort was approximately seventy metres by fifty metres with the shorter edge facing the mainland, but at that point I was doing everything I could to take my mind off the situation I found myself in.

Leeches clustered around the tiniest scrap of flesh that they could access, which after wrapping my coif around my head, mask over my face and stuffing my hood in around my throat left only my forehead and fingers. Every few seconds I could feel something latching on somewhere only to release its hold due to my vampiric blood and I found myself not looking forward to Viconia’s mood over the coming days after this endeavour. Each foot needed to be dragged free from the silt and mud and I was simultaneously tensing my feet in the effort as well as ensuring that I didn’t stop in place as that would mean they would become stuck. After the effort it took to kill the minotaur titan whose hide had been turned into my clothing I certainly wasn’t going to let the marshes have my boots.

Slowly lifting myself out of the marsh on the thin strip of mud and grasses at the base of the wall I tried my best to ignore the slimy, squirming sensation of the various things that fell off me. In the back of my mind I tried to convince myself that it was all merely the collections of reeds and water plants that had clung to me during the swim but my subconscious had other ideas. It also wasn’t helping that the vampiric portion of my mind was shifting forward with each step, whispering promises of strength, power and the ability to completely ignore all the physical sensations that left my flesh crawling and stomach churning from my submersion. While I fought back my darker instincts, I still called upon the vampire as I looked through the darkness with my enhanced sight to find a suitable portion of the wall before beginning to climb.

Viconia was detectable only by her heartbeat and with my mask soaked with muddy water and every inch of me covered it was almost impossible to smell anything other than decay and grime. Before I had begun the crossing I had taken care to smear a layer of mud across my forehead to hide my pale skin from view and I had to continuously resist the urge to wipe the noxious sensation away. The effort of digging my fingers and toes into the ancient stonework of the walls assisted me greatly in ignoring all of my sensations, as did the growing strength of the vampire as it lent its aid.

Carefully sliding my way over the ramparts on a portion of wall that appeared utterly undefended and lacking even a single sentry I could sense Viconia’s presence several dozen metres away. Despite the fact that she had taken a longer way through the swamp to reach a separate portion of the fort, she had managed to beat me in scaling the wall and was already ghosting herself around the ramparts. By the way that a heartbeat suddenly stilled as she encountered it she was already well along the way of thinning the numbers of bandits within the fort and I began to follow her example.

With Sunchild and the Light of Dawn clasped down my spine I instead moved about with only my dagger which had been covered in a considerable amount of ash and charcoal to dull its blade. I held it steadily in one hand, moving as quietly as I could with the fact that I was still dripping with moisture, covered head to toe in stinking mud and leaving a steady trail of footprints behind me.
None of this I could really help besides ensuring that no one was left alive in the position to come across them. Along the entire length of wall towards its lone staircase to the interior I left two of the bandits cooling on the stonework after plunging my dagger under their ears.

The fort itself was spacious but it was more and more obvious that it hadn’t been designed for the same purpose as those I had seen or served at during my time in the Legion. It was built in a similar way but was lacking in many key features. There was no real space or building set aside for accommodation other than the tiny bunkhouse built against one of the walls, no smithy and no space for drill or any form of training. The central keep also sat in the direct centre rather than against a wall furthest from the gatehouse which also reduced the amount of available space, but there was no mistaking the fact that what space was available was being utilised.

Illuminated by a handful of slowly dying lanterns and campfires and the faint light of the moons it was far too easy to see that the bandits had claimed the fort in force. Tents, canvasses and tarpaulins had been strung out between the outer walls and the interior keep in haphazard attempts to provide cover from the daily rain and mists that soaked every available surface. Bedrolls and collections of cloths were scattered about with dozens of bandits sleeping on top of them. Some had some form of thin mesh arrangement set up over their sleeping arrangements, but for most the only true protection from the swarms of insects seeking a meal of flesh and blood was the burning of wet wood and the clouds of smoke that spread about as a result.

One bandit died quickly and while it would have appeared that I had cut their throat I used the opportunity to slake my growing thirst. While I tried to convince myself that I was doing so simply to state my appetite for blood it was also pragmatic because I would need all the strength I could muster for us to have a chance against the numbers within the fort.

With Viconia’s presence growing closer along her path of cooling corpses I could also faintly sense Weebam-Na and Bejeen lurking in the water a short distance from the ruined gatehouse. Even if any of the bandits on sentry duty had been keen eyed enough to be able to see them, there was very little that the top of their heads and eyes above the surface of the water. Like the rest of their kind, they could submerge and remain so indefinitely and would be waiting for our approach from the interior of the fort itself to launch their own attacks. It was up to Viconia and I to silence the sentries, and then up to the four of us to hold the breach while the others crossed fifty metres of boggy ground before assaulting the ruins. I couldn’t bring myself to believe that it was a good plan, but it was the only plan that I or the others had and so would have to do.

My heart was hammering away in my chest as I realised that the last dozen metres or so across the pile of broken masonry that was the fort’s original gate was completely lacking in cover. Only by calling upon my true nature would I have been able to cross the distance between the walls and the last handful of sentries but the risk of being uncovered by the others was too great. Alexi and the remainder of our group would be watching the tiny collection of lit torches at the top of the mound intently and I would have been too easy to spot appearing from the shadows if I used my vampiric nature. That was not even taking into account the way that Weebam-Na and Bejeen were much closer than the others.

Thinking quickly, a crumbling, moth eaten cloak was pulled around me from my latest victim and doing everything I could to steady myself I simply began walking casually in the direction of the remaining guards. My hood was pulled down, mask over my face and keeping it hidden in shadows and slowly and carefully and without the slightest hint of stealth I walked over to them.

One of the more alert ones heard the sounds of my boots on the moss and creeper covered stones and turned, eyes squinting and his head slightly moving from side to side as he tried to make out my shadowed figure in the gloom. “Who’s that?”
Not changing my speed of the way I was walking, I made some half-hearted gesture into the darkness and mumbled something that was inaudible and sounding name-like.

The trio sitting near the tiny campfire and sitting on blocks of stone repurposed into seats turned and looked my way, and all bar one did little more than shrug and turn back to the fire. While the night wasn’t cold, they too were rugged up under their cloaks in an attempt to ward off the hundreds of flying insects hovering around their patch of light. As a result, my cloaked and hooded figure wasn’t unusual to them and barely rated a mention from any of them.

“What the oblivion are you doing?” said the first, still squinting as I ambled my way casually over to them. “Shifts not swapping over for a while yet.”

“Couldn’t sleep. Fucking bugs.”

They all shared a collective chuckle that was dark and filled with understanding, especially when one slapped himself in the face loudly and grimaced as his hand came away with a spot of blood. “FUCK this place,” he growled, wiping the mangled bug that had been biting into his cheek onto the front of his gambeson and rubbing at the bite.

“You got that right.” Agreed the third of their group, a woman by her build and voice. She was so rugged up that there was barely any trace of her underneath the folds of the cloak and hood but the bitterness was obvious.

As I moved much closer, the bandit who had first spotted me twisted and spat into the darkness, idly scratching under the cuff of his armour at what was undoubtedly insect bites. His expression was also bitter and consumed with annoyance, but as I moved almost within arm’s reach of them it turned to confusion as he managed to get a better look at me.

The bushy eyebrows frowned in puzzlement as his cursory glance turned into a careful one and I knew that he had seen the way that my legs were covered in mud and still dripping with water. Covered by my acquired cloak all that was visible were my legs from the knees down and it was enough to make him suspicious. I could almost see the way that his brain was trying to understand what exactly he was seeing, his mouth falling open in surprise as his eyes reached my masked features and realised that I was not one of them.

In a flicker of movement my arms appeared from within the folds of my acquired cloak, gripping him by the shoulder tightly and plunging my dagger to the hilt in his temple. There was a fleshy thud and the slightest hint of bone crunching as I jammed the blade into the depths of his brain and the second before I twisted and ripped it free he was left convulsing.

The other two reacted with all the speed of tired men and women who had spent months within the depths of the Blackwood. There was shock, surprise and realisation as their comrade toppled over and even before their conscious minds had grasped the situation they were reacting. Through the curse pumping through my veins I saw their mouths beginning to open, their eyes widening in the darkness as they began reaching for their weapons and raising the alarm. I also saw in overwhelming clarity how my blade reappeared covered in blood to take away the throat of the female bandit before she could even draw in a breath. With the adrenaline in my veins and vampire rising to the surface I was much faster than I had any right to be, but it wasn’t fast enough to entirely stop the alarm being raised.

It was not from the sounds of fighting or dying or even a scream or shouted cry but from the way the third and last bandit flailed away from me as I hurled myself at him. With a half cut off cry he fell backwards off the chunk of stone he had been using as a seat and it was the metallic clatter of his equipment and armour on the ground that drew attention from the few not sleeping in the fort’s
interior. It could have been something as simple as someone tripping over in the darkness but it was all too easy for the couple of bandits in the fort to see the way that I had practically tackled the last sentry. With one hand I cut off his cry in mid breath, and the other rammed the point of my dagger into his armpit as it sought out his heart. He died almost as quickly as the other two but by now my actions had been noticed and there was a couple of shouted queries from those who had witnessed it.

Knowing that there was no time to spare, I ripped one of the burning logs from the fire and began waving it into the sky, twisting it back and forth for the rest of our group waiting in the marsh and on the other side of the tiny strip of land. The shouts and questions from within the fort grew louder, more urgent before the realisation set in and surprise and anger began to take hold.

“You never seem to be able to do anything the easy way, can you mrannd’ssinsi?” Little more than a shadow, Viconia seemed to appear from nowhere and joined me by the tiny fire and the trio of dead and dying bandits. In the darkness before us it was as though a nest of ants had been kicked as some of their number began rousing their closest companions.

A quick glance over my shoulder was all that I needed to tell me that the others were going to be some time before they could reach us. My vampirism allowed me to see Weebam-Na and Bejeen pushing their way up onto the banks but the others still had over fifty metres of waterlogged ground to cover in full armour. And that was before they could climb up the mound of rubble into the fort itself. “We’re going to need to buy time.” I said, trying not to feel fear or the building vampiric anticipation of bloodshed.

Without a further word, Viconia broke out into a jog across the ruined gatehouse as easily as it had been a grassy plain, Dragonbane already gripped in one hand and the tinge of magicka beginning to form in the palm of a hand. My dagger had found its way back into its sheath without conscious effort from myself and shedding my acquired cloak I drew Sunchild and began running towards the heart of the bandit infested ruins.

A dozen silhouettes were moving towards us, calling out and shouting their queries into the night as were charged them. Whether it was the last shreds of sleep releasing its grip from their minds or the instinctive hope that it was all a misunderstanding they were slow to react. The first who crossed my path died on Sunchild as I impaled them on the blade, twisting them to the side and launching myself at the next foe. Almost to a man they were barely dressed, their armours and even most of their clothing left behind in the sudden confusion that gripped the camp tightly. So used to not needing to fear or be concerned about anything more than the natural dangers of the swamps, they were unprepared for a direct assault upon their makeshift home in the dead of the night.

The tumbled stones of the gatehouse were treacherous and I was nearing the bottom when my boot skidded on a patch of moss made slippery with blood and I fell in front of the nearest foes. Only saved by my vampirism I somehow managed to roll tightly, feeling my shoulder groan in response even as I came up swinging. It was a clumsy movement, especially when compared to Viconia’s elven grace. Only a few meters ahead of me she pressed on, kicking over the nearest tent to add to the confusion even as she stabbed down on anything wriggling under the canvass.

More and more of the bandits were swarming, writhing out from their beds and sleeping arrangements in bleary eyed groups that struggled to understand what was happening. The tent I was near disgorged a pair of half-naked individuals and I blocked a clumsy slice of a dagger with one of my own that cut a hand away. Screaming in agony, the male bandit was granted a few more seconds of life as the woman with him swung a club studded with iron, before falling to the ground with a mortal wound in the chest from Sunchild. Another to my rear charged as I dispatched the bandit missing his hand with a single downwards stab, bellowing and swinging his quarterstaff with intention of braining me from behind.
Sailing out of the night like they had during the battle in the village, a spear as long as his staff punched into his chest, ripping him from his feet and throwing him backwards in a tumble of limbs. The first spear was joined by a second, and a third thudded into another bandit’s thigh near Viconia as Weebam-Na and Bejeen entered the fray. Unfortunately, as good as they were with their spears they could only carry four at a time and they were soon reduced to one after thinning the numbers arrayed before us. To a greater extent, they had to rely on their speed and surprise as their thin leather armour was barely any better than the men, women, mer and beastfolk that had made the fort their home.

There were dozens of the Black Bows within the fort but our only real advantage other than our surprise assault was that these were even more poorly equipped and trained than those who we had fought in the village. Wearing little, and not just because of being caught unawares during the night they were limited to boiled leather and padded cloth to protect themselves. This may have been useful against villagers armed with primitive spears and clubs and fending off some of the marshes insect species but it was completely inadequate against the likes of weapons such as Sunchild and Dragonbane. Their weapons too were extremely crude, consisting of spears tipped with iron and steel, bows and crossbows affected by the damp and humidity and a collection that was mostly tools and farm implements instead of weapons. Polearms and poleaxes, scythes and billhooks, mason’s hammers and carpenters’ mallets and a varied collection of daggers were gripped in the clammy hands of cutthroats and thieves.

But whether they had been designed for war or not mattered very little as they were still more than capable of taking lives. A dagger could slip between armoured plates and penetrate chain link, poleaxes could hack through armour and wooden mallets could break bones through armour if struck correctly and with enough force. Spears could keep a swordsman at bay and against the numbers within the fort we quickly found ourselves being pushed back.

So I fought for space. I fought for time. I fought for enough seconds to allow the other half of our group to wade across a thin patch of sunken dirt covered in ankle deep water while wearing heavy armour. I cut legs and hacked at faces. I sliced Sunchild across at head height and forced the dozen or so untrained bandits facing me to shy away from my naked blade to instinctively protect their eyes. I kicked knees in and stoved in chests with my boots and fists. I cut throats and tossed the spasming victim into the path of those fighting by his side to tangle and trip them in their attempts to close with me. I fought for Viconia only a few short paces by my side and…

I fought for the Nine.

The thought that entered my mind made me blink and almost miss the spear-thrust aiming for the thinner armour of my groin and I only barely managed to parry it away at the last second. The spearman blanched at the sight of me flicking the spear away, reaching forward and ripping him off his feet with my left hand while breaking out into a hideously loud laugh that I knew twisted my face into terrifying mask to those facing me. While I was still mostly hidden behind my mask, hood and coif there was enough of my ash blackened, mud covered face for them to see that I was laughing even if they were deaf to it.

For almost two decades I had fought for a number of things. I had fought for bets or in tavern brawls, served the Empire and received the Emperor’s Septim for crossing blades or loosing arrows into anyone or anything deigned to be a foe of Tamriel. There had been so many years and so many battles that I had fought which the meanings had long since drained from my mind but in the depths of the Blackwood I was fighting in service to the Gods that I had never really heeded. The fact that I was doing so to protect those within the world that needed protecting from the monsters of oblivion paled in my mind in comparison to the fact that I was doing so as a corrupted, accursed being. This reason and this reason alone left me laughing even as I fought for my life.
My laughter echoed over the cracks of metal on wood and metal on metal, and even over the screams of hatred, fear and pain. It was loud enough that it drew Viconia’s attention for the briefest of moments and she too began laughing in her own way and for her own reasons but it was drowned out as I kicked a foe away and bellowed on the top of my lungs.

“For the Nine!”

A trio of bandits wielding spears tripped and fell as their hammer wielding comrade I had kicked fell onto them knocked them down. They and the others who were threatening to surround me all flinched away from my voice as much as my sword, but their eyes were pulled from me as my cry was answered in kind.

Scrabbling and sliding with far more grace than I had managed Detane and Alexi joined the fray and almost leapt into the bandits streaming from the canvass tents and interiors of the fort. Alexi returned my shout with one of his own but it and whatever cry that parted Detane’s lips was drowned by the dual roars from atop of the rubble behind us.

Roaring Talos’ name into the sky, Falid clenched his fists with one brandishing the enormous length of his greatsword to his side. The sheer force of his voice despite the strange muffling from wearing his great helm sent a ripple of shock through the press around us. From their position at the base of the slight rise of ancient ruins and stonework, the collection of bandits would have been left with the sight of a black-clad titan stomping through the ruins of the sentry fire with flames and smoke billowing out of his armour. The angle, his sheer size and the fact that many of those facing us had been jerked awake and filled with adrenaline left them cringing and even backing away as he stomped his way down the slope with world-ending swings of his sword.

Mazoga had also appeared but unlike the rest of us she hung back momentarily, looking across the crowding enemies with narrowed eyes. The famous battle-lust of her kind was driving her one but she was hunting rather than charging and her battle cry joined the rest of us in its emotional fury. When she reached the rough battline she did so with all the force of a stone hurled by a trebuchet. Before she seemed to vanish into the press I saw a broken body sent hurtling through the air from a swing of her mace, and it was soon joined by whipping arcs of blood from her terrible blows. Only the continued and repeated cries of “Mogens!” revealed that she was still alive after the first initial seconds and it continued unabated, even if it did become somewhat breathless as the battle wore on.

A trained force of adversaries would have been able to take advantage of their numbers and hem us in and surround us until we tired but the Black Bows were incapable of doing as such. They fought as a pack of individuals that tripped, befouled and otherwise hindered each other unintentionally. Their attacks were spoiled by their wounded and dead and even by those jostling and fighting by their sides. They shied away from our attacks and blows and there was almost a constant shifting and rotation in their ranks as some were forced forward to face us and others fell back to save themselves only to be forced forward again.

They did however have the advantage of being able to concentrate on us as individuals and even as the battle fully joined we found ourselves the target of arrows. Some of them had the clarity of mind to gather their namesakes and find positions to loose arrows at us through the darkness and chaos of the fight. The odd one or two arrows found their mark and I was left battered by at least two that I was saved from only by my armour but was left slowed nonetheless. I briefly caught a glance of a hail of arrows and crossbow bolts being directed at the towering, smouldering figure of Falid who’s sheer size and terrifying presence was drawing most of the marksmen’s attentions away from the rest of us. Thankfully enough the quality and thickness of his armour was proving to be a match for arrows being directed at him from stretched bowstrings and rotting bows.
Outnumbered, fending off anywhere between half a dozen to a dozen foes each it should have been a quick and decisive fight upon the part of the Black Bows but instead they were wavering. Within the first minutes of the battle we had killed or otherwise crippled and wounded a score of them and with every death the thread of the collective courage began to unravel. For those facing me it was my laughter that seemed to clutch at their souls, Mazoga was terrifying in the fact that she seemed entirely unstoppable and no one in the right mind wanted to get in the way of an orc in the middle of a fight. Viconia was an elemental fury of magicka and sword blows, Alexi seemed almost untouchable with his agility and Detane was matching him blow for blow in skill. As for Falid, none of the bandits wanted to be in the same province as the towering black knight killing all within reach of his gigantic sword that made mockery of armour and flesh alike. One particular blow left a large portion of the bandits facing us shuffling and scrabbling away after he cut three of them in half without any undue effort.

Left partially out of the fight, Weebam-Na and Bejeen didn’t have the skill, training or equipment to get into the middle of what was almost a brawl and so they were left lurking around the edges. They would dart in with a spear or retrieved javelin, kill, wound or otherwise harass our foes before darting away into the shadows once more. The few times that they were chased or the bandits attempted to engage them directly they quickly ran back to the swamps, diving under the surface and reappearing dozens of metres from where they disappeared.

Over the screams, clashing metal and shouts I heard Alexi’s name shouted from a baritone voice a few seconds before a sour faced man dressed in tarnished plate rushed him from the press. Appearing well into his fifties, the bandit chief and Alexi suddenly found themselves in the centre of an opened space as the rest of the assorted scum moved away from the sword champion and their leader. Even before their swords crossed, the Black Bows around their fight began shouting and chanting the name Greagious while cheering in time with every blow.

Greagious was not the only champion and leader of the Black Bows, and from the ruins a handful of others appeared. The four of them were as impressive as their kind usually were; all tall, heavily muscled and well experienced in the art of using their physicality to order lesser beings about. Unsurprisingly one was a massive orc who matched Mazoga muscle for muscle, while his companions were a pair of similarly sized Nords and an Argonian who had the physique of a river caiman. Each and every one of them were heavily armoured in makeshift clothing and plated armour that looked like they had been pieced together from a large collection of victims and their weapons were not simple farm implements and repurposed tools. The Argonian’s sword was wreathed in swirling frost from an enchantment that left my mind aching from its proximity, and one of the nords was carrying an enormous spiked flail with chains as black as the night itself.

Making a conscious decision, the group looked between the members of our party and chose to face me rather than my companions. In a way I didn’t blame them, as I certainly didn’t want to try to contend with the giant black armoured warrior cutting men and women into twitching pieces, or the dark elf killing anyone who came near as viciously and painfully as possible. On top of this, the other options were a tiny Breton that filled the space around him with gleaming arcs of silver or the orc swinging a mace already heavily clotted with blood and flesh. Faced with such foes I couldn’t blame them for choosing me, as I appeared more of a scout or assassin than a dedicated fighter.

At least, they tried to. The bandits around me fell back as their armoured commanders moved in my direction but before they even made it a handful of paces a bellow ripped through the night.

“Mogens!”

Catching sight of one of the Nords approaching me, Mazoga redoubled her efforts at killing everything and everyone in between them. There was a hesitation from them as a crushed corpse was
thrown into the air from a powerful underarmed swing and the bandit commanders paused in mid step.

The powerfully built Nord with his beard matted into greasy dreadlocks shrugged and gripped his axe tightly as Mazoga began shouldering her way towards him. “Kill this fucker quickly, I’ll deal with this bitch.”

Heedless of the weapons that chopped down onto her heavily battered and dented armour and the arrows and spears punching through the gaps, Mazoga gave another spittle ejecting roar and smashed her way through the last of the bandits with as much force as a destrier. With shield and axe in hand the Nordic commander of the Black Bows turned and faced the enraged orc head on, but only after directing a significant number of their subordinates to become meatshields to Mazoga.

“You’ve come a long way to die.” Proclaimed the brutish orc dressed in his cobbled together armour. He outweighed me and his armour appeared to be even stronger than mine if I ignored the fact that mine was forged from ebony and mithril. Like many living such a lifestyle, his weapon of choice was brutal, cheap but dangerously effective. A heavy, lead filled mace head had been attached to a quarterstaff as long as Falid’s greatsword which looked like it weighed even more than the Black Knight’s weapon. In the hands of an orc, the weight would amount to nothing and could possibly kill a minotaur with a single blow.

His fellows were also impressive specimens. The other Nord was large and heavily tattooed, his forearms bare and showing a wrestler’s physique while the Argonian was equal in weight with claws, fangs and horns looking sharp enough to carve through leather. Three against one wasn’t entirely sporting odds but for the moment I had a reprieve from the fighting that was continuing around us. There was not going to be any help from any of the others, as Alexi was busy fighting Greagious, Mazoga battling Mogens and Viconia, Detane, Falid, Weebam-Na and Bejeen fighting the three or four dozen bandits that were still in fighting condition. For the moment at least I seemed to have the least number of foes to deal with which suited me perfectly in the conditions.

Glancing over the enormous flail, the clubbed polearm and the enchanted blade that the Nord, Orc and Argonian were carrying respectively I pulled my mask down and grinned fiercely. I was covered in mud and gore, dripping with moisture and feeling the numerous insect bites from the countless marsh species across my body but I was overwhelmingly confident. The three of them were making shows to the handful of their minions not directly involved in the rest of the battle, puffing their chests and shuffling about to surround me. My own expression of amusement was obvious to them as I watched their every moment and flinging Sunchild point first into the ground.

“Oh? Surrendering already?” mocked the Nord with the flail, swinging it back and forth in preparation for the enormous, bone shattering swings as he moved to flank me. “Have your balls shrunk so high that they are caught in your throat?”

Grunting, the orc stepped closer brandishing his enormous club while rolling his impressive shoulders. It would have been intimidating if not for the fact that I had just spent a week travelling with a man who made everything smaller than a minotaur seem weak in comparison. “When you get to Oblivion.” He growled, twirling the club in one hand that it turned into a circular blur. “Tell them that Black Brugo sent you.”

Laughing in his face, I reached up behind my head and drew the Light of Dawn in a quick, but steady motion. “It’s funny that you think you can take the hero of Kvatch.”

My title sent a shiver of recognition through the group and while most were entirely incredulous or disbelieving it was this tiny hesitation that I had been counting on. The shimmering length of the Light of Dawn cut through the night and the darkness, twirling it as I gripped in it both hands and
swiped at the flail carrying Nord.

He saw my attack coming and reacted, ripping the heavy weighted ball from where it was dangling in a movement that against a regular weapon would have tangled it in the chain. It was a movement that would’ve resulted in the effective disarming of an opponent but the Light of Dawn cut through the links like they were made of mist and cutting him in half across his barrelled chest.

The shock of his death didn’t register for him or any of the others watching and before he had begun to fall apart I was already moving, turning on my heel and launching myself at the Argonian wielding the enchanted blade. I could feel the cold emanating from the blade as the lizard’s eyes widened in surprise at my movements, bringing his weapon up and successfully blocking my first strike. Although I could sense or taste its fear like I could with other beings I still revelled it’s expression as the Light of Dawn crossed with the enchanted sword with an impact that rang up my arm.

Incomparable and flawless in design and its edge to any other mortally forged weapon, the enchantments bound into the skymetal of the Light of Dawn couldn’t contend with other magically bound items. Since I had nearly been disarmed against the Xivilai the night I assisted the rangers, I had tested the Light of Dawn and discovered that almost any enchantment could stop the weapon. Whether it was a ring or weapon, armour or clothing the Light of Dawn treated it as though it was a normal sword. Against a mundane suit of armour, even one made from orichalcum it cut without hindrance but even something as simple as leather infused with a muffle spell could cancel the unique magicka in the ancient Ayleid blade. In those situations, the Light of Dawn simply turned into the equivalent of a sharpened dai-katana which, for the most part still allowed it to contend with anything else I used it against.

Against the Argonian’s sword of frost it resounded with a clang and left a tiny chip in the stolen blade. Without giving the lizard a chance to react, I pushed in closer before twisting my wrist and running the Light of Dawn down the entire length of his weapon. The folded metal of the blade itself may have been enchanted but like most magicka infused weapons it wasn’t universal. With a flick of my wrist I sent a collection of clawed digits falling to the ground as my weapon sliced through the mundane cross guard, shredding its hand grasping the hilt and through the hilt as easily as softened butter.

As he hissed in surprise and agony, I twisted my attack in mid motion and turned the slice into a powerful stab that transfixed him through the chest and folded him over. Only a handful of seconds had passed since I had launched my attack against the bandit commanders and already two were dead and the enormous ‘Black Brugo’ was suddenly left alone.

“Ah… I… Uh…” he stammered, looking this way and that and trying to back away from me without appearing to do so. The others around who had been watching were staring aghast at how effortlessly I had killed two of their number considered to be their champions.

“Yield.” I hissed threateningly, all the time moving towards him with the Light of Dawn clasped tight.

“Sure. Whatever you say. I surrender to the better man.”

To anyone not expecting it, the blow that he tried to land would have been something of a surprise but I had seen it coming. I had fought and trained with some of the greatest fighters that Tamriel had to offer even before I had deserted and this particular bandit couldn’t have made his duplicity any more obvious even if he had sent me a letter stating his intentions. Even without my vampirism, the way that he swung the two handed mace above his head and brought it down as though it was an axe and he was chopping firewood gave me plenty of time to react. It thudded into the ground at my
feet and almost without any effort at all I flicked the Light of Dawn out and separated his head from his shoulders.

Spurting blood from the thick stump of a neck, the surprised expression on the orc’s face rolled off into the darkness as the entire body dropped nervously to the ground. The three bandits were dead and I had almost managed to kill them with a single blow each. Those around me who had been watching and not drawn into the fighting against the rest of my companions were alternatively shocked and disbelieving at my success and was the moment that we all had been waiting for.

Greagious and Mogens had fared as equally well against Alexi and Mazoga in their respective duels. The leader of the Black Bows lay on the ground turned sodden with blood and shit while bleeding out from the impressive wound in his throat, and Mogens was pressed face down into the ground with an orichalcum boot in his spine and both legs shattered at horrific angles. The overwhelming force of our assault and how quickly we defeated their champions left the surviving bandits shifting away from us as a single-minded horde until a space opened up between us and them.

In the end all it took was one of the surviving number to look at the number of dead and wounded scattered about, the fact that we all were still standing despite the handful of injuries we had sustained and how effortlessly we had killed their leaders for the last strands of courage to snap. A spear clattered loudly to the ground as one of their number threw it at his feet and within seconds the entire group of them began throwing their equipment down in a clattering wave of noise.

Chapter End Notes

I've finally realised who I am basing Falid off. He's obviously got a build of a world-champion weight lifter, but in my head I've always had him with the personality of T'ezac (Stargate) and the voice of Kevin Michael Richardson...
https://youtu.be/nGaxRU7ipBY (Skip to 1:20 to miss the ads... hahaha.)

Although, its difficult deciding which character I'm having the most fun out of this merry band of adventurers, even with the likes of Detane. XD
As quickly as it had begun, the battle in the ruins was over and we were suddenly faced with several
dozen prisoners and the fact that most of our group had suffered injuries. Many of the bandits had
been injured, crippled or outright killed but it still left us with a group that still heavily outnumbered
us as prisoners.

For several long seconds the call for further bloodshed thundered through my mind and the blood-
wet length of the Light of Dawn trembled in my grasp as I forced the darkness away. Every tooth in
my head was tingling, as were my jawbones in the desire to continue killing and inflicting pain and it
was with difficulty and some regret that I resisted the urges. Taking the briefest of moments to wipe
the ancient sword clean on one of the corpses at my feet I steadied myself and tried to find a measure
of calm while keeping one eye on the huddled group of bandits in providing us with a wide berth.

“Who’s not dead?”

My voice echoed startlingly loud in the night air now that there wasn’t a chorus of screaming and
the clashing of metal. As my heart threatened to burst with a combination of adrenaline and finally
stopped hammering as Viconia called out and I was somewhat surprised to hear our entire party
respond to my shouted question. We had been ridiculously successful but it was not without cost as
not a single one of us was uninjured.

I was covered in bruises, insect bites and several of my bones felt like they were creaking where
blades and blunt weapons had failed to penetrate through my armour. As always, the Moonstone
chainlink and daedroth scales riveted to it was incredible at dispersing blows but it was not infallible.
There were several painful days awaiting me while I healed but I was one of the least injured out of
all of us.

Viconia had broken her hand, either through punching or striking at a foe or being struck in turn and
while it wasn’t obvious she was favouring her left leg. An enormous gash ran down the length of
Detane’s forearm from a dagger or edged weapon ripping through his poor armour but otherwise he
was none worse for wear. As it had earlier in the night, the fact that he seemed to have been alive to
claim victory seemed to irk him even more than everything else seemed to. As intimidating as ever,
Falid’s unnatural presence diminished somewhat to the relief of the bandits as the illusionary flames
and smoke ceased billowing from his armour. He still left many of them aghast as he removed his
helm and pulled a crossbow bolt out of his bicep with his teeth, after being unable to reach across
with his other hand due to the breadth of his chest while fully armoured.

Our two Argonian scouts were the least injured from their hit-and-run tactics during the battle and
while they were cut and bruised they were far better off than the rest of us. The worst off by far was
Mazoga, who stood over the whimpering and badly injured Mogens with blood running down from
a multitude of injuries and from several rents in her armour. Normally green-brown in colour, the
spattered mud and blood of those she had slain was being mixed in with a considerable amount of
her own blood and her skin was already several shades lighter.

A spear was lodged in the side of her chest, the shaft broken away like a handful of arrows and bolts
that had managed to penetrate through her armour. She was also sporting a deep gash that left a
chunk of her scalp hanging loosely and drenching the side of her head in gore from a blow that had
nearly cloven her head in two. On other beings such injuries would have been incapacitating from
the pain alone, but she simply ignored them as though they were little more than leeches, reaching
down and dragging the badly injured Mogens up by the hair.

Turning away satisfied that we were all still alive for the moment, I turned to the bandits shifting into
a group away from their fallen weapons and took several steps in their direction. They to a man were
terrified and rightfully concerned at what our next actions would be, and I knew that it would not
have been too much more effort to have simply killed them all. Instead I crushed away the
bloodthirsty desires, frowning at them all and feeling every set of eyes on me as I approached.

“I am Kaius Desin, and you are all now our prisoners. Resist and we will finish what we began.
Comply, and you will live.”

Looking over the group of them, I fixated my gaze on one of the nearest of the group, seeing myself
framed in the wide eyed expression of a rough faced woman with hair long since turned into
dreadlocks. “You.” My finger pointed at her with as much force as a sword thrust and she flinched
away from it. “Is any of your number have any experience with healing or treating injuries.”

“A f-few. Some of our prisoners are healers.” She stammered urgently as though even a fraction of a
second of hesitation would cause my swords to be unsheathed.

“Fetch them immediately.” My growl sent her scurrying off in the direction of one of the portions of
the fort that was still standing and I nodded after her after catching Weebam-Na’s eye. He followed
her as she almost broke out into a run in her haste to obey my command and I turned back to the rest
of them, stabbing my finger again at half of them who didn’t fail to shy away from my attentions.
“You lot, start gathering the wounded and take them somewhere dry. We will treat everyone we
can.”

Bejeen moved over without hesitation and began supervising the handful chosen to shift what
wounded they could and I felt rather than saw the enormous presence of Falid at my shoulder as he
moved closer. His greatsword was returned to its place down his spine and there was a collective
muttering as they beheld the armoured giant at my spine.

“Are you wounded?”

I saw the way that he shifted at my question and the heavy clanking of his armour as he shook his
head. “Negligibly Sir Desin. I will supervise these.”

“Good. Have them start collecting the dead and help the others with the wounded as needed. My
skills are needed with the others.”

“It will be done Sir Desin.”

There was no mistaking the way that the group before us looked amongst themselves as the Black
Knight stepped closer and began issuing orders in a voice so deep that it could be felt in their guts but
I was already turning back to the others. The sight that greeted me was several score meters covered
with blood, gore and bodies and my mind was slowly trying to relax and shut down after such a riot
of sensation. Even with my experience in fighting and death it was still my normal reaction to seek
out somewhere quiet and peaceful away from everything but I was not in the situation to do so. My
hands were beginning to shake as the adrenaline began to wear off and unless I found myself
something to do quickly I would begin suffering shock and fatigue.

Seeing Viconia cradling her broken hand and hissing in her breaths in the vain attempt to ward off
the pain, all other emotions and instincts were brushed away and I moved over to her to the exclusion
of all others. She did not fail to recognise my actions and while her face was pinched in agony there
was still scorn on her expression.

“Triage you jaluk. There are others worse than I.”

Feeling my embarrassment even as I gently cupped her injured hand in both of mine I willed the healing magicka between them and forced myself not to look into her eyes. “We need every one of us who are able to lift a sword in case these lot become unruly.”

Not for a moment did she buy my excuse and for a moment her uninjured hand caressed my face. “Shorten wael. I can recognise a broken slave when I see one. They will not give us any trouble.”

“I hope so.” Quickly checking over my handiwork I saw how although it would be a few days before she regained strength in her hand it was no longer entirely broken. “Are you well?”

“Other than the broken ribs....” She saw the way that my eyes moved up to her breastplate where a minor dent revealed where a mace or hammer had struck and she roughly pushed me aside. “Go. I am not some fragile waif in need of nurturing. The orc needs your attentions more than I.”

“Where is Mazoga?”

I received a nod in return as she moved over to assist Falid with supervising the bandits shifting the dead and wounded and I saw Mazoga limping and staggering her way towards a portion of the fort’s interior. Between the overgrown stonework and the mud covered cobblestones that seemed to fill the expanse inside of the outer walls, a portion had sunk over the centuries and filled with water. It was in the direction of this puddle that Mazoga was dragging the wounded Mogens by the hair. Despite her injuries she was bent upon reaching it and before I could catch up to her she had cuffed the bandit’s hands away and threw him into the tiny pond.

For the few seconds that it took for her to step into the shin deep puddle and put her boot onto his chest she was silent and appeared not to have heard me at all. With a sick fascination I watched as she forced him back into the water, forcing him down by her bodyweight alone and holding him with her foot despite his panicking struggles.

“You know there are easier ways to kill a man than that.”

“Yeh.” She replied, ignoring the way that he broke his fingernails scrabbling on her armoured leg and simply pressing down harder. “But they be too quick.”

By the time that the bandit’s frantic movements had ceased and she had been satisfied that he wasn’t faking anything it was obvious that she was becoming light headed with blood loss and pain. Only when she reached down and checked the body lying on its back in the puddle slowly turning reddish brown from blood for a pulse did she finally relax.

“It’s over.”

Taking shaky steps out of the pond, the last reserves of her considerable willpower finally ran out and she fell to her knees with a squelch. The corpse of the Nord bandit was bobbing lightly in the bloody puddle but she no longer had any interest in him and knelt with her eyes closed.

Whether she initially registered my presence I was uncertain but for those few moments that I began looking over the myriad of injuries she had sustained during the battle she knelt there quietly. It was as though she was feeling the wind and the cool night time air on her flesh for the first time even as it caressed her dozens of braided ponytails and began drying the copious amount of blood she was bathed in.
“He was obviously the reason why you came to Blackmarsh?” I said as I began shifting her armour as best I could and determine which of her injuries were the most serious. By rights she shouldn’t have been able to stand at all from the pain alone and while her flesh was pale and waxy she was still conscious at least.

“Yeh. Been hunting that bastard for three years.”

Digging my fingers into a split seam in her plate armour I felt the weakening pulse of blood from the gash in the armpit and sealed it as best I could with a burst of magicka. It was taking a lot of my concentration to call upon my magicka after such a battle but at that point I knew that without treatment she could simply fall asleep and never wake. “What did he do?”

For the most part she put up with my ministrations, barely reacting as I sealed some of the more grievous injuries with restoration magicka that I knew from experience felt like someone pressing an icicle into the wound. Taking a couple of deep breaths as I carefully pushed the flap of skin hanging from her head and healing it very carefully she sighed and clenched her fists.

“I didn’t grow up in Orsimium, never knew who my folks were either. Whoever they were, they dumped me shortly after I was born. The only reason why I’m still breathin’ is that I was found by a Khajiit Caravan.”

“So you were raised by Khajiit?”

Partially understanding that I was only half listening despite my interest, Mazoga nodded and winced as I began probing the axe and spear heads lodged in her chest. “Yeh. They treated me like one of their own and taught me everything that I know. I know that they liked having an Orc around to keep the thieves off their stuff, but they were my family.”

Using both hands and a considerable amount of effort I managed to rip the axe head free from where it had been lodged between a rib. “Keep pressure on that for a sec.” A gauntleted hand almost twice the size of my own pressed down hard enough for me to hear the metal creak in protest. Due to my vampirism I could sense the way that the blood flow was staunched from the wound which while useful was still disconcerting. “Mogens did something to them?”

Another nod and she grunted with the sensation of me pushing my fingers under her hand and sealing the wound. “After we got old enough, Ra’vindra and I set out on our own for a bit. Founded our own caravan trading silks between Camlorn and Kings Guard and were making a pretty pile of coin when he and his gang showed up. He demanded tribute for passing through their turf, which we paid but when we got to the next town Ra’vindra reported them to the guards.”

Her voice was suddenly constricted with a pain that had nothing to do with the physical damage that she had sustained at the hands of the Black Bows. Despite her best efforts there was a hint of moisture in her eyes and a tremble that coursed through her body. “He and his gang attacked us a couple of days later. Some of us he killed and they did… things to me and the other women. Then, he killed her. My sister… Ra’vindra.”

She must have seen the look on my face at the prospect of any number of beings smaller than Falid being able to take her prisoner and there was a feral grin around her tusks. “Ya’ll wouldn’t have recognised me those years ago. I was half the orc I am today.”

“He let you live though?”

Another nod and while she was still grinning there was a shadow in her expression. “Out of all of us I was the only one to see the dawn. He and his goons left me tied to a tree, telling me ‘an Orc who
can’t defend themselves is already dead.’ a couple of days later a group of Knights passed by, saw me and cut me loose.’

“I thought that the Knightly Orders in Highrock and the Bretons overall didn’t like Orcs.”

“They don’t.” She grunted in pain again and pressed her hand over the hole where the spear had punched through a weak portion of her armour. “An Orc wandering about on their own can be slain without repercussions and you are allowed to shoot at Orcs in groups of three or more with a crossbow from the walls of most cities in Highrock. These Knights though saw me as someone in need and their honour made them help me. Ra’vindra and I had been raised on tales of the great deeds of the Knightly Orders and while most of them are still stuck up bastards they still try to be good and fair. When they set me free I knew that I had to be one of them. I made a Knightly Oath and now after all this time that Oath is fulfilled.”

“What will you do now?”

With a wince of pain from her attempt at shrugging she chose to gesture hopelessly instead. “I dunno. Never thought that far ahead.”

“You’re welcome to join us.” I replied honestly. “If you live through the night, your injuries are extensive.”

She caught my sarcasm as I pulled my blood covered hands away and looked fruitlessly for a part of my body that wasn’t covered in gore, mud or stinking river water to wipe them on. While she was still deathly pale she still managed a choked out painful laugh. “Good. The boys in Orsinium love a gal with meat on her bones and some scars to show she isn’t a wuss.”

“They’ll be lining up for your hand at this rate.”

A crunch of stones and the clink of metal as someone behind me kicked a discarded weapon and I turned to see Viconia moving over towards us. She was still limping despite her best attempts to force her unwilling body to ignore the injury but there was no sign of how some of her ribs were cracked and broken.

“Once you are done, Alexi needs your attentions.”

Looking between her and Mazoga kneeling in front of me I nodded. “I’ll be over shortly. This one isn’t going to die on us just yet.”

“Yer definitely good with that pansy magicka stuff.” Mazoga gingerly pulled herself to her feet with my assistance and she gave me a look from my boots to my head. “And yer stronger than yer look.”

“I wasn’t always a knight and an adventurer. I used to be a forester.”

“Yer mentioned so earlier.” As I followed in Viconia’s footsteps I could hear Mazoga’s armour clanking as she felt around at the various wounds she had suffered and became satisfied at my handiwork. It would take days, if not longer for them to heal fully but unless she did something overly strenuous there shouldn’t be much threat of them reopening.

“It’s part of a forester’s training to be battlefield support. All of us are taught the basics of restoration to take care of ourselves while we are scouting and during pitched battle we help heal the legionaries as their ranks rotate the wounded to the rear. It helps the legion fight for longer and allows cohorts to outlast our enemies.”

Stopping in place I blew out a loud breath at the sight before me and for a moment tried not to laugh.
Viconia’s expression was one of immense amusement despite the situation and Mazoga snorted.

Alexi was sitting patiently on a scavenged chair from one of the nearby tents and unlike the rest of us his helmet was still on his head and being greatly assisted by the fact that an arrow was lodged deeply in the visor.

“A littlth helpth pleath?” Came his muffled voice and despite myself I laughed out loud. His duelling sallet was superbly designed and allowed him considerable range of movement without overly hindering his vison, but couldn’t and didn’t offer the same protection as Falid’s greathelm or Mazoga’s orich helm. The arrow had struck his visor in the portion covering his cheek and had penetrated through the weakened portion where the collection of tiny holes allowed him to breathe.

“Looks to me like someone finally found a way to shut you up.”

“Ha ha. Very funnth Kaiuth.”

Mazoga turned and wandered off in the direction of Bejeen supervising the bandits shifting and moving the wounded towards one of the smaller stone buildings constructed against the outer walls and I motioned for Viconia to move over to assist me. The arrow had clearly punched through the helm and judging by the blood slowly streaming down from under his helm and down his bevor it was lodged in his face. Going by the way that he was breathing and the almost constant spitting and attempts to clear his mouth it was in his cheek or jaw.

“So much for luck.” I said as I knelt down in front of him. “You’re lucky that these bows aren’t worth their weight in kindling and they don’t have the strength to draw them back far.”

“I donth feel lucky.”

“I bet. Now try not to speak while I get this thing out of your face.”

Viconia snorted as she moved closer and looked over the way the metal visor had been buckled in by the arrow punching through it. “This one would be able to speak around a mouthful of mud.”

A pained groan was all that he was able to do as he attempted to laugh and clear his mouth and throat. The only portion of his face visible under the sallet was the strip revealing his eyes and I knew that if the arrow had hit a few centimetres higher he would have been dead.

Choosing not to use my dagger to try to break the shaft of the arrow, I instead used the Light of Dawn to effortless slice it away to reduce the amount of jerking and the threat of twisting the arrowhead in his face. I was hoping that the arrow would have been a bodkin which would have been easier to remove, but due to the nature of the Black Bows and their reliance on their weapons for hunting I would have bet a sizable amount of money that it was a jagged and hooked broadhead instead.

“Right, brace yourself Alexi.” Looking into his eyes for a moment I saw the anticipation and the way he winced at what was to come before they closed. After nodding to Viconia she knelt down behind him, wrapping her arms tightly around him to hold him still but as I began feeling around his collar and the visor itself to find the best way to lift and pull the arrow free I heard someone cry out behind me and rushed footsteps in our direction.

“By the light of Julianos don’t do that! You’ll shred his flesh even more.”

Panting from the sudden run, the young man that skidded to a halt under our bemused expressions seemed to ignore our wariness and almost physically slapped my hands away from Alexi. “You could sever the arteries if you aren’t careful and you can’t just pull it out.”
“Ver’bol? Who are you supposed to be?”

While just as filthy, the young man who glanced between Viconia’s dark expression and my own questioning one was not as drenched in blood and gore as we were. He flinched away from her for a moment, fumbling with his belt and trying not to meet any of our gazes as he produced a pair of heavy metal snips. ‘I’m Thedret D’urnar, Knight-Errant to Lord Jenshkode of Dunlain.’

I shrugged at the names and title he provided and looked over him with some curiosity as he began carefully studying the way the arrow was lodged into Alexi’s helm and face. That he was young was obvious, but he had the appearance of a Redguard and yet spoke with the accent of Highrock that sounded similar to Detane’s. “Were you one of the prisoners?”

His nod was quick and succinct, his eyes for the moment solely focussed on the arrow as he moved closer with the snips in one hand and gesturing for me to hold the cut arrow shaft and Alexi’s helm. “Yes. I have been for some time now along with a few others.”

With myself holding the helm, and Viconia keeping Alexi as still as possible he began cutting the visor away, sweating as he had to put considerable effort into each squeeze of the snip’s handles to cut the hardened steel of the visor. Centimetre by painful centimetre he managed to cut the visor off entirely near the hinges and allowed us to see the injury much more clearly.

“Broadhead. Thankfully it was mostly broken when it penetrated the helm.” Thedret muttered as he saw the way that it was lodged in Alexi’s face. The pain that the sword champion was feeling was obvious in the way how his normally pale features were almost translucent in the flicking torchlight. His eyes would alternate between being open and scrunched shut depending on whether we moved him or the arrow, and for a few seconds he grimaced in agony as the young esquire used a pair of thin pliers to dig the arrowhead out of his cheek.

“No too deep, didn’t break any teeth and mostly superficial damage. You’ll live but unfortunately I am not skilled enough to remove the chances of heavy scarring.”

Watching with curiosity as the young man carefully stopped the bleeding with a burst of magicka I saw the way that he was also extremely well built, if suffering from the weakness that a prolonged imprisonment would bring. There were collections of scars up his bared forearms that were obviously from practice with blades but I could also see that his flesh was darkened and mottled in places that was not from his ancestry but from bruising.

“So you’re a Knight as well?”

Again he nodded as he carefully looked over the wound that was now a mass of scar tissue and lightly rested his hand on one of Alexi’s to stop him from prodding at the injury. “Yes Sire, of the Holy Order of Julianos. It seems that I have you all to thank for our rescue but you have also provided me with an overabundance of work. You will have to excuse me.”

His eyes darted about and despite the strength in his words there was an edginess as though he expected us to retaliate for such brusqueness. After however long he had been in the clutches of the bandits it was not surprising and after the moment of hesitation he retrieved his crude collection of chirurgion tools and scampered in the direction of the wounded bandits.

“Well, that was different.” I said after a moment of amusement. “And don’t play with it Alexi, it won’t heal otherwise.”

Looking much paler than normal, but better now that the arrow had been removed from his face Alexi’s eyes fixed on me and he sheepishly lowered his hand from where he was going to poke the
injury. As he went to speak Viconia’s dark laugh was enough to chill the blood mas she too began moving in the direction of the bandits.

“It might be best if you don’t speak until it heals a little more. As torturous as it may be, it’ll be for your benefit.”

“You mean ours?” I added with relish. “A day or two without his mouth is going to a blessing from the Nine themselves.”

Alexi didn’t appreciate our joke as much as we did but his eyes were still flashing with amusement as he kept his wounded face very still with willpower alone. He did however raise a hand and a very particular finger in our direction as we all moved to supervise our prisoners.

Despite my initial expectations our band of captured bandits didn’t provide us many troubles during the rest of the night. The survivors of our attack on the fort numbered less than a third of their original strength and for the most part their will was utterly broken. They had seen the eight of us not only attack them where they were strongest, but personally kill the handful of their leaders and champions without much effort at all. Counting the bodies left more than just myself wondering how we had managed to be so successful in the assault, as over forty of the Black Bows were dead, and another dozen joined them as they succumbed to their wounds in the early hours of the morning. Only twenty-eight of them lived with minor or no injuries at all but it was difficult to say that they were entirely healthy.

The months that they had lived within Blackmarsh had been extremely detrimental to their health. While we all had initially marvelled at how we had managed to defeat a force of almost a hundred bandits in a single night they were not in peak condition by any stretch of the imagination. Besides the usual assortment of poxes and infections brought about by their salubrious lifestyles, there was barely a man or woman among them who weren’t suffering from marsh maladies of one kind or another. Dysentry, cholera and malaria was rife among their group, as were those suffering from Ataxia, Swamp Fever, Bloodlung and other less common ailments. Many of those who we had fought had been struggling to contend with our small, highly skilled, healthy and heavily equipped group but the tiniest hints of unease at the slaughter was pushed into the depths of my mind. They had meant to kill us and they would not have given us any chance to surrender as we had provided them but the niggling pleasure of the death I had inflicted would not go away as easily.

There were other prisoners as well in their group, a handful of men and mer who had been kidnapped or spirited away over the weeks or months by the Black Bows for the various ransoms that they represented. While our group took advantage of the fact that the Bandits were thoroughly contained I made arrangements for us and the recently freed prisoners to set aside a secure portion of the fort for ourselves and begin the long process of recovery. Even though the surviving Black Bows were still dazed and confused at the inexplicable turn of events we could not risk turning our backs on any of them even for a moment. We did however need to rest after the week of paddling through the swamp and an entire night spent fighting and killing and we took turns snatching what sleep we could manage.

The sun was rising by the time that I managed to find a dark corner to crawl into and I had forced myself to remain as conscious as I could while Alexi, Mazoga, Viconia and Weebam-Na took the opportunity to rest before the rest of us. Falid, Detane and Bejeen kept watch over our new charges while I assisted the Esquire Thedret and an elderly Imperial healer Luselivupis Bernus in treating the injuries of the bandits wounded in our attack. Luselivupis had been a prisoner with the Black Bows for several months but despite the fact that he had lived through at least sixty winters he was by far one of the healthiest within the fort. While we went about the business of treating gashes and cuts and setting broken bones I remarked on his health and received the response of “I better be healthier
than these fools; I don’t drink the same water that I shit in.” He also explained that he, like the other prisoners had been taken by the Black Bows for various purposes, in his case they needed a dedicated healer to contend with the dangers of the marshes.

Theedret was more of an enigma and the dozen wounded bandits didn’t give us much of an opportunity to speak before I was relieved by Viconia after she managed a handful of hours of sleep. The young esquire diligently went about his duties of treating the wounded bandits without any hesitation at all despite spending time as their prisoner. Unlike Luselivupis his brief tenure in the care of the Black Bows had not been as pleasant and Luselivupis made mention that the young Breton had been ‘interrogated’ several times over the previous weeks. Judging by the bruising that was visible despite his Yokundian ancestry it was obvious that the bandits had not been gentle, or overly imaginative in their efforts to extract whatever information they had been seeking.

When I did sleep I did so as though dead, my eyes closing and exhaustion taking me within seconds of laying down in one of the few dry interiors of the Fort itself. I was still covered in blood and splattered in mud, my under layers still soaked through to the skin with river water, but the full night of fighting and the after effects of adrenaline ensured that I fell unconscious within minutes, if not less.

It felt as though the handful of hours passed in a single blink and the tiny stone room built into the fort’s walls was suddenly brighter and lit compared to the twilight of the night. I knew that I had received some rest, but it had been fleeting and served to reveal just how many injuries I had received throughout the night. While nothing was broken and I hadn’t added to my growing collection of scars, the tenseness throughout every muscle and the way that it hurt to move much showed that underneath my partially dried mess of armour and equipment I was thoroughly bruised and battered.

Walking out into the sunlight and squinting at the brightness I looked around the bloodstained interior of the fort and the small bustling movements within it. Alexi was seated just outside our impromptu sleeping quarters, acting as a guard for those of us inside while we slept. He was diligently cleaning and sharpening his sword, but the rest of his equipment would need more than a simple whetstone to return to its original colouration and condition.

Giving him a quick glance as I stepped into the sunlight I finished pulling Sunchild’s belt tight around my waist. “How’s the face?”

He looked up at me, his expression set into a scowl with the brutal scabbed mass on his right cheek despite the humour in his eyes. “Itchy.”

“That means its healing at least.” Looking about the ruins I saw how for the most part, the surviving Black bows were sitting in groups and being watched very carefully by Falid. Detane and Bejeen were still asleep in the ruin at my back, but I wasn’t sure whether Falid had rested at all. He certainly hadn’t stripped even the smallest piece of his armour off himself but at some point he had attempted to clean the majority of blood and gore off it. “Any issues while I was asleep?”

The whetstone continued scraping down the edge of his blade. “A couple of the prisoners tried their luck and jumped Viconia.”

“Is she okay?”

His chuckle and the humour it invoked was as dark as the marshes themselves. “She’s fine. They didn’t even lay a finger on her, although she did make an example of one of them.”

“I’m not sure I want to know.”
Placing his sword against his knee, he looked between me and the gave a nod in the direction of the collection of sullen prisoners. “I never knew that magicka could make someone… well… *explode.*”

Flicking his fingers out in an imitation of an explosion, he made a loud popping sound with his mouth and immediately grimaced as it twisted his injury. I chuckled both at his expense and to hide the mild trepidation at Viconia’s actions and her typically brutal way of dealing with such situations. “Well, that’s Viconia for you. How are the others?”

“Bam’s gone back to the village but I reckon he’ll be back shortly. With luck we’ll have some form of contact from the other villages nearby and get a few more clawed hands to help us out with this lot. Have you decided what we are going to do with them all?”

“What’s the going rate for bounties these days?”

He shrugged. “Thirty or forty silver each? Count Caro will probably even throw some coin our way for finally disposing of the Black Bows. So, let’s say forty silver a head…” He trailed off, giving the collapsed gatehouse and the pile of corpses peeking over the slight rise a suspicious look. “Minus the headless ones and those we left in pieces…”

“More than enough to recoup our expenses on this trip.”

“I have to keep reminding myself that you were a mercenary.” His words were bitter but his tone was far from it, the usual gleam in the redhead swordsman’s eye making up for his deadpan delivery. “Fighting for gold and profit and all that.”

“Don’t forget fame and women.” Turning about I too cast my eyes over the fort not that it was fully visible in the sunlight and realising just how old and dilapidated it truly was. The mound of the collapsed gatehouse was also a lot smaller in the light than in the darkness and was maybe a metre or two in height at the most. “Speaking of which; where’s our new friends?”

The grimace this time on his face was not entirely in jest. Other than Thredret and Luselivupis there were also a handful of other prisoners taken by the bandit gang for ransoms. “If you mean her lady the Baronetess Marialia Fulcalius and her hangers-on; they are currently resting under Viconia’s ministrations.”

“I thought you and the Baronetess got off rather well.” I replied with sarcasm dripping from every word and a smile on my face. When the other prisoners had been released we had discovered that three of them were minor nobles captured by the bandits several weeks before and being held until their families paid ransoms. Thankfully for them their titles and families ensured that they were worth more untouched, and so managed to avoid the usual fate reserved for women in such situations. Despite this their experiences had left a different type of scars and when they were released they almost literally threw themselves at the first person they encountered with gratitude.

When faced with a collection of individuals such as ourselves, it was no surprise and a considerable amount of amusement on all of our behalf’s to see the Blade Champion of Tamriel the focus of undivided attention from three young noblewomen. After being freed by Weebam-Na and encountering the other members of our group, Alexi had been the obvious source of succour than the rest of us. Viconia would have sooner spit them on Dragonbane than provide comfort, Detane’s personality acted better than a coating of dung at keeping people at bay, Falid was intimidating in every measurable way and the other members of the group were Argonians and an Orc respectively. My appearance had been just as off-putting at the others, clad in my darker armour that was covered in gore and stinking mud whereas Alexi in his mithril chainmail and white-yet-heavily-stained tabard was the quintessential white knight.
“Her father would kill me at the very least for being within a hundred metres of his daughter.” He said, idly prodding at his scabbed cheek.

“The greatest swordsman in all of Tamriel braves the swamps and marshes of the most dangerous region in the world, bests a bandit king in single combat and rescues a group of fair maidens from the foul clutches of his comrades? You’ll end up the toast of the Elder Council and a Baronet by the end of the year.”

A moment of true horror appeared on his face and I struggled to identify whether it was real or not before it broke into one of his typical grins and accompanying laugh. “By all the Nine’s graces I hope the dreaded beast of marriage is one that I will never have to face.”

“Worried that your ‘sword-work’ isn’t up to the challenge?” we both shared a laugh and I gestured to the ruins around us. “Anyway, do you know where Thedret is?”

Alexi looked up from where he was rubbing at his face from where the laughter and smile had pulled at the healing flesh. “With the rest of the wounded I suppose. He wouldn’t have gone far.”

“Excellent. I think I know why he is here but I also think it is time we look at getting what we came all this way for.”

With a grin on his face Alexi rose to his feet, flicking his sword into the air and twirling it around a hand with a skill that would make most circus jugglers green with envy before sliding it into its sheath once more. “I suppose I will join you. The Nine knows that you need all the help you can get these days.”

“You almost sound like Viconia.” I replied, catching Falid’s gaze as he stood guard over our prisoners. A brief moment passed between us as I gestured to the portion of the fort set aside as our sleeping quarters and the enormous Redguard nodded in acknowledgement as Alexi and I began walking away. For a short time, the others still sleeping would be looked after by the Black Knight until one or both of us returned.

Together, Alexi and I moved towards the place where we had dragged the wounded and where Luselivupis, Thredret and myself had spent several hours doing what we could to save those injured during the battle. The injuries had been expectedly terrible and several had succumbed no matter how much effort we put into keeping them alive. Their bodies had been added to the pile just outside the walls which had also noticeably shrunk in size during the night as the resident denizens of the swamps took advantage of the sudden food source. Some had been buried in the rough soil or had makeshift cairns made from broken masonry and scavenged stones, but for many of the bandits without family, lovers or close friends who had survived the night they were simply dumped and left for the marshes to claim.

Only five of the bandits remained in the crude tent strung off the side of the central keep. Many of the bandits slept on bedrolls and the odd hammock or two but their leaders had managed to cobble together or claim something resembling bedding. It was these crude beds that were used to assist us in treating the wounded but they were all almost irreparably ruined with blood and flesh.

Looking close to death himself in a combination of old age and exhaustion, Luselivupis gave us a glance as we entered the tent but returned to busily applying bandages and a freshly made poultice to one of the Black Bows. The young bandit on the stretcher looked pale and shivering but what was as a result of the gash across his chest or a previous illness brought on by living within the swamps was almost impossible to discern. I nodded to the aged healer as we moved past, seeing one of the other figures sitting with his back against the only wall made of stone rather than cloth with his eyes closed and hands on his knees.
Whether he sensed our presence or felt our approaching footsteps I was uncertain but the dark skinned Breton opened his bloodshot eyes and looked up at us from where he sat on the floor. Like the rest of us, he too hadn’t slept much the night before but he was also exhausted from his imprisonment and treatment at the hands of the Black Bows instead of hours of fighting we had experienced during the night.

“Sir Desin, Sir Vanevius.” He said softly, knuckling his eyes with a hand that was conspicuously clean in comparison to the grime and blood that covered him to the elbows.

“Good morning Thedret.” I replied, moving over to him and sitting down on one of the spare beds that had been dragged in and ignoring the half congealed bloodstain on it. “Sorry if we woke you.”

Slowly, he shook his head and yawned. “I was merely dozing. What can I do for you?”

“Kaius has a few questions I think.” Alexi said from over my shoulder.

“More like confirmations for a few things, like how you are here for the Shield.”

Like a wave, the exhaustion seemed to flow out of him and his eyes perceptibly hardened at the two of us. “You were not dispatched by the Knights Mentor, were you?”

“No. We’re here on our own volition.”

“I knew that it hadn’t been long enough for the Order to realise that we were missing.” Thedret looked equal parts relieved and despondent but forced a smile onto his face. “It does raise the question just how you all found yourselves here.”

“We’re like you it seems. We’re seeking the Shield.”

Pressing his fingers into his temples, he massaged them gently and I found myself acutely aware of how I too was feeling the strain and the encroaching headache. “No one outside of the Order is supposed to know of this place or that the shield is here. It’s been one of the closest guarded secrets for two centuries.”

I looked at him directly and gave a smile of my own. “Viconia and I have been on the path of the Relics for the past weeks. We have been successful in retrieving the Helm and the Boots, as well as the Cuirass in the old Priory of the Nine.”

At hearing this he immediately gained suspicion and looked at Alexi and I very carefully, seeking for falsehood and becoming satisfied when he found none. “Pelinal’s relics are becoming whole once more. The hour of Umaril’s return truly is at hand.”

“That is what we believe.” Seeing the expression on his face I shook my head and cut him off before he could ask the obvious question. “and no, Pelinal’s heir is not among us as far as we know. We were all hoping to find the Divine Crusader on our journey to recover the Relics.”

“Speak for yourself.” Alexi chuckled at my back. “Who’s to say that it isn’t yours truly?”

“There’s not enough space in the armour for the sheer breadth of your ego, and I thought holy warriors were supposed to be humble?”

“I can be humble.” The amount of sarcasm and the fake pout was obvious and we both grinned at each other briefly while I made a show of rolling my eyes.

Turning back to Thedret, I saw the annoyance on his features at Alexi’s and my banter. It was
obvious that we were a far cry from the Knights that he was used to travelling with in his own journeys. “Sir Henrik Fenahrson died defending this place, and while he was one of the Knights of the Nine he died wearing the Heraldry of the Order of Julianos. I’m guessing that the Shield is still heavily defended here otherwise the Black Bows would have gotten their hands on it ages ago.”

Thedret nodded. “This is true. The Fort will not give up its secrets easily.”

“Can you tell us how to retrieve the shield?”

The long silence that fell between us was unmistakeable and I knew that he was thinking over all the times the Bandits had tortured or otherwise interrogated him during his imprisonment and how a new group were asking him for the same thing. he didn’t know us anymore than we knew him and his hesitation was all too apparent.

“I will help you retrieve the Shield.” He said finally, slowly drawing his words out and staring at us intently. “But the Shield will remain in the care of a Knight Mentor until whoever is worthy to wield it is found.”

“Excellent. How do we get the shield?”

“It would be easier to show than tell you.”

True to his word, Thedret rose to his feet and together the three of us left the makeshift infirmary and made our way into the central keep of the fort. It was a fairly crude but sturdy structure, standing tall enough that the roof was at least two or three metres above the outer parapets but being little more than six or seven metres tall at the highest point. The interior was also a very plain and undecorated space that if not for the collection of rough beddings and personal effects from the Black Bow Commanders scattered about would have been empty. It was built it a square, twenty metres by twenty metres in width and length and looking about as rich as the interior of a Legion fort after the furnishings being looted. Only a handful of statues stood on their pedestals, carved into the likeness of great warriors but still appearing crude and poorly fashioned.

In the far end of the keep’s interior, opposite the only entrance was a collection of stairs that vanished into the murky depths under the fort and it was clear that shortly after reaching the level below the tiny corridor branched off in two directions. Standing at the top of the stairs I had a very uncomfortable feeling as I looked into the darkness.

“I’m going to go out on a limb and guess that wherever that leads, its heavily trapped the entire way.” I said simply, giving Thedret a quick look as he took note of each of the statues in the keep.

“Hundreds of metres of tunnels and passages covering three hectares arranaged into a labyrinth. And yes, you are correct. There are dozens of traps ranging from the usual darts and triggered bolt mechanisms, spear traps and pitfalls and after all this time some of those passages will be flooded.”

“Good thing that we don’t have to go down there then.”

Both Alexi and Tredret looked at me, the first with an expression of puzzlement and the latter with an increasing amount of shock.

“How do you know?”

I shrugged at Alexi. “Viconia and I learned more than just where this place is at the Priory of the Nine. Like that the Shield isn’t in the depths of the fort but within the main keep itself.”

“You are correct Sir Desin.” Thedret said simply, gesturing to the statues. “The Fort was designed to
safeguard the Shield but traps and physical defences can be circumvented and destroyed with time. The true defence is that those seeking the shield requires wisdom to find and claim it.”

Gesturing to each of the satutes in turn he looked over them all and smiled sadly. “I was one of fourteen sent from the Order of Julianos to retrieve the Shield. After the attacks on the Church the Grand Masters decreed that the time had come to recover the relics to face Umaril and so they sent us.”

“Us?” Alexi asked.

“Master Georeph, Commander Ametecou, and a dozen of the finest Knights in the Order.”

It didn’t take a vampire’s senses to see the sadness that infected him and I moved a little closer. “So what happened to you all?”

“The Black Bows ambushed us a few days travel north of here. We had heard reports of bandits in the area but we didn’t take heed too much. Is there anywhere in Tamriel that is free of bandits? Master Georeph assured us that there was nothing in the region that could stand against fourteen Knights Mentor and he was partially right at least. The Black Bows waited until we were crossing a portion of the marshes and ambushed us almost enmasse. They didn’t even need to try to kill us, but let the marshes do the work instead.”

Moving from statue to statue I saw the way that he was specifically walking, counting the steps between each one and obviously calculating something in his mind. “Half of us died then and there. Anyaene and Veribertton were knocked into the water and never resurfaced and Paureus got attacked by a shoal of fish attracted by all the blood. He didn’t even make it two meters towards the shore. Any of us who got out of the water were captured, tied up and brought here.”

“The bastards got greedy.” Alexi said and Thedret nodded.

“Originally they planned on ransoming us back to the Order but after they discovered the maps we were carrying they began asking us questions. It didn’t take long before Greagious took a personal interest and they started torturing us. Tutcon was the first to relent and tell them how the shield was here and after that they forgot about ransoming us all.”

I saw how he counted the steps towards the centre of the statues and scuff a mark into the dirt covered floor with a boot. “They killed you one by one to get the others to talk?”

“It didn’t really work for them though. We might have told them that the Shield was here but none of us told them how to retrieve it.” echoing darkly in the shadowed interior, Thedret’s laugh was as bitter as his expression. “They believed that we had come in such numbers to breach the traps and never thought that the Shield was right under their noses the whole time.”

“How’d you survive though?”

“Me?” again he took another measured set of paces from another one of the statues and made another mark with his boot. “I’m a trained healer. When they caught me healing one of the others after one of their interrogations they realised that I was worth more to them all alive than dead. The others… the others didn’t make it though. Greagious hoped that I would see ‘reason’ and tell them more.”

The collection of scuff marks made a rough hexagon seemingly in a random portion of the floor and he stepped backwards from it with a wave of his hands. “Well, this is where the Shield lies.”

“How certain are you?” I asked, moving over and taking note of the position of the marking.
“As certain as I can be.” His voice became cold as he looked over the two of us. “What will you do once you have the Shield?”

Standing with the scuffed stonework at my feet, I couldn’t help but feel trepidation that yet another of the relics were almost in our grasp. “Get out of these damnable marshes first and foremost. After that? There’s still the other relics that need to be found.”

Chapter End Notes

I have reached my 1st year anniversary of beginning to upload my works on here and in that time I have somehow managed to write and upload over 500,000 words. This time of year is very busy between work and family so my writing schedule might be stretched a little to compensate. I still intend on putting up a chapter a fortnight with an update to Sos do Dov roughly once a month but if I’m honest I’m getting a little burned out. Half a million words in 12 months has been a massive effort so I think I need to take a step back and readjust my brain for a bit.

Rest assured though that if, and I mean if I have a hiatus it will be a very short one. I fully intend on finishing Knight by mid to late Feb 2019, and begin updating Champion shortly after that. Over the next few weeks I might start going back through and do some amendments and rewrites of my fics overall to de-stress a little.

For the handful of my readers and those few who have left comments I can't thank you all enough. While I am writing this for myself and to shut my insufferable muse up, I appreciate that I'm not doing all this for my own self-gratification. Thanks all!
Despite first appearances and the fact that we no longer had to contend with hundreds of metres of trap strewn halls, retrieving the Shield of the Crusader was neither quick nor easy. The rest of the fort may have been an elaborate ruse but the original builders ensured nothing was left to chance. For the rest of the afternoon and a good portion of the following day we laboured within the keep, levering and hauling the fifty kilogram stones from the floor where Thedret had marked, relying upon Falid and Mazoga’s impressive strength in order to shift them away. By the time we had finished moving the stones we had managed to excavate a chest deep hole before we found what we were looking for.

The size of the steel box and the complete and utter lack of ornamentation did little to allay our growing fears that Thedret and the Knights Mentor were mistaken but after cracking the seals and prying it open we all fell silent. Locked away for two centuries and buried the entire time, the Shield like the other Relics I had seen was immaculate and impossible not to identify. Lovingly placed into the velvet cushioning within the box it was as pure and unmarked as the day it was created but to most of us it was much, much smaller than we expected.

Little more than a buckler designed to be strapped to the arm and the wrist rather than held, it was a far cry from the enormous Legion tower shields that I was used to. Fashioned into the shape of a diamond with the points cut away, it was less than my forearm wide, but twice a long in height. While there was no doubting the overwhelming power of the relic I realised that it was not designed for the same style of fighting as the other shields I was used to, and was much more suited for combat on the back of a horse than on foot. Falid commented that it appeared suitable for fighting with a weapon using both hands, and I for one agreed with him, especially how his knowledge of fighting with larger weapons surpassed the rest of us.

After staying our third night in the area we departed the fort in a group exponentially larger than the one we had arrived in. The remaining Black Bows were loaded into a collection of barges that had arrived from some of the other nearby Argonian villages as the word of our success spread. For the most part they didn’t show any signs of resistance, especially after the two that were killed in their attempts to attack us and the three that tried their luck fleeing into the marshes. Their fate in particular was left as a mystery but the blood curdling screams and the roaring that echoed out of the night after one escaped had thoroughly discouraged the rest.

The local villages had also sent handfuls of their population to assist, and while many were no healthier than the first we had encountered their assistance in herding our prisoners was invaluable. They also greatly assisted our journey back to the larger settlements which ensured that after a short two-day journey we found ourselves back within comparative civilisation and handing our charges over to the authorities.

Much to Viconia’s amusement, the bounties we received for the remaining bandits was surprisingly considerable once the authorities were convinced of their identities and any attempts to cheat or swindle us were dealt with. When we left the township and our collection of grateful guides from the liberated villages we did so with a considerable amount of gold and silver coins as well as our recovered artefact.

The return journey was very much the same as our journey to Blackmarsh although there was much more resting than before. All of our injuries had ensured that we were able to do little more than rest,
recuperate and see to our arms and armour that had taken just as much of a battering as we had. Much would have to wait for the attentions of a smithy or armourer to receive more than patching and cleaning but by the time we laid eyes on Leyawiin we were positively bouncing and riding on the waves of our success.

Word of our success had proven to be much faster than the river carrack we returned on, once again proving that the messenger posts continued their service in spreading news at a breakneck pace. When we finally moored onto Leyawiin’s docks an enormous crowd was rapidly building, kept at bay only by the cohort’s worth of guards, the ship’s sailors and a handful of Knights of the White Stallion sent to escort us to the Stallion Lodge. As far as I could tell there were easily several hundred citizens and faithful straining for a glimpse of one of Pelinal’s Relics or the individuals responsible for its successful retrieval. As sailors swore and guards bellowed and pushed the crowd back we managed to disembark and make our way through the docks and out of the city towards the lodge.

Our reception was also very similar, as every member or individual affiliated with the Order in any way was there in person to welcome us back and I was mildly amused to see that there was no fanfare or the like awaiting us. Just a sea of grinning faces until someone started clapping and left the entire lodge shaking from the overwhelming applause and cheering from the hundreds of Knights, Squires, Men-at-Arms, servants and craftsmen that made up the Order’s ranks.

Sir Ramauld was standing at the end of the great hall, a smile splitting his enormous beard and being flanked by his two remaining Knight-Captains Sir Niseus and Madame B’ivin. For a moment I almost stopped in place, as the way the applause and cheering was threatening my calm was suddenly compounded as I realised that the Count and Countess Caro were also present. Their handful of chosen Men-at-Arms and a small gaggle of courtiers and other dignitaries were joining in on the cheering, their presence somehow more off putting than that of an entire knightly order. At that moment I would have preferred to singlehandedly face down the hordes of Oblivion and all of Nirm’s monstrosities than continue being within the heart of such public acclaim.

“You all know how to make an entrance.” Sir Ramauld said, raising his voice to allow it to carry over the thundering noise filling the stallion lodge.

I barely had time to brace myself before the enormous Nordic Knight grasped my hand tightly in a bone crushing grip that lasted barely a second before he moved to the others in our group. One by one he gripped everyone by the hand and his example led to us being swamped by his Knight Captains, the Count and the other attending dignitaries.

“Well, at least it appears that you both have learned how to share glory.” The noise had died off as we finished receiving the personal congratulations, which allowed Count Caro’s voice to carry across the hundreds pressing in around us. For a few seconds there was a ripple of amusement throughout the crowd as our group spread ourselves into a rough line before them.

“When I knighted you both,” He continued, delight written across every line of his face as he addressed Viconia and myself. “I did so to honour your accomplishments, not to challenge you to outdo them.”

“What can I say my lord? We like testing ourselves.”

Breaking into a massive grin, he turned and looked at one particular individual in the centre of our party with the priceless relic in his hands. Thedret had willing followed us on the journey but he had refused to let the Shield out of his sight and care beyond the briefest of moments. Now dressed in partially reclaimed and recovered armour, the relic was clutched protectively in his mailed hands in a way that allowed everyone to gaze upon it and Count Caro nodded appreciatively to the young Knight.
“All of your deeds are now beyond legendary, and you all have accomplished what most have considered impossible. Leyawiin, Cyrodiil, the Empire, and even I owe you all immensely for what you have done.” Slowly he looked over us all, seeing the way that we stood there filled with pride by clearly showing the hardships of our journey. His eyes came to rest on Alexi, standing tall despite the fact that his pure white tabard was now a stained grey and face twisted into a permanent smile from the jagged scar on his cheek. “Is it true that Greagious and the Black Bows are no more?”

Alexi nodded. “It is true my Lord. Greagious was slain by my own hand and his lieutenants were killed by Kaisus. The rest are either dead or in captivity.”

For the briefest of moments all of the years that Count Caro lived landed heavily on his shoulders but there was satisfaction in the way that he slumped. “I…” he began, pausing and physically correcting himself. “My family, thanks you all for what you have done. We are in your debt sir Knights.”

The young Countess moved over towards her husband and I couldn’t help but notice the way that her hand flowed down his arm briefly before entwining their fingers together. It was a simple, regal motion that on the surface appeared to be a formality but I could see the way that the older Count took solace in his second wife’s presence. Her face might have been as harsh and arrogant as she had appeared all those months ago but she too was struggling not to show some sign of satisfaction or gratitude to us all.

The dark pall lasted for the briefest of moments before the Count crushed any trace of it aside with well-practiced ease. His grin grew even larger until I was beginning to wonder whether his lips would split from the effort. “The Black Bows finally destroyed for good, and another of Pelinal’s relics reclaimed in the name of the Nine. I had intended on holding another ceremony in the coming days but now is as good as a time as any.” Clicking his fingers, one of his attendants stepped forward with a scroll in one hand and a small box in the other. “Sir Desin, I believe that you have recovered the most relics of any being within Tamriel’s history, even surpassing those within the ancient Order of the Nine.”

Feeling a sudden stab of trepidation right into the depths of my stomach, I tried not to show any of my unease and returned his smile with one of my own. “I haven’t been alone in my successes my Lord, I have had considerable help.”

“Oh, I can see that.” His gaze briefly flickered to the others standing by my side and the way that Viconia surreptitiously moved closer to be by my side in a facsimile of him and the Countess. There was no way I could not notice the way he had to look up to meet Mazoga’s and Falid’s gazes the second before he raised his voice to carry it to every corner of the great hall. “It gives me immense pleasure to announce that the Elder Council has ratified the reformation of the Order of the Nine, decreeing that whomever retrieves the most relics shall lead the Holy Order in the reclamation, and protection of the arms and armour of Pelinal Whitestrake.”

“My Lord, I…”

“Oh for Shar’s sake Kaisus,” Viconia said at my side. “You retrieved the Boots on your own and have been part of retrieving three other relics. You’re the only one who meets the criteria.”

Count Caro nodded both to me and Viconia and my quick glance to the others in the party let me see that none of them were going to come to my rescue. It was galling that I could face off against daedric horrors, vampires and other assorted monsters infesting the lands without hesitation but finding myself the centre of attention and praise was giving me the shakes and leaving me nauseous.

The scroll was unfurled in the Count’s hands and the courtier stepped forward and offered the tiny
box to myself. It was large enough to sit comfortably in the palm of a hand but as I took it off the man and opened it I saw that inside was an immaculately made signet ring.

“I took it upon myself to commission Leyawiin’s finest jeweller on your behalf even before the Council’s decree was formalised. With this ring and my authority, I declare you; Sir Kaius Trebanus Desin, as Knight Commander of the Order of the Nine.”

Again the thunderous applause shook the air and could be felt through the very stones under our boots as I took the offered ring and Count Caro made a show of reading the scroll authorising my new rank and title. At that point I was far too overwhelmed to think or listen to what he was formally announcing, instead taking all of my concentration to remove my signet ring of the Order of the White Stallion and slip on the new signet bearing the Diamond Sigil of the Order of the Nine.

Despite its size, the weight of authority attached to such a simple piece of jewellery made my hand and arm feel as solid and heavy as lead. I had never envisioned myself being the commander of any number of men beyond being a Praefect in the Legion, and if I had been honest with myself, during the weeks since Viconia and I had decided on re-establishing the Order of the Nine I had purposely not thought about the consequences. Now that I was standing before a Count, wearing a ring representing the authority granted by the Elder Council Itself I was struggling to believe or even understand it all.

Sir Ramauld didn’t have a congratulatory handshake for me this time and instead I found myself smothered in a momentary warrior’s embrace and receiving a pat on the back that threatened to crack ribs. If he could have found a way to smile even more he would have done so, and as the noise once again died down he was nodding and gesturing to the crowd around us.

“We are equals now Kaius, but you will not truly be a Commander until you have Knights to lead. Thankfully for you I have already assisted you in this regard and several of the White Stallion have offered to swear fealty to you.” There was another rolling wave of amusement from the assembled crowd at his proclamation as a number of Knights and an equal number of Men-at-Arms stepped forward from the crowd and assembled behind our group. “To be honest I had to put a limit on the number allowed to leave the Order, otherwise I would have had to rename the Order of the White Stallion to the Order of the Nine.”

Both Viconia, the rest of the party and I were astounded to look upon the three ranks of Knights standing proudly in their white surcoats and tabards and the band of Men-at-Arms standing behind them. Thirty of some of the most experienced looking Knights of the White Stallion had already made the decision to leave their parent Order to swear oaths of service to the Order of the Nine. It was becoming increasingly difficult not to succumb to the overwhelming nature of the situation.

“I give you all my thanks. I…” words utterly failed me and I shrugged helplessly at the crowd around me, seeing little more than a sea of expectant gazes and smiling faces. “Thank you.”

“They are ready to take their oaths of Service to you and the Nine,” Sir Ramauld continued. “Along with anyone else you deem suitable or willing to join. No doubt there is going to be quite a number seeking to join the Order once word spreads.”

“I can think of a few already that might be interested.” I said, turning my own gaze to the handful who had fought and bled by Viconia’s and my side in our quest to retrieve the shield.

“I will swear the oath.” Viconia said by my side, and I managed to keep the grimace of amusement off my face at the tone she had expertly hidden in her words. I knew her better than to think that she was doing so out of some misplaced piety or belief, even if she was capable of truly putting herself into someone’s else’s power. She had originally taken the oath to become a Knight of the White
Stallion purely for the boons and prestige that it afforded and this situation was no different.

There was a moment of unspoken questioning between Sir Ramauld and Alexi as they caught each other’s gaze and after some initial hesitation Alexi stepped forward as well. “I’ll join the Order of the Nine.”

As the other two Knights within our party, Thedret and Falid were smiling but as I looked over them they shook their heads in alternative ways.

“My Oaths to Talos are binding Sir Desin.” Falid rumbled. “I will continue on this journey alongside you but as a Black Knight.”

“Thedret?” I asked the youngest Knight of our travelling band.

With his hands still grasping the shield tightly as though he expected someone to come and steal it at a moment’s notice, the dark skinned Breton shook his head. “My place is with the Shield but you can rely on my support, and potentially that of the Knight’s Mentor.”

Weebam-Na and Bejeen shook their heads so hard I was almost expecting them to fly off their shoulders. “Oh no. There isn’t enough gold in the world to get us to become Knights.” Weebam-Na hissed like a pot coming to boil and chittered in his own strange laugh through a fang filled maw. “Although if you ever need guides into Blackmarsh again we will certainly consider it.”

My laugh was echoed by a majority of our group but as always there was one individual who managed to make every occasion look as appetising as chewing on a mouthful of lemon. When my gaze fixed on Detane he sneered with the same venomous potency, somehow appearing as though he had just spat at my feet without actually doing so.

“I swore that you had my sword Sir Desin but there is no authority in the world capable of granting me Knighthood.” For the briefest of heartbeats there was a momentary waver in his voice and expression so minute that I struggled to identify it. “Therefore I must decline your offer.”

“Very well.” Turning to the final and last member of the group I saw how Mazoga seemed more interested in the stained glass window that took up most of the wall on the far side of the hall than he occurrences within it. I wondered just how much of the situation she had been following which somehow amused me. “Mazoga?”

“Eh?” she started at her name and blushed as she realised that I and everyone else present had focused their attentions exclusively on her. “What?”

“I will not beholden you to any oaths of joining in service to the Nine, but there is something that is now within my power to grant you.” I nodded to the floor in front of her as the slow realisation dawnded across her face. “You have shown the attributes worthy of honouring beyond those in battle, and it will be fitting for you to be recognised as such. Take a knee.”

Her mouth fell open but she dropped to her armoured knee so hard and so fast that I and some of the nearby servants winced at the anticipation of repairing broken tiles from the impact. Slowly I cast my gaze over the other Knights who had proclaimed their desire to join the Order of the Nine and in a shuffling mass they too knelt.

During the months since our pilgrimage along the wayshrines from Anvil to Cloud Ruler I had read extensively about the Knights of the Nine and as I stood in the Stallion Lodge a particular collection of words entered my mind. It was a collection that had featured heavily through all the books and treatise regarding the failed Order, and the last I had seen the words was etched into the tiny chapel.
in the Priory of the Nine before meeting those who had sworn it themselves.

“I give my body, heart and soul to the covenant of the Nine.” I began, standing before Mazoga’s kneeling form and trying my best to force the nervous tremor from my voice. Any potential issues with such a statement with Mazoga was non-existent as she had proven that unlike most orcs, she was not a follower of Malacath. In fact, she was possibly the least devout being I had ever encountered but it didn’t make the oath any less powerful to her.

“No plea of help shall find me wanting.” Raising my voice so that it carried through the entire hall, I couldn’t help but feel a tingling surge of excitement as I spoke the oath of the Nine. Possibly the last time the Oath was spoken aloud was when Sir Amiel and the original Knights still lived and breathed. “No obstacle will stand before me. No evil will taint the lands of Tamriel and beyond while I draw breath. As the Eight and One are my witnesses; that which is sacrament; I shall preserve… That which is sublime; I will protect… That which threatens; I will destroy…”

“This is your oath.” Mazoga’s eyes rose up to meet mine from where she was kneeling as I drew Sunchild, tapping it on one shoulder and then the other before lightly drawing it across her cheek. In comparison to the dozens of other scars, including the enormous one from eyebrow to behind the ear it would have been unnoticeable but the expression on her face told me this was going to be the most memorable scar of her entire life. “And this is so you remember it.”

The entire weight of every stone within the Lodge’s construction seemed to weigh down on me as I looked over the kneeling Knights, trying my best not to smirk at the way that Alexi winked at me when I looked at where he was waiting on one knee. “Rise as Knights of the Nine!”

My exclamation elicited an enormous, ground shaking roar from ever man, mer, woman and beastfolk within the great hall as the ancient Order was reborn but only Mazoga remained on one knee. She was too shocked, too stunned to do anything and for a moment I feared that the situation might make her fall over; something that blood loss had failed to do.

Offering the stunned Orc my hand, she looked at it questioningly while still looking faint. “Rise a Knight… Madame Mazoga.”

Taking my offered hand with an enormous green paw that fully encompassed everything below my wrist, she rose to her full impressive height as the cheering once again dwindled away. “I think that I’d prefer ‘Sir’ instead of Madame.” She said to a rolling wave of honest laughter.

With the formalities aside and the full weight of realisation and the exhaustion of our quest into Blackmarsh began eating into our flesh. Even as the hall roared in appreciation and Sir Ramauld ordered the laying of a feast that appeared to have been weeks in the making the members of our party splintered away for what time we could. Viconia and I retreated to our allocated room, as did Alexi, Detane and Falid while the others went about their own business. Mazoga and Thedret were assisted in acquiring their own temporary accommodation within the Stallion Lodge and after paying the rest of what we owed them Weebam-Na and Bejeen made their own hasty retreats as the celebration began to grow. Our thanks for their help couldn’t be summed up with simply paying them the septims we owed them and a considerable bonus but neither of them were the types to dwell on such matters and returned to their less excitement filled lives without hesitation.

When Viconia and I finally returned from our room, now dressed in our spare travelling clothes and the dust and muck of the week long return journey from Blackmarsh scrubbed from our flesh the feast was in full swing. A handful of squires, Men-at-Arms and servants with the appropriate talent had managed to procure a motley collection of musical instruments that throbbed and bounced in the hall and there was no direction to turn away from the sheer amount of alcohol that was being brought out. Our companions had also joined in the festivities in their own ways, those who had chosen to do
so in any case.

Detane was the first to vanish, disappearing like smoke in the breeze and without anyone other than ourselves to take note. The hulking form of Mazoga had also vanished but in a different way, as her sheer size and personality ensured that she could be found without the need for eyes. Judging by the cheers and chanting from the far side of the hall she had somehow managed to find worthy opponents to challenge to arm wrestling and other competitions of strength. It had been a source of some amusement that no matter how hard she tried on our journey she seemed entirely unable to test herself against Falid who would refuse on every occasion.

As for the gigantic Black Knight, he had temporarily situated himself on a table nearest the kitchens after removing a majority of his armour. In quantities that in any normal being would have appeared gluttonous, if not weighing a third or half of their bodyweight he was consuming the food needed to restore his physique from the journey. No matter how capable he was, or how precise and effective his training, our quest into Black Marsh had put a huge constraint on his diet and for all intents and purposes he had been starving for those weeks. To those unfamiliar with him, the way had he devoured the food put before him was almost daedric in intensity but for those of us who had journeyed alongside him we could tell that every bite was purposely calculated and controlled.

Alexi was barely visible in the crush of nobility and courtiers that had followed the Count and Countess to the Lodge, his expression as his eyes met mine was almost pleading in an amused way. Unsurprisingly the young Baronetess Fulcalius was also present despite his best attempts to send her on her way back to her father. As soon as the ship had docked he had begun trying to make the arrangements for her journey the several days north to Blankenmarch but in the chaos and confusion of making our way to the Stallion Lodge she and the other women we had rescued had followed. From what I could hear over the pandemonium of noise in the Hall, she and the others were regaling anyone who would listen all of Alexi’s knightly qualities and tales of heroism against the Black Bows. Judging by his expression it was something that he was becoming more and more uncomfortable and embarrassed about and both Viconia and I were amused that the master swordsman of Tamriel was so impossibly inept with receiving praise.

From the middle of the afternoon and well into the night the feast continued, even as many taking part became increasingly inebriated. Both Viconia and I were floating by the time we retired as midnight beckoned and surprisingly enough it was already dying off of natural causes. The Knights of the White Stallion may have been one of the most chaotic Orders within Tamriel but there was still enough discipline instilled within its members for the feast to end shortly after midnight. In varying degrees of sobriety, the men and women of the Order staggered off to their rooms, either alone or with company and for the most part the Lodge fell silent.

Morning came as it always did, filling the world with light that some particularly didn’t care much for depending on the amount that they drank during the feast. By the time Viconia and I rose it was well after the eighth hour, the Lodge was filling with sound and movement and it appeared that it was indeed little more than business as usual.

For the first time in weeks, if not longer we again found ourselves with no clear goal or purpose. The journey to Blackmarsh had been exhausting and more than what we had expected. A single night sleeping in a bed that didn’t rock and sway or had consisted of our bedrolls had only served to reveal just how tired, sore and battered our bodies truly were. It also highlighted that all of the events of the previous weeks had indeed happened, and as Viconia wandered off to find Ultrin’s stable and I wandered in the direction of the training yards I felt dazed returning the salutes of even the most senior knights of the Order.

A large portion of the Order were still sleeping off their inevitable hangovers but for most it was a
day like any other. Servants and craftsmen performed their duties, Knights, Squires and Men-at-Arms trained and many seemed off practicing manoeuvres on their enormous warhorses. As a footsoldier I preferred my own training with my feet on the ground and I was not alone in my preference. While most of the Order’s Knights were busy elsewhere there were a few within the training squares, undertaking callisthenics and other activities.

Falid of course was one of the few as evident by the hovering collection of amazed onlookers as he went through his own routines. Somewhere he had acquired a millstone and a collection of varied weights that ranged from the equivalent of his enormous sword to those that would have easily been more than my total bodyweight. Entirely stripped to the waist and wearing nothing more than his pants and boots he was somehow even more intimidating than if he was fully clad in his enchanted armour. It was the fact even with the size and weight of his armour, underneath he was a titan of an individual. Somehow the seventy kilograms of forged ebony plate armour seemed ill suited to contain the slabs of muscle covering him.

I watched for a few minutes as he lifted an iron counterweight made for assisting in opening the Lodge’s gatehouse doors one handed. His face was contorted with the strain as he raised it straight armed over his head and carefully and precisely lunged forward and back a couple of times before swapping arms. Sweat was running off him like a torrent but I didn’t need more than a glance to tell me that without vampirism I would’ve struggled to even drag the weight unaided.

My own training beckoned and I wandered off and found a small duelling square set aside for no more than two or three combatants at a time. At that point I had no interest in weights or callisthenics, but rather my own personal training to ease the tension in my limbs and body from the weeks of travelling by ship, boat and canoe.

Sunchild whispered through the air as I wove it around myself in slow but steady patterns, using the weight of the sword and the rolling motions to twist and turn me about. The strokes were lazily easy and had been drilled into me for months during my Legion training as a way to stretch and limber up my muscles. Within minutes they were already beginning to pleasurably burn, speaking to me in their own way of the journey to Blackmarsh and the strain it had put upon me. There was no real killing technique, especially those taught to foresters who were expected to fight more as duellists than soldiers in a shieldwall. We might have fought with gladii just like the legionnaires but our techniques were far different to the precise and accurate stabbing into an enemy’s vitals. A forester’s attacks had to roll and flow, relying on the double edged blades that we carried to equally defend and attack and to kill with cuts and slices as well as stabs and thrusts.

The familiarity of the patterns and rhythms was also instilled into us to allow us to regain a measure of calm and to control our senses. Even in the heat of battle the simplest roll of a shoulder or twist of a wrist could bring instinctive and immediate composure just from something as simple as muscle memory. During training it allowed one to control their mind, in a militaristic meditative way.

After the events of the previous day I was in desperate need of calm as even the slightest glimpse of the expensive signet ring that had replaced the White Stallion one on my hand was enough to make my heart race as though I was about to take a life. It was proof and evidence that not only was the whole situation real but I had somehow gone from a simple Archer-Praefect in the Legion, to a deserter condemned to die, to leading one of the most independent military organisations in all of the Empire. A Knight Commander was beholden to no one other than their affiliated or sponsoring count or their local ruler and the Elder Council themselves and my new signet represented this and more. I was the new leader of arguably one of the most famous Orders and the most successful individual in retrieving the holiest of relics in all of known history.

The fact that I was also a damned individual with toxic, corrupted blood infusing my flesh to the last
hair was somehow laughable and borderline insane. I didn’t know whether to burst into hysterical laughter, break down and cry from terror or shout to the world how utterly, inconceivably wrong they were in their choices.

Instead I focused on the old routines that had been drilled into me through a lifetime in service to the Legion and the Empire. *Cut, twist, roll, stab, slice.* Slightly awkward with a four-thousand-year old elven sword made of unbreakable skymetal instead of a short, leaf bladed gladius but still familiar enough to control my breathing and fact that my heart was racing as though I had just finished running. Anxiety was a foe that truly didn’t care who you were when it chose to sink its claws into your mind.

While not as familiar as Viconia’s, the footsteps my vampiric hearing picked up approaching from the direction of the Lodge was enough for me to identify the source. There was only one being who walked with such grace without the gift of vampirism or hailing from the Underdark and I turned to see Alexi’s grinning face.

“That’s got to be some of the worst techniques for that sword I could think of.” He said, moving over and leaning over the wooden fence running around the dirt of the duelling square.

“It is, but it is useful for warming up.” I made a show of looking over his shoulder with a series of exaggerated movements. “No pretty noblewoman hanging off your arm?”

“Ugh, no, but the Baronetess is definitely smitten with me. I didn’t believe that Mara and Dibella were gods in favour of cursing mortals.”

“One man’s curse is a woman’s blessing.” Rolling my shoulders in one last motion, I returned Sunchild to its sheath. “Did you come out here to escape?”

The puckered scar tissue from the arrow twisted in his smile but somehow didn’t affect the humour in it. “Yeah. That and to ease a few of these kinks out of my spine. I granted her Ladyship my quarters for the night, but managed to find a space in the stables.”

“Glad to see that you slum it with the rest of us low-born. What would the gossipmongers say if they heard the dashing Sword-Champion of Cyrodiil woke up smelling of manure?”

“I made sure it was clean before I laid down, and just for that I think you need a bit of a lesson in the manners of your betters.”

Gracefully he gripped the fence with both hands and hopped over it without any effort at all.

“Betters? Unless that I’m mistaken I do believe that it was I who received a promotion yesterday.”

“Please forgive me commander, I was remiss with my tongue.” He said, bowing deeply at the waist with an exaggerated wave of his hands. His broadsword was already in one as he held it out to his side in almost the perfect mimicry of a travelling performer.

Both of us were chuckling as I drew Sunchild, returning his bow with one just as mocking as his own with the same lack of venom. Immediately the two of us were wary of our opponent as it had become a routine for us to practice together.

“I didn’t get the chance to yesterday, but you have my congratulations on the promotion.” In one smooth movement, he swung his blade upwards, bringing the crossguard in line with his eyes in salute before adopting a fighting stance.

Despite the seemingly casual way he rested the flat of his blade over his bare forearm as though it
was the lip of a towershield, I could see the deadly gracefulness that infused every fibre of his being. I adopted a stance of my own, feet resting lightly on the ground and ready to jump or move either forwards or back with Sunchild held in my right hand in a more traditional fencer’s grip. “Thank you. Although I am not sure whether I truly wanted such a promotion despite how I expected it.”

The sudden ringing of steel echoed around us as our blades met. In one second he was standing solidly, almost flat-footedly so and the next he was as quick as a viper. On instinct alone his blade was slapped aside with Sunchild as I flicked it away but rather than following on with another blow he danced away, content with merely testing my defence.

“Do you really think that I would have taken the oath, let alone followed you into Blackmarsh if I didn’t think you weren't a decent sort?”

“I thought you were bored?” I said with only mild sarcasm as we quickly traded a handful of blows in less time it took to think of them. As effortlessly as I would have killed a caged rabbit with my bow he had managed to open my defences and leave the point of his sword hovering a few centimetres from my throat.

“There was that. Don’t tell anyone though, but I actually respect you Kaius.” Sliding away like a spring breeze, he gave me space and we both adopted our stances again. “You have come a long way since we first met.”

“I hope you realise that was only a few months ago?” Our conversation was paused for a moment as we again launched into a blistering combination of attacks, parries and dodges that still resulted with his blade piercing my defences and leaving the bout firmly in his grasp.

“I know. You have still come a long way.”

By now both of us were beginning to concentrate, eyes narrowing slightly and care was taken to control our breathing. Even the greatest of fighters and swordsmen could be worn down with exhaustion and no skill in the world could keep death at bay if you had no breath to fight.

“I still have a long way to go with the sword it seems.”

“Not as far as you think.” We circled each other warily and Alexi’s grin was no longer being mirrored in his eyes. It was an expression he wore whenever he fought and I was beginning to know it well. “You are a good swordsman, and with more practice you could be excellent.”

“I am glad you are going to be with us Alexi, the gods know that I need all the help.”

“Between myself, Viconia and Falid I think you have all the intimidating warriors in the land at your back.”

“What about Detane and Mazoga? Or Thedret?”

There was no mistaking the way he paused at the names. Our blades flashed but again he managed to disarm me in less than six moves. “To be perfectly honest I nearly fell over when you offered Detane a Knighthood. Mazoga I can understand because she has more than earned it. Hells, she’s more noble and knightly than half of the Order of the Stallion. Detane though?” his breath was long and drawn out even as he casually flicked away one of my thrusts without the slightest of effort. “That man is poison.”

Judging my next attacks and trying to work out a strategy to breach the wall of Alexi’s defence I thought hard about Detane and the interactions we all had with him over the weeks of journeying. He was overwhelmingly divisive and he was extremely apt at driving others away but there was
something about him that was off-putting. I could still remember the way that he had turned to face
the bandit in the Argonian village with the spear, and the overwhelming anger he had directed at me
when I had pulled him out of harm’s way.

“There is something about him.” I said carefully to Alexi, trying me best not to show any hint of my
next attacks or strategies. “I can’t explain it but my gut isn’t sitting right.”

“Maybe its indigestion.” Another blow was redirected away and again I found a blade to my throat.
“I have to be honest though, I trust your gut almost as much as mine and I too think there’s
something off about him.”

“More than his personality?”
Alexi shrugged. “There’s that, and there’s the fact that I have never encountered someone as good
as a sword as he is. Men of that skill don’t simply appear out of thin air and yet I have never heard or
seen his like in any of the tournaments.”

“You could take him though… right?”
Worryingly Alexi shrugged again and his expression was grim. “I could and would, but it would be
a much closer fight than I have had in a while.”

“You need to fight Viconia more often then.”
We both laughed at that. “Vicky is dangerous in her own right.” His sword flashed and there was a
dusty rattle as Sunchild was twisted out of my hand and skittered across the dirt. The blow had been
almost too fast for me to see even with my vampiric enhanced sight and reflexes. “My sword against
hers I would win every time, but she’s not one for fighting fair.”

“Good luck dealing with her magicka as well.”

“Yeah… there’s that too.”
For another handful of moments our swords rung through the air with a quality of their own until
our breathing was becoming more and more ragged. Alexi won again, still showing the same
effortlessness that he did with all things related to his blade.

“What about the others?”
Both his eyebrows raised. “Thedret? Easy. Although it would be interesting dealing that glaive of
his. The Knights Mentor have always been a bit of a weird bunch.”

Before we had left the Fort, Thedret had managed to retrieve some of his equipment and that of his
slain comrades and Viconia and I were possibly the only ones not to be surprised at his personal
choice of weaponry. Like Sir Henrik who had gifted me with a scar up the back of a leg from his
ghostly weapon, Thedret used an enormous polearm instead of the typical knightly sword or mace.
He had explained that it had been chosen to assist the Knights Mentor in their roles as guardians of
libraries and other storehouses of knowledge.

“What about Falid?”
Alexi and I shared a mutual look of concern before bursting out laughing. “I’d have to get one or
two good hits in and hope he’d bleed to death quickly. How would you take him?”

“With a ballista.” I replied half-jokingly. “And at least three hundred metres between us.”
We traded several dozen more blows, our concentration increasing and our breath soon robbing us of our ability to converse or tease each other. For the most part we reduced our spoken words to acknowledgements of skill and mutual praise, discussing techniques and how I could improve.

Both of us were quickly sweating in the increasing heat and Alexi’s tabard was soon patchy despite the fact that it was sleeveless and allowed all to see just how muscular he was. Unlike legionaries or some of our companions there was no overwhelming bulk or size about him, but there was no doubting that underneath the rough training clothes or the mithril chainmail he usually wore was a body as tempered as iron.

I was much less elegant and had exerted myself much more than he had in my vain attempts to best him and as a result sweat was dripping down my forehead and soaking every inch of my flesh. The heat of the southern provinces was much stickier and the air was a lot closer than that of the north that I was more accustomed. It certainly wasn’t helping my bouts against him.

We continued to train however and with every failure I was learning from a combination of watching and being directly taught by Alexi. There were few betters that I could learn to improve my abilities from and he seemed to take great joy in teaching those with the skill and desire to match him. I still had a long way to go but it wasn’t something that would stop me from trying.

The blows rang through the metal of our weapons and through the meat and bone of our forearms and despite the casual flicks and parries he made appear oh-so-effortless there was incredible strength behind them. It had taken me less than the first thirty seconds of our first ever fight to know that without the full might of vampire filling me there was no way to best him. Even then it wouldn’t have been anywhere near a one-sided confrontation as I would have liked.

Rolling my wrist as Sunchild met his broadsword I could feel the tremor course through the Ayleid blade from the impact and I felt rather than saw the way that he rolled his own sword to compensate. In less than a blink of an eye he had rolled the hilt of his weapon to minimise the amount of time Sunchild’s edge had on the flat of his blade as it wouldn’t take as great of a blow as expected to shatter forged steel. What surprised me though was the direction that he rolled our blades, as instead of twisting my hand and wrist around and popping Sunchild free from my grasp he moved it the other direction, allowing me to snake the point into his guard. Instinctively and before my conscious mind could truly understand the consequences there was an opening, as brief and short lived as the beat of a butterfly’s wings and it was one that I took.

For the first time it was the point of my sword that had managed to come to rest close to his chest, in the hollow where his throat met his ribcage and we both stood there, stilled and both trying to work out what had just happened. I was blinking, staring with my mouth falling open in amazement at how for the first time I had actually bested Alexi.

His own shock was just as brief as the opportunity that I had grasped and his habitual smile returned in full force. “I keep telling you that you’re getting better.”

“Yeah…” Slowly, and feeling shocked I lowered Sunchild and took a step back as my mind caught up to where my body was. Creeping realisation set in as he too took a step back and I frowned at him. “Alright, what’s going on?”

“You won, it’s been quite a long time since anyone managed to get one on me.”

Ignoring the way that he laughed I stopped in place and made another point at his chest with Sunchild as though it was an extension of my hand. “No, it’s definitely not that. What in oblivion was that? That’s got to be the sloppiest technique I have ever seen from you.”
“I am human. I’m allowed to make mistakes.”

For a moment I stopped, eyeing him carefully as I returned Sunchild to my side. “Yeah, but you
don’t make ones like that. Something’s eating at you.”

Alexi was a master swordsman with a confidence that billowed from him like the bow wave of a
caravel but I saw the sudden pause in his motions. I also especially saw the way his eyes shifted
away from me for a second.

“He. Thought so. Is it her ladyship?”

He chuckled and his own sword slid back into its scabbard. “What if I say yes?”

My own smile wilted somewhat as I saw the way his hand unconsciously lifted itself from his side
and appeared to move towards his face. It was becoming a nervous tic and I suddenly had a flash of
insight.

“Then I reckon you’d be lying. It’s that extended grin you have there.”

The way that his eyes suddenly locked to mine with the glimmer of shock and mild horror was more
than enough confirmation. “How in Oblivion would you know that?”

“Come on Alexi, when we train I don’t have a hope at foretelling or predicting your moves, but
other times you wouldn’t make it any more obvious if you painted it to a sign and dragged it about
behind you.”

“Do you have to be so damn perceptive?”

“Well, I used to be a forester so… yeah.”

The way he paused and his eyes roamed around us was strangely more telling and for those few
seconds I was witness to the first amount of doubt I had even seen in him.

“Do you know how many battles I have been in?” He finally asked, looking me in the eye as I
shrugged.

Holding up a single hand, he extended his fingers and tucked his thumb into his palm.

“Four?” I exclaimed. “But what about all the tournaments you have won?”

Nodding to the disbelief in my voice he smiled but this time there was no humour in it. “I said
battles… Not tournaments. A tournament is merely a harder training session with very little risk of
drawing blood. In battle you aren’t expected to step away if your opponent trips or the like… In
tournaments it is all about honour and chivalry.”

“I’m guessing that the one of those times was against the Black Bows?”

“I was counting the village and the fort as two separate battles….” He trailed off and I suddenly felt
uncomfortable.

“Have… Did you kill anyone before our journey into Blackmarsh?”

The chuckle this time was dark and sent a chill up my spine. “I’m not a complete virgin Karius. It
wasn’t the first time I have wet my steel but I certainly haven’t experienced anything like that
before.”
My head was spinning at the revelations and I struggled to grasp hold of any of my thoughts. “What about the time the Order closed the Oblivion gate?”

“Fighting daedra isn’t the same as fighting men,” As he looked at me I could see the way his expression hardened and it showed me that he had seen my tiny nod of agreement. “That was the second battle I have ever been in and I was leading my Lance from the centre of the third rank. My role in the battle was little more than digging in my spurs, lowering my lance and seeing if there was anything left standing after the knights in front of me ran them down.”

Again his hand lifted as his eyes moved away from me and this time he didn’t stop it as he pressed his fingers into his injured cheek. “This is first wound I have ever had. The first true one at least.”

In contrast to my own flesh his was almost pristine and unblemished. There were the handful of faded cuts on his forearms that all swordsmen had from their initial years of training but his were very few and testament to his natural skill. It made me all the more conscious of the overwhelming amount that I wore, from the dozens, if not more scars up my forearms and over my hands. This was not even mentioning the others from the deep, pink burns where Viconia had burned the marks of desertion away from my bicep, to the other injuries I had accrued over years of fighting.

“Forty-two tournaments, thirty-eight of which were victories and not a single scratch to show for it.” His tone was mockingly sarcastic but it wasn’t directed at me or anything else in particular. “Then the first time I get injured it’s to some pox-ridden shit-stain with a rotting bow.”

I started laughing, and he stared at me with his eyes burning holes into my soul as I witnessed him become legitimately angry for the first time. “It’s not funny Kaius.”

“Actually, it is.” My chuckle was as dark as his was earlier but I was smiling in a way to show that I didn’t meant to offend him. “That’s got to be one of the best, ‘first-injuries’ I have seen. Do you want to know how I got my first real scar?”

He shrugged noncommittedly and still smiling I untucked my tunic from my belt and lifted it up to show the bottom rib on my left side. Pointing to the tiny jagged white scar I laughed again at the memory. “I got stabbed by an elderly Dunmer woman with dementia.”

Alexi blinked, scrunched his face slightly and blinked again. “What?”

“One night while I was on leave, myself and a handful of the foresters spent most of a night in a tavern and on our way back to the fort this little old woman came up shouting abuse. It was after midnight, we were all drunk and so initially we tried to shoo her off home and not make too much of a scene. Instead her malady made her think I was her first husband who had left her decades before with another woman. Before I realised what had happened she had stabbed me in the side and toddled off. It was only when we all got back to the fort that someone noticed I was bleeding everywhere. I’ve lost count how many times I have scarred myself doing something stupid or while I was drunk. Hells, I’m fairly certain I’ve tripped onto my own sword or cut myself shaving or the like than I have been injured by others.”

“How do you deal with it all though?”

“Which part? The falling over and stabbing yourself in the leg, or the getting injured?”

The twinkle of amusement was slowly returning to his eyes and his lips curled in more than just a grimace. “Both?”

“I try to walk better these days and watch where I put my feet, and honestly I don’t really think
about the times or the likelihood of getting hurt. I guess it’s something that I have come to expect but whether it’s from Legion training or not I wouldn’t be able to tell you.”

“How can you not think of something like that?”

It was my turn to shrug. “If you work it out please tell me and we’ll both know. Although, come to think of it, if I ever did stop myself long enough to think about what I was doing I wouldn’t have gone hunting minotaurs or throw myself into an Oblivion portal.”

Alexi snorted at that and leaned against the fence. “I don’t think you realise how much I respect you for all the things you have done. There is truly no one more deserving of leading the Knights of the Nine than yourself. I know that you aren’t the type to seek out fame and glory but you have earned everything you have received.” I didn’t need my vampirism to hear the way that he sighed and glanced about the training yards. “Maybe one day I’ll earn something similar and have my own legacy.”

Almost on its own volition I lightly bounced my fist off his bicep, feeling how solid his arms truly were. “You’ll be fine Alexi. Both of us have got many more years left in us…” I paused and scowled for a second. “Granted as long as Mehrunes Dagon and Umaril don’t wreck the world in the near future.”

“I hope so. I hate feeling like I haven’t achieved anything.” He sighed again, glancing between me and the ground. “I have only gotten this far from luck. Only lucky break after another.”

“You’ve worked your arse off to be as good as you are.”

“Besides my skill with a sword, what am I?” His eyes burned into mine again, drawing his sword and holding it up on an angle as though he was inspecting it for the first time. “I was granted this sword by Count Caro because I proved to him and his court that I could fight.” The pommel thudded into his chest as he rapped it against the White Stallion Heraldry on his tunic’s breast. “I received my Knighthood because of the same reason, but the only way I was in the position to be noticed was because my grandfather was born a bastard to Count Caro’s father. A son of a haberdasher becoming a page to an Imperial Count because he happens to have a spoonful of noble blood somewhere in him.”

“That’s more than I can say about myself. My father was a hunter to the local lord. When he died I was too young to take his place and so my family and I were left to our own devices. I was fourteen when I joined the Legion and had never picked up a sword before some centurion pressed a gladius into my hand.”

“It shows.” Slowly his usual amusement and teasing attitude was returning. “Although you are also the prime example that there is no better teacher than combat.”

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t recommend it. You tend to get beat up regularly.”

Both of us shared a chuckle and while I could still tell his dark mood was still gripping tight he was still able to smile that wasn’t just a scowl of scar tissue. “What is the plan from here o’great and worthy commander?”

“Well, I was thinking about doing a bit more training, kicking your arse again and then promoting you to Knight-Captain. After that Viconia and I were planning on lunch and going to the Cathedral to see what we can do about retrieving the Mace.”

“If you think that I’ll let you have it easy again you are going to be sorely disappointed.” This time
his laugh was almost entirely that of a challenge as I moved from the fence, drew Sunchild and gave a few experimental swings. “Wait… Knight-Captain? When did I get demoted?”

“When you swore your oath to me of course.” I replied with a full volley of sarcasm. “You don’t bring your rank with you when you change orders. You’re going to have to prove you’re worthy.”

“By the Nine you can be a bastard, but you’re a bastard I can follow into battle.” His own sword once again grew into a silverly swirl as he swung it about himself to loosen his shoulders and arms for another bout of training. “Maybe I can actually train you well enough that you will be a challenge for once.”

Our laughter this time was loud enough to be heard over the sound of our swords striking together once more.

Chapter End Notes

In Oblivion, the culmination of the quest(s) against the Black Bows results in both the Player and Mazoga becoming "Knights". As a result you become the Order of the White Stallion and get access to a dingy, run down hut which passes itself off as the Stallion Lodge.

The mod I have based the Order off is very much a different situation entirely although I have taken huge amounts of creative licence with it all. Mazoga is one of those characters that interests me despite her limited appearance in game, and so making her become a Knight of the Nine, rather than a Knight of the White Stallion made more sense and allowed me to keep her around for everything I have in store for Kaius and co...

Knight is slowly expanding and we are very much on the home run for the completion but so far I have had to split some of these chapters into more managable sizes. While this isn't affecting the overall length/word count it is increasing the number of Chapters. A lot is going to happen between now and the end, especially how Umaril is still hovering around the background with his face as-yet unsmashed. hehe.
As it was to be expected, the Cathedral dedicated to the Craftsman God was enormously impressive and reflected all of Zenithar’s glories. It was by far the largest, tallest and grandest building in the entire city, towering over every other building by dozens of metres. The dual belltowers alone were seventy metres tall, and the central stained-glass window depicting the God Himself was easily ten metres in diameter. Every column, overhang and centimetre of the cathedral was intricately carved into the likenesses of saints and heroes of great renown and it was somewhat confronting to walk towards the oaken doors with the gaze of dozens of stone figures watching you every step of the way.

Although with my obvious nervousness and unease approaching or entering holy places was not being helped that myself and the group with me was drawing the attention of everyone living within sight. At the best of times Viconia and I turned heads on our own even if we dressed shabbily and left our signature armours behind, but our increasing fame was making it even more difficult to go unnoticed. Our group also consisted of most of those who had journeyed with us into Blackmarsh and between Falid’s enormity, Mazoga’s force of personality and Alexi’s appearance of unperturbed amusement we were practically swamped with citizens with every step.

What I did find amusing was that we didn’t actually find it difficult to move through crowds despite all of this. Viconia’s expression that somehow conveyed the high likelihood of dying messily in the gutter if anyone considered getting in her way was usually enough but with individuals like Mazoga and Falid it was as easy as though the streets were deserted. Falid simply strode forward and appeared to simply not care or take note of the dozens scrambling out of his path. We had been travelling together enough to know that it was for the most part an act. While he might look as though to try to stop the giant in black plate would be to attempt to stop an avalanche by raising your hand and asking it nicely, he was also controlled enough to ensure that he would never bump or touch anyone as he moved.

Entering the subjective cool of the Cathedral’s interior and immediately being assaulted by the smells of incense we also laid eyes on the dozens of priests, worshippers and visitors filling its space. It may have been Middas but there were still quite a number of petitioners and faithful attending private sermons or their own prayer sessions.

“Security has definitely increased.” Alexi muttered offhandedly at my side as we entered and I couldn’t help but nod. While this was my first time within the Cathedral it was obvious there were a considerable number of armed men and women scattered about. Some were city guards, but there were others who varied from the odd one or two members of the Fighter’s Guild, to travelling knights, or priests who had shrugged on chainmail or a breastplate and found a weapon somewhere.

“It’s about time they starting looking out for themselves.” Viconia’s voice was a low hiss and her tone was enough to tell more than just myself how she thought about the Nine and its followers. “What use is a church that can’t defend itself from attack? All the others I have seen have been ripe
for plundering if not for the proximity of the city guard.”

I gave a shrug and bowed very slightly to one of the priests who waved us to the left. “Until Umaril there wasn’t much of a threat to be worried about. There might have been an odd thief or two who would clean out the poor box or steal some of the silver but they didn’t have to worry about being massacred.”

All of us were left cold from more than just the temperature within the Cathedral. During our recovery of the Shield the Church of the Nine had publicly admitted that they had been suffering attacks and the faithful were dying as a result. The fact that they had done so had sent shockwaves to every corner of Tamriel that worshipped the Nine but it was obvious to those such as ourselves that they had only admitted so to deal with the backlash. Too many places of worship had been desecrated after the attendees were slaughtered like cattle and the Church couldn’t contain the secret any more. They had been aided by our own success in recovering the relics, as my recovery of the boots and the quest for the Shield had allowed them to counter the revelation of Umaril’s return with the fact that the weapons to defeat him were being gathered for the first time in centuries.

If I was to be truly honest with myself I despised the fact that Viconia and my actions, and in turn those of our comrades were being distilled into propaganda but it was providing us all with a fighting chance. With something like the reclamation of the relics and the reestablishment of the Order of the Nine fuelling hope, there was also greater banner to rally behind.

“Good morning Sir Vanevius.” One of the robed priests said as he bowed to Alexi. The movement made the teal robes flow like water as he bent at the waist.

“Good morning Kantav. Blessings of Zenithar to you.”

“Thank you, my son. Have you come to try your luck again?”

Alexi smiled, trying his best not to appear to be turning his head to the side to hide his injury. “Not myself, but my friends here would like to.”

The elderly priest looked at the rest of us in turn, smiling pleasantly as he nodded to each of us and trying not to look intimidated as he tilted his head up to meet Mazoga and Falid’s gaze. “Well, I trust that you know the routine by now. May Zenithar grant you his blessings.”

Without further word the priest had turned and shuffled away and Alexi noticed my bemused expression.

“Just how many times have you tried to retrieve the mace?” I asked.

“One or two times.” He replied, turning away and motioning for us to follow. “Or a dozen or more. It’s almost a hobby for a lot of us in the Order.”

Seeing the splash of colour from the various surcoat wearing knights throughout the cathedral I could easily believe that. It was almost a rite of passage for the Order, or indeed any of the militaristic organisations within Leyawiin to try to retrieve the Mace. There was no doubt at all in my mind that all the lustre and religious significance for such an event was long diminished over the centuries of failures, especially as Alexi led us over to a small table where another acolyte sat.

“Names and ranks.” He said, his tone almost as weary as his ink splattered robes and I felt uncomfortably reminded of my arrival at the Imperial Prison. This time I was not a condemned deserter dressed in sackcloth, but a Knight Commander in armour of moonstone and ebony.

Heeding Alexi’s wave of a hand and before the long-suffering priest could sigh with annoyance I
stepped forward. “Knight Commander Kaius Desin.”

Normally my name would have sent at least a tremor of recognition through anyone, even without my recent honorifics but the priest didn’t so much as twitch. Not that I could blame him as I watched him write my name and date into the book on the table and managed to read a couple of other names off the list. Apparently I was the second Knight Commander that same day who had tried along with a dozen or so other minor nobility and the usual collection of commoners. I had also managed to see the names of at least two Counts or equivalent from Highrock and other provinces who had tried to retrieve the mace in the past days before he looked up, gave me a brief nod and looked for the next person to record their name.

Viconia, Mazoga and Falid followed suit and had their details recorded. Alexi hung back, choosing to be part of us but distancing himself. Our conversations through the morning had let me with full knowledge that he didn’t intend on trying for the Mace again, but there was nothing stopping the rest of us.

Without a further word from the priest and little more than a gesture from him, one of the several armed men leaning against the wall lifted himself up and walked over to us. He was well into his fifties with salt and pepper hair, a neatly groomed goatee wrapping around his lips and surprisingly enough a solid appearing, if worn set of Legionary armour.

“Good morning Sirs,” he said with a smile that showed that he was missing a few teeth. “and Madames. My name is Carodus Oholin and I will be your guide for the day.”

“Were you a legionary?” Viconia asked, a split second before I could get the words out of my mouth and judging by her expression she did it to tease me more than any desire to personally know.

“Indeed I was Madame. In a previous life I was Centurion Oholin, but now I am merely Citizen Oholin.”

“Retired?”

Again his smile was large enough to show exactly how many teeth he was missing. Like some I had served with, missing teeth was to be expected, especially for those who fought in the shieldwall. Although, most who lost their teeth was as a result of tavern room brawls or the usual bouts of boxing and fights between cohorts or castas than in actual combat. This fact alone even without seeing the old, yet well-kept armour that he wore was enough to know that Carodus was a fighter and an experienced one at that.

“Indeed I am Sir. Going on six years now but one cannot simply sit around his house all day, so here I am helping keeping an eye on things.”

“And give tours it seems.” Despite her words Viconia’s tone was more teasing than her usual harshness but unknown to the rest of our group she was just as uneasy in being in the cathedral as I was. I was doubtful whether she would ever truly be comfortable in any houses of the Surfacer Gods.

“That’s just an added bonus Madame.” The accent of the retired Legionary made several of his words blur together and each time he spoke Viconia’s title it sounded very close to Ma’am. “I know some of you are more than familiar with the history of the Cathedral and the story of Saint Kaladas but is there anyone interested in the usual tour or would you all prefer to get down to business instead?”

Almost as a single mind we all went to move in the direction of his urging but a voice towards the
rear of our party spoke up. “I would like to know a bit more about the place.”

Mazoga had a habit of almost blending into the background at times, which was a semi-remarkable feat for a being that weighed over a hundred and fifty kilograms. She had been looking about the interior of the chapel for some time with evident interest and had practically leapt at the chance to learn.

Carodus in comparison looked just as pleased to teach and had the sudden appearance of being about to regale his grandchildren tales of his youth. “Really? Excellent. Follow me please and try to contain yourselves from acquiring mementos or the like otherwise I will have to beat you.”

The way he framed the statement and the grin didn’t quite remove the seriousness in his tone or words despite the fact he was addressing some of the most capable beings in the Empire. Like many old legionaries there was a strange streak of confidence that was impossible to remove and he was not making idle threats or speaking from bravado. The fact that he had lived long enough to retire from the Legion was more than enough to show that he meant every word. It was an unspoken rule or law to be wary of those who survived a life where almost all died young.

“The legends say that in the wake of the Alessian Rebellion,” he began, his face cheerful as he took a freshly lit lantern from the hands of the stationed priest before leading the way down the stairs to the catacombs. “and when Pelinal Whitestrake was slain by the Ayleids, a messenger carried the Mace to the human settlement of Leywindium as a message. The ancient city is well and truly gone these days but on the very spot that the kings of old received the message the great Saint Kaladas began constructing a monument to the gods, the victory over the elves and in glory to all mankind. For most of his lifetime he supervised and poured all of his worldly possessions into the construction of this very cathedral in tribute to that very legend.”

“Seems to me that he merely bought his way into Sainthood.” Viconia muttered bitterly, framing her words as a mixture of a statement and question at the same time.

For a brief moment Carodus couldn’t decide whether he was being insulted or asked a serious question before he chose to provide an answer. “You are partially right of course Ma’am. Saint Kaladas is more widely known and regarded for building this cathedral but these days it is merely the last of his works that still exist. Much of what he had accomplished is long since dust and rubble, but in more ways than one he laid the foundations of what Leyawiin is today.”

Moving into the ancient halls under the cathedral I suppressed a shiver from the obvious difference in temperature and saw that the catacombs were extremely old. They left me remembering the way the tunnels and passages under the Imperial City where the Emperor died had been before they had been filled with violence and blood.

There were others moving back towards the surface and the ground level of the castle as Carodus led us through with the utmost confidence that experience and routine provided. “When the Saint finally died and was laid to rest, those who prayed to Zenithar at his tomb began to receive visions of the Mace of the Crusader.”

“How long have pilgrims been receiving these visions?” Mazoga asked again from the back of our group.

“You’d have to ask one of the priests for a more definite answer but this cathedral was built in the late First Era, so for two thousand years or so at least.” He gestured to the dozens of passages leading off the primary room connecting the stairs to the rest of the catacombs. “This was apparently the first portion built shortly after the Cathedral was finished but now I know that at least one of the primary passages is over three hundred metres long and connects to the rest of the Undercity. Some of the
younger guards do regular patrols to keep out grave robbers and other less reputable individuals."

“Two thousand years’ worth of attempts and no one has succeeded?” I asked this time, somewhat knowing the answer but still feeling uneasy with the question.

“Not yet at least my Lord.” The twinkle in his eye could not be undimmed even with age. “Someone will reclaim it, but only if they are truly blessed by Zenithar.”

He led us further into the depths, but not as far as I was expecting. The Catacombs had been massively expanded throughout the centuries since it was originally carved from the earth but Saint Kaladas’ tomb was within fifty metres of the stairs. There were hints that were several other levels beneath this one, sinking deep into the earth and branching outwards in all directions almost in defiance of the swamps, river and rice paddies surrounding the city. Some of the deepest levels would have water soaking their floors but the greatest holy place to the God of Craftsmen was not one to find crumbling walls or poor workmanship. From the smallest carving to the largest bronze bells that weighed over fifteen tonnes, the entire cathedral was almost a work of art, which made it even more surprising that Saint Kaladas’ tomb was almost bare of decoration.

“The Tomb of Saint Kaladas.” Carodus’s voice was a whisper lest we disturbed the few people standing and kneeling around a large marble sarcophagus. The room itself was tiny, just enough space for the saint’s coffin and the two tiers of stairs that it sat upon in the direct centre. There were no carvings, no bas-reliefs or sculptures other than simple but unyielding bricks in the walls and tiles that had been polished smooth by centuries of feet and kneeling faithful praying within.

Of those already within the room two were a pair of stern faced, and heavily armed soldiers a match for any within the Order of the White Stallion. They stood silently but watched everyone carefully with their hands close to maces of their own clasped by the sides. It was only when the nearest looked over our group, thudded his fist into his chest in salute that I saw the heraldry on his tabard and the signet rings identifying them as knights of yet another Order.

As I returned the salute, Alexi whispered over my shoulder just loud enough that only those in our group could hear. “Iron Knights.” He said, and I could almost hear the grin on his face. “They are the only Order exclusively dedicated to Zenithar. Most live in High Rock like the other orders but a dozen or so remain here in Leyawiin to watch over the resting place of the Saint and the Mace.”

“How is everyone so certain it is here?” Mazoga asked this time, sizing herself up to the Iron Knights and trying to work out who was the larger of them.

Carodus heard her question and like a good host he replied before the rest of us had the opportunity. “Extensive magical testing. I’ve even heard that they have consulted the Elder Scrolls but everyone agrees that it is here.”

I turned and looked at Viconia and raised an eyebrow. “What do you think?”

“There is magicka here, very similar to that at the Priory and the other relics.” The only other people in the room was another traveller with his assigned guide acting in a similar role to Carodus, except this traveller was kneeling in front of the tomb with his eyes closed, breathing softly. Viconia moved forward very carefully and as quiet as only she could manage with her eyes beginning to glow from her magical scrutiny. “What does this say?”

While softly spoken her words were loud in the relative silence in the tomb and it echoed down the corridors as I stepped forward. The only true ornamentation besides the solid lid was a single line of carved lettering at the very base of the tomb closest to the door.
“Ambulare per fidem.” I answered, eyes narrowing at the writing that was strangely crude in comparison to the rest of the cathedral. “Walk in the faith.”

“As cryptic as usual.” She said, moving back into our group. “Do any of the Nine lack subtlety?”

“Of the original divines, Zenithar is thought to be the most in touch with the mortal realm. “Carodus began, rubbing his face for a moment and sharing a brief nod with his fellow guide on the far wall. Most legends say that Zenithar has close ties to Kynareth, an idea that is supported by the manner in which the two gods’ realms interact. Craftsmen devoted to Zenithar are able to create and profit from the materials provided by Kynareth’s natural world and as such one cannot revere Zenithar without acknowledge the power of Kynareth.”

“Sounds to me that you should be worshipping the stronger woman instead of the man.” Viconia replied and Carodus looked like he was struggling to hold back a laugh.

“I think you would have gotten along well with my second wife ma’am.”

“So, I guess that he is taking the test?” I asked, gesturing to the kneeling figure at the base of the tomb who had so far paid no heed to our sudden presence.

“You are correct Sir.” Unlike the rest of us Carodus didn’t move with the same grace or care, and didn’t lower his voice. “You don’t need to worry about disturbing him, those who are undertaking the test are utterly oblivious to everything around them.”

“What is the test?” Mazoga asked, peering forward and leaning to look at the Knight’s face as he knelt on the stones with his hands on his knees and eyes closed.

“It’s a test of faith.” Carodus moved over to a wall and leant against it, placing his lantern on the ground. “To take the test you simply kneel right on that spot, say the words; ‘Zenithar, test my resolve’ and you are then given a vision of the Mace on a floating island above a gigantic chasm.”

“The chasm represents your doubt.” As deep as the bowels of the earth, Falid’s voice reverberated through the room. “Your faith must be a guide across it.”

Carodus nodded to the Black Knight. “Many have tried over the centuries, ever since the first pilgrims began receiving the visions but no one’s faith has been strong enough.”

The silence fell over us like a blanket as we all watched the knight continue undertaking the test. If not for the steady rise and fall of his chest there was very little to show that he was indeed alive and breathing. It was uncertain how long that he had been attempting to retrieve the Mace before we had arrived but initially there was no sign of the duration until he suddenly fell backwards with a cry of surprise, his eyes opening in an instant with his face going pale.

What little dignity he had left was carefully measured as he picked himself up off the cold stone tiles, glancing around at us with an expression of embarrassment that quickly turned into indignation and anger. “This is impossible.” He said bitterly, wrapping up his cloak and flicking it over his shoulder before storming out without as much as a backwards glance.

“Another one down.” there was a trace of amusement through Carodus’ tone as he watched the knight disappear through the doorway. The two Iron Knights stood impassively without a flicker of emotion and I guess that such a sight was extremely common to them. “Who’s first?”

Before any of us could even twitch Viconia stepped forward, her expression grim and determined. “I will try.”
Without the slightest hesitation she knelt before the tomb, relaxing as though she was mediating and mouthing the words for the test. There was no change, no sudden rush of magicka or even the slightest hint of anything changing but her breathing slowed and steadied and her eyes remained firmly closed.

“Viconia?” I asked carefully, feeling foolish as I moved forward towards her. At my presence and voice she made no sign of having noticed and didn’t even twitch in the slightest.

Behind me, Alexi made a surprised sound and chuckled. “Huh. If I’m honest I’m surprised that that actually worked for her.”

“What do you mean?” Carodus looked somewhat confused and I saw one of the Knights angle his head towards us in interest.

“She’s technically a heathen and doesn’t follow the teachings of the Nine.” I replied.

Carodus looked between me, the Tomb and Viconia and shrugged. “She’s not the first and there’s no law against it.”

Unlike the previous Knight who had failed, Viconia didn’t remain kneeling for even a fraction of the time. In less than a minute she suddenly jolted as though struck with a bolt of lightning or being plunged into a pool of freezing water.

“That was disconcerting.”

“What did you see?” Alexi moved forward and watched her expression carefully as she rose from her kneeling position and brushed her hands down her sides. It was the only sign of any nervousness or anxiety that she would permit to show.

“I was standing on a broken island floating in a sea of nothingness. In front of me was another island, similar in size and shape to the one I was standing on but between them there was nothing, just an abyss.”

“Did you see the Mace?”

She nodded to Alexi. “It’s definitely a Relic. I can’t sense it now but when I was… wherever that was, I was able to feel it. I couldn’t get close though, as soon as I stepped forward off the island I fell.”

“Looks like faith doesn’t affect the vison.” Alexi said after a brief moment of contemplation. “That’s interesting.”

“It is indeed.” Viconia’s eyes locked onto mine and I could feel the uncertainty of her thoughts. She hadn’t believe for a second that she would have been successful in retrieving the Mace but had been ‘testing the test’. It had obviously left her with more questions than answers but her mind was already working on the problem. “Kaius, I would like you to try next.”

It wasn’t certain which was more amusing, the way that she had framed her question as a statement that brooked no option but to comply or the fact that I was technically her superior.

“I shall take your advice under consideration Madame DeVir.” I said with a smile and the look in her eyes promised some form of amused punishment she would bestow on me when we had a measure of privacy. It didn’t however affect the deadly seriousness that was positively flowing from her. “Anything in particular that you wish for me to attempt in this holy endeavour.”
My sarcasm made the corners of her mouth curl upwards very slightly and intensify her expression. "Take note of everything you see or feel. Your experience as a 'forester' is going to be of great assistance."

This time my smile and nod was more sombre than before as the unspoken meaning behind her words were obvious. She had attempted the test as an unbeliever of the faith and now she wanted to know how I would go as a vampire.

“Very well.” Watching where I placed my feet I moved over to the portion of the floor where Viconia and the other Knight had been kneeling and lowered myself into a similar position. It was hard not to notice that this particular spot was worn almost entirely smooth from the thousands upon thousands of faithful who had attempted the test over the centuries. I didn’t have any belief that I would be successful in this attempt, but a small part of me wondered the opposite especially after I had been the only person to retrieve the Boots.

Carefully and with nothing more than willpower I slowed my breathing and tried to ignore the hammering of my heart within my chest. The nervousness and anxiety was almost tingling through my hands and limbs like the adrenaline that surged through me before I fought or did battle.

“Zenithar, test my resolve.” I murmured and tried not to feel the way that I had to force them out of my throat. It seemed utterly incongruous that I was expecting to be tested again for purity when I was so obviously corrupt.

Nothing happened and despite my expectations of feeling something… anything… there wasn’t even the slightest flicker of air across my skin or the sensation of change. It made it even more insane when I opened my eyes, expecting to see the plainly made tomb but instead found an abyss less than a metre in front of me.

I had been expecting something after all the stories I had heard from the others but nothing could have prepared me for the fact that the tomb, the underground levels of the cathedral and all of those in there with me had utterly vanished. There were still hints of the room in the tiles under me but the only things I could truly see were a pair of tiny islands in a sea of utter blackness.

“Okay… I think I’m getting a little tired of the Nine playing these tricks.” I said to the nothingness, moving about and looking carefully at the island that I found myself on.

It was less than ten metres wide and was roughly in the shape of a circle as though a great earthquake had sundered it away from the land itself. What was the most disconcerting being the fact that the island was, as far as I could tell, the tomb itself, right down to the shattered and broken doorway at my back and the ancient, smoothed tiles of the floor. The tiles simply ended at the edge of the yawning expanse of nothingness between the two islands, their hand sized surfaces cracked and shattered where the islands ended and revealing nothing beyond.

There was no breeze, no sound and strangely enough no source of light despite the fact that I could see clearly. The light came from everywhere and nowhere, illuminating both islands but being unable to penetrate the blackness that spread to eternity before me. In every direction that I looked there was an emptiness that contained nothing, and without the broken doorframe on my island and the other island floating some distance away there was nothing to allow me to gain my bearings. Even my vampirism was of no use, my eyes revealing that either there truly was nothing to be seen or the darkness was so absolute that even my vampiric vision couldn’t penetrate it.

The only things I could smell other than ancient stonework was myself, and the silence was almost deafening in its own regards. It was so quiet I could hear my own heartbeat and my soft, increasingly nervous breathing and with my enhanced hearing I could also hear the strange gurgling of blood
flowing through my body. I also couldn’t sense any other form of life no matter how hard I concentrated but what I could definitely see was what was on the other island.

That it was a Relic of Pelinal was not in doubt. Even without my vampiric senses I could feel it, and while the space between us sat threateningly between me and it, I was still close enough to see the priceless artefact clearly. The tomb of Saint Kaladas was open and missing the marble lid and sides that covered the ancient remains. There was little left of the architect and builder besides a pile of dust laying in the open, but the rough semblance of a humanoid shape surrounded the Mace of the Crusader.

Like all of the other relics, the Mace was immaculate and untouched by time. Even though that it sat in the dust and remains of a dead man not a single blemish or speck touched it. While I shouldn’t have been as surprised as I was the Mace was somehow even more of a work of art than the other relics we had recovered. It was fitting that the relic of Zenithar was fashioned to a far greater standard to the other Divines but at the same time it wasn’t ostentatious. Somehow the metre-long object was humble, and yet brutally effective.

The head was flanged and I knew that if I managed to look directly down on it the metal would form the shape of a star. Every centimetre was covered with flowing runes and symbols, shapes of men and mer building, creating and forging works of their own. If not for my vampiric senses I would have been unable to see anything besides the fact that it was indeed a mace but for several long minutes I was stuck in awe of the impossibly beautiful forging of such a weapon.

Shaking off the Mace’s hold on my senses I took another look around at the two islands. While I couldn’t see the base of the island I stood on, the other was looking as though it had been ripped from the ground before being suspended into the void.

“Walk in the faith… This should be interesting.” I stepped closer to the edge until my toes were mere centimetres from the abyss and peered down. It didn’t seem to matter which direction I looked it was all the same nothingness that stretched away in distances that left my head swimming. There was nothing below the island and it easily gave me vertigo.

An idea came to me and I felt around the handful of pouches attached to my armour. One of the more disconcerting things was the fact that I was still wearing everything that I had originally entered the tomb with, including my weapons and equipment. One of my pouches contained a small handful of coins that I poured into the palm of my hand, shifting through them with a finger before selecting a small copper septim that I flicked off into the darkness.

My vampirism allowed me to hear the tiny metallic chiming as it spun through the air but after the first few seconds it vanished. I could no longer see or hear it and after waiting for a considerable length of time I definitely didn’t hear it strike anything, much less reach the bottom if there was one.

“*Ambulare per fidem*…” I said without the slightest trace of confidence as I took a nervous pace forward. The abyss gazed up at me as I stood at the edge, stepping forward and pitching myself into the dark.

I fell as quickly as I expected but the sudden drop and the fact that my foot came down on nothing was more surprising than I expected. Within seconds I tumbled away into a freefall and even with my vampiric senses and abilities I quickly lost sight of the pair of islands as they receded into the nothingness above me. For those panic filled seconds I writhed against the grip of the void, finding myself trapped within its depths with absolutely nothing visible to my sight.

Gasping and tearing my eyes open I felt the sudden impact of stonework as I landed on my back. Sound and light had returned, and with it I could easily hear the mild chuckling from Mazoga and
Viconia, especially when my sight of the ceiling was replaced with Viconia’s amused expression.

“How was it?”

“A little terrifying.” I replied, trying to remove the sensation that I should still be falling.

Alexi laughed but nodded in agreement. “That it is. No matter how many times you try it’s just as bad each time.”

“Good to know.”

Viconia watched as I rose to a crouch before staggering to my feet. “You saw the mace?”

“Yes. It’s definitely one of the Relics.”

She stood silently for a moment, her eyes narrowing. “How far were the islands apart?”

“Thirty meters or so, but no greater than forty.” I could feel her scrutiny as I dug my collection of coins out of my pouch and counted them. It wasn’t as surprising as I thought to discover that I was indeed missing a copper septim. “I also wouldn’t throw anything important in there.”

“How about you all?” She asked the others. “How much distance was there between the islands?”

“How about you all?” She asked the others. “How much distance was there between the islands?”

“She is normally like this?” Carodus asked as she disappeared, and he was obviously trying to decide whether to be concerned or amused.

“Usually worse.” My own chuckle was enough to break the tension and one of the Iron Knights caught himself before a smile broke his stern expression.

“I would guess that it is the same for everyone who has ever attempted this test. Surely I’m not the only one suspicious about this?”

“It is a test of faith.” As usual Falid’s voice was deep and threatening without meaning too but there was no emotion in his tone. “Whether the distance is thirty meters or three thousand, it is too far to jump or otherwise travel across and therefore you must rely on your faith.”

The dark pall on Viconia’s expression grew as she looked back at the tomb, her gaze lingering on the simple carved message on its base.

“You don’t think that it’s a test of faith?” I said hesitantly, receiving nothing in return for several moments as she concentrated.

“I will return.” She said after some time, resting her hand on my shoulder before walking towards the tomb’s entrance. “Keep trying in the meantime. You might be lucky, but make sure you try everything you can think of.”

I caught her hidden meaning again and nodded as she left our small group looking amused and somewhat confused as she left.

“Is she normally like this?” Carodus asked as she disappeared, and he was obviously trying to decide whether to be concerned or amused.

“Usually worse.” My own chuckle was enough to break the tension and one of the Iron Knights caught himself before a smile broke his stern expression.

“She thinks that there is a trick to the test?”

For the first time I sensed the faintest hint of unease or insult in Falid’s tone, and the way that he stood filled the air with a predatory tension. I could barely meet his gaze as he watched how Mazoga stepped forward and knelt.
“The test to retrieve the boots was not as straightforward as it appeared. Hundreds, if not thousands, had gone to that place, seeking the shield and trying to slay the unslayable. In the end it was not a test of strength or a battle of arms, but one to see who would be willing to offer respect and fealty to Kynareth.”

“So it is a trick.” He growled.

Shaking my head to the enormous Redguard I watched as Mazoga mouthed the words and relaxed as though falling asleep. “I don’t think that it’s a trick, but maybe that it is not what everyone thinks it is.”

One by one our group knelt before the tomb and undertook the test under the watchful gazes of the two Iron Knights and Carodus. Each resulted in the exact same thing; failure. Mazoga fell backwards in a clatter of metal and an expression of the utmost terror before bursting into laughter, and Falid tried once as well. When he experienced the sensation of falling into nothingness he had simply grunted and opened his eyes, barely twitching in comparison to Mazoga’s exclaimed “Bwuh!” and colourful swearing in Orsimer.

For his part, Alexi simply hung back watching. He had tried repeatedly over the years and watched with interest as I tried several more times myself, letting the handful of other faithful who were escorted by their own guides between attempts. Each time was the exact same situation, finding myself stuck on a pair of islands floating in nothingness and staring at the Mace that was sitting tantalisingly out of reach. After the second attempt I began my own experimentation, trying my more esoteric abilities to cross the space without any success. At first I tried to turn my body into a swarm of bats but for whatever reason I couldn’t control the ability for anything more than a few seconds. Simply stepping off the edge was much less terrifying than suddenly reforming into human in-between the two islands and plummeting like a stone into the shadows.

Transforming into mist resulted in just as much success. There was no sign of any outward changes to my being while being tested but while there was no wind or air movement in the void I still couldn’t keep my mist form coherent and was forced back into my human form the same as being a swarm of bats. Even my enhanced strength and abilities were of no use, as the space between the two islands was too far to leap no matter how agile I was. It was becoming infuriatingly taunting and I could understand why Sir Ralvas died after failing multiple attempts. The whole test was infuriatingly simple and I could see how those with the strongest faith suffered the most. For someone such as myself and Viconia we knew we were not holy or had much faith, if any in the Nine and therefore we expected to fail, but for others such as the original Knights of the Nine or Falid, they left feeling wounded at the failure.

After my second attempt Mazoga had grown bored and wandered back to the surface level and Falid wasn’t far behind her. Only the two guarding Knights of the Order of Iron, Carodus, Alexi and myself remained alternatively watching any of the others come to make the attempts and chatting about anything or everything. Carodus was indeed a veteran of the legion having spent most of his life on the island of Stros M’kai. He, like many of the Legionaries who served there were well versed in fighting on ships and naval warfare and bringing the iron might of the Legion to the seas. The Casta in which he served could easily be counted among some of the most experienced in the entire Empire, and Stros M’Kai was well known to be a dangerous place to be a Legionary. Between the ruined Dwemer city, the tribe-horde of Goblins and the usual assortment of pirates and smugglers, Carodus had seen and fought the worst Tamriel could offer. The fact that he survived mostly intact to retire was credit to his experience and abilities.

For almost two hours we remained with the tomb waiting for Viconia to return. When she finally arrived we were surprised that she was not alone. Several of the new Knights of the Nine had
followed and to my surprise so had Thedret. Viconia’s expression was grim and determined but the Knights, Thedret included were wary and somewhat abashed when they appeared.

“We have come as ordered Commander.” One of the young Knights said as they entered the tomb and I couldn’t help but notice the way that they had been escorting Viconia. I could do little more than nod and mentally make note of how I would need to speak to Viconia later. It was one thing to exert her influence but the newly recreated Order of the Nine could very well come apart at the seams if there was no clear leadership. As much as I hated it, I would need to exert my own influence and rein her in as well; a prospect that made singlehandedly charging into a horde of daedra more appealing.

“Have you acquired what you needed?” I asked Viconia, trying my best to hide my annoyance and the hesitation I had.

“I have.” In her arms was a sturdy leather bag filled with woollen wrappings that she rummaged through in an attempt to free whatever they contained. For a while she tugged and pulled until the sight of what the bag truly contained became visible and I understood the presence of so many from the Order of the Nine.

Somehow the room became brighter as the flickering torches and lanterns threw light over the immaculate Boots of the Crusader. Those within the room fell utterly silent and the stern expressions of the Knights of Iron were utterly wiped away as their jaws fell open in surprise. One stammered for a moment, before making the sign of Zenithar across his chest in salute to the obvious holy nature of the relics.

“Um… Viconia?” I said, moving over to her as she sat heavily on the ground in front of the tomb and began unlacing her boots. “What are you doing?”

“The damn test is a riddle. If this was truly a test of faith than the mace would have been retrieved centuries ago with all your god-botherers coming here.”

“But the boots?”

Pulling one of her boots off, she threw a thumb over her shoulder to the young, nervous appearing Thedret as he obviously wrestled with his sense of duty and unease at what was occurring in front of him. “I ran my ideas past Thedret and he seemed to come to a similar conclusion to me.”

“And what conclusion is that?”

Under my gaze Thedret looked slightly more uneasy and struggled to find his voice. “That the phrase “Walk in the faith” alludes to using the Boots to retrieve the Mace.”

Viconia continued removing her boots and with some considerable hesitation slipped the priceless relics of a faith not her own over her feet. Despite her size and the size of the boots I was left blinking and feeling distinctly uneasy at the way that she was able to wear them as I knew from personal experience that they were slightly too large even for me. For those few heartbeats after she slipped them on and knelt before the sarcophagus the boots suddenly appeared as though they had been forged specifically for her.

“Thedret.” I said softly as I watched Viconia’s breathing steady and relax after she mouthed the words to begin the test. “What do you think?”

“I think that it’s not going to work.” Alexi interrupted, smiling like usual. “I’ll even bet a silver that it won’t make a difference.”
Thedret stood still, flanked by the trio of Knights chosen to escort Viconia and the priceless relics from the Stallion Lodge to the Cathedral. “I think… I think I’ll actually take you up on that bet. She spoke of the magicka involved in this place and how the vision of the floating islands exists and yet doesn’t. To be honest much of what she said on the way here didn’t make much sense.”

My questions expression was not lost on him and he sighed loudly, rubbing at his temples. “I’m a scholar-knight Sir Desin, not a mage. You’d need to talk to someone from the Mages Guilds but she spoke of tonal magicka and something about the architecture of the songs needing to be tuned correctly.”

Alexi looked between her kneeling form and me. “Does that mean anything to you Kaius?”

“Not in the slightest, but I know she knows more about Magicka than all of us combined.”

We watched with a building impatience as she remained kneeling, her breath steady and controlled and eyes firmly shut. The seconds dragged on so slowly that I began wondering just how long we had remained within the tomb until without warning she sighed and opened her eyes once more.

Thedret and the other knights looked downcast at the way that she sat there, shaking their heads sadly at the way she had simply awoken but startling themselves as she began violently swearing, writhing on the floor and wrenching the Boots off her feet.

“Natha szithrel cha'kohken pholor nindolen axsa klezn!” She spat with almost as much force as she flung the second and last boot off her foot into the wall with a metallic clatter. Everyone in the room with the exception of myself looked aghast at the way she had treated some of the holiest artefacts in creation but I was too busy seeing the way that she was grasping her feet.

Blisters covered her ebony flesh as though she had dipped into boiling water to the ankle. Her usual stoicism was being put to the utmost test as she sat back, groaning and more than just myself were shocked at the injuries.

“How could the relics do something like that?” one of the Iron Knights exclaimed as I carefully lifted her feet and looked over the injuries. It was mostly superficial but still painful enough that she hissed curses through gritted teeth as I began channelling magicka into the wounds.

“They are the holiest artefacts of your Gods.” Viconia said, grimacing and giving me a sharp look as I moved her a little too roughly in my haste. “The legends also state that only those blessed by the Gods and with pure and noble hearts can wield them. Looks like I just proved them all right.”

“Among other things.” Fumbling with the pouch attached to his belt, Alexi was laughing under his breath and shaking his head in amazement as he flicked a silver coin to Thedret.

The coin plinked off the chainmail of the younger knight, who’s despondent expression had changed to one of shock and unable to react to the thrown septim. Collectively everyone was staring in amazement at the base of the sarcophagus where the inscription was now partially hidden behind an object that hadn’t been there before.

“When you’re right, you’re right.” Viconia muttered, the pain of being unworthy of wearing the boots fading with my magicka and pride in what she had done.

I had been so intent and focussed on her that I hadn’t seen what the others had seen until I caught a glimpse out of the corner of my eye. It drew the gaze in a similar way to the rest of its kin but there, sitting on the ancient marble less than a metre away was the Mace of the Crusader.
Natha szithrel cha’kohken pholor nindolen axsa klezn - A thousand curses upon these damnable things (Drow)

The original quest couldn't have made the requirement for needing the boots any more obvious if it tried, (not even taking into account the in-game messages after you try and fail three times in a row to cross the abyss.) Like everything I have attempted to make this a little more realistic and 'flesh' it out a bit more as well.

The next few chapters though are the ones I'm really looking forward to writing though... ;-P
“I hope you both realise that you don’t need to do everything yourselves?” Despite the good humour in Alexi’s voice there was still a streak of bitterness that was barely noticeable through it.

Viconia was beaming from her position on the floor, stretching her legs out and grimacing as I tried my best to treat the strange stigmata that had afflicted her feet. The blister like burns were superficial, but painful and even with her usual tolerances to pain every movement or wave of magicka I channelled left her growling. “If you want something done right…” She muttered around a scowl, directing daggers through her eyes at me as I lifted a leg as carefully as I could and lightly ran my fingers over the wounds.

My magicka was helping immensely but it would be some time before she would be free of the strange burns that wearing the boots had afflicted. I did manage to half her feet enough that she was able to go through the slightly laborious process of carefully pulling on her socks and wearing her proper boots again. As she continued her softly spoken curses and annoyed utterances at how her socks were now slightly bloodstained it gave me the first proper opportunity to look at the Mace up close.

The vision of the floating islands ensured that no one could get a close look at the Mace’s grandeur but now that it had been recovered its finery was revealed to all. There was absolutely no doubt that it was an artefact of the God of smiths and craftsmen, and there was also no doubting the fact that there had been no finer item forged or made in all of creation. Rather than appearing forged, it was so finely made that it appeared grown from a single piece of purest metal. The entire length of the haft was made of a mithril like metal that shone like the dawn sun rising over a still water of lake and the grip was fashioned as though winding ropes of the purest silver streaked with the faint darkness of ebony. Even in the few torches and lanterns in the tomb, it somehow radiated light as though it was absorbing it and expelling it tenfold. The tiniest movements of the head and eyes while looking upon it made the swirling shapes and patterns flow like water and left the impression of a steam rolling across the eons smoothed stones in its bed.

For several moments I reached out, my fingers hovering over the naked haft of the weapon while Viconia slowly and carefully put her boots on and until I built up enough courage to grasp it. Until the very moment that my fingers touched the cool metal I could scarcely believe that we had no successfully retrieved another relic. A total of five of them were now within the possession of the Knights of the Nine, both original and new and I took the utmost care to move the Mace from where it sat.

At first, I felt confident in picking up the relic as the other items such as the boots and the helm had not been an issue and I had been able to hold them without any negative effects. Although I was wary after seeing how the boots had burned Viconia it didn’t stop me from picking it up.

At first the metal was cool and almost welcoming but it quickly changed for every second that I held onto it. I was mostly expecting something of the like but within seconds the metal had seemed to become superheated as though I had plucked it from the heart of a forge. To those watching with some trepidation they watched me drop the haft of the weapon back down, rubbing at my hand and being left uncomfortably reminded of the effects of silver on my cursed body.

“You can’t wield it either.” Alexi said flatly. “At least there’s something that you and Viconia can’t
do.”

“I don’t think that many people will be able to, which is why we need to find Pelinal’s heir.” With a few quick movements I unclasped my cloak from around my shoulders before wrapping the mace up as best I could until it was as swaddled as a newborn.

“What now Commander?” Said one of the new Knights of the Nine and I could feel all eyes upon me. The room was deathly quiet and everyone was almost too shocked to truly react but there was a sense of anticipation in the air. Everyone present; the Knights of Iron, the four Knights of the Nin and Carodus, Thedret, Alexi and Viconia were all watching me carefully as I finished wrapping the Mace up and picking it up.

“We need to get the Mace out of here and safely to the Stallion Lodge.” As I tucked the Mace into my arms I breathed out a sigh of relief at how it either couldn’t burn me through the multiple layers or didn’t unless someone attempted to wield it as a weapon.

“I doubt the priests are going to simply let you all walk out of here with the Mace Sir.” Carodus said simply, immediately reaching the same conclusion that I had despite his relative lack of experience in the regard. When I had retrieved the boots the Priesthood of Kynareth had attempted to claim possession over the boots and I somehow doubted that the followers of Zenithar in the heart of one of the largest and wealthiest cities in Cyrodiil were going to be as open to the idea as their kin.

“I know. That’s why we’re going to need everyone we can to help escort us out of the city.” My eyes glanced about the room as Viconia and I rose to our feet. She was still looking in pain but it was quickly being concealed with her usual disdain for all concerns of the flesh. She didn’t bat a single eyelash though at how I handed the wrapped-up mace to her as my mind swirled with a torrent of thoughts and plans.

“Surely we can just sneak this out of here?” She said as she took it from my hands and I shook my head sadly.

“Even if we managed to get out of the cathedral without anyone getting suspicious, people need to know that another Relic has been recovered.” Another thought occurred to me and to her amusement I quickly knelt before the tomb, relaxing and asking for Zenithar to test my resolve. It didn’t appear to surprise anyone that nothing happened and my eyes opened instantly to the tomb instead of the not-quite-vision of the floating islands. “And it also appears that the test is truly completed.”

“Didn’t you trust me Kaius?” Viconia’s voice was sickly sweet in her amusement but I could tell that she was as deadly serious about the situation as I was.

“I like being thorough.” Turning and taking note of the individuals within the Tomb I did a quick count and drew up some plans in my mind. “We’re all on escort detail. Viconia will carry the Mace and we will show it to the people in the cathedral but at the first available opportunity we get it out of here and to the Lodge. Do not let anyone lay more than their eyes on it.”

“What about the priests?” The amusement was evident in Carodus’ face but I nodded with a savage grin forming on my own.

“Especially the priests. The only person that this Relic leaves with is Madame DeVir and I will expect us all to defend it if needed.”

The two Knights of Iron looked between themselves and came to some unspoken agreement before one opened his mouth to speak. “You can count on us as well Sir Desin.”
“My thanks to you.” Turning to one of the Knights directly under my command I gestured to him and the halls beyond that lead back to the cathedral. “Did anyone else from our Order come with you?”

“Three other Knights and a squad of Men-at-Arms.” He said and I tried my very best to hide my increasing anxiety from him and the others.

“Good. You go ahead and ensure that they are waiting at the top of the stairs when we arrive. I suspect that we will need every able body we can manage.”

As his metallic jingle disappeared into the halls our impromptu group was readying ourselves both physically and mentally. No one was truly expecting a fight beyond some strongly worded arguments from the priest but with a relic of Pelinal in our care I doubted that any of us were taking any chances. With the Knight rushing off to prepare the others under my command we formed ourselves into a rough block surrounding Viconia and the Mace and I was soon struggling to continue hiding my nervousness than the situation we were in.

By the time that we managed to leave the catacombs and reach the top of the stairs we not only found a small group of Knights and Men-at-Arms waiting for us but a growing number of curious worshippers and a gaggle of priests who were not too pleased with the intrusion. While there was no outright ban on weapons within houses of worship and Knights and other nobility were allowed to openly carry their arms, the sudden appearance of over a dozen fully armoured warriors marching their way inside was a different matter. What was even more galling to the men and women of the cloth was the fact that the handful of Knights and accompanying Men-at-Arms under my command had completely ignored their protests, marching purposefully to the top of the stairs and blocking access to everyone until we arrived.

Being surrounded by a small number of armed men and women was as comforting as it should be and while they were not the equivalent to a similar group of Legionaries, they were still formidable soldiers. Sir Ramauld had not let just anyone from the Order of the White Stallion to change their Heraldry and the knights and footsoldiers of the new Order of the Nine were some of his most experienced. Without the order to do so they had for all intents locked shields together as we reached the top and found ourselves the centre of numerous shouted questions and prying gazes.

All fell momentarily silent as they saw what was wrapped in Viconia’s arms as she had carefully unwrapped a portion of the flanged head of the mace to make it obvious what we had done. Several of the priests looked alternatively in shock or apoplectic that the Mace had been retrieved, and as Carodus had mentioned in passing as we climbed the stairs it was almost too much to believe for some of the clergy that a female dark elf had been the one to claim the Mace.

The surge of the faithful and curious left me reeling and remembering a portion of the battle of Kvatch where a horde of minor daedra had rushed the cohort I was fighting with. Several of the Men-at-Arms grunted and dug their heels in as those wishing to lay eyes upon a relic of the Divines pressed in closer but there was no anger, rage or hate within any faces I could see. Many were openly weeping, crying out praise and benedictions and somehow unsurprising the only hostility we were receiving was from the members in the robes and monk habits, especially after I politely but firmly announced that the Mace would not be delivered into the care of the Church.

Cheers mixed in with cries of joy and the sound of clapping echoed throughout the room and for the first minutes we could’ve move at all. It was only when the enormous form of Falid appeared, striding through the press as though the people were merely stalks of wheat that we were able to begin shuffling our way towards the doors. The priests continued to mob us in their own way, demanding to speak to me, ordering me to hand the mace over and to stop attempting to leave the
We were barely half way through the door when I felt my stomach drop as though I had fallen off a cliff and for a moment I thought it was simply my body and mind reacting to the stress. The cathedral’s Bishop had managed to wriggle his way through the impromptu shieldwall of the Men-at-Arms and was, and in no particular order listing the reasons why what we were doing was blasphemy, heretical and would result in the disbandment of the Knights of the White Stallion. If it wasn’t for the strange queasy expression on his face and that of a handful of others I could see, I would have thought that the flip-flop of my guts was only something that I alone was experiencing. Instead I was growing more concerned by the second at the similar reactions of those surrounding me.

While unusual, the tell-tale signs of magicka in proximity was enough to draw the attentions of every being in the cathedral who was sensitive to such things. With one arm wrapped around the Mace, Viconia shifted uncomfortably and pressed her free hand into her temple, audibly groaning as she too was left reeling by the sensation. What was worse though, was the way that Falid’s expression hardened in the moments it took for him to unclasp his winged helm from his belt and place it firmly over his head.

If it wasn’t for the way that most people around us were left groaning and hunching over slightly in pain at the alien sensations, I would have struggled to seek out their source through the press of bodies. I could feel the magicka hammering into my mind but the portion that wasn’t entirely human was already rising to the surface, growling in displeasure and allowing me to see the way that the interior of the cathedral began to warp and twist.

Beginning like the first hints of predawn light there was a puckering, swirling beam of sunlight that seemed to stretch into existence from one of the many spearing from the stained-glass windows. The beam seemed to drink in all other colours, merging and growing and yet splitting like a rainbow despite the colours being wrong and utterly impossible. The headache that thundered its way into my mind at the sight was enough to tell me that whatever I was witnessing was not something that could be comprehended by mortal minds.

Further along the enormous expanse several of taller candle holders were illuminated in increasingly bright light, as though their tiny flames were suddenly enhanced somehow and the primary chandelier above our heads was reacting the same way. Four metres across and containing dozens, if not a hundred or more softly burning candles, the central chandelier was bathed in a harsh white light that grew brighter by the second.

One moment the expanding beams of light were almost physical and the next they had whip-cracked together and stretched into impossible shapes before breaking away from their sources. The magicka was still growing but it was no longer headache inducing now that what had been summoned tore themselves into reality.

Like the bastard merging of a sunbeam and a will-o-wisp, the shuddering, flickering forms dropped from the light sources that had given birth to them and began to dance about the cathedral’s interior. They were difficult to focus upon but I caught semblances of humanoid figures leaping and cavorting before utter pandemonium erupted.

Priests and the faithful alike suddenly scattered from the things that had appeared without warning and it took mere seconds before the first screams ripped through the air. Initially in fear and terror of the unknown, the shouts of warning and alarm were replaced with full-throated shrieks of pain and agony as the things fell upon those closest to them. I saw one priest fall as though tackled by one of the shapes, the energies that it consisted of burning him horribly and blinding him even as he
screamed and slapped ineffectively at it.

“Ssussun errdegahren!” Viconia shouted, growling in the lingering pain from the creatures’ appearances and obviously trying not to limp from her injured feet.

“What?”

“Light Atronachs!”

With growing horror at the indiscriminate way that the flickering beings leapt about and attacked whoever they could reach I found myself struggling to think or act, finding my limbs growing as solid as lead.

“What in all the hells are Light Atronachs doing here?”

Thedret, like the rest of us had already drawn his weapon and he gripped the enormous three metre length of his bladed glaive in both hands. “They are creatures of Meridia! Umaril must have sent them for the Mace!”

In the weeks and months of reading and learning all that I could about the Knights of the Nine, Pelinal and his ancient nemesis there had been one being who was mentioned in every written works. The Daedric Prince Meridia was considered to be one of the ‘good’ or at least ‘lesser evil’ of the princes but the sight of some of her creatures attacking innocents proved that there was truly not a ‘good’ daedric prince. She was one of the more difficult princes to describe and consider to be wholly evil with her everlasting hatred of all things undead and a permanent rivalry against the likes of Molag Bal but she was also the patron goddess of Umaril the Unfeathered. It had been her blessings and support during the Alesian rebellion that had allowed him to contend with the might and blessings of the Eight Divines and survive the destruction of his physical body at the hands of Pelinal Whitestrake. The appearance of her servants within the Cathedral of Zenithar shortly after the retrieval of one of Pelinal’s artefacts was no coincidence and did not bode well for any of us.

In a handful of seconds, I felt a strange calm wash over me that was wholly unlike anything that the vampire could offer. I felt my muscles tighten, stomach clench in almost the opposite of quivering nervousness and for the first time in days at least I felt my mind clear of all doubts and worries. Months of Legion training as a minor commander and Praefect suddenly took over in its own kind of muscle memory and I could almost feel like blood chill in my veins.

The nervousness from the fact that every armed individual near/by was suddenly waiting on me was washed away by my sudden rush of confidence. Here was an enemy, and around me were men and women sworn to combat such things. While this didn’t appear to be the same sort of attack that had resulted in countless desecrated temples, churches, chapels and cathedrals throughout Tamriel we were certainly in the position to do something about it.

One of the humanoid collections of sunbeams bounced off one of the walls, twisting unnaturally in mid-air as it hurled itself into the centre of our ad hoc formation but before anyone could react Thedret had impaled it on his glaive in a shower of twinkling lights. The air was suddenly filled with the hint of fireflies as it shivered and came apart on the bladed polearm, somehow screeching inaudibly before he flicked it away.

“We need to get everyone the hells out of here!” I shouted over the increasingly loud screaming and cries of absolute terror and gesturing to the collection of Men-at-Arms surrounding us. “You all clear a path to the entrance if you can. If you can’t, I want you all to get as many people into the catacombs as possible.”
The wide-eyed expression of the Bishop reappeared as I turned and I could see the man’s sudden terror in his pale features and quivering jowls. “The relic cannot fall to the hands of the Unfeathered,” he said with his voice cracking with fear. “and you must also save the faithful!”

“I fully intend to, my lord Bishop.” Taking a quick tally of the number of armed warriors with me I quickly nodded to some who quickly moved off in the direction of some of the creatures with their weapons drawn. Others I motioned between themselves and Viconia who was now holding the Mace close to her chest as tightly as she did her coin purse and valuables in Bravil. “I need you all to escort Madame DeVir and the Relic out of here and not stop for anyone or anything.”

They nodded and I turned away from the Bishop despite his attempts to keep my attention. As for Viconia, she only had eyes for me as she drew Dragonbane. “I can fight.”

Our expressions mirrored each other and I couldn’t help but think of the inevitable words she would have with me at a later time. “We’ll hold them off but you need to get the Mace to safety. We can’t afford to let them get their hands on it.”

“Always the hero Mrannd’ssinss.” She said softly, nudging my shoulder with her forehead before gripping her sword even tighter. There was the briefest moment of concern on her beautiful face that framed the old acid scarring and tattoos of her forehead and cheeks before she turned away and I was left facing the others.

Slightly off to the side I saw the old retired centurion hardening his expression at the sight before us as the dozens of armed soldiers and guards engaged the flickering light atronachs. The preparations and precautions that the Church had implemented since announcing the attacks was already paying dividends but the collection of volunteers, and hired guards couldn’t stand up to the increasing number of daedra spawning from every flicking candle or stained-glass window.

“Carodus.” I said, seeing his gaze twist to look at me at his name. “I want you to escort the Bishop and everyone else you can into the catacombs.”

Despite being unable to hear it over the sound of one of the militia being born down screaming under a pack of the creatures, I could see the way that Carodus snorted. “No disrespect intended my lord,” he said, rolling his shoulders and drawing his gladius in a smooth, experienced motion. “but you can shove that order up your arse.”

There was no use arguing, nor was there any time to as a collection of the capering things rushed forward. While they casually swiped or stuck at anyone in their path they paid little heed to the few armed soldiers or militia or even the unarmed civilians in the way. Their attentions and burning, shapeless gazes were fixated on us and the Mace in Viconia’s arms.

Even as we shifted forward to engage the Atronachs I could feel myself tensing at the growing realisation. The cathedral interior was enormous and could hold congregations of hundreds if not more at a time. While it was not a day of worship there were still dozens, if not a hundred or more worshippers and priests scattered and panicking in all directions and only two or three dozen armed guards and soldiers to defend them. Several of the guards that the church had hired had already been killed or wounded and besides the small number of Knights and Men-at-Arms from the Order of the Nine there were very few capable fighters.

The way that the things moved and their semi-transparent natures made it impossible to make even a somewhat accurate estimation of their numbers but everywhere I looked there were dozens of them squirming around the increasingly panicked defenders. The only true saving grace regarding the whole situation was that they appeared to be extremely fragile and had difficulties inflicting injuries on anyone wearing decent armour. They were hard to hit and moved like lightning but unless a
group of them managed to pin someone down they could do little more than momentarily blind and inflict something akin to severe sunburns.

As we rushed forward it was Falid who encountered the first of the light Atronachs, a gleaming, stuttering streak of light in the rough semblance of a humanoid shape. It launched itself at him without hesitation, leaping and twirling through the air with ease which didn’t seem to help it much when it met an enormous black plated leg coming the other direction. The force behind the kick would have been more than enough to outright kill a grown man but the atronach appeared to explode instead.

Although he staggered and lost his footing from the moment’s surprise at how easily he killed the atronach, Falid was already moving like a storm. With his sword grasped in his enormous gauntlets he turned two more of the creatures into sparkling droplets of energy that dissipated into the air in two sweeping blows. Thedret, Alexi, Carodus and the small collection of Knights by my side also quickly made short work of several of the shimmering daedra. More than one of us were left blinking away the sheer intensity of their forms and their partially explosive deaths as we carved them apart but with our comrades close by there wasn’t any opportunity for them to take advantage of the momentary weakness.

The first that fell to Sunchild’s edge dropped from one of the towering pillars supporting the roof like a glowing insect, shrieking with voice that sounded faintly of wind chimes as its formless claws of sunlight sought out my eyes. With barely a thought I had cut it in half but only after I gained the impression of a howling mouth, a face lacking any form of eyes and the vaguely feminine shape only from the curved edges of its half-formed appearance. Like the others that died it dissipated with a muted thunderclap of imploding energies as it was banished back into the Oblivion Realm of its Prince.

“There’s a lot of these damnable things!” I heard Carodus shout and unlike the battle cries and chanted hymns of some of the more religious Knights fighting by our side it was the first noise I had heard from him since he had rejected my order. Like every Legionary he had been taught to fight silent and cold but as a centurion he would have been used to shouting orders and blowing whistles during such a battle.

Thedret twisted the bladed end of his glaive in the approximation of one of the daedra’s guts and it came apart like wet paper. “We must hold them off for as long as we can. Whatever magicka is summoning these things cannot be sustained forever, nor can they remain in this world for long.”

Knowing what I did about the barriers between the world and Oblivion from personal experience with Oblivion Portals I knew that however long it took it was going to be too long.

“Agreed.” Another of the creatures was hacked into two pieces that disappeared before they even struck the ground and I twisted Sunchild into the path of a second. “Kill any in our path but we need to rescue as many people as we can.”

When the Atronachs had first appeared, a large majority of the faithful had rushed towards the main doors but many others had simply fled in whatever direction appeared to be the opposite to the daedra. As there was only the door leading into the rear courtyard, the stairs to the undercroft, the stairs leading to the belltowers and the door to the priests’ quarters there was very few ways to exit the cathedral. Although the enormous stained-glass windows appeared to offer and option to escape, the wrought iron depicting the various Divines and Saints ensured that most would be lucky to fit a head through let alone the rest of their bodies.

On the far side of the cathedral I could see a pair of local guardsmen and a Legionary who had been caught in mid prayers holding off a baying swarm of Atronachs from a group of civilians. As they
fought, a priest was lifting up some of the smaller children under his care and passing them through the hole bashed a window depicting Arkay. Whatever thoughts of blasphemy or desecration were put aside by everyone nearby and I caught glimpses of hands reaching up from outside from passers-by helping the crying children climb through the gaps only just large enough for them to wriggle through.

But for every small victory such as that, there were several defeats. The press of civilians trying to get through the double doors of the entrance and outside to safety had not only blocked and trapped many within the cathedral but had also ensured that it would be some time before any guards or help from outside would be able to make it inside. What was partially worse was that the press had also ensured that the small numbers of Men-at-Arms escorting Viconia and the Mace were for the most part stuck wallowing two dozen metres from the entrance, keeping their shields locked together and cutting any of the sentient light beams down when they came too close.

The daedra also struck at random, and while it was obvious that they were seeking out the Mace many scattered like cockroaches under the light of a lantern and attacked everyone they could reach. More than one group of unarmed civilians were slaughtered by ravenous packs of the burning Atronachs and age or ability to defend themselves didn’t matter as the beings killed the young and old alike. Spurred on by several such sights a handful of defenders were also cut down in their attempts to stop the ceaseless and mindless slaughter, proving to the survivors that anyone who was cut off from allies would die just as quickly.

Most at least. Such concerns of being outnumbered and overwhelmed didn’t matter to the likes of Falid and he simply chose the largest concentration of the creatures and attacked them head on. For anyone else it would have been a quick route to the grave but if I wasn’t mistaken the daedra were actually forced to back away from the enormous sweeps of his greatsword that cleared a space five metres in diameter around him. Surprisingly Thedret was also in the thick of things and appearing alone and unsupported but still holding his own with his enormous polearm. The brief glimpses I gained was of a strange dance or ballet from the young Knight Mentor, using the iron tipped end of the haft and the deadly glaive on the other end to hew his way through the mass without pause.

The rest of us continued to fight for our lives in more traditional ways but I did catch glimpses and the sounds of another member of our group on the other side of the cathedral closer to the door. Mazoga hadn’t gone far in the hours since our arrival and had also thankfully been inside when the daedra attacked and was attacking in her own way, a style as straight forward and as subtle as a battering ram.

What was extremely concerning after I realised it was the way that not all of the Atronachs were attacking everything and everyone they could. Groups of them were clustering together at several points throughout the cathedral seemingly at random but always in a position that offered some space. Most were in locations that we could not easily reach through those that were attacking us but they were bunching together so tightly that making an exact count was entirely impossible.

Each one of the huddled groups were pressing and writhing like a swarm of bees, clambering over each other and twisting and almost becoming one as they condensed together. The sheer intensity of so many in one place was enough to burn into the eyes with a single glance in the general direction but there was also no mistaking the subtle traces of magicka from the masses.

One such group was very close to the main doors, another was further within the cathedral close to the primary altar and the third was less than a dozen metres away from where Alexi and I had found ourselves fighting side by side. Each swarm of Atronachs filled the entire cathedral with their strange luminescence which, while blinding was still assisting us in fighting the others in its own way. It was also making it more difficult for more of their kind to birth themselves into the mortal world as it
appeared that they needed some form of steady light source to spawn.

The swarm nearest to us heaved and rolled like a blanket over a sleeping individual and both Alexi and I shared a glance as something else within the mass moved. Whatever the being was, it was no wispy strand of vaguely humanoid light, it was tall and broad, twisting and tearing the last strands of embryonic energies as it finally tore free of Oblivion’s grip.

“Okay, now what?” I growled, ripping Sunchild across where I vaguely guessed where one of the atronach’s faces were and being rewarded with a tiny shower of glittering flakes.

Nearby, Thedret had just finished eviscerating a pair of the cavorting daedra and spun his glaive neatly. There was no doubt that he, like the rest of us were sweating and panting from the exertion but his Redguard heritage turned waxy at the sight of the larger creatures pulling themselves into our world.

“Aurorans!” he called out, taking a few steps away from the hulking figure that rose to its full height and stretched.

There were only three of them, but the size and power within them made the number of them appear to be overkill. Each had the appearance of golden knights wearing a suit of form covering and beautiful golden armour that gleamed like the morning sun. Every single one of them were taller than every mortal present, including Falid but his winged helm gave him a few centimetres of height over them. Unfortunately, they were almost just as broad and moved with a supreme grace of creatures not of our world.

“Well, this just got a lot worse.” Alexi said in his usual cheerful manner despite the tenseness of his jaw and sword arm. The swarms of light Atronachs fell away like autumn leaves and most appeared to dissipate and fade after their energies had been siphoned away to summon these new daedra.

“New plan!” I shouted, gesturing to the figures as they began to wade through the remaining Atronachs. “Kill those things and get everyone the fuck out of here!”

Unfortunately for us there was still too many foes and far too many civilians scattered about for it to be easy and already the remaining Atronachs were twisting and moving further away from us in an obvious attempt to merge together to summon more of the golden giants. One of them immediately charged into a small group of cowering civilians and began laying about with a gigantic double bladed battleaxe that shone with starlight and another rushed us without any hesitation.

What was even worse was that one of them had been summoned between the great doors of the cathedral and Viconia’s group of Men-at-Arms. This being assaulted the press of screaming humanity without any mercy or restraint, killing several with every blow of its sword that was almost the length of Falid’s and sending sizzling arcs of crimson through the air.

The situation was too overwhelming, too quick to keep track of and it was no doubt that the initiative of this battle was well within the golden claws of Umaril’s minions. About the only thing that I was thankful for was that none of the Aurorans appeared different or otherwise unique beyond what weapons they had been summoned with and so far at least the Unfeathered one had failed to show up himself. It was still becoming an unmitigated disaster and there were only a few of us who could do anything about it.

Falid as always, treated the appearance of a daedra that was taller and heavier than himself with about as much emotion as he did ordering a meal. Although his expression or any hints of surprise was lost behind the ebony skin of armour he wore there was no hesitation in him, or in fact any of the rest of us as we immediately attacked these new foes. The closest Auroran managed to drop its
sword down quick enough to parry the Black Knight’s blade but it was obvious that the creature was the stronger even if ultimately not by much.

Several of the remaining guards and armed priesthood hired to protect the church lost what resolve they had and joined the fleeing masses who were doing everything they could to escape. Some were huddling in cloisters and corners, others where crawling and wriggling their way under pews and altars and a steady stream were pushing and shoving their way out the back door and down into the catacombs away from the fighting. What was somewhat surprising though was that not everyone was fleeing. Some were unable to, trapped between the bulk of the daedric horrors and any possible avenue of escape and others but commoner and noble alike were taking up arms to defend themselves and others. For every two who were trying to escape there was one who did everything they could to fight.

A priest fought alongside myself and the others, wielding nothing more than a censer filled with incense on a chain as though it was a flail, and more than one of the worshippers had drawn knives or even their tools to defend themselves. Further away a grossly overweight nobleman dressed in clothes that were worth a year’s legionary salary was fending off a pair of Atronachs with little more than a jewelled dagger and a candlestick. The fact that he had obviously put himself in the way of the beings and a family of commoners to protect them was somehow even more ridiculous than the fact that he was actually succeeding. Elsewhere weapons that had fallen from their original owner’s hands were snatched up by those closest as the people of Leyawiin chose to defend their families, friends and their faith from the daedra.

The Aurorans were an entirely different foe than the flickering, weakening Atronachs who were ever decreasing in number. Unlike the other daedra that Viconia and I had faced these creatures were just as quick as they were strong. Every daedra it appeared were blessed with an unholy strength that a very rare few mortals could ever match and only people like myself with my vampirism or Falid with his years of training could consider ourselves to be their physical equal. Their blows shattered shields and bones with ease and with their daedric weapons they could cleave through the thickest of armour with a single blow and did so repeatedly. More than one knight or guard was killed when the enormous golden beings hacked them into pieces, sometimes cutting men and mer in half with little effort.

Together with the handful of knights I engaged the nearest one, casting aside Sunchild in favour of a weapon that was more devastating and drawing the Light of Dawn. I had my doubts to the enchanted blades effectiveness against beings that appeared just as heavily armoured as Falid but at that point every little advantage was worth it.

Getting closer to such a creature left no doubt to its otherworldly nature and the magicka-corruption stink that emanated from it was almost a physical sensation. The strange helmet that it wore was fused with its flesh which was somehow the same colour and texture of its armour and it made it difficult to determine where the creature ended and the armour began. The armour-flesh was also impossible and yet beautiful, flowing into curves and plates of such intricacy that no mortal could match there was still the underlying appearance of edges and blade-like protrusions. Especially the pair of horizontal blades that jutted from the temples of the open-faced helm and twisted back like the wings a bird made of golden knives were gleaming with sharpness.

It attacked like a storm of gold and razors, swirling around with the same impossible grace as the Atronachs and glowing with its own faint radiance as it parried and dodged our blows. Impossibly agile it was difficult to get close enough to hit but our numbers were working in our favour as we managed to corner the creature and trap it between us all.

Roaring with the sound of a summer storm, it laid about itself with its sword and I found myself
horrified to see the way that its face shifted within its helm-skull. In many ways its armour was its flesh and already some of the plates were bleeding a silvery, mercury like substance that evaporated and somehow flowed upwards as though rejecting the world’s pull upon it. There was no mistaking its monstrous nature however as its mouth unhinged like a snake in its unspeakable rage and revealing no tongue, teeth, gullet or even eyes as it roared. Beneath its flesh was no normal being but one that seemed to consist of nothing more than a brilliant white light that smouldered and glowed in silent promise.

While it appeared to be similar in terms of strength and size to the other daedra that Viconia and I had faced, the Aurorans were not filled with the similar rage and bloodlust of the Dremora or even Xivilai. They were no less deadly for this, and if anything they were even more dangerous as they attacked with lightning speed that forced all that they fought onto the back foot. This was further compounded by the fact that their strength was enough to shatter shields in a single blow and break bones through thicker armour. One of the Knights who had so recently pledged himself into my service died without the time to draw breath as his skull and neck was cloven in two from a blow of incredible speed and strength.

Despite being surrounded by almost a dozen armed men and mer the Auroran showed no hesitation as it engaged us all. It was so quick that while our numbers managed to force it onto the defensive it was able to parry and glide out of the way of our blows. Even worse, it was canny enough to know which blows to let through and which it needed to parry or block. Falid’s enormous greatsword was certainly one in the latter category but it was also extremely wary of the Light of Dawn, using its daedric weapon to deflect and knock away as like all enchanted weapons it counteracted the Ayleid sword’s magicka.

Unfortunately, it was also appearing much more resilient than Dremora. The servants of the Prince of Destruction bled and died like mortals and shared many of the same similarities in terms of weaknesses and organs but the Aurorans did not. Under their outer layers there was nothing underneath except for white light and silver blood and they were able to ignore many injuries that would have crippled a Dremora Markynaz. Most of us managed to land solid blows, even the Light of Dawn hacked into a golden calf shaped like knee high boots but there were no muscles to sever, nor arteries to gash and allow it to bleed to death.

Fighting like the legionary that he had been his whole life, Carodus was in the thick of the fighting like the rest of us and he used his enormous tower shield to full effect to protect himself from the creature’s sword. As powerful as the daedric weapon was, it was proving enough to batter and hack chunks out of the shield boss by little else as he soaked up the punishment. It allowed him to stab the thing several times but he was nowhere near as spry or agile as the rest of us and it was not long before he paid for it.

The taloned hand the size of my head latched onto his shield after a particularly successful stab from his gladius left his blade sunk halfway to the hilt in golden flesh and before any of us realised the retired legionary was thrown through the air. None of us had time to see where or how that he landed before the creature was already moving, twisting and kicking backwards like a mule and throwing Falid away with a metallic crash even as its free hand caught an Iron Knight’s hand and pulled. One moment the steel plated knight was swinging his mace with the full intention of breaking the Auroran’s knee and the next there was a flash of gold and he had been pulled onto the daedric sword, losing his arm and a large portion of his armoured shoulder with it.

There was no time to react, no moment to allow us to come into terms with the sudden shift in the fight before it speared the censer wielding priest through the chest and swung the severed arm like a club, smashing us all from our feet in a spray of crimson. I tasted copper from the blow and my vision was filled with stars from the impact of the shredded limb across my jaw and for a ludicrous
moment while my head spun I was suddenly more concerned by the possibility of a broken jaw than the likelihood of dying to daedric horrors.

It was a struggle to move, breathe, or even think and I found myself rolling over and trying to force my aching body to push up off the floor and find a weapon, any weapon to defend myself with. The Light of Dawn was gone, briefly skittering away before its incredible nature allowing it to cut into the floor until only the hilt was sticking into the air several metres away. I caught glimpses of Alexi being the only one of our small group having held onto his sword but my wounded mind also noticed something far worse.

The entire interior of the cathedral, while appearing more and more like a slaughterhouse than a house of worship was now filled with dozens of panicking, terrified people fleeing in all directions. The appearance of a fourth Auroran and their seemingly unstoppable advance through the soldiers and warriors had broken the spirit of almost all within the cathedral and with the door still blocked by the majority of the civilians they had simply run anywhere they could. Young and old, soldier and civilian alike they all fled and only a few such as ourselves and the small knot of resistance around Viconia and the Men-at-Arms held firm.

If anything, the killing worsened and was not caused by the daedra. Men and women alike tripped and fell and were trampled in the stampede of panicking humanity and the screams and cries of women and children were even worse than the roars and wind chime echoes of the Atronachs and Aurorans. I was still unarmed and staggering to my feet when a dozen terrified worshippers almost knocked me down in their efforts to reach the stairs to the catacombs and while I remained upright some of their number were not so lucky.

A young girl, being dragged along by her weeping mother had been tripped on one of the Knights of the Nine who was lying motionless and unmoving from the fact his helmet was staved in from being stuck by the severed limb. She shrieked in fright as she fell, losing her grip of her mother’s hand and skidding in a fresh puddle of gore right in front of the towering Auroran.

There was no hesitation from the daedra, seeing the child land in front of it and even before it finished dropping the bloodied limb an enormous boot was lifted into the air. It had no emotion, its angular face dispassionate and burning with the lights in its empty, soulless eye sockets as it stomped down as hard as it could.

None of us were close enough to move or do anything but of all of those who had come with us we hadn’t been counting on Mazoga’s appearance. She threw herself over the girl before the Auroran could crush her, even discarding her mace and shield in the process. Using her own body as a shield she slapped the bloodied floor, dropping onto her hands and knees just as the golden boot came down with titanic force.

Mazoga grunted from the impact that left her back plate dented and deformed. There was no doubt that anyone else would have been left with a broken spine and shattered chest and while it had still left her coughing blood she held herself aloft over the screaming child and continued shielding her with her own body.

The Auroran was stopped in place, its glowing eyes widening in surprise at the orcish knight’s actions that for a moment it was stilled. Her actions were so unconceivable that it and the rest of us were given pause before dragging whatever weapons were in reach but its hesitation didn’t last long. Again the pillar of a leg lifted into the air as Mazoga appeared to simply brace herself for the expected impact, but before it could steady itself it was stuck in the face.

A collection plate of all things sailed through the air and it would have loosened teeth if it had any within its blank maw. It stuck with full force, rocking its head back and leaving it shaking its head
and rolling its jaw even while swiping a candlestick out of the air as it too was turned into a projectile.

With an arm honed from literal decades of hurling pilum, Carodus had risen from where it had thrown him and cast his destroyed shield aside. His gladius was still jutting from the thing’s hip in a wound weeping silverly streaks that swirled up the length of the blade but he had taken to throwing everything that he could get his hands on. Some of the items would have given the priests heart palpitations if they were in any state of mind to take notice.

An immaculately crafted shrine to Akatosh was thrown, the five-kilogram weight being knocked out of the air by the daedra as it staggered back from Mazoga and the young girl, hissing in rage at the impudence of the man throwing things at it. It had the desired effect though, and for the moment at least its murderous attempts to kill the child and her Orcish protector was forgotten.

“Yeah! That’s right you spavined streak of horseshit!” Carodus roared, putting his full experience in bellowing and inventive insults that seemed to be a requirement for all Centurions. With one hand he gestured to the larger monstrosity and with the other he grabbed and threw a donation box that exploded into a shower of silver and copper pieces as it was knocked out of the air. “Over here you plague-infested whore-son!”

Whether the words had an effect or it was momentarily distracted or annoyed at the constant barrage of thrown objects including a tiny reliquary containing the finger bones of an ancient saint I would never know, but its full attention turned to him nonetheless. It roared, once again its jaw uninhung and opening as wide as a snake’s and allowing the sound of light itself to bellow forth like a punch. They were mostly emotionless beings but there was no doubt that this particular daedra had been made mad and judging by Carodus’ expression he realised the issue of attracting its wrath whilst entirely unarmed.

It never had the chance to move as another projectile struck it in the spine and folded it over with a crash that we all felt in our guts. This projectile was no thrown object but instead two hundred and fifty kilograms of ebony plated Redguard launching himself into a flying tackle. The Auroran was bigger, taller and stronger than all of us but Falid still hit with all the force of a thrown trebuchet stone and there was not much in this world or the ones beyond that could withstand such an impact.

The Auroran still fought despite the fact that its back, spine and most of its chest had been crumpled in by the impact and within seconds it was using its larger size and strength to wrestle the Black Knight. Hands of segmented ebony wrapped and twisted around the golden metal-flesh of the Auroran and briefly it appeared that Falid held the advantage. We were all clustering around attempting to come to his aid and lend our scavenged weapons to slay the daedra but we struggled to get near, let alone render aid.

Both of the creature’s hands fastened themselves around his enormous winged helm, now lacking one of the signature horns after it had been snapped away and we could do little to assist him as it began to squeeze. So great was its strength that we could actually hear the metal creaking in protest as it tried to crush his skull with a strength rivalling a minotaur. As we began hacking and stabbing at whatever parts we could reach Falid continued his grasping and punching until its face was leaking mercury and his arms were coated to the elbows in its silvery blood.

Finally, and under a flurry of attacks it died but its end came quicker than expected when Thedret retrieved his Glaive and hacked down hard on its throat. The thick, spurting stump of its neck began erupting with silver blood that was quickly evaporating into the air but as soon as its head was cut from its shoulders it ceased its attempts to crush Falid’s helmet and skull. It was a victory of sorts but there were still others to contend with.
The other three remaining auroans and the last of the Atronachs were still creating havoc but a second was starting to succumb to the number of foes battling it. Pierced by a dozen spears and having been impaled by a handful of thrown javelins and a pilum or two it was swiping and swinging its weapon feebly around itself against the dozen guards and knights fighting it. The Atronachs were being banished in greater numbers as they found themselves faced with a foe confident and knowing just how fragile they were but the other two Aurorans were a different matter.

While the rest of us were tied down battling their siblings and the lesser daedra these two in particular had focussed their attentions on the crowds at the cathedral doors and more importantly Viconia and her escort. They knew exactly where the mace was and they were focusing their efforts in claiming it for their dread master. Everyone who came close to them died and they were elemental forces bent on destruction and killing and there was no ceasing their attacks. Men, women, children, civilians, priests and warriors died and they killed indiscriminately in naked savagery made so much more terrible by the comparative lack of emotion fuelling it. A swing of an enormous butterfly shaped battle-axe cleaved through a small group of civilians including a family and the other Auroran gripped Kantav; the priest who had first greeted us by the shoulder and hip and tore him in half. Even Viconia’s magic was only enough to slow them down as she couldn’t dare to drop the mace from where she was carrying it to call upon her full power.

Besides the surviving Men-at-Arms a handful of others were still fighting but it wouldn’t be enough to hold the towering monsters off long enough for us to assist. A man dressed in expensive clothes marked with the obvious heraldry of a nobleman fought alongside his small collection of servants and Viconia’s escort and while their weapons were streaked in silver there was little they could truly accomplish. The axe swung through their air in a crescent of drizzling blood from the dozens of lives it had claimed and added his to the tally, hacking deep into his shoulder and burying both curved heads deep in his torso.

He had no time to scream before he died as the battleaxe lodged deep in him and easily cutting through all of his organs and heart. Despite the way his eyes were open and the brief gout of blood erupted from between his lips he was already dead, his mind just didn’t have the time to accept the fact before the Auroran kicked him off its weapon.

The ruined corpse of the travelling nobleman bowled down his small collection of servants and was thrown with enough force that it also knocked down three of the Men-at-Arms and Viconia. His blood misted the air for a dozen metres in all directions and the cloud of the coppery liquid thickened as the second Auroran added its sword to the slaughter. Servants and soldiers alike died as the daedra pressed their advantage but in the midst of it all the Mace had been dropped.

Viconia had been knocked down by the ruptured corpse of the noble and the relic had bounced across the floor. In its brief journey across the blood soaked tiles my cloak had fallen away, leaving it entirely revealed for all to see and its effects were immediate.

Even though most of the light within the cathedral was being produced by the cavorting Atronachs and streaming through the stained glass windows, it somehow became filtered and purified by the mere presence of Pelinal’s Mace. The cathedral interior became brighter and yet less painful on the eyes in comparison to that of the light Atronachs but this meant that every single one of the daedra were drawn towards it like moths to a lantern.

Viconia was rolling the noble’s body off her from where she had been knocked down, and some of the Men-at-Arms were also struggling to rise as well. The rest of his servants were cut down where they stood, along with a pair of local guards trying desperately to fend the Auroran’s off with their halberds. In the space of three seconds there was almost no one between the daedra and the Mace of
Everyone and everything was converging on the Mace, those of us who had been fighting the daedra trying our best to reach it before every surviving creature reached it. There was little we could truly accomplish though, as the two Aurorans were much closer and only had a single person between them and claiming the Relic for Umaril.

Alone, and picking himself up from the bodies of his fellows a young man barely into his twenties was kneeling less than a metre from the immaculate weapon sitting untouched in a pool of blood. While he was covered almost head to toe in the blood of his lord and fellows he was unwounded if not for the light gash running down his chest from a daedric blade. Somehow he had been lucky enough to be missed from the swings that had ended his friends and master’s lives but was now the only mortal closer to the mace than the daedra.

From the dozen metres away as I sprinted as hard as I could at the mace I could see the shock on his face change to a grim acceptance of his fate and an unwillingness to back down despite it. The thin bladed craftsman’s dagger was dropped to the ground as the Aurorans loomed over him with grasping talons of gold and without any hesitation he grasped the Mace with a single hand.

The Aurorans were expecting resistance, possibly even expecting for someone to use the Mace against them but neither them nor anyone else present was expecting what happened when the young man picked it from the puddle of gore. A vague halo of light burst into existence around the head; a pure and holy light unlike that of the servants of Meridia. Power radiated and pulsed down the haft from where the young man’s hand grasped it firmly, threading through the metal in veins of holy light and illuminating the series of swirling patterns and untranslatable runes. Whether it was the presence of the weapon’s ancient foes or from the dire need of the man wielding it, some deep seated power was unlocked and made itself felt by his touch as it swung to block the descending battleaxe.

As the two weapons came together there was a flare of energy, a heartbeat of silence and peace so minute it barely existed and then the world appeared to explode. The Auroran’s axe, that which had proven so capable of cleaving through some of the greatest and thickest armour not merely shattered, but instead disintegrated into dust without so much as a tremor through the holy mace. Every stained glass window, glass, and piece of furniture within ten metres was blasted into fragments and everyone within twice that distance was knocked down.

The Aurorans fared even worse and before either of them could react, one had been sent back to Oblivion. A follow up blow of such force that the tiles under its feet cratered pulped its head and cracked its chest open and the other hesitated just long enough for the young man to close with it. He had no technique to speak of besides that born of desperation and terror, the adrenaline fuelling his limbs to not rest until the threat was gone.

Each hammer blow ripped through the air and ground like a physical force that snatched the Atronachs from existence as though they were candle flames being blown out by a thunderstorm. Even before the second Auroran felt the bite of the Mace it was struggling to remain in the mortal realm, its daedric essence being leeched away right up to the point that the young man slammed the mace into its stomach, folding it over like a sheet of paper before crumpling its head into the floor.

A pair of creatures so powerful that they managed to face off against dozens of knights and prevail were left as shattered remains leaking their mercurial gore. It was shimmering and raining upwards from the bodies of the destroyed Aurorans and the power of the Mace had been enough to ensure that every single one of the malevolent light daedra had been sent back to their infernal realm. All that was left was a single solitary Auroran bleeding and weakening from the dozen spears, javelins, pilum and pikes tearing through its golden flesh and pinning it down long enough for other warriors...
to slay it.

The battle within the cathedral had come to an end.

Chapter End Notes

I have realised that Knight is going to be a bit longer than I was planning but 37 Chapters is going to be the end total, give or take. I have Knight and Champion fully planned out now and I’m aiming to have my chapters to be shorter in length than what I have been averaging.

As always, I hope everyone in enjoying the story and I would love some feedback on my characters and my take on the Knights of the Nine questline thus far!
There was no such thing as silence after a battle. For those who spoke of such things, even those who had participated in such battles there was an absence of noise rather than true silence. I had experienced such things numerous times, especially in the previous months but I was also experienced enough to know that what I was truly hearing in the cathedral at that moment was the lack of fighting.

It was quieter yes, but it was not truly quiet. Men and women were moaning in pain or weeping at wounded and dead friends and family. Many were simply sitting or standing mutely, unable to comprehend not only the events that had just unfolded but also the fact that they were over. Dozens had died and just as many were wounded but with the banishment of the daedra the shock was already setting in.

Post battle shock was something that I was not impressed with how regular it was occurring to me but despite its regularity it still hit with full force. Familiarity was not lessening the blow and all I desired at that very moment was to find somewhere quiet and hide away from it all. Instead, experience and a measure of Legion training took over and I futilely wiped at the gore staining my face.

“Sir Vanevius.”

Alexi’s expression was one of his very best ‘oh shit’ ones at the tone of my voice and my formality but he still moved with considerable haste over to me. “Sir?”

“I want everyone who isn’t wounded, a fighter or a healer out of here right now.” Pausing for a moment I looked over the handful of knights closest to me and made a quick count. There weren’t many, but they would have to do. “Sir Antentia?”

Wearing the dual heraldry of the Knights of the White Stallion and the Order of the Nine, the heavyset Imperial raised his visor. Underneath the layers of metal and leather, the man was sweating and pale but there was still determination in his eyes. “Sir?”

“I want word sent to the Stallion Lodge. Sir Ramauld needs to put the Order on high alert and we will need additional troops here and to escort the Relics.” My eyes lingered over the bodies nearest to me as the dozens of survivors began realising that it was truly over and alternatively milled around in shock or took the opportunity to flee. Unfortunately, there were dozens dead and wounded throughout the cathedral, including some of those who had only recently come under my command. Strangely enough, in amongst the surprise of being attacked in such a place and by such monstrous foes, at that moment all I could think of was that some of those under my command who had died I didn’t know the names of. One of the dead Knights of the Nine was laying on his back, motionless and with gore slowly pulsating out from the breathing holes in his helm.

There was something strange in the way that he was laying, his great helm stove in by a blow of a severed arm of a Knight of Iron and out of all the emotions I should’ve been expecting to feel, regret was not one of them. He had been one of the handful of men and women under my command and he had died in the service to me and the Nine and I didn’t even know his name.

One of the other Knights, wearing the hastily sewn red diamond on his surcoat followed my gaze
over our fallen brother and I struggled to hold my composure. Attempting to wipe my face clean of the blood of men and daedra alike, I instead frowned at myself and vowed that I would learn each and every person within the Order of the Nine while gestured between them.

“Recover the body and the bodies of any others who have fallen. We will honour any wishes for their funerals at the first opportunity, otherwise we will take them to the Priory of the Nine with us.”

“Yes commander.” The Knight said with a determined growl of approval and I turned away, trying my best to keep my mind focussed and away from the usual darker thoughts that plagued me during such situations. It was something of a losing battle, as I couldn’t turn in any direction without seeing something that left the vampire roiling under my flesh and my fists tightening with a burning rage.

Men, women, and children alike had been killed by the daedra and there were very few places that weren’t covered in blood and gore. Tiny bodies were strewn about amongst the adults and all had their parents nearby whether they were wailing and crying or laying just as still. Most of the dead whether they were young or old were in pieces from the fury of the daedric assault, but the number of wounded outnumbered them all. With ever second that passed, the noise within the cathedral was growing louder and louder as those with injuries began to feel the pain over the shock and adrenaline, those without began shouting for assistance and everyone else was shouting to everyone to leave or to let them out.

Walking over to where the elegant hilt of the Light of Dawn rose out of the bloodstained floor, I saw how there were small measures of calm in the cathedral. Despite everything around them, some of the survivors were sitting or kneeling quietly as they went about triage and comforting others. Some did so without thought or hesitation and I could see men and women of all races and walks of life taking solace in each other’s presence. A noblewoman in a ripped silken dress was holding a pair of commoners close as they wept at the sight of their injured child being treated by one of the priests. Further away, a beggar was tearing a strip of his sackcloth tunic away to use as a makeshift bandage on a wounded city guard and closer to where I stood, a young family sat as one of the priests began seeing to another Knight under my command.

Mazoga was sitting upright, her legs outstretched as the priest and local man carefully pried her battered armour away to reveal her clothes underneath. Pain it seemed had finally caught up with her and she was sitting quietly, eyes unfocussed and staring and thick, bloody drool flowing out of her tusked jaw. The Auroran’s stomp had been powerful enough to dent orichalcum, and judging by her rasping breathing and the blood she was spitting it had broken ribs as well.

“Making you a Knight is probably going to be the best thing I’ll ever do.”

Painfully, her head turned and eyes briefly met mine and there was triumph in her pale expression and unfocussed eyes. The grin was unmistakable, appearing somewhat goofy despite her tusks and the blood dripping down over her chin. She was unable to speak, or unable to decide on what to say and instead made a slight shudder that could be identified as a shrug and looking back down at her outstretched legs. For only a few moments did I linger near her and the couple of people kneeling or sitting close to her, hearing the amazement in the priest’s voice as he noted her injuries and the fact she was still conscious and the relief of the others at she wasn’t dying anytime soon. As I turned, I couldn’t help but smile at the way that the young girl that Mazoga had saved sat as close as she could to her orcish saviour, her mother’s arms wrapping tightly around her and a single, dainty hand only just managing to wrap her fingers around an enormous gauntleted finger.

The cathedral was slowly beginning to empty of everyone who were only getting in the way and my attentions were moving about to the others who had accompanied me to the cathedral. Falid was standing as still as a statue in a position specially chosen to allow him to respond to any new threats,
and Viconia was busy marshalling the remaining, unwounded Men-at-Arms to assist their comrades and the numerous other wounded. When her eyes met mine across the gap between us I saw the slight incline of a head and knew exactly who she was referring to and the meaning when she patted the pack on her back containing the Boots of the Crusader.

Standing almost knee deep in corpses, the young man who had so thoroughly defeated the Auroran’s was truly a statue, his eyes staring and mouth hanging slackly as he looked about the devastation around him. Each of the giant golden daedra were little more than ruined piles of incomprehensible flesh, leaking their silvery gore that floated and evaporated in the air but his eyes were on the mortals who had died attempting to stop them.

Despite everything else that had occurred and was occurring within the cathedral, the Mace of the Crusader was still flawless and didn’t have the slightest trace of blood or daedric essence staining its flanged head. It was hanging loosely in the young man’s hand, faint traces of witch-light playing up the metallic shaft being the only evidence of the energies that had scoured almost all of the daedra from the Cathedral. With my own weapons sheathed and with a surprising amount of nervousness, I approached the young man who failed to notice my presence until I was almost within arm’s length. His eyes were almost entirely white from ever-increasing shock but as I squelched through the thickening pools of blood he turned them at me with an expression that changed from shock, to sorrow, to a sudden and surprising fear. As though it had suddenly burned him as it had Viconia and myself, he dropped the mace into the mess at his feet and immediately bowed.

“My lord. I… I apoligise and submit myself to your judgement.”

His words and the way that he had immediately adverted his eyes from me stopped me in my tracks even more than the way that such a priceless relic had been dropped in such a way. “Judgement?”

There was no doubting the tremor that was coursing through him as he kept his hands by his side and head bowed and I was finding it extremely unusual and confusing how he had faced down two daedric monstrosities without hesitation would suddenly be shaking in his boots at my presence. “For touching a Knight’s weapon.”

Realisation crept into my mind and I looked over the way that his clothing was rough despite the obvious heraldry that he wore. The Shield and Banner arrangement and the coloration meant nothing to me but underneath the blood and ruined bodies, I could see that most of those standing near him were wearing the same markings.

“You’re from High Rock, aren’t you?” I said simply, asking the question despite knowing the answer and without lifting his head for a moment he nodded.

“Yes my Lord.”

He was so nervous that he was practically shaking and finally managed to pull a strip of cloth from the pouches I still wore. Carefully wiping at my face in an attempt to remove the tingling sensation of daedric blood evaporating and the stickiness of human blood, I tried to smile in a way that he would find soothing if I could get him to look up from my boots.

“You have no need to bow to me, and I’m certainly not going to punish someone who willingly took up arms against daedra.” After a moment’s pause and no sign that he was going to raise from his bow, I sighed and finished cleaning my face. “What’s your name?”

“Caleb, my Lord.”
“Just Caleb?”

Slowly, hesitantly he rose and straightened his back but he refused to look me in the eyes. “Y-yes. I am lowborn, but I suppose if I was to have a last name it would be Farrier.”

“Well Caleb Farrier, I am Kaius Desin, Knight commander of the Knights of the Nine. You did well before, as not just anyone takes up arms against daedra, let alone lives to talk about it.”

I saw the way that he mouthed my name with recognition and for a briefest of moments I thought that he would finally look me in the eyes. From my years in the Legion, but more from my recent experiences within the Order of the White Stallion, I knew that the culture within High Rock was considerably different to Cyrodiil. The Breton Nobles ruled and most of the population lived within various feudal serfdoms. Most, such as the young man standing in front of me lived their entire lives as servants to the nobility in comparison to those born in Cyrodiil as a combination of landowners and freemen. They couldn’t own land or property, were forced into the trades of their parents and lived under rules such as the one that he seemed to fear more than creatures from Oblivion.

“My apologies, but… but are you the Hero of Kvatch?”

Nodding, I saw the way that he seemed to shrink down even further as he registered the movement. If he stood up to his full height he would have been a centimetres or two taller than myself, and despite the fact that he would have close to his twentieth birthday he had a build of a legionary that seemed somewhat at odds to his peasant’s background. Most Cyrodillians, especially Colovians would have been standing tall and proud no matter their upbringing which only served to further highlight the difference between the provinces.

Ignoring his increasing nervousness, I gestured to the gleaming bodies slowly melting as though they were wax statues too close to a fire. “How did you do that?”

“Do… Do what my Lord?” glancing in the direction of my hand, he shrugged slightly. “I don’t know. The mace is enchanted I believe.”

“It most definitely is. It’s the Mace of Zenithar.”

This time the shock overrode a lifetime, if not entire generations of enforced servitude and he looked me in the eyes, looked to the mace, looked back at me with his mouth opening and closing like a fish. “The Mace… of Zenithar?!”

“Indeed it is. I can fully understand why you grabbed and used it. Hells, I would’ve done the exact same thing but neither I or my Knights can lift the weapon, let alone use it in battle.”

Half strangulated words flowed from between his lips as he tried to look in every direction at once. He looked at me, the Mace, the other Knights scattered about the Cathedral almost several times a second, becoming more and more animated and almost terrified with every passing moment.

“But… But… But my Lord, only a Knight can wield the Relics! It’s heresy for a Lowborn to even look upon one of the Relics of the Eight, let alone touch them! Especially wield them!” His hands lifted up and wiped his own face in the building terror despite my best attempts to calm him and there was no mistaking the way that he took a couple of paces away from the Mace as though it was a venomous reptile. “I have committed an unforgivable sin!”

“I’m lowborn myself.” I said, feeling his feverish gaze return to me as I shrugged and tried to move a little closer to calm him down. “Used to serve the Legion and only recently have I become a Knight. I became a Knight Commander last night and yet I have been present or directly responsible
for retrieving five of the Relics. If it is blasphemy then all of Cyrodiil is in big trouble. Right now though I’m more interested in the fact that you somehow used a weapon that none of us can touch to outright kill two creatures capable of fighting a dozen knights on their own.”

“I don’t know my Lord! The Ma… the Relic was just lying there and I was unarmed so I took it. I didn’t actually expect to win or do anything but I wasn’t just going to let them kill me.”

“It’s a good thing you did, otherwise it is very likely that Umaril would have gotten his hands on the Mace at the very least.”

Caleb was looking increasingly pale and was even beginning to sway slightly as I tried to comfort or calm him down. His eyes had returned to the dead laying nearby and realisation was beginning to set in. “I’m… I’m just Lord Tussrienele’s personal farrier. I make horseshoes and saddle his horse and he… he… Oh Gods…”

Without warning he dropped to his knees and slapped a hand into a puddle of gore before explosively vomiting and adding to the mess on the polished tiles. I could do little more that glance around with my own anxiety and attempts not to join him as he promptly emptied his stomach until there was nothing left. The whole time between his retching he was babbling in a mixture of sobs and an outpouring of grief and confusion that left me kneeling by his side with a gloved hand on his shoulder.

“They’re dead.” he said finally as the body wracking shudders and sobs finally gave out to his attempts to drag in air into his lungs. “All of them. Lord Tussrienele, Sir Uthsable, Sybilia, Claelc, and Chrius.”

My hand did little more than continue to softly pat him on the shoulder as he dragged in another breath and wiped the stringy drool from his mouth on the back of a stained sleeve. “They fought well.”

“But they still died.” He closed his eyes and I could physically see the way that he was forcing himself to breathe normally in an effort to calm himself. “I’m all that’s left. We only came here today to receive a benediction before leaving for Highrock. They didn’t deserve this.”

With a slight gesture, I waved in the direction of the rest of the Cathedral. “No one in here did. Neither did those in the other houses of worship that have been attacked or the cities that have been besieged by the Daedra.”

“I want them stopped.”

“Good.” I flinched somewhat as he coughed, spat with the bitter taste in his mouth before attempting to straighten up from where he knelt. “As you are without a Lord, and as terrible as this sounds I think you need to come with me and the Knights of the Nine.”

“Why?”

“Because you can wield a relic that no one else can. That makes you special.”

“I guess I don’t have a choice, do I my Lord?”

As his eyes met mine I smiled slightly but there was no warmth in my expression. “We’ll see to the funerary rites of your friends, but no, no you don’t…”

Chapter End Notes
This is a much smaller chapter than normal for the likes of Deserter and Knight but I have used it to get back into writing the series again. I somehow managed to write the entirety of Blood, Ice and Oil over the space of 29 days over the Christmas holidays, starting a new job and all the fun that involves.

From here on however, I will be returning to posting a full chapter once every 2 weeks. I intend on finishing Knight sometime in the middle of this year (2019) and completing the series and Champion off by the early portion of 2020. Somehow I have managed to write over 700,000 words since November 2017 so I'm surprised that I haven't burned myself out with writing Bloodtide Rising and Sos do Dov, not to mention the fact that I have already created the framework, plots and planned out the end to Kaidu's story with a third Series The Dragonblood King (Name to be confirmed hahaha)

Otherwise, for the dozen or so regular readers (You know who you are) I thank you immensely for reading and following my writing, whether you have commented, hidden in the shadows, Kudo'd my work or simply subscribed. It means a hell of a lot to me. :-D

~Tyranidlord
Knights of the Nine

It shouldn’t have surprised me as much as it did, but hunting was an activity that was inherently relaxing for me. It was the rare occasion that I didn’t return with a collection of rabbits or a deer or wild goat hung over my shoulders, but whether I was successful or not it didn’t matter and I always felt relaxed when I returned.

Unlike what was typical for most Imperial, especially Colovian Noblemen there was no team of servants or soldiers by my side, and nor was I mounted atop Trygve with a lance or spear at the ready for the quarry to be flushed out of hiding. Despite my title as Knight-Commander and the heavy signet ring safely tucked away in a pocket I hunted alone, dressed in a rough spun tunic and pants, my minotaur leather cloak and hood and without a single piece of my armour. It was liberating, especially after everything that had occurred over the previous months to simply pick a direction and wander aimlessly until I decided to seek out some local game and the West Weald was certainly what I would call the perfect place to hunt.

It had been years since I had hunted in a region that didn’t feel utterly inimical to human life. Vvardenfell was harsh, unforgiving and deadly between the beasts of the wilds, the corpus infected monsters that occasionally appeared and the fact that between the semi-random ash storms most of the island could only support various fungus and mushrooms in lieu of trees. The West Weald brought back memories of being a child in Eastern Hammerfell of simpler times and it was filled with a scenic beauty that allowed my stress to flow away.

Not that it wasn’t dangerous and I remained on my guard just as I had during my Bandit hunt in Anvil County the months before. This time at least there was an almost complete absence of human life within the entire area, and I was no longer responsible for hunting those that were. Only the occasional lion or other large predator from beyond the Elsweyr border a week’s journey to the south, the suggestion of trolls or ogres being local to the region, or the traces of goblins two days’ travel to the north east revealed the threats, but I knew better than to let my guard down.

Breathing carefully and taking care not to look directly at my latest prey I pulled back on my bow and felt the silent groan of my arms from the motion. Viconia had noted that I hadn’t been using my bow as much for the past weeks, and it was somewhat of a surprise to realise just how much favouring the sword was affecting me. The previous times I had gone hunting had left my arms and shoulders aching even with my vampiric nature, but it was a pleasant ache in comparison to the training that Alexi and Viconia were putting me through.

My vampirism did assist in hunting and there was no denying the fact. The grass in front of me was almost thigh deep and hunting the rabbits that lived within it would have been impossible without the curse. Instead their every sound reached my ears and I could hunt them by their heartbeats alone. Even the smell of fresh blood allowed me to find them once my arrow had struck true and this time was no exception, the soft crack of the bowstring slapping the leather bracer on my arm only marginally louder than the hiss and thud of the arrow striking the rabbit twenty metres away.

The enhanced senses of the vampire allowed me to ensure that everything within a kilometre or more didn’t go unnoticed and this fact as well also allowed me to relax. For the most part at least. I was arguably the most dangerous being within the region but this was not my home as such. I was a visitor, a guest even and I could taste the true owners on the wind.

Of the creatures of the wilds, there were uncountable dozens of species and monsters that contended for the title of deadliest. Bears, lions and other large predatory cats were obvious contenders, and especially in Cyrodiil trolls and ogres were infamous in their strength and taste for flesh. Goblins
were always considered to be more of a nuisance than a true threat despite the fact that in numbers they could easily overwhelm small villages and even the more legendary creatures such as land dreugh and minotaurs were the talk of taverns and inns throughout Tamriel. But there was one species that most overlooked but only the truly foolish ignored.

Even towns and villages much closer to ‘civilisation’ than the Priory of the Nine could be threatened by wolves and it seemed the further you travelled the larger and more dangerous they became. They were as intelligent as they were cunning, capable of hunting in packs and taking down creatures much larger than themselves by numbers and tactics, or by simply having the patience and endurance to simply follow their prey until they collapsed from exhaustion. I knew from personal experience from my childhood that villages and towns were not immune to losing people to wolf packs and even with my vampirism I kept an eye and ear out for the local pack.

There was a dozen or more that had claimed this region and with my vampirism I knew several of them by smell. Each of their pack, from the younger pups to the oldest females were creatures to be wary of but they were as wary of me as I was of them. More than once they had approached me during my hunting trips over the previous weeks, and on one occasion had come almost within bow range in their curiosity. As I had during my childhood I had purposefully left one or two of my kills for them and each time I could almost hear my father teaching me that the land didn’t belong to man and we needed to be respectful.

The pack was led by a sizable specimen that I had only caught glimpses of; an alpha with bone grey fur and streaks of black that was easily my equal in weight. I knew without a doubt that they were wary of me much more than they would be had I been fully human, and there were several times where I had listened to them move away as soon as they caught my scent on the air. It was disconcerting though having acute senses in such a way, as I also knew that had I been human there would have been numerous occasions that I wouldn’t have known that they were nearby at all.

As I moved over and retrieved my fourth rabbit for the day I could hear them moving closer, and strangely enough I could smell the pack on the breeze. Normally they were careful in revealing their presence and ensuring that they were upwind at all times, but as I attached the rabbit to my belt I realised that they were also moving differently to normal. The previous times I had encountered them they had remained hidden, moving carefully or even stalking me but this time they were moving almost casually. The pines were far too thick to see but I could hear and smell them, picking them out one by one and realising that they were moving in a rough semicircle and coming directly towards me.

It was curious, especially how I could tell they weren’t hunting me or anything else. Their pace was neither slow and controlled, or fast and precise but instead almost relaxed. There were also other smells beyond the pack; hints of leather, steel and civilisation that created the unmistakable aroma of mankind.

Within my position in one of the many clearings within the pine forests I simply waited, hearing the jingling of saddlebags and the gentle clopping of hooves on pine needles at a distance several times greater than I would’ve without vampirism. There were a handful of people who lived within the region, mostly the odd woodsman or two but the nearest village was over a day’s journey away and didn’t explain the presence of the lone individual walking almost directly towards me from the north.

Curious, I waited in place with my bow held loosely in hand but still ready to vanish into the grass and draw an arrow if required. Bandits were not a concern as we were too far away from anything to be a target, but the growing fame of the Order of the Nine would draw them eventually. It was almost with amusement that I watched as the lone traveller appeared through the greenery, leading their horse along with the reins and humming what was unmistakably a legion marching tune under
their breath. What was more amusing was that I found myself smiling at the sight, and the fact that the traveller was not unknown to me.

“Good morning.” She called out as she entered the clearing, still leading the horse along who seemed completely apathetic to the fact that there were wolves in the area. Unlike its owner, I doubted that the horse didn’t know that the pack was nearby but it didn’t show any sign of distress.

“Good morning.” Holding my bow up above my head to show that I was no threat before taking a few paces towards them. “You’re a long way from the shrine of Kynareth.”

The woman’s expression shifted from shock, to wariness, to recognition and she stood staring at me as I casually wandered over. “Sir Desin? We meet again.”

There was little to show of the priestess in the woman in front of me, especially how she had ditched her monk habit for something more suitable for travelling. A wide brimmed straw hat was firmly pressed onto her head and she was dressed in a simple, yet sturdy pair of pants and short sleeved tunic that did little to hide the multitude of scars up her arms. It was impossible to ignore the fact that in a previous life she had been a trained soldier, especially by the fact that clasped to her waist was a long bladed spatha instead of the typical Legion gladius.

“We do indeed.” Despite the situation and my wariness at the somewhat close proximity of the wolf pack my mood was light at her presence. “What brings you all the way out here?”

“Looking for you if I’m going to be honest.”

“For me?”

Trying and failing to swat a fly away from her face, she instead elected to blow some errant strands of her white-blonde hair out of her eyes. “You and the Knights of the Nine to be more precise. I hope you know how hard it is to find you all.”

Chuckling to myself I shouldered my bow even while keeping one ear out for the wolves. “Oh I know it. If not for a map to the priory, Viconia and I would have never found it at all. In fact, you’re lucky enough to have found me out here.”

“Kynareth guides the faithful it appears. Although after the past few days of travel I am glad to have finally made it.”

“Almost.” Her expression changed to a quizzical one and I threw a thumb over my shoulder roughly towards the south. “The priory itself is a few kilometres away but I can lead you there.”

“I’ll be much obliged Sir Desin.” For a brief moment she stroked her horse’s flank as it took the opportunity to crop at the grass. “Isabelle isn’t used to such exertions I’m afraid.”

“But not you it seems?” I grinned to show that I was making a joke but she recognised it for what it was.

“Being a priestess of the goddess of nature keeps you fit and healthy and I’m used to walking everywhere.”

Slowly turning around and moving alongside her as she clicked her tongue, I cast my gaze around the edge of the clearing and the hovering presences within the foliage. The whole wolf pack was nearby and while they had stopped in place as Avita and I had met, they were still close enough to make me wary. What was strange though was that they obviously not hunting and a hundred metres away to the west I could make out the presence of the pack alpha.
Unlike the others, he was not hiding but instead standing right on the edge of the clearing. To a mortal he would've been almost impossible to see but instead I could see the black-grey fur within the shifting shadows. If not for the way that the slight breeze flowed through his fur he could have passed for a stone or boulder and I knew that his eyes were only for me. It was even more disconcerting that there was no doubt in my mind that he knew that I was watching him.

“Something wrong Sir Desin?” Avita said as I lingered for a moment, watching as the alpha wolf shook itself slightly, met my gaze for the last time and turned away.

“Nothing. It pays to be careful though.”

She looked over my expression and the way that I was somewhat tense as I sensed the way that the rest of the wolves were turning away and moving back into the forest. “You don’t need to be so worried. Kynareth guides and protects her faithful. You should know this more than anyone I suppose.”

“I do remember you telling me to ‘fear and respect’ nature.”

“And that is something to live by.”

Making our way across the clearing where I had been hunting rabbits, I pulled my hood back over my face to cover it from the sun and walked alongside her. “So why were you looking for myself and the priory?”

“Well… Um…” she paused for a moment and looked somewhat embarrassed. “I have come to join your Order.”

“Really?”

Her hat bounced a little as she nodded but out of the corner of my eye I saw the way that she was making an effort not to look in my direction. “Yes. I… ah… received only what I can call a ‘divine vision’ from Kynareth herself.” The silence that fell between us was mostly unintentional but she seemed somewhat confused as I was listening intently instead of treating her with doubt and scepticism. “You don’t seem surprised Sir Desin.”

“Just call me Kaius. I get enough “Sir Desin’s” these days as it is. You are right though; I’m not surprised.”

“Why not?”

“What if I told you that Viconia and I originally took up this quest to retrieve the relics from the ghost of Pelinal Himself?”

“Ah.” She laughed and I couldn’t help but chuckle from the sheer amount of relief in her voice and the way she suddenly relaxed. “Well, I am unsure of exactly what you were shown or told, but I have been shown that to protect all Kynareth’s creations I must take up your cause and be willing to lay down my life for you. So, here I am.”

“I think that anyone stupid enough to turn down help offered from the Primus Lanceae of the 6th Legion is doomed to failure.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“Not that long. Besides, I guarantee you that you have more experience commanding and organising something like the Order of the Nine than I do. I believe that I may have told you that I had only
been a Praefect in the Legion.”

“I do vaguely remember something of the like. I also remember hearing how you were declared Knight Commander of the Order, and were responsible for retrieving the Mace and the Shield.”

“I’ll be surprised if all of Tamriel doesn’t know of it by now.” Moving slightly ahead of her I pushed my way through some of the low hanging branches and waiting for Avita and her horse to move past. “It’s been a busy couple of months.”

“That I have no doubt. It does however raise the question why the Knight Commander of a Holy Order is out by himself in the forests.”

“Stress relief.” I replied, gesturing to the furred bodies at my hip streaked with mostly congealed blood. “I needed to flee from all the paperwork and management lest I took my sword to the nearest stack of parchments. So I came out here to get some fresh food.”

“Oh. Well, I hope that I won’t be a burden on your supplies.”

Laughing out loud and smiling at her, I shook my head. “You don’t need to be worried. We don’t have many concerns in that regard.”

It took us little over an hour and the sun was high in the sky when we finally came within sight of the priory. Gone was the partially decayed ruin that Viconia and I had originally discovered and in its place was a veritable hive of activity. Most of the priory that could be seen behind the various scaffolds, frames and tents clustered around it was covered with men and mer, shifting and moving construction materials as they went about restoring the building to its former glory.

The Priory was no longer alone in the wilds, and while they were little more than wooden skeletons of frames and joists a handful of buildings were also being erected within a stone’s throw of it. Two of the buildings could be identified as stables and a bunkhouse styled arrangement that for the moment was mostly covered in canvas for protection from the elements but there were dozens of tents arrayed in neat rows in all directions.

“By the Nine.” Avita breathed as we finally managed to get a good look at the priory and its surrounds and I couldn’t help but smile as she was stopped in mid place. “This… This is unexpected.”

“We are certainly not resting on our laurels.” I replied. “It is also amazing how much you can get done when your coffers are deep.”

“I’m not sure I want to know how much the Order has access to, but I can guess that it is considerable.”

“That’s somewhat of an understatement.” Her initial surprise was now replaced with wonder and we continued on into the clearing around the priory. The clearing itself was certainly one of the more obvious changes as it was almost two hundred metres across instead of the forest practically growing on top of the building. “Between the Imperial Tithe on the Church and the numerous donations from various counties, baronies and even provinces, we have more than enough money for anything we could require.”

“I can see that.” Guiding her horse through the thinning maze of tree stumps, Avita’s eyes were roaming about and for a moment I felt embarrassed at what could easily be described as an outright devastation of the local area. “Yet you are still using local materials for the construction?”

“Easier than trying to bring what we need by wagon from Skingrad. The old roads are all
overgrown and we would almost have to clear them before we could get any significant quantities.” I gestured off towards the south east and a section of clearing that was conspicuously absent of stumps. “The closest village is almost two days in that direction. At least, the closest inhabited village. When the trade routes through here were abandoned in favour of the others to the west this region was mostly abandoned. We still managed to find a couple of the old settlements. There’s one roughly half a day away in the same direction that used to be a mining settlement which we are considering re-establishing. The Order of the Nine is going to need raw materials in the future.”

“You’re not thinking short term.”

Shaking my head, I looked over the way that the dozens of people were moving about. There were dozens of labourers and builders alone busying themselves with their trades. “Unfortunately I have to try to do both. The Order was established to safeguard the relics, but the Elder Council and especially the Church expects us for all intents and purposes go to war right away.”

“Just how long have you all been here?”

“Four weeks.” The number seemed to hang in the air and still it into silence despite the noise that grew louder with every step. “It took us a week to get from Leyawiin to here but as you can see we aren’t wasting any time. We are lucky that the Priory is here and gave us something to start with but we are trying to achieve something far beyond the original Order.”

“Like what exactly?”

I gave her a glance and a nervous smile. “The original order was nine knights and they had no men-at-arms and only a handful of dedicated craftsmen to support them. I have twenty-five knights under my command and that doesn’t include those from other Orders acting as auxiliaries. Every day I am finding myself with more and more volunteers that I have to somehow create a fighting force from.”

“Like myself?”

There was no doubting the hint of disappointment in her tone and I winced at the way I had accidently insulted her. “Oh no. You’re different and I can’t express how pleased I am to have someone like yourself offering support. The more professionally trained soldiers I have, especially Legion trained soldiers the better. The fact that you were also *Extraordinarii*, let alone a Legion’s *First Lance* makes you worth your weight in gold.”

“You flatter me Kaius.” Her tone went serious and cold and for a few moments she pointedly stared at me. “I have to ask though, how do you know that I haven’t simply lied about my past?”

“Your arms can’t lie.” She dropped her gaze to her bared forearms that were tanned from years living as a priestess. Underneath the brown colouration there were dozens of white scars of swords practice and for a moment I wondered whether she was struggling not to blush. “Also, that sword on your hip is certainly not Legion standard. That’s a champion’s blade and you only get to keep one if you win three tournaments.”

“I guess you were truly in the Legion as well.” There was no mistaking the way she was smiling at my comments but her eyes were still roaming about the sea of tents as we reached their edge. “I do have to admit that Isabelle is the first horse I have ridden in the better part of a decade so I have some trepidation.”

“That’s fine. Many of our volunteers with military or fighting experience have been or are retired in various ways. Although most of who arrive have no real experience at all but we have been lucky in a few occasions.” Catching the eye of one of the burly foremen supervising the erection of what was
to be the main bunkhouse for the Order I gestured about and shouted over the sound of sawing and hammering wood. “Uzulak! Have you seen Captain Vanevius?”

With a bundle of freshly sawn planks over a burly shoulder, the orc glanced about himself and managed to shrug despite the weight. “Not recently my Lord. He was over at the training grounds earlier this morning.”

“Thanks.” Giving him a handful of the labourers a quick wave and nod of appreciation of their efforts, I also handed over one of my rabbits.

“Captain Vanevius?” Avita asked.

“He’s my second in command and in charge of the Knights.”

“Not Madame DeVir?”

“Viconia?” I laughed. “She’s one of my Knight-Captains, but she was better suited to command the infantry. Neither of us are overly experienced with cavalry and Alexi was Knight-Captain of the Order of the White Stallion. I think you are going to be better suited under his command.”

She stopped in place, blinking and mouth falling open slightly in astonishment. “You’re going to make me a knight?”

“Not right away. I have knighted a few here, but at this stage it is more of an honour and a way to differentiate the heavy cavalry from everyone else. Unfortunately, one of the many difficulties that I and this Order faces is that Knights fight in a very unique manner. As you can understand it takes a considerable amount to train a horseman, let alone train them to fight in formation with lances.”

I could see by her expression that she knew exactly what I meant. While arguably the elite of the Legions, the *Extraordinarii* fought in their own manner and the strength of the Legion still lay with the Legionaries. The Foresters would harass and weaken the foe during the initial engagements, the Legionaries would wear the enemy down and inevitably inflict the most casualties and the *Extraordinarii* would deliver the knockout blow and mop up. Avita was right having some concerns, for the moment at least.

“You mentioned that there were others who had served in the Legion?”

I nodded, carefully stepping my way through a collection of various men and women who had followed us in to the priory like driftwood followed a caravel. “Indeed. I’ll introduce you to them shortly but including myself, you make the fifth that I know of.”

“That doesn’t seem many compared to how many are here.”

“I’ve had to turn away several. You’d be surprised how many retired Legionaries have arrived, but as experienced as they were I can’t afford to put men and women in their seventies and eighties into a battleline.”

Despite the way that I thought she had tried to hide it, I still managed to see the nod she provided in agreement even as we picked our way down the churned dirt between the tents. There was more than enough space for Avita and her horse to walk without getting in the way of anyone, but there was no doubting that there were a lot of people near the priory. Despite my best efforts, keeping an accurate count of the numbers was near impossible as every day a new group or even individuals would arrive and set up camp. Any concentration of soldiers or encampments attracted everyone from skilled craftsmen and artisans, to peddlers and whores and the Knights of the Nine was no exception.
Through the village of tents on the eastern side of the Priory lay a surprisingly immense cleared area that was also playing host to dozens of individuals going about their duties. Unlike the rest of the area however these men and women were training for war rather than supporting and I heard Avita’s amused chuckle of nostalgia.

“Just like coming home isn’t it?” I asked humorously and she laughed.

“Oh indeed. You couldn’t have made training grounds any closer to the Legion standard if you tried.”

Pointing in the direction of the soldiers facing off against straw filled dummies, I directed her gaze to one of the instructors marching back and forth. “You can blame Carodus for that.”

As we continued moving closer I could see how Avita was noting the effort that had gone into building the training grounds. Crude fences had been set up marking out areas for sparring and on the far side was a fence fifty metres long that was sitting all by itself. Only the churned up clods of earth and crushed grass showed that it was in fact a jousting list, but for the moment all but the rows of dummies were being utilised. The entire cleared space was over a dozen acres with the majority set aside for formations practice and already the grass had been trampled flat from weeks of training.

The volume of shouting emanating from the armoured form of Carodus Oholin was almost physical assault but unlike what most citizens believed, Centurions and other Legionnaires didn’t shout randomly or randomly berate those they commanded. Like all centurions, Carodus had his own unique idiosyncrasies but it didn’t change the fact that he was proving to be an extremely good teacher. Whether he was critiquing one of his trainees, or extolling their ability he practically roared, but never in an aggressive or overbearing way. Whether he was training one on one, or every single Men-at-Arms within the Order of the Nine it made no difference to his tone or attitude. The only real difference was how loud he projected his voice.

At the sight of Avita and I walking over he paused between breaths and gave a solid legionary salute that was clearly audible over the impacts of dulled swords striking wood and packed canvass and I couldn’t help but smile at the pleasure on his face. Over the weeks since the attack on Leyawiin’s cathedral, the retired centurion had thrown himself into his new duties with an almost worrying zeal and passion. I had originally attempted to leave him within Leyawiin but he would have none of it, simply stating that he was going to come with the Order as it was going to be safer than staying in the same city as his ex-wife.

“Centurion Oholin. How goes the training?”

With a smile that was entirely lacking in shame at the number of missing teeth, he bowed his head briefly between the two of us and rose to his full height. “It’s going surprisingly well Sir. No one is holding a sword by the pointy end anymore and on occasion the archers are all aiming the same direction.”

Avita was staring at the old Centurion as though trying to pick his face and he noticed the scrutiny. “You seem familiar Centurion.”

“Sixth legion, Eighth casta, third cohort.” He said without hesitation and his grin grew larger. “You are also Sixth unless I’m mistaken.”

“You are correct.” Avita’s face lit up and I could understand why. Each legion contained at most fifty Cohorts and typically fifty or sixty centurions when illness and promotions were taken into account. From what I knew of Carodus, he had spent most of his life on the isle of Stros M’Kai and Avita’s role as First Lance would have left her on the mainland but despite the distances involved the
Centurions would have a passing familiarity with each other. “It’s a small world, isn’t it centurion?”

“Indeed it is m’am.” It was impossible to ignore the jovial mood that had gripped Carodus, but he turned his attentions away from Avita and towards me. “With your permission Sir, I’d like to promote the twins to Praefect.”

“What’s your reasoning?”

He shrugged, keeping one eye on me while the other hovered over his trainees continuing with striking and hitting the dummies. “Besides the fact that they are the only other Legion-trained Men-at-Arms, they are proving quite adept as assisting me. You did say to promote a few to help me.”

“I did.” Pausing for a moment, I cast my gaze over the lines of recruits and managed to pick out the Nordic twins stalking through like a pair of wolves. Both we extremely broad and muscled but I could also see the cross brand on one of their biceps. “What about their history?”

“Men don’t desert the Legion; they desert its officers.” Carodus replied simply. “They are both bright lads, and spent enough years in the 19th to gain experience commanding infantry. Besides that, no one else has really been shaping up for the roles.”

“Very well. I trust your judgement and you to keep them in line.”

Proving that all centurions had unnatural senses or eyes in the back of their skulls, Carodus flinched and glanced at one of the new recruits who had stepped forward to a dummy swinging his sword with a dull thud. “Adavvys! By the Nine you are killing someone, not slapping their face with your cock!” He slammed his fist against his chest in another salute but his attentions were on the suddenly wide-eyed Dunmer recruit. “You’ll have to excuse me sir.”

I watched with some amusement as he moved over to the trainee and began showing him what he was doing wrong before demonstrating the correct technique in such a way that every single one of the trainees could see and hear him. It was a combination of concerning and nostalgic as he moved through the press, offering advice and critiquing their abilities while reminded me of my first years in the Legion. Given enough time, the Order of the Nine would have been able to match any Legion in skill and ability but unfortunately time was not on our side.

“He’s something.” Avita said after a few moments of watching him teach. “I vaguely remember him from the Legion but I can’t remember when.”

“He spent most of his career on Stros M’Kai.” I added, seeing the way that he directed the two Nordic brothers to ensure that none of the trainees weren’t being watched. “And I think he retired five or six years ago.”

“I served around Rihad but I would’ve met him once or twice.” She turned and looked at me and nodded in the direction of the twins and the fact that their desertion crosses were visible with their lack of sleeves. “Deserters?”

Nodding, I couldn’t help but feel a twinge in my stomach and a strange crawling sensation up the scars on my own arm. “Yes. Geimund and Gukimir were both in the Elswyr Legions but deserted for reasons they haven’t shared. They were both caught, tried and punished and managed to live through the beatings before returning to Skyrim. It appears that they have spent the past few years working as daytallers and guards in Markarth until the local Temple of Dibella was desecrated.”

“They came from Skyrim to join the Order?”
“Not us specifically. Apparently they were among the guards at the temple when it was attacked and were unable to save the priestesses so they came to Cyrodiil hoping to do something. Like many of the others here, yourself included; they must’ve heard about the restoration of the Order and came looking.”

“The Knights of the Nine are the talk of Tamriel and there wouldn’t be many who haven’t heard of your deeds. Not to speak ill of other faithful, but priestesses of Dibella aren’t the usual members of the cloth.”

Chuckling, I glanced at Avita out of the corner of my eye while looking about for Alexi. “Why do you think that a pair of young men who had deserted the Legion would guard a house of worship in the first place? Especially a Dibellian Temple in Skyrim. I’m fairly certain that some of the temples would be nothing more than legitimised bordellos.”

“I see you are familiar with acolytes of Dibella.” Avita teased.

“Well, I was in the Legion too you know.” Catching sight of my quarry towards the jousting lists, I motioned for her to follow and began walking towards a collection of horsemen moving around the edge of the tents and training grounds.

“The Order does seem quite established already.” She said as we moved away from the Men-at-Arms. “It’s much larger than I was expecting.”

“Two dozen knights, about the same in assorted cavalry and almost a cohort and a half of infantry. We have a dozen experienced hunters and trackers for scouts and thirty men and women experienced with a bow or otherwise capable with crossbows. Overall we have almost two hundred soldiers and about the same in camp followers. What we lack though is experience.”

“That sounds like you have already got plans for me.”

My laugh this time was loud and I was grinning, especially when I caught Alexi’s attention and waved for him to come over. “I had plans for you almost within seconds of finding you in the forest.”

Atop his enormous destrier, Alexi was fully dressed in his armour like the other knights with him as they prepared their own kind of practice. Other than those who had joined us from the Order of the White Stallion, the other dedicated heavy cavalrymen were varied in both equipment and skill. All were seasoned fighters and between them there wasn’t a man or woman without a decade’s experience of fighting in the saddle, but there were a collection of other mounted soldiers following who stood out from them. Some were dressed in little more than chainmail and brigandine, leathers and padded gambesons and other than the odd boar spear, none were carrying any kind of lance.

“Good morning Commander.” he said as he trotted over, before sliding out of the saddle with a natural grace. “Have you picked up another stray?”

“It appears I have, but she’s one I want you to meet. Alexi, meet Avita Vesnia, formerly of the 6th Legion.”

His eyes darted between my face and hers, taking note of the tanned arms with white sword scars and the fact that she had at least fifteen years on the both of us. “A legionary? Well, as you haven’t handed her over to Carodus I’m guessing that she’s not a footslogger.”

There was no way that she could miss the humour in his tone or the way that he was looking at her for an answer and she smiled. “Former Extraordinarii officer Captain.”
“I like her already.”

“You’ll like her even more. She was Primus Lanceae.”

Alexi’s expression didn’t change but his eyes narrowed slightly, taking a few more moments to study the woman in front of him. There was nothing outward to his expression or body language but I knew that he was pleased with what he saw. “By the Nine Kaius… It’s not even my birthday.”

Turning to her directly he extended his hand and they both shook hands. “I suppose I will be able to find a use for a woman of your talents and experience.”

“If the Goddess wills it, it will be so.”

Turning back to me he nodded and I was almost laughing at the way that he was acting like a child receiving the present that he had always wanted. “Looks like we might be able to salvage the light cavalry after all.”

“That’s what I was thinking.” I replied, seeing the way that Avita was looking between the two of us.

“Light cavalry?”

Alexi nodded, reaching up and unclasping the aventail from his cavalry sallet. “Knights fight differently to normal cavalry, even Extraordinarii. We’re the only force in the world that is capable of breaking a shield wall in a head on charge. It takes a certain type of horse, training and specialised equipment to achieve and we don’t have enough time to bring the others up to standard. Unfortunately, we have no one really experienced with fighting in the more regular styles of mounted combat to be able to whip the others into shape, let alone command them.”

“You want me to command them?” The alarm on Avita’s face was obvious as she looked over the dozens of cavalry moving nearby.

“Well, we will have to test you, see how well you ride and fight and make sure that you are capable of being an effective leader before we do anything.” As always Alexi’s tone and expression was riding the fine line between humour and insult but managing to come across as overwhelmingly friendly. “And we might have to find you a replacement steed…”

Avita’s hand reached up and patted her horse affectionately on the flank. “That’s fine. Isabelle is faithful but war is not for her. I’m… I’m grateful for you all giving me this chance.”

“Don’t mention it. Help us turn this rabble into something and you’ll more than have paid your own way.” Almost in mid breath, Alexi stopped and glanced over my shoulder and his face turned amusingly grim. “You probably don’t want to know who’s coming your way Kaius.”

My stomach dropped and with it my expression as I sighed in painful annoyance. “It’s Sepula, isn’t it.”

“Yep… With his arms full of scrolls.”

Blowing out a breath as heavily and loudly as possible, Alexi laughed out loud and Avita was left looking at the Imperial man hurrying in our direction. “He doesn’t look that threatening.”

“Sepula would struggle to slay anything more dangerous than a mouse. But he’s the Order’s scribe.”

“And the biggest thorn in Kaius’ side.” Alexi added helpfully. “He doesn’t look happy.”
“That would be because I wandered off today without telling him when and where I was going.”

Both Avita and Alexi were left laughing as I turned and tried not to feel crushed with the reappearance of my responsibilities. They both knew from their own experiences how it felt to be in command, and despite my own reservations I knew that I was slowly growing into the role of Knight Commander, even coming to enjoy it. It didn’t help the fact that every time that I dealt with Sepula I was reminded just how much responsibility I truly had on my shoulders. The Knights of the Nine was mostly autonomous, but every day brought more and more demands and calls for aid from the Empire and Church of the Nine to fight back against a foe that we were yet incapable of facing, let alone finding.

“My lord.” Sepula said as he came over to me, and I had enough experience with him to know that he was annoyed. “I have missives for you.”

“I’ll have to leave you with Alexi for now,” I said to Avita as I tried not to sag under the expectation of more paperwork. “but welcome to the Knights of the Nine.”
The ground heaved under Trygve and I could feel every shuddering jolt of his hooves striking the ground with the force of a smithing hammer. Every impact drove its way up my legs, through my very bones and into my spine and I swore that he was cracking Tamriel from the force of his charge. This was what he was bred for, the very meaning of his birth and hundreds, if not thousands of generations had instilled this instinctual understanding of his reason for being and he revelled in it. For myself perched in his saddle I could do little more than hang on as tightly as I could as all eleven hundred kilograms of warhorse charged with all the speed that he could muster.

His size and his strength was what set apart knights from other cavalry throughout the Empire and in *en masse* there was very little that would be able to stop them. While fully armoured such as he was at that very moment and myself on his back, he was fully capable of charging a spear wall or Legion shield wall and break it apart, and with others of his kind by his side they would ride over the top of any foe. He was one of many horses within the world that had faced down daedra in battle, and while his original rider had been slain during the defence of Leyawiin he had been part of the proof that there was very little that could stand up to knights.

My entire world though was compressed into a slit half the width of my finger wide across my eyes, a sliver of colour amidst the darkness of my helmet. Besides the rumbling of the ground under Trygve’s hooves I could see and hear little besides my own thunderous heart, shuddering breaths and the creaking and clanking of all the metal that I was clad in. I felt entombed in the layers and trapped within the hindering confines but through the vison slit I could see my adversary, rapidly closing on top of his own armour plated steed. My world compressed even further until all that I could see was our dual lances, the points lowering and aiming at each other’s hearts across the fence separating us.

For those brief moments before we came together I felt my heart begin to hammer until it threatened to burst, my mouth growing dry and my entire body tensing with expectation even as I struggled to keep the tip of my lance steady. It was far too long, far too heavy. Far heavier than even the largest of greatswords and the weighted tip wavered and bounced up and down with every stride. There was a flash of realisation and I tried not to cry out as we came together and my world exploded. It was as though one of the gods had stepped down from oblivion and punched me in the chest, and not one of the nicer gods but the likes of Malacath or perhaps even Mehrunes Dagon. Even though I tried to twist and roll my shoulder as I had been taught it was to no avail and one second I was seated in Trygve’s saddle, the next my world was transformed into agonised breathing and tumbling green and blue as sky and earth merged as one.

The second impact on my back and spine drove the last clinging remnants of my breath out of my lungs and despite the vison slit my sight turned to black. My entire universe had somehow managed to shrink even further until all that remained was blackness and a body consumed with agony and I struggled to breathe, let alone move.

Time itself lost all meaning as I lay on the solid surface that my mind was somehow identifying to be the sky and all I could do was lay there, feeling the crawling pinprick sensation across my chest that transformed into a cold spike of pain with every breath. The fact that a rib was broken was somehow less galling than the fact that I could barely move at all, my limbs and body refusing to rise even as I could feel shudders drawing closer.

Without warning the darkness was wrenched away with a click of metal and I found myself staring up into the clouds, and my armoured opponent looking down over me atop his own steed.
“How you feeling?”

“Like I just took a couched lance to the chest.” I said, gasping and groaning in agony as the broken rib or two made themselves felt. “I have broken ribs.”

“I’m not surprised.” Alexi said good humorously as he twisted and dropped the butt of his lance into the leather holster on his saddle and made several gestures. “You practically threw yourself on it.”

Before I could finish gathering my thoughts hands were grasping and tugging on my armour and checking me over before carefully lifting me up. If it wasn’t for my vampirism I would have struggled to hear them at all through the thick padding and heavy sallet helm I wore but they seemed content that my injuries were minor.

“Good thing they gift you legionaries with thick skulls.” A crate was dragged over at his gestured command and another pair of knights moved over and assisted Alexi in climbing out of his saddle. The fact that he was almost perpetually grinning and struggling not to laugh was not helping my painful mood.

“I certainly would prefer having my feet on the ground. It seems safer.”

“But you are getting better though. You actually hit me this time and not many people manage that.”

“Getting myself unhorsed is an instant win for you though, right?”

“In a tournament maybe, but this is still just training.”

My helm was tugged free of the grip of the padded coif that had stuck to my scalp with sweat and with it my hearing improved to the point of no longer needing my vampirism to properly hear everyone. Breathing was still difficult but it did become easier as straps were released and leather belts undone and the layers were lifted away from my body. Unlike my normal daedroth scalemail and ebony-mithril breastplate the armour I wore was overwhelmingly heavy and was very close to my total bodyweight. Without vampirism I would have struggled to stand or walk and getting into a saddle, especially on a horse of Trygve’s size was outright impossible. The increased padding also ensured that I couldn’t even reach down to grasp my belt let alone bend over or anything of the sort.

“Training is still painful enough.”

Everyone, including Alexi laughed at my grim humour but they knew that it was true. The men and women assisting us were all Knights of the Nine themselves and had also gone through similar training over the previous weeks. At seventy kilograms, the armour was crude, heavy and unyielding and the padding made it impossible to move but it also ensured that injuries were kept to a minimum. Even using blunted tips on the lances and weaker types of wood that splintered and cracked easier there were very few days without an injury like broken bones or dislocations.

Learning to fight on horseback was a challenge and while I enjoyed learning something new I couldn’t help but feel comfortable with my feet on the ground and in my lighter armour that allowed free range of movement. In battle the knights would be wearing lighter, thinner armour in comparison to allow them to change to swords and other close weapons where required but again, the heavy training plate proved its worth. When the time came that we would fight in formation against a true foe, the experience of being weighted down would leave our normal armour feeling as light as cloth.

Eyeing my battered breastplate where Alexi’s lance had struck it, I could see the dent that had been added to the number it had already gained over the previous weeks and grimaced. As far as I could
tell by the pain in my chest, at least one of my ribs were broken, and one or two more could possibly have hairline fractures. Nothing the handful of healers among the people supporting our order couldn’t fix, but it ensured that my lance practice was over for the day.

It was proving very effective in showing just how deadly it would be on the battlefield. A blunted lance, with the full weight of warhorse, its rider and their collective armour behind it could still break bones through several inches of padding and reinforced plate armour. It was a grim thought in my mind when I considered what would happen when a dedicated combat lance, reinforced with metal and tipped in steel would hit a lighter armed opponent with a tonne and a half of flesh and metal behind it. There was no longer any doubt in my mind how three hundred Knights of the White Stallion had charged into an Oblivion gate through the daedric hordes pouring out of it and won with only two fatalities to show for it.

Despite my misgivings and initial inclination not to learn to ride and tilt, I knew I didn’t really have a choice. As Knight-Commander I would be required to lead the Order in battle and as the Order’s entire strategy revolved around the knights I had to become one of them. Viconia was finding it immensely enjoyable watching my efforts in the saddle, as each and every one of those I had knighted regularly knocked me out of the saddle. Given the time we had available and the increasingly forceful demands for the Order’s assistance from throughout the Empire I was again thankful for my vampirism. It would have taken me months to learn how to ride if not for my unnatural strength and agility and while it was a balancing act keeping such skills hidden every time I sat in the saddle I knew that I was getting better.

A crude wooden stool was dragged over and a soft, but firm hand on my shoulder lowered me into it. One of the many new arrivals since the Order’s founding, Brellin was a soft spoken Bosmer with far too many lines etched into his face. Wrinkles and ritualistic tattoos covered most of his flesh but unlike many of us he was no knight or soldier despite his proficiency with a sword. Many years before he had been one of the up and coming champions in the Imperial City’s arena until he retired and he had arrived to offer his services as a healer rather than with his sword.

“Fell off a horse again commander?”

“You know me Brellin. My boots are better suited tasting dirt.”

Dragging over his own stool he sat down and began lightly prodding the padded tunic I wore and taking note of the slightest of winces or reactions from myself. “You know this would be a lot easier if you and the other ex-legionaries would actually show pain.”

“Sounds like a common issue.”

“Oh it is.” His tone was light as he carefully lifted up part of the tunic and gazed at the fresh purple-black bruising that was already blooming underneath. “Thankfully I could count all the ex-legionaries in this Order on one hand but you all seem to be my regular patients. I thought the Arena was tough, but the way they train you all still astounds me.”

As I pulled off one of my cotton gloves off with my teeth I felt the chilled touch of his fingers that was not of a result of his body heat. The tingle of magicka and the pressure in the back of my skull spoke of the magicka he was using but instead of a simple restoration spell he was using something different.

“So how bad is it this time?”

“Two broken ribs and a pair of greenstick fractures.” He said, gazing at the pulsating collection of muscles, bones, veins and the odd organ or two in my chest. It was always disconcerting watching
his illusion magicka strip back the layers of someone’s body with invisibility spells. He had enough control that he could peer inside of someone one millimetre at a time and was skilled enough to be able to identify exactly what the injury or illness was with one hand while directing healing magicka through the other.

Lowering my shirt and dissipating the magicka that had turned the outer layers of my chest invisible he sighed and gave me an expression of mild annoyance. “I’ve done what I can but I would recommend not taking a lance to the chest until the day after tomorrow. There’s nothing stopping you partaking in normal training but if you aggravate the injury don’t come crying to me.”

“Thanks Brellin.”

“No need to thank me Commander. Auri-El guides my hand and brought me here to serve. I’m proud to serve the Knights of the Nine.”

“And we’re certainly glad to have you. How are your assistants faring?”

He shrugged. “Malvssa needs more confidence in her abilities but she will become a fine healer. Enronriel is also doing well even after last week.”

“Finding yourself faced with a sucking chest wound can ruin your day.”

As he collected his bag and tucked the strap over a shoulder he laughed darkly. “The problem with healers is for the most part we never see, let alone deal with true injuries. Sprains and strains, fevers and sicknesses and maybe the odd plague or two is about the most we will ever see. Many of those who come here seeking to help may find their faith tested, both in themselves and in the Nine.”

“But not you?”

Brellin shook his head but the smile was darker. “My faith has already been tested. Numerous times in fact. I share memories of dark times and terrible events and like you and your Knights I am prepared for what is to come. There are others that all I can do is guide and pray for them.”

“As I have said, I am glad that you are with us.”

“Thank you Commander. Maybe next time you get injured you could at least act like it for me? It’s disconcerting seeing someone with broken ribs sitting calmly and talking.”

“I think I suffered a broken bone every week for six months when I joined the Legion.” I replied, rising to my feet and feeling the aching of horribly bruised flesh across my chest. “and I have been injured for worse in the past twelve months.”

“Legionaries....” He said, this time laughing a true laugh as he bowed and moved on to the next of his patients nearby. “I will never understand any of you.”

Taking a brief moment to stretch and test the fresh limitations of my injury I found myself scowling at the thought of once again returning to light duties for a few hours. My training both on horse and dismounted was proceeding at a rapid pace and I spent most of the daylight hours with sword in hand, dressed in armour and testing myself against the very best the Order could provide. There were many to choose from in their levels of expertise, Alexi with his skill with a sword and lance, Carodus with his incredible skill with a shield, Falid with his sheer size, strength and astonishingly quick speed with his greatsword and somewhat unsurprisingly Avita with her ability in the saddle. Almost every member of the Order had their own distinctly unique skillsets and every day I felt as though I was learning something new from them all.
I could see several of them training with the other Knights and Men-at-arms of the Order throughout the training fields. Men like Falid and Thedret who were outside of the Order were still highly respected and offered their own services, but the new Knights of the Nine were proving to be in good hands. Whether they had been with us since the beginning like Viconia and myself or only just joined that week like Avita they all had dedicated themselves wholly to the cause.

Most of them anyway. Picking my way through the fenced off sparing yards I saw one of the few issues I had with the men and mer under my command. Caleb had followed us to the priory but only because we didn’t provide him with any options, even if there had been any to give. From the few tests and trials we had undertaken with some of the relics before we locked them away into the Undercroft, he was indeed the only person who seemed capable of wielding or wearing them without injury. Not only this, whenever he picked up or wore any of the retrieved artefacts they began glowing or otherwise showing some kind of aura or power that had lain dormant for thousands of years. The signs were obvious and while there were many who were increasingly quick to proclaim him as Pelinal reborn, I and those directly beneath me ensured that the rumours were squashed. I, like several of the Order were more pragmatic and while Caleb was showing clear signs of being highly skilled or a quick learner of the martial arts I was wary about placing all of our hopes on him.

Part of my trepidation was from the fact that despite the smattering of knowledge he had gained during his time as the late Baron Tussrienele’s personal stable hand he was not a trained fighter. With the likes of Alexi, Carodus and other highly experienced instructors he was proving to be a quick learner but for the moment he was not someone I felt comfortable with taking into battle. Let alone against the likes of daedra and Umaril while wearing the most priceless artefacts in creation.

For the moment he was squaring off against one of the many straw filled training dummies with another of the surprisingly skilled Knights as his teacher for the day. Most of the Knights under my command with the exceptions of Falid with his greatsword and Thedret with his glaive were all swordsmen. A sword, especially on horseback or with a shield was the preferred weapon but of the retrieved relics the Sword of Arkay was not among them. My decision of ‘hoping for the best, but planning for the worst’ had left me with little choice but to focus Caleb’s training on wielding Zenithar’s Mace and there was only one person suitable as a teacher.

“God’s goolies, yer’ll end up breakin’ yer wrist like that.” Mazoga spluttered as Caleb’s training mace thoccked into his training dummy.

“But I hit it like you said? Starting above the shoulder and flicking it downwards…”

“Yer did, but yer too stiff. The mace is meant to be the unyielding bit, not yer joints.” She stepped forward with her own mace resting on her shoulder and her orichalcum shield fasted to her other arm like Caleb’s. The major difference between the two of them besides Mazoga’s enormity was the fact that the shield that Caleb used was not a round, tower or kite shield like the rest of the soldiers of the Nine but diamond shaped instead. It was also resting in the size between a heater shield used by the mounted knights and a gladiator’s buckler that Brellin would have been familiar with.

It was not the relic though but merely made to assist in teaching him the idiosyncratic fighting style that the relics demanded. The shield especially as it was smaller enough to allow him to wield his weapons in one or two hands while still providing some measure of protection. Mazoga was close enough to the young stablehand to show the disproportionate height difference between them, let alone the fact that she outweighed nearly everyone two times over.

“When yer swing, the head starts behind yer body right? Whether it starts at yer hip or over a shoulder or whatever it don’t matter, but when yer swing it; lead with yer elbow.” She demonstrated
slowly, dragging her own flanged mace down at such a speed that would have left anyone else shuddering with the effort of keeping the five kilogram weighted head steady. There wasn’t even the slightest hint of a tremor in her arm as she slowly brought it down onto the shoulder of the dummy. “as it reaches halfway to the strike, yer flick yer wrist, like so.”

The blow continued just as slowly and I watched, leaning against a fencepost as she rolled a wrist as thick as my forearm. Despite the slow nature of her demonstration, the head of her mace still moved quicker than the wrist and showed how dangerous it would be at full speed.

Turning and looking at Caleb, her eyebrows lifted and the collection of braids on her scalp swirled with the movement. Since returning from Blackmarsh they had almost grown into a mass of dreadlocks but other than cutting them short enough for a helmet she ignored them. “What’s the other important bits?”

“Be mindful of the recoil once you strike,” Caleb replied simply. “and target anything breakable.”

“Now yer getting it!” Mazoga was practically beaming which seemed to accentuate the enormous jagged scar that ran from eyebrow to behind her ear; one of the several scars she had gained during our retrieval of the Shield.

“Brutal and crude as always Orc.” Called out another voice, and I tried not to sigh with recognition. “Perhaps next you’ll be able to teach him how to rifle though the trough for the best gristle.”

Like a stormcloud covering the sun, her expression darkened as she turned to regard the short Breton sitting on a crate scrubbing his sword with a set of chainmail too clean to be his own. Detane was stripped to the waist to deal with the heat and humidity of southern Cyrodiil and the layer of sweat seemed to make him appear greasier than normal.

“Go crawl up yer own arse. Can’t yer see that we’re busy?”

“Yeah. Busy wasting time. The kid’s never going to be a knight, especially with a pig teaching him how to smack people around.”

Mazoga growled and turned her back to him and I watched them all carefully for the moment, realising that Detane hadn’t yet realised I was there. He did nothing more than smile venomously but ducked his head back to cleaning his exquisite rapier, chuckling under his breath.

“Just ignore him.” There was no doubting the growl in Mazoga’s tone as she turned back to her young charge. “He’s just pissy at how good maces are for clubbin’ knights. Swords don’t cut plate, but a mace? Yer can break them into puddin’ under all their fancy armour. Like I taught yer yesterday; aim for the knees, the elbows and the joints. Cripple the bastards, knock them on their arses, flick their visors up and put a knife through an eye.”

I continued watching, curious and finding it somewhat amusing that such a being like Mazoga was an extremely capable fighter in her own right. She seemed too large, too clumsy and slow to be a dangerous adversary in the presence of masters of the sword such as Alexi and Viconia. There were however a lot of dead Black Bows to show that she could be armed with nothing more than a tree branch and still prevail and of everyone, she was the undisputed champion of the mace and club.

“Of course, you will never be a true knight.” Detane suddenly added without even raising his head as Mazoga went to show Caleb the effect of strength with technique on the dummy. “Not until you ride a horse at least.”

The words had the desired effect and halfway through the blow Mazoga lost a measure of her self-
control and struck the dummy with full force instead of a controlled blow that she had intended. There was enough force in her underarm blow that the canvass bag passing for the dummy’s chest simply exploded into dust and bits of straw and the head was flung twenty metres away into the tents. Judging by the sudden shrieks and sounds of people falling over, the stuffed bag covered with the crudely drawn representation of a face had landed in the middle of a group of people and Mazoga was flinching and wincing.

“What the fuck is yer problem now, little man?”

“My problem is that we should be teaching the lad how to fight as a knight. With dignity and chivalry and he won’t learn such things from a pig.”

“I’m a Knight.” Mazoga snarled, Caleb and the training forgotten for the moment. “The Commander knighted me and everything.”

“You will never be a true Knight. Knights ride to battle. Knights have honour and grace and civility and aren’t beast-kin.”

“Who says I need to ride a damn horse? Ain’t no one getting me on a horse.”

Hovering behind her and trying not to get involved, Caleb moved to put himself in between Mazoga and Detane despite his own unease. “Why don’t you ride?”

While she may have been angry at Detane and quick to rise to his bait, she was also just as quick calming down. “I… uh… don’t trust them.”

“You… Don’t trust horses?” Caleb asked hesitatingly over Detane’s snort of amusement.

“I don’t sit on anything that has a mind of its own. Besides that, they are dangerous on one end, smelly on the other and cunning in the middle.”

“It astounds me that you don’t get along with them famously then.”

Mazoga’s temper finally reached a breaking point and she surged forward in a wall of green muscle and fury. To anyone else she would have been enough to chill the blood and freeze them on the spot but Detane merely stiffened, his hand dropping to the hilt of his rapier and the strange calm expression he wore during battle covering his face.

“Sir Mazoga!” I roared, choosing to use her preferred honorific rather than the proper one of madame not only to gain her attention but because it was quicker to say. At the sound of my voice she stopped in mid step, and Detane suddenly tensed in annoyance.

“I… But he…”

“Whether he deserves the thrashing that you are fully capable of providing is unfortunately not up to you to decide.” I stopped in place as I looked between the three of them and tried not to take note of the dozens of expectant and curious eyes from the surroundings. “I will not tolerate fighting, no matter how deserving.”

“Yes sir.”

“Master Acquunax,” turning my head to the smug looking Breton still seated on his crate, I frowned at him so hard that I felt the vampire rising to the surface. “While you may not be directly under my command or a member of the Order of the Nine, this is my place and you will abide by my rules. You proved your worth in Blackmarsh but that well of goodwill is not infinite. You are here only
because I allow it.”

The sneer remained but there was the hint of a nod before I turned back to Mazoga. “Of all the Knights under my command you are the only one who is not a member of the cavalry and this does cause a slight problem. While the title is mostly honorary and despite the fact that it galls me to say it, Master Acqunax is somewhat correct.”

Mazoga looked crestfallen while I could see Detane’s expression of astonishment crack his façade of self-assured confidence for the merest of seconds.

“However.” I continued, briefly catching Caleb’s curious expression as I looked between them. “Sir Vanevius has shown me that every knightly Order always has at least one knight who fights dismounted. I was planning on revealing this at a later time, but I have commissioned a new standard for the Order of the Nine. Traditionally the Standard Bearer for the Legions, and as I have learned; Knightly Orders is typically one of the bravest and determined individuals within their ranks. Putting aside the fact that you do not ride, I can’t think of anyone more suited in the Order than yourself.”

Words failed her and she stood stupefied, mouth falling open and even Caleb was left grinning at her reaction. Detane however once again returned to his typical scowling self, practically snarling with pursed lips as he rammed his blade back into its scabbard and rose to his feet.

Patting the giant orc on the shoulder and giving her a smile I saw how several of the onlookers were also smiling and nodding in agreement while she struggled to process what had just happened. I had been intending on making the formal announcement once the standard had been completed and delivered from Skingrad but it had been useful to stop things before they went further.

My attentions however were set on a different individual and after sharing a few brief words to Mazoga and leaving her and Caleb to continue their training I quickly hurried after Detane as he stormed off through the tents. Despite his size and stature, he moved like a storm and people shifted out of his way from a combination of his expression and body language.

“Master Acquanx!” I called out after him as we moved deeper through the collection of tents. “A word?”

“I’m busy.” He snapped, venom dripping from every word and he didn’t even bother turning around.

“That was not a request.” My own reply was just as sharp and he stopped, turning slowly and frowning as I jabbed a thumb at one of the half-finished buildings nearby. There were several buildings under construction around the Priory itself but unlike the stables or the barracks on the far side, this was a simple wooden storehouse. The walls and the frames were completed and in a day or two the roof would be finished and the handful of workers and labourers stared at us as we stepped through the empty doorframe.

“Give us the room.” I stated simply, and the workers glanced amongst themselves and made themselves scarce, leaving their tools and their jobs where they were to provide us with privacy.

Detane was scowling and his eyes were burning into mine as I struggled to stand still and relaxed and not pace back and forth. Everything about him at that moment was infuriating, from the way that he stood with his hands clasped in front of him, his shirt slung lazily over a shoulder and the ever-present hints of a smirk on his face.

“This needs to stop.”
The cold eyes continued pressing into me and he didn’t blink or even flinch in the slightest. “What do you mean commander?”

“All of this. The goading, the divisive attitude and the picking of fights with everyone who happens to be nearby. Especially Mazoga. So far I have let you stay because you proved your worth in Blackmarsh but I am serious when I say that your welcome is almost used up.”

“Is that all?”

My face began tingling and I could feel the silent urgings of the vampire straining under my flesh and I knew that at that moment it would not have taken much to physically rip the expression off his face. Every fibre of my being was yearning for it but I knew by his expression that he knew it just as well as I did.

“Gods be damned that it not all! Would you like me to draw it in the dirt or speak with smaller words? Stop. It. You’re a damn good fighter and if not for the fact that you verbally abuse everyone who comes by, you are a bloody hard worker but I cannot and will not abide any further division among anyone here. Consider this to be your final warning. If you cause any further issues you will be sent away.”

Not for a moment did his expression change and he met my gaze with one of his own, never wavering or backing down for even the slightest of moments.

“I don’t understand your reasons for anything Detane.” I said carefully, taking several breaths to calm myself as best I could while rubbing at my temples. “I don’t really know why you are here with us and I don’t understand your point for infuriating everyone.”

“Maybe I’m just a terrible person.”

His tone was as cold as ice but I raised an eyebrow. “I have never met a terrible person who was actually self-aware so I can’t bring myself to believe that. What I do know is that you are lucky that Mazoga has as much self-control as she does. Just what are you trying to achieve? To get yourself killed?”

While his expression didn’t change his gaze twisted and dropped away from mine and I felt a chill course up my spine despite the heat. There was nothing to suggest anything beyond his usual disdain and corrosive personality but I remembered a moment we had shared in the swamps. He had worn a similar expression shortly after I had pulled him out of the reach of a Black Bow’s spear before it had been replaced with anger, and my guts dropped with the hint of realisation.

“Wait… Are you looking to die?”

“Good day Sir Desin.” He said, turning on his heel and moving away. There was no sign of distress or emotion beyond his annoyance but I found myself staring after him as he stepped through the open doorway, desperately trying and failing to understand what had just happened and what I should do.

For the rest of the day the I couldn’t stop my mind’s ceaseless recollection of the events as they replayed over and over in my head. Even as I worked my way through the day’s administration with Sepula’s assistance I couldn’t help but feel unnerved by the revelation of Detane’s motivations. It was made worse by the fact that I couldn’t for the life of me think of any way to approach or deal with the issue or predict what effects it may or may not have.

Even as night fell and I and the rest of the higher ranking members of the Order gathered for dinner
and our informal nightly discussions I struggled to solve the problem. I was left sitting in thought, staring into the cooling remains of the bowl of stew in my hands until Viconia’s non-to-gentle kick to my knee startled me into the present.

“Interested in joining us here on Nirn, Kaius?”

“Hmm? What?”

Rolling his eyes Alexi’s grin threatened the split the corners of his mouth along the mess of scar tissue on his cheek while the others around the campfire chuckled. “See how much he values and respects us?” He joked, leaning forward and placing his own empty bowl onto the spare stool in front of him. “I said; what are you going to do with Areldur?”

“Areldur? I thought that he was part of the light cavalry?”

On her side of the fire, Avita stretched out her legs and smiled sadly. “He is but he is having difficulties. Overall he is an adequate rider and he is more than capable of fighting, but he lacks stamina.”

“And not just from his years as a Bishop.”

Stirring the vanquished remains of my meal I chewed on my lip in thought. “He wants to fight and he has martial experience. We’re short on capable fighters.”

“I know…” Avita glanced between Alexi and the others around the fire and gestured with empty hands. “He means well and after retrieving the Gauntlets he has more than earned the right to fight with the rest of us but the curse is crippling him.”

The evening meal was one of the few occasions that we all could sit together and discuss the events of the day and plan for the coming ones and all of those deemed important enough gravitated to it. Besides myself, Viconia, Alexi and Avita all of the other high ranked members were present in their various positions. Carodus sat off to one side of the fire with the recently promoted Praefects Geimund and Gukimir close by. If not for the slight differences in their scars and deserter brands they would have been utterly indistinguishable and was something they utilised to the fullest. In a hulking mass of scarred green flesh, Mazoga sat close to the fire with a book that she had procured from somewhere, slowly and carefully reading with a finger pointing to each word in turn and in the darkness Falid sat in quiet mediation, little more than a silhouette in the gloom.

Members of the camp followers were also with us in their own capacities. As always Sepula was my own personal shadow and while it had taken a week or two I had finally convinced him to leave his scrolls and documents behind long enough to eat during dinner. The only other people with us were a hardened smith by the name of Sergius Turranius; elected from the craftsmen and builders to represent them and Brellin in his capacity as the most experienced healer.

It was Brellin that I turned to and he looked up at my scrutiny and shrugged. “I can’t explain it Commander. It’s unlike any disease or ailment that I have ever seen. It shares symptoms with malaria, ataxia and helljoint but nothing I have tried so far has made the slightest difference. Not that I’m surprised mind you. As far as I am able to discern every descendant of Sir Casimir has suffered the ailment, right up until Areldur took it upon himself. Please don’t ask me to explain how that works because I have no idea.”

I rubbed at my face and nodded. Areldur had arrived a few days before Avita did, bearing the Gauntlets of the Crusader. Previously the Bishop of Chorrol’s Cathedral, he had been present and seen countless pilgrims and travellers attempt to lift the Gauntlets from where they had lain for two
centuries. Both Viconia and I had heard first hand from Sir Casimir of how he had struck and killed a beggar in the Cathedral and had been cursed by Stendarr as a result. The curse was debilitating, painful and in that moment Casimir had cursed his entire family and lineage. As far as we could tell the curse both on the Gauntlets and his dynasty had been unbreakable until Areldur took it upon himself to lift it.

Being able to lift the gauntlets had come with a price, and when the last surviving member of Sir Casimir’s lineage had journeyed to Chorrol in an attempt to break the curse, Areldur had willingly taken the curse onto himself. He had freed him and his family from continued torment and gained the right to lift the gauntlets but only after taking the curse as well. None of us seated around the fire could fault the bishop’s determination and devotion, but despite the fact that he had been an adventurer and mercenary before becoming a priest, the curse was making him a liability.

“Where is Areldur anyway?” I asked, looking about the fire and not catching sight of the Altmer anywhere.

“In the chapel conducting the evening prayers.” Viconia replied from her spot next to me. Time to ourselves was becoming a luxury and we took every opportunity to be in each other’s company. There was something calming about feeling her lean against me, even if it was during dinner.

“Once a priest, always a priest.” Avita laughed.

“What does that make you then?”

Avita’s grin at Alexi’s subtle teasing was soon joined by an apple core that she had just finished eating and not only showed her throwing arm and accuracy but his reflexes and skill when he caught it just before it hit him between the eyes.

The laughter of the group was loud for a moment but they all saw my expression as I mulled over the thoughts and options in my mind. “What are everyone’s suggestions?”

Glances were shared and Brellin was the first to awkwardly clear his throat. “Commander, I can’t recommend him taking part in any battle in his current state. The curse or disease or whatever it is will only result in him getting killed.”

“With the choice between quality and another warm body to put between Tamriel and Umaril, I have to say that we have to stick with quality.” Alexi’s stare was deathly serious and there was no hint of the jokester that he usually was. “Most of us have seen or fought daedra in some degree and if we let Areldur ride with us it’ll get more than just him killed.”

“His retrieval of the Gauntlets is to be praised, as is his selfless actions to do so.” Rumbled Falid from the shadows and there was a brief shuffling as most of us turned to look in his direction. “Unfortunately his affliction puts our mission at risk. Perhaps his skills might be better utilised elsewhere?”

I nodded as everyone turned back to face me. “Well, that sounds fairly unanimous. I’ll have a chat to him later but I reckon he might be able to help me out with some of the more religious arrivals.”

“Like the flagellants you mean?” Alexi’s comment was sarcastic but there was still an undercurrent of darkness to his words. “We all knew that we’d attract all sorts being part of the Order of the Nine but whipping yourself to show faith? That’s a whole new type of crazy.”

“Not the craziest I’ve seen.” Added Viconia, leaning further against me and putting her boots up on the stool between us and Alexi. “I could weave tales of the Underdark that would make daedra
worshipping seem like the cult of Mara.”

Opening his mouth to reply Alexi paused, tilting his head and listening over the crackling campfire and the sounds of several hundred people eating and relaxing after a day of work. The sound that had caught his attention had also caught mine and I sat up straighter as I recognised the sound of hooves.

“Someone doing some late riding?” I queried, seeing the shared expression of confusion on Alexi and Avita’s face.

“I doubt it. Only a damned fool or someone looking at breaking their neck would be out riding in the dark.”

On the edges of the clearing, the handful of sentries that we posted every night called out into the shadows and from our position we saw the shape of a rider and his horse illuminated in the dozens of flickering torches scattered about. The Priory was more of a makeshift town with every day that passed and we watched curiously as the horseman made his way down the beaten dirt track leading between the rows of tents.

“Who commands here?”

From my position resting on the crudely fashioned stool I looked up at the mounted individual with some amusement. Not only was he appearing vastly overdressed for the climate and the situation while I was dressed in little more than a rags, his accent and tone brooked no insubordination.

His own pants were pleated and tucked neatly into a pair of leather riding boots that were immaculately kept and absent the slightest trace of muck or mud. Every buckle and crease was perfect despite the fact that he had been riding at speed long enough for his horse’s mouth to be edged with froth and in the light of the campfire his chainmail and armour gleamed with polish. Over a breastplate of silvery steel clung a surcoat of red and yellow, a raven clutching a crown of oak leaves staring outwards from its golden filigree.

Our silence twisted his expression into one of annoyance as he tugged on the reins of his steed, pulling the horse’s bit tight until it stopped in place to allow him to stare us all down. “Will no one answer me? Damn your hides.” Moving from face to face as we sat with building amusement his gaze came to rest on me where I comfortably sat with Viconia’s sinuous body curled around me. “You there! You will answer my question lest I have you flogged!”

Whatever reaction he was expecting, it was not the sudden outburst of laughter from our collective group to the point where the like of Mazoga and Carodus were almost rolling on the ground. Alexi was slapping his knee, chuckling loudly and I couldn’t help but smile at the red faced fury of the rider as it built to apocalyptic levels.

“Well commander, you better stand up.” Alexi spluttered, trying and utterly failing to keep his expression deadpan and tone serious at the indignation of the surcoated rider. “You wouldn’t want to be flogged again...”

Amidst the renewed laughter around the campfire and the sudden bloom of confusion on the armoured rider’s face I disentangled myself from Viconia and stood up. The rider looked about the group, seeing the differential way they were all treating me despite the fact that they were all collectively laughing and realising the error he had made. As all the pieces fell into place in his mind he almost fell out of the saddle in his attempts to dismount quickly, dropping himself to one knee.

“A message for you…” He stated with a quiver of uncertainty in his voice as he struggled to come
up with a way to salvage the situation. “Sir.”

Trying to keep my own expression serious in comparison to the others I stepped over to him as he bowed, taking note of the hesitant way that he had spoken my title that seemed to stem from something different than his error. A rolled sheet of parchment was plucked from a weatherproof saddlebag and held out and I took it from his hands, seeing the slight tremble in his arms and the way that his pants were being ruined as he knelt in the dirt.

Like the heraldry on the surcoat, the wax seal on the rolled parchment was unfamiliar but no different from the hundreds, if not thousands of noble families and houses throughout the Empire and I cracked it open and began to read. The handwriting was elegant and flawless, the words flowing across the parchment but I still frowned as I read them out loud.

“Let it be known that Duke Bradelc Weylinille Stenanius de’Leorion the third, Lord Marshal of Wayrest, blessed of the house of Maumaulese, Champion of Lainlyn, lay-brother of the Knights of the Horn,” I stopped not only for breath but to scroll through almost three full lines of titles, honours and awards before my eyes came to a halt on a particular collection of words. “Reclaimer of the Sword of Arkay and Greaves of Mara…”

The laughter died away and while the armoured messenger remained kneeling at my feet I felt a chill crawl up my spine. The relics had been reclaimed and for the first time in three thousand years it appeared that they would soon be reunited. It was difficult to ignore the way that my heart was suddenly hammering into my ribcage and my breathing quickened. With an undue haste I continued reading the scroll, reaching the end and feeling a new feeling sink into the pit of my stomach. As the others fell silent I abstractly knew that they could see the change in my body language and expression. Viconia rose from her seat and moved over to me and I barely even felt her touch on my shoulder as I closed the scroll and nearly crushed it in my grip.

“Has been duly appointed Commander of the Knights of the Nine.” The night seemed to rise up and swallow me as my mouth became as dry as the deserts of Elsweyr. “He will arrive in the morning.”
When morning came it came with a wave of uncertainty and nervousness that seemed strange to the
world that we had forged in the heart of the West Weald. There were many, myself especially who
did not receive much sleep during the dark hours and the word had spread faster than what should
have been possible. By the time dawn arrived and the scattered cockerels let everyone within earshot
know just how large of arseholes they were, there were very few people still asleep. Men and
women darted and moved about between tents and those within the martial of pursuits busied
themselves with their equipment. I had personally spent a majority of the night with my mind running
wild, hunched over my ebony armour polishing under weak candlelight until the silvery vine
etchings gleamed and the ebony was as dark as the night itself.

Despite dressing before the sun had begun to rise I found myself pacing up and down, struggling
and trying to understand exactly how I felt about the situation. In the end I gave up, moving through
the tent lines and ensuring that preparations were made. The Men-at-arms were ordered to dress
themselves in whatever armour they had been provided, and the Knights of the Order were similarly
prepared. Sentries were placed further out in the forest, the handful of hunters and woodsmen
assisting the order providing look out for the Duke and his entourage which gave us plenty of time to
react once word of his approach reached us.

The noble messenger who had brought word in the evening had rode off in first light to guide his
liege back and I found myself fighting and twitching uncomfortably in my armour as I stood in front
of the two rows of Knights. The Men-at-arms were also lined up to my right in a neat three ranks
with Carodus out front and the twins placed on the flanks instead of how Alexi and Viconia were
right by my side.

We heard their approach far before we saw them, the haunting notes of horns echoing out of the
forest a hundred metres to our front and it wasn’t long after that we caught sight of movement within
the greenery. Colours began to bloom within the forest, growing and spreading like the re-emergence
of spring. Men and horses, pennants waving in the wind and dozens of heraldic tabards and surcoats
were visible, both on foot and riding on a collection of warhorses. Somehow, despite the presence of
Alexi and Viconia I found myself clenching my fists in an attempt to keep from shaking.

Every man, woman and child who had called the Priory their home for the past weeks were
gathering around behind the armoured ranks of knights and Men-at-arms, peering and talking in a
swell of noise as the column approached. There were easily just as many knights and infantry
approaching us as there was within the Order of the Nine, and if anything there were also just as
many in the baggage train behind them. It was an imposing sight and one that was only added to by
the fact that the lead cavalry raised their horns to their lips and blew another throbbing note into the
sky.

The messenger from the night rode forward on his charger, the hooves churning up clods of earth
and he came to a halt in the rough centre of the Order’s troops. There was none of the initial
nervousness that he had shown after he had realised my identity and he raised himself high in the
saddle, his boots locked into his stirrups as he called out over the crowd before him.

“May I present Duke Bradelic Weylinille Stenanius de’Leorion the third. Son of Duke Varlius
Champion of Lainlyn. Lay-brother of the Knights of the Horn…”

The lead horses of the column reached the closest Men-at-arms and I caught the look of calculated
mischief on Carodus’ face a moment before I realised his intentions. In that moment I struggled not to
break out into the largest of grin’s as the retired Centurion dragged in a lungful of air, projecting a
voice honed from decades on the battlefield from the depths of his belly into the air with frightful
intensity.

“Cohort! Atten-SHAR!”

I found myself in awe not only in the fact that he managed to startle a trained warhorse with his
voice, but also because the Order’s infantry moved with immaculate precision, crashing their heels
together and bracing themselves in full armour. All of the back-breaking training that Carodus had
been putting the men and the women of the Order through proved its worth and I fought down a
satisfied smile and the number of heads turning towards the Men-at-arms.

The column kept advancing, five horses abreast and the infantry in rows of six behind but they were
more than close enough to start picking out details amongst the number. Most of the mounted cavalry
were Bretonnic knights, their heraldry a mixture of colours and makes but a majority were a deep
honey-yellow with a bull’s head on a maroon shield. Most of their number consisted of these
particular knights and so did a large number of their accompanying infantry and it was obvious that
they hailed from the same Order.

I could hear Alexi fidgeting by my side as he tried to remain standing still while trying to get a better
view of the knights as they approached. They were moving with a noticeable precision as they
shifted into the centre of the L shape that the Order of the Nine’s Knights and Men-at-arms formed
and before our eyes the host arrayed themselves into a collection of three neat ranks directly facing
the Priory. The honey-yellow Knights occupied the front rank with their infantry continuing to
remain at the rear but our eyes were soon drawn to a handful of individuals moving ahead of the rest.

Atop their enormous chargers, a trio of Knights moved forward with a handful of attendants
remaining behind. A small cluster of infantry wielding halberds was locked in a perfect square
between the trio and the rest of the horsemen but for the moment they remained as still as boulders,
turning and facing outwards in what was obviously a defensive posture. The Knights however
continued until they had moved past the infuriated herald staring daggers at Carodus who was
standing in a legion textbook stance of attention; one hand holding his gladius perfectly vertical
against his thigh, the other holding his shield so that it wrapped around his left side.

If I didn’t know that a Duke was arriving there would have been no mistaking the royalty of the men
before us. The central individual was clad in gold-lined plate and the make of his clothes were far in
excess of anything we owned, even those that Viconia had purchased with the treasures we had
acquired in our adventures. The other two were just as overwhelmingly opulent despite their martial
nature, and I heard Alexi’s hiss of recognition as they made their stately way towards us.

“That’s Cedrecer Wirile.” He growled and it was the first time I could feel the tingle of anticipation
in my spine at the wariness of his tone.

“Friend of yours?”

Even without the luxury of being able to turn I could picture Alexi’s expression as he stared at the
Knight wearing the bull’s head heraldry. “We’ve crossed swords a few times. He’s a daedra of a
swordman and don’t trust him as far as you could piss him.”

With his warning still resounding in my mind I looked over the three mounted knights, seeing the
scowl and a deep facial scar on the features of Sir Wirile. The scar itself was obviously from a
downwards blow of a sword that had narrowly missed blinding him and there was no doubt that the
dark haired Breton was a dangerous fighter. He sat in his saddle like his was born to it and had all the
watchfulness of a hawk seeking prey.
The Duke was somehow even more opulently dressed and the cost of the silks in his surcoat would have provided enough coin for the outfitting of every Man-at-Arms in the Order of the Nine. His plate armour was almost artwork than protection and every piece had obviously been custom made for him before being etched and detailed so heavily that there was not a single millimetre without some decoration. A stern, emotionless expression stared out of a padded chainmail coif that had been plated in gold and held in place with a silver band around his forehead as a symbol of his title. There was no possible way that anyone could mistake his authority or identity and as they came to a halt I thudded my fist into my chest and bowed.

“My Lord. Welcome to the Priory of the Nine.”

After a pregnant pause and the sudden hush of silence that fell over the area, I slowly and carefully rose while trying to keep my nervousness and sudden unease at their presence and scrutiny. When I lifted my eyes to the Duke I could not see any sign that he had heard or even taken note of my greeting, instead looking over the rows of tents and construction and the hundreds of people gathered for his arrival.

“My thanks Sir Desin.” He said finally, having completing his inspection of the area and showing no sign of his thoughts or feelings in the slightest. As a pair of servants quickly moved over he handed the reins of his steed over to one, turning and sliding out of the saddle onto a stool that the other had been carrying with an extreme ease. “Is this the entire Order?”

My nervousness was threatening to overwhelm me but I nodded, trying to clench my fists without making it obvious in an effort to force the tremors out of my arms. “Yes my Lord.”

“Good.” stepping towards me but looking over the crowd and the knights at my back he gave a tiny hint of a nod. “I am Duke de’Leorion! By the grace of the Nine, the right of my title and my deeds I have been granted command of this Order!”

His voice echoed over the stunned crowd. The rumour that I would no longer be in command of the Order had reached everyone’s ears almost before the word of the Duke’s arrival had but no one had truly been prepared to hear it spoken out loud from someone of authority. From my position a few meters away from the Duke I could see the collection of sullen expressions of the Men-at-arms and the crowd at their backs and I knew that not everyone was happy with the outcome. I didn’t know how I was meant to feel, but there was no way that I could fool myself that I wasn’t feeling equal parts relieved at having such responsibility lifted from my shoulders and downcast at the fact that such a title was no longer my own.

There was also considerable doubt in my mind at the veracity of the change and had been the leading cause of discussion and outright argument through the night. Viconia had railed against the change and not just because she considered any loss of power an insult, especially when it directly affected her. Others had weighed in but it all came down to the simple fact that the Elder Council had decreed that whoever claimed the most relics would lead the Knights of the Nine, and from all accounts the Duke had managed to retrieve two whereas I had directly retrieved the Boots, and assisted with the Helm, Cuirass, Shield and Mace.

“As the Nine wills!” the Duke cried out, his voice almost straining with the effort of the cry and I felt the surge of adrenaline as he reached behind to the sword sheathed down his spine, dragging it free and holding it aloft.

“Et Novem vult!” Roared the newly arrived knights but I barely registered the words. My eyes were instead drawn to the blade in the Duke’s hands, a blade that was swirling and glowing with incredible energies.
It was longer than Sunchild, but not as long as the Light of Dawn or Falid’s greatsword. Sitting in the somewhat uncomfortable length of a bastard sword it was obviously designed for use with two hands while dismounted and one handed on horseback for additional reach but the most obvious feature was the fact that it was no ordinary weapon. Ethereal lights flowed up the blade in the rippling swirls of the forged metal and the hilt appeared to be crafted from something akin to silver or platinum. In the Duke’s hands it was almost an elemental force upon the senses, an overwhelming, throbbing power that crashed into the mind like a storm.

That it was a Relic was not in doubt but it felt different to the others that we had encountered. All of the other relics seemed capable of breaching the clouds themselves with their purity and radiance and while this was obviously powerful, I found myself gritting my teeth in a sudden and overwhelming desire to claim the blade as my own. It had a hypnotic pull that the vampire was suddenly resisting, which was in stark contrast to the gnawing pain in the back of the mind when I gazed upon the other relics.

A quick glance to my sides showed the grim faces on Viconia and Alexi and my suspicions increased as they too appeared uneasy at the Sword’s presence. As the gathered crowds cheered and applauded, especially with the collection of halberd wielding Men-at-arms revealed the presence of the Greaves myself and those closest to me remained silent.

Lowering the sword into a casual, heroic appearing stance with the flat of the glowing blade resting on a shoulder, the Duke turned and regarded me with the same expressionless mask of a face.

“Sir Desin?” He said carefully with a voice as cold as ice. “There are things we need to discuss.”

It was impossible not to recognise the command despite the pleasant way it was framed and we all moved quickly after that. Leaving the Men-at-arms within Carodus’ care and dismissing the Knights, Viconia, Alexi and myself escorted the Duke and his companions out of sight into the main building. While it didn’t take long I felt myself growing increasingly uncomfortable from the silence from the three nobles and the sensation of intense scrutiny every step of the way. The Duke seemed to refuse to look in any other direction than straight ahead, while Sir Wirile and the other as-yet unknown knight appeared disgusted at everything around them. The silent, unintroduced knight especially appeared a combination of insulted and full of loathing, walking about with a silken handkerchief pressed to his nose as though trying to ward off the plague.

The personal discomfort that I felt was only further increased as we entered the half completed priory and had, in no uncertain terms been told that I, and I alone was to speak with the Duke. Viconia’s expression was unreadable to most but I could sense her discomfort and Alexi’s wasn’t much different as the door to my private study closed behind me. All three of us were incredibly wary, and my own unease was not helped that I suddenly found myself in a room with three noblemen.

Slowly moving around the desk in the centre of the room, the Duke appeared extremely out of place to say the least. Between his expensive clothing, armour and equipment, let alone the Sword of Arkay still strapped down his spine he was a far cry from the half restored wooden walls, the desk carved from locally made wood and a chair that creaked as soon as he rested a hand upon it.

“I am aggrieved.” He said simply, his eyes moving about the room and for the first time since his arrival I could see emotion on his features.

“My Lord?”

A flush was working its way up from his armoured bevor and his eyes were dark in his skull. “Aggrieved. Pained. Distressed. Surely you understand these terms?”
“I do, My Lord.”

“Then what possible excuse do you have for the state you have greeted me?” he gestured about himself to the half-finished priory and beyond. “How could you have possibly considered that this was in any way adequate for Pelinal’s heir?”

There was a time, a year or so before that moment that I would have simply straightened my back further, put my heels together and simply replied “Yes Sir, No Sir,” for as long as required. As unnerving as the situation was with the amount of authority that was present in the room with me, facing down the likes of daedra and vampires made such things trivial in comparison.

“In respect my Lord, this Order has been founded for less than a month and a half. Those who wear the Red Diamond have only done so since then and all things considered we have been extremely lucky with what we have.”

“Oh yes.” Replied the third knight. Unlike the Duke and Sir Wirile his armour was almost entirely chainmail, with only a breastplate covering his torso. He was however far more heavily covered in signs of his wealth and status, rings adorning most of his fingers and every surface of his breastplate gilded in some fashion or another. “We have all seen ‘what you have’ and you should be disgusted.”

“We haven’t been introduced.” I said with far more confidence than I felt, taking a moment to make note of his signet rings and any other signs of his titles and status and making the gamble that he wasn’t as high ranking as the Duke. “I am Sir Desin, otherwise known as the Hero of Kvatch and the Champion of Anvil.”

The subtle barb was enough to leave the noble almost snarling but he kept his own anger in check by the narrowest of margin. “I am Sir Denos Pierlon Jaseton; Baron of Norvulk.”

My feeling of vindication was lessened despite the fury on the Baron’s face as the Duke pulled a silken cloth from his armour and laid it on the surface of my desk and began removing his gauntlets. Duke de’Leorion’s face had returned to the passive mask that he had worn but there was something in the way that he carefully removed his gauntlets and leather gloves that set me on edge.

“This Order is a disgrace.” He said as the first gauntlet was placed on the cloth as though the desk itself was tainted in some way. “Your knights are an affront to every Order in Tamriel. Your Men-at-arms, when they are men at least are by far the most ill-kempt, slovenly individuals I have ever laid eyes on. You allow beasts and other lesser races to wear the symbols of the Divines and worst of all it seems you allow them to consider themselves to be soldiers.”

“They are soldiers.” My words were practically a growl and I could feel my flesh tightening no matter how hard I tried to keep the vampire in check.

His second gauntlet slammed into the table hard enough that I felt it through my boots and in that moment I honestly believed that he was about to draw the Sword of Arkay. “They are NOT! You have committed blasphemy and desecrated the Order of the Nine by your actions and I am thankful that you haven’t been in command any longer lest the damage be too great to repair! Women do not belong on a battlefield! They are for siring heirs and warming a bed, and cannot and will not be equal to men in combat. The lesser races; whether they be pig, cat or lizard, are animals and are utterly incapable of understanding the notions of honour and chivalry. Only through the nobility and grace of mankind can the world be saved from being plunged into eternal night!”

If all my years within the Legion had taught me anything it was when to be quiet and hold my tongue. Despite his anger and passion and the fact that he and the other two noblemen were directing it in full force at me I stood as still as a stone, my feet placed on the floor in such a way that it could
not be mistaken as being at attention. I also somehow, with increasingly great difficulty managed to keep my face blank and none of my own building anger to be seen as the way the other two were watching me made me feel as though they were waiting for me to react. There was something about the whole situation that reminded me of the few times that I had been in front of Legate Quintillius or Tribune Herana for various reasons.

It was a set up. A trap and while I didn’t fully understand their reasoning an identified trap was one you could avoid and so I stood in silence as the Duke continued raving for a few more minutes before running out of steam. He stood on the far side of the desk as it was flanked by the other two and I stared him down, refusing to budge despite the vast disparity in our rank.

“The Elder Council has elected me to be the Knight-Commander of the Order of the Nine.” His voice still contained a quaver from his outburst and he was obviously flushed as he returned to speaking normally. “I understand that you and your… ‘knights’ have been responsible for retrieving the other six relics and that is to be applauded. However, as you have not personally retrieved these relics and have been unable or unwilling to wield them, then such an honour falls to me.”

My face remained blank but I replied with another simple ‘Yes, my Lord’ as I knew that it was the best and safest response at the time. Sir Wirile however tilted his scarred expression in my direction as though he had been waiting for the moment to speak. “Your name holds a great weight, Sir Desin. Within Cyrodill at least. Several members of the Elder Council ensured that your actions and deeds were to be rewarded which is why you have been made the second in command.”

The Duke didn’t have any reservations at this point of showing how he felt and was practically growling like a starved animal. “Their authority, especially after seeing the horrendous state of this place and the numerous grievous mistakes on your part is the only reason why I am unable to strip everything from you.”

Every thought and part of my will was focussed on remaining impassive and calm despite every fibre of y being demanding blood. I had originally felt relieved that the responsibilities of the Order would no longer be mine but after having all of my efforts and those of the men and women who had given so much already I was increasingly angry. I held my tongue as much as it was almost physically hurting me, and all nervousness was now replaced with a smouldering rage that the vampire was trying to use as a method of release.

Dragging the chair out of the way and pausing for a moment as though he was about to sit, the Duke thought better of it and remained standing, clasping his hands behind his back. “What were your intentions with this Order?”

This was an answer I had readily available despite how my every thought was bent towards keeping my face as impassive and blank as possible. “Train a number of cavalry and field as many infantry as I could supply and equip until such time as Umaril was found.”

“It appears you truly are a fool. The Unfeathered one is dead; banished to the bounds of Oblivion and incapable of returning.”

“And the attacks on the Church my Lord?” I said with my voice growing as cold as the atmosphere within the room.

His gaze didn’t waver and while I refused to back down I could see a pair of hunter’s eyes framed within his bearded face. “Heretics and daedra worshippers. Once this Order has been turned into something of use we will hunt down and burn such a taint from the land. There is no great conspiracy, no returning daedra and certainly nothing beyond the evils of women and beastfolk behind these criminal acts.”
I could no longer ignore my mind’s hissed warnings, or the fact that every time the hilt of the Sword of Arkay revealed itself from behind his head my gaze was drawn to it. While I knew that he and presumably Sir Wirile and Sir Jaseton believed what he said was true, Viconia and I especially knew better. Their attitudes and the strange yearning desire to claim the Sword had put me on edge even without their constant attempts to gain a reaction from me.

“Very well, my Lord.”

Silence fell between the four of us and the Duke stood still, his eyes slowly moving from my head to my toes and taking note of every detail of my armour. His expression was unreadable but I could see the way that he lingered over certain portions of my armour, especially the breastplate and daedroth scales. Unlike his armour and those of the two knights flanking us my armour was battered and dented, showing signs of damage and combat that very few people would have experienced. Their armour’s were signs of their titles and accomplishments as much as mine were, but theirs stemmed from wealth and noble birth rather than trials, hardship and blood.

“The other Relics.” He said after some time. “Where are they?”

“Secured in the Undercroft, my Lord.”

Crawling up my spine, the look that the three men suddenly wore made me tense and the vampire growled in the depths of my mind. Despite the situation the charged tension in the air was potent and I found myself reading for an attack while struggling my body to remain still, especially when Sir Wirile’s hand came to rest on the pommel of his sword in a relaxed gesture that appeared everything but.

“Very good, at least you can do something right.” Looking between the two other nobles, the Duke gave a slight grin of triumph before giving me a smile that reminded me of a slaughterfish, or Viconia about to commit some form of violence on some hapless individual. “The Relics are pivotal to our efforts and my claim to them will not be denied and the Knights of the Nine will become the premier Knightly Order within all of Tamriel. Have taxes been collected?”

Caught off guard from his sudden question, I felt myself start and twitch before I could control my expression again. “Taxes, my Lord?”

“By the Nine, what kind of Noble are you? Taxes! Septims! Money that will be required to operate an organisation of this magnitude!”

“The Church is providing a percentage of their tithes towards maintenance and operating the Order. Once a month a caravan will arrive bearing the relevant amounts.”

The news seemed to please the three men, and their reactions somehow put me even further on edge when I thought that I couldn’t become any more concerned. “That’s a start, but judging from your words you haven’t collected any from the… squatters here.”

“The people here are craftsmen and labourers, otherwise they are men at arms. There are a few with families but they all contribute to the Order.”

“Then they can contribute by making donations to their faith.” I couldn’t bring myself to believe that the ‘donations’ that the Duke spoke of would be voluntary and I found myself gritting my teeth that were increasingly tingly. “Cedrccer, see to it.”

Sir Wirile’s grip on the pommel of his sword turned into an amused tapping and the smile that creased his face was not pleasant. “Your will be done.”
“As for you ‘Sir’ Desin, you will take us to the Relics.”

Between their reactions, their opinions and my gut feelings I felt myself stiffen and a decision had formed in my mind even without needing to consider it. “I must apologise my Lord, but that is not possible at this time.”

More than just Sir Wirile’s hand tightened on his sword and I found myself itching to grip Sunchild at my hip. The Duke’s expression turned dark, then cold and while there was no outwards sign of it for the moment there was anger building under the surface.

“Why not?”

“The undercroft is secured behind a door and after we secured the Relics last month it… broke.”

“Broke? Surely something as simple as a door shouldn’t impede the progress of such an ‘esteemed’ individual as yourself? Take a few of the animals you call ‘soldiers’ and bash it down.”

“I would have already done so, my Lord, but the door is enchanted. This entire building is over two hundred years old and has been abandoned for most of that time, but the magicka is powerful. None of those here have any experience with magicka and I have been in liaison with the Mage’s Guild for assistance.”

Despite the lie, it flowed off my tongue as easily as breathing and I felt myself relax as the three men accepted it. The undercroft and the door was enchanted, and still just as powerful as it had been when Viconia and I had discovered it but the only thing keeping the door closed was Sir Amiel’s signet ring attached to a cord around my throat. I didn’t fully understand my own reasoning but I knew at that moment that I was not going to let these men access to the relics until I knew more.

“Finally, you speak some sense.” Clicking his tongue in thought, the Duke looked between me and Baron Jaseton. “We will no longer need to deal with the likes of the Guilds but it pleases me that you don’t affiliate with such people. Denos, how about your pet wizard?”

“Mayvraud is an illusionist, but I will dispatch him to make an assessment.”

“Excellent.” His attentions turned back to myself and he couldn’t have made it any more poignant without holding a loaded crossbow at my chest. “I want full records and details of all finances and expenditure provided to me before last light.”

“I shall send for the scribe, my Lord.”

For a moment it appeared as though he was going to speak but instead he straightened a little more and turned his back to me. “You are dismissed.”

The sword of Arkay was in full sight, secured to his spine with leather straps in its leather sheath and I found myself almost salivating at the sight. There was definitely something unusual about the sword and I had to physically drag myself and my gaze away from it to leave the room. It was almost impossible not to see the expressions and half concealed smiles of the other two nobles as I pulled the door open and stepped through into the main hall.

As I made my way out of the building I could feel the writhing of my cheekbones and teeth under my skin and struggled not to turn, enter the room and drag the sword away from the Duke. The vampire desired it more than blood and it was only this thought and the vampire’s natural inclination of self-preservation that stayed my hand. I knew that I was probably more than capable of killing everyone, including the men and women of the Order and while normally inclined for such bloodshed, my vampiric instincts were also trying to make sense of everything.
Alexi and Viconia had not gone far, and judging by their expressions they, and anyone else within earshot had heard a majority of what had occurred. Viconia looked ready to storm into the priory with Dragonbane in hand and deal with the three noble’s in her own manner, and while Alexi was smiling there was a shadow behind it.

“It went well I take it?”

“Define ‘well’?”

“You didn’t kill anyone and you haven’t been arrested, so I would consider that a victory.”

As I stepped out into the sunlight, I tried and failed to ignore the collection of people crowding just outside of the priory’s gatehouse. Many had gathered to see what would result from the arrival of the duke and his entourage and the fact that the Order had changed commanders but at that moment I felt bitter and on edge. “How much of that did you hear?”

“Enough that I want to know why you haven’t killed them.” Viconia growled. “Want me to?”

“As satisfying as it would be, I don’t think it’ll solve anything.” I replied.

Alexi nodded, his cheerful expression at odds to the chill of his tone. “Kaius is right, and from here we need to tread very carefully. This is now the battlefield of politics and we are very much at war.”

“Glad to know that I’ve gotten myself into a fight that I am utterly inexperienced in.”

“You did well.” Viconia’s voice was just as cold as Alexi’s and they both shared a mutual nod of agreement. “They were baiting you and you didn’t take it.”

“I think you scared them Kaius.”

Moving through the crowd that parted as we left the priory, I glanced at Alexi and saw that he was being serious for once. “How the hell did I scare them?”

“Believe it or not, but you can be extremely intimidating sometimes. You have this way of staring at people that makes you look like you are going to… I don’t know, rip them apart and eat them or something.” Only Viconia would have seen my sudden apprehension but Alexi was too busy looking ahead to see my surge of unease. “It will be useful with dealing with de’Leorion and his ilk. Trust me, I know all about their kind and they are petrified of someone like you who has gotten to where he is by skill and talent instead of birth.”

“As long as they don’t see how terrified I am then we will be fine then.”

Both he and Viconia laughed lightly but none of us were in pleasant moods. “We need to take this very carefully. You are a threat to them, and while I don’t know what they hope to accomplish, having the likes of Cedrccer here means it isn’t going to be good.”

“I told them that the Relics are locked in the undercroft and the door is broken.”

“Good.” he nodded. “I’ll tell the others to keep their mouths shut.”

Stopping in place in a portion of the tents that was for the moment quiet and lacking people, I gave him a pointed stare. “I half expected you to want us to throw our support behind the Duke.”

Alexi chewed on his lip and carefully looked around us. “Before he arrived yes, that’s exactly what I would have advised but something’s wrong with this whole situation.”
“Besides the fact that the Sword is… tainted somehow?” Viconia’s expression was that of someone sucking on a piece of lemon and the fact her hand was on Dragonbane told me all that I needed to know.

“Glad I’m not the only one that could feel that.” Rubbing at his face for a moment he used the metal creases of his gauntlets to scratch under his jaw. “But that’s not the only problem. Most of the knights that arrived here are from the Host of the Horn, and Cedrccer is one of their Knight-Captains. He’s not someone we want to get on the bad side of and their order is not what you would consider to be a typical one.”

“How well do you know him?”

“Well enough to say that if you shake hands with him, ensure you count your fingers afterwards. The man is a snake in every sense of the word and is one of the most renowned tournament fighters in High Rock and Hammerfell. He’s got more victories under his belt than I do and that’s saying something in itself, but most of those victories have been in suspicious circumstances. Three years ago in Daggerfall he was proclaimed tournament champion after two of the finalists came down with bouts of food poisoning and another suffered an accident when his opponent used a tipped lance by mistake. That’s only one tournament out of many and the rest of his Knights aren’t much different.”

“So we’re in deep shit?”

He nodded, only once but once was enough. “Very. The Host of the Horn are a band of thugs and legitimised strongarms. Oblivion take them, they are known for extorting the locals.”

“So we’re going to expect to see the like here?”

“Indeed. There’s enough of them that they equal our number of knights. Unfortunately, there are going to be many in our ranks that will obey and join them. After all, de’Leorion is a Duke, and now our commanding officer.” He paused, his face going slack for a moment before having another, closer look at the tents around us. “We will need to be very, very careful from this moment onwards. No talk of murder or anything that can be used against us. They will be looking for every opportunity to remove you and the threat that you represent and we can’t afford to give them the opportunity.”

“Agreed.” All of my fears, concerns and anxiety was churning through my stomach and I almost felt as though I was going to vomit. “Why can’t things be as simple as going to battle?”

“The world would be less interesting.” Viconia chuckled under her breath, one of her deep, husky laughs that never boded well for anyone. “Looks like some of our new acquaintances are getting settled in.”

Following the direction of her gaze, I saw a pair of knights being escorted by their Men-at-arms and others who were obviously their personal servants moving about as though taking in the sights. Their laughter was loud over subdued nature of the priory and the unusual lack of construction going on and my annoyance grew as they seemed to enjoy the sport of mocking everyone they came across.

There were not many people in the tents at the moment, most were crowding around the larger concentrations of the new arrivals but around a corner a familiar figure appeared and I felt myself grow tense with recognition. Of all the individuals capable of further complicating things, Detane was on top of the list.

As one of the members of our group who wasn’t a knight, Man-at-Arms or directly affiliated he had been absent for most of the morning and in fact this was the first time that I had seen him since our
brief chat the day before. As he always did he was moving about with a purpose and ignoring everyone and anything in his way as though they were insignificant, at least until he turned the corner and caught sight of the Knights.

Of the reactions that was typical of the short Breton, freezing in place for a moment before turning as quickly as he had appeared was not what I was expecting, and was unusual enough that it caught the attention of the two knights. It was also impossible not to notice their moment of recognition, their conversation stopping in mid breath as their expressions turned to shock.

“You there! Hold!”

For a brief second it appeared that Detane was about to run but after a second’s indecision he ground his heels into the ground as the small collection of Men-at-arms moved to surround him. There were only five of them, dressed in mail and blue and silver surcoats flapping as they obeyed the gestures of their lieges but they moved quickly.

“The divines be praised.” One of them exclaimed, his face breaking out into a smile that was not at all pleasant. “Isn’t it amazing who you run into when travelling the world?”

Both of the knights, like their accompanying men-at-arms were dressed in the same pattern of heraldry with only a few minor variations. Besides the symbols or marks of their own noble families and heritage, their heraldry matched that of Baron Jaseton. “Indeed it is.” Scorn and arrogance dripped from every word of the second knight as he made a show of looking Detane up and down. “It has been quite a while Varden.”

Instead of the usual arrogance and disdain for everyone and everything around him, Detane was standing as still as a statue and not reacting. While we were not far away and watching with growing confusion at the knight’s actions and his reactions, he was facing away from us and we couldn’t see his face.

“So this is the darkened corner of the world that you have slunk to. Looks like Tamriel is a small world after all.”

Detane remained silent and unnoticed to the knights and their accompanying servants Viconia, Alexi and I had shared a glance and began making our way closer.

“You look good scum. Too good in fact.” A mailed fist came down on his shoulder and gripped Detane tight and yet he didn’t react, standing still and keeping his head lowered to the ground. Without needing to see or hear anything else, this uncharacteristic reaction made me feel even more concerned, even before the first knight smashed a fist into Detane’s face.

The solid blow rocked Detane’s head back and if not for the grip on his tunic he would’ve sagged at the knees and collapsed. Even before he had begun to fall the two knights had unleashed a flurry of blows, smashing him in the chest and stomach and punching him again in the face before I reacted.

“Enough!” I roared, bursting into a sprint and seeing the way that the handful of men-at-arms tensed and dropped hands to weapons at the approach of Viconia, Alexi and myself. The five soldiers moved to put themselves between us and their lords and the now-bleeding Detane. “What in Oblivion’s name is going on?”

There was no deference from either the two knights or from their servants and one of the men-at-arms had begun dragging his sword free before the tip of Alexi’s sword was pressed under his chin.
It had been the fastest I had ever seen the sword-champion move and his skill was not lost on any of those who witnessed it.

With blood staining his mailed fist, the first knight tilted his head and smiled at me in such a way that made me want to rip his jaw from his skull. “It appears that slum has an infestation, and we are doing our civil duty in removing it.”

“Not like that you don’t.” I growled as I burned a hole into the soul of the soldier who stepped closer to me despite the threat of Alexi’s sword at his comrade’s throat. “That man belongs to me.”

“Really?” One second Detane was lolling about in the knight’s grip, the next he fell as he was let go. Only his groan of pain and the way that he rolled over showed that he was still conscious. “Then it appears that this place is as decadent and corrupt as we expected if such scum exists in the employ of people like you.”

Whether it was the stress of the morning and everything that had happened or not didn’t matter, but the two men-at-arms closest to me stopped in place and visibly began shaking as my will pressed into their minds. After everything the vampire was close enough to the surface that I could taste the scent of blood on the air and it was intoxicating, although not as much as taking some of these individuals down a few levels.

“That man has proven his loyalty, and unlike yourselves he isn’t in the habit of assaulting others without cause or reason.” Another stare sent shivers down the spines of all looking at me and I was struggling to keep my emotions in check. “Nor do they impede a Knight-Captain or superior officers.”

The recognition was slower in the two knights but the men-at-arms each took a step back with the exception of the one with Alexi’s sword against his flesh. He especially was looking increasingly worried and audibly sighed with relief when the blade finally lowered.

“What crime deserves this as punishment?” Viconia hissed with all the presence of a deadly viper, almost willing them to make a move that would allow her to butcher them where they stood.

Unfortunately for her, the two knights were either oblivious to her threat or were too arrogant or foolish and ignored it. “Murder.” Said the second with considerable relish, turned and scuffing an armoured toe in the dirt at Detane. “Of a woman and her two children.”

“Is that it?”

More than one set of eyes widened at Viconia’s flippant comment and the men-at-arms stepped aside after several moments thoughtful consideration. With Viconia and Alexi flanking me I stepped closer until Detane’s body was almost at my feet where he was trying to gather his thoughts and stem the bleeding from his face.

“Who are you?” I said very simply, looking between the two knights and curling my lips in distaste.

“Sir Steglon of Norvulk. Esquire to Baron Jaseton.”

The second knight stiffened as I turned to him in turn and he coughed lightly, clearing his throat. “Sir Tilile. Also an esquire to Baron Jaseton.”

“I am Sir Desin, and as I have said this man is mine and there are laws about such actions. Assault is punishable by flogging I believe.”

At my back, Alexi caught the cue and I could almost hear his expression from his words alone.
“Indeed it is sir. Knights and nobles are no exception.”

Both knights finally lost their arrogance and realised that they were in a situation that their titles and rank could not protect them. They turned slightly pale and Sir Tilile appeared as though he was now sweating from more than just the heat.

Steglon was a different matter and while suddenly nervous he still had an insubordinate streak deep in his being. “Do you understand the kind of man that you have in your employ, sir?”

“Maybe you should explain yourself and your words.” I growled.

Taking the bait but slowly becoming more deferential, he made a vague gesture to Detane who was groggily picking himself up from the dirt despite the blood pouring from his busted lips and nose. “This ‘man’ you claim to be your own is a murderer. By the lords of Wayrest he has been banished, exiled from High Rock as punishment for his crimes.”

“If he was a murderer, then why was he not hanged?” Viconia asked coldly.

“If he had been an ordinary murderer he would have hung, but his crime was far worse than normal. His victims were kin; his wife and children to be exact.” Sparing a glance to the kneeling Detane I saw the cold expression on his face but it was not one of anger or hatred as the knight continued speaking. There was nothing in his expression in the slightest.

“So he was banished instead?”

“Indeed.” Sir Steglon nodded and went to spit on either the ground or Detane but stopped himself. “His face was marked and he has been declared to be an outlaw; to be hunted for all the days of his life and for all goodly citizens of High Rock to render him harm if able.”

Still, there was no reaction from Detane but I could smell the fear and sorrow on him with my vampirism. “We are not in High Rock, and if there are any attacks or further assaults on anyone here I will take great pleasure in enacting Imperial law.” My threat hung in the air and both the knights before me understood perfectly. “Detane, on your feet.”

Staggering upwards, the short Breton looked around at the collection of men and women, knights and servants alike but there was none of his usual attitude. He was as cold as a glacier and as emotionless as a stone as his pain and injuries seemed forgotten.

Only when Detane moved between us and away from the huddle of knights and men-at-arms did I stop my glare at the two knights who had assaulted him. He was still dabbing ineffectively at the blood from his face and now hunched over from the blows he had taken to the body.

“Now what?” Alexi hissed to me as we escorted the short Breton away from where the servants of Baron Jaseton stared in sullen silence.

“Now?” I said simply, sparing a glance to Detane who looked as though all the fight and will to live had left his body. “Now we go and look after each other.”
“Things could be going a lot better.”

My amused snort wasn’t lost to Viconia and Alexi as we sat around the table, briefly lifting their gazes in my direction before returning to our individual pieces of equipment scattered in front of us. All three of us had our armour entirely disassembled and piece by piece we were going through the extensive process of cleaning and maintaining them.

“Don’t just snort at me Kaius, you know exactly what I mean.”

“I know.” My gaze lifted up to Viconia and the deepening scowl that she was wearing. “Everything that we have fought and bled for is already unravelling and it hasn’t even been a week yet.”

Though he tried to hide it, I couldn’t help but notice the way that Alexi lightly touched his scarred cheek when I mentioned bleeding. “As always, Detane is a problem.” He said almost absentmindedly.

“But one we can deal with.” I lifted up one of my vambraces that had a fresh series of scratches across it from sword practice and frowned at them. “How is he going?”

“Hasn’t spoken more than a handful of words since getting beaten up. I almost prefer the complaining Detane that we are accustomed to.”

The silence that fell was leaden and I stared at the young sword master. “Why don’t you just say what you are thinking?”

“I’m not thinking of anything.” He replied, running a length of chainmail across his breastplate and scouring it clean of grime and oiling it at the same time.

“Bullshit Alexi. You’re wondering why we haven’t sent him on his way.”

The repetitive motions of his hands ceased and he sighed loudly. “Fine. Why is he still here?”

“Because he’s one of us.”

Viconia made a sound that a cross between a snort and a chuckle and rolled her eyes. “Doubtful mrannd’ssinss.”

“I didn’t consider that a convicted murderer is ‘one of us,’ Kaius…” Alexi stopped and trailed off as he saw the expressions on our faces and our mutual amusement. “Gods damn it, you two don’t make things easy.”

“We’ve all got our dark secrets, even if they aren’t entirely secrets.” Grinning while lifting up Dragonbane to inspect its length, Viconia gave Alexi a haughty look that wasn’t subtle in its teasing.

“There’s definitely some things you two could have gotten away with not telling me and there’s definitely a few things that I would have slept a lot easier not knowing about.”

“Like our sordid pasts?” I teased in return.
“Yes, and fine, you make your point. Detane isn’t the only murderer in our ranks, especially with the two of you.”

Viconia had lost her jovial attitude and had turned serious, her wolf-yellow eyes narrowing slightly in his direction. “We’re all killers, Alexi. Only what surfacers consider to be ‘civilised’ separates the reasons for killing into ‘good’ and ‘evil’.

“Vicky… you burned a man alive.”

“Only after he and his son violated me.”

“Have we found out anything new about Detane?” I interrupted, partially to save Alexi from his unease and embarrassment.

Gritting his teeth and trying not to glance at Viconia who was now staring at him with a very particular stare of hers, Alexi shrugged and turned his attentions fully to me. It was taking a surprising amount of effort as Viconia had a way of looking at someone that could make hot blooded men quivering with desire, while also simultaneously leaving them feeling very disturbed and terrified. I usually likened it to a look that a spider would give to an insect trapped in its web.

“Not much more but it is certainly interesting. I asked around the Duke’s entourage and it seems that Detane is one of the most renowned killers in Highrock, especially in the Kingdom of Wayrest.”

“What makes him so renowned?”

Alexi continued looking at me despite Viconia’s question and I could see out of the corner of my eye that she was now truly playing with him. “Killing one’s kin in Highrock is one of the most terrible of crimes, but it also appears that Detane used to be a Baron. Not only did he kill his wife and his two children but he was caught in the act by several witnesses. His title was the only real reason why he wasn’t simply hung and as such death was not deemed enough of a punishment.”

“A Baron. Gods we have attracted all sorts here.” I continued rubbing polish and oil into the vambrace but continued listening intently. “So they cut up his face as a sign of his crimes and banished him from Highrock to live out the rest of his days as an outcast. It explains how he can fight so well.”

“That’s not what really gets to me though.” Alexi’s motions with the chainmail stopped and with it the oiled scraping. “I haven’t been able to confirm exactly what or how it happened but everyone I have spoken to has agreed that the way that he killed his wife and children were horrific. Not only that, but before the title was stripped from him he used to be the Baron of Norvulk.”

This caught my attention and I saw how serious Alexi was being. So did Viconia judging by the way that her teasing expression softened and her brows furrowed.

“Norvulk? Isn’t that the Title of Baron Jaseton?”

He nodded and I found myself chewing my lip. “Yes. Baron Jaeston acquired the title after Detane was convicted. He originally held the title of some of the lands adjacent to Detane’s but when he was stripped of everything, Jaeston was handed it on a silver platter.”

“Shar curse the politics of the surface.” Viconia muttered to herself. “Is all of Tamriel this complicated?”

“This is nothing.” I replied, almost chuckling to myself. “But if I’m honest, Highrock is by far the most complicated of all the provinces.”
“It still leaves us with a disgraced, child killing baron among our number, one who is a walking target for all of these newcomers.”

“He’s not a child-killer.” Viconia stated suddenly and flatly, stopping in mid motion as she registered our attentions turn to her. “What?”

“There were almost a dozen witnesses from what I heard, and he even confessed.”

I looked at Alexi. “He spoke to you?”

“Well…” He paused and looked between the two of us. “I went to speak of him before doing my rounds with the others and he wouldn’t say a word. He’s been in that tent for two days now but didn’t say anything more than ‘it’s all true’ before I left.”

“Sort of sounds like a confession to me.”

“I still don’t believe it.” Viconia replied. “He may have done it physically but he’s not someone for murdering a child.”

“You seem really certain.”

She looked at Alexi with little more than a smirk on her face. “Of course I am certain. He’s a stunted, insufferable, arrogant, malicious, little man but I can guarantee you he doesn’t have it in him to intentionally harm a child, let alone one of his flesh and blood.” Carefully she lifted her arms, twisting them back and forth in the candlelight to reveal the network of scars that covered almost every centimetre of skin but remained mostly hidden due to her complexion. “I suffered through countless agonies and tortures because I couldn’t bring myself to hurt an infant and there is very little that I would find distasteful in this world. Trust me when I say this; if I couldn’t do it, then he couldn’t.”

After the moments pregnant pause, Alexi coughed into his fist and tried not to stare at any of Viconia’s exposed flesh in morbid fascination. “The more I find out about you Viconia, the more terrified I become.”

We all laughed but there was a serious edge to it with an undercurrent of unease. Alexi especially was still extremely sombre. “What are we going to do with him though?”

“Keep him here and look after him. Despite everything he has proved himself, and besides that he’s a greater danger to himself than anything else.”

“How is he…”

“He’s trying to get himself killed.”

Cutting him off in mid-sentence, I saw the way that Alexi’s mouth opened and then snapped shut. “Are you certain?”

“Unfortunately… Very much so. Ever since he joined us there’s been a few instances that I didn’t really understand at the time, but I do now. A couple of days ago I challenged him over his attitude and actions, especially with goading Mazoga. I wasn’t entirely serious when I asked him whether he was looking at killing himself but his reaction spoke more than words ever could. I think that the only reason why he joined and went into Blackmarsh with us was that he was expecting to get killed in the process.”

“Kaius… It was a gods-damned miracle that we all came out of that. Injuries and everything aside,
that entire journey was suicidal and I still don’t know how we managed to succeed.”

Again his fingers lightly pressed into his scarred cheek and I smiled faintly. “Exactly. From the outset we all had very little chance of coming back alive and that’s what Detane wanted. His goading of all of us, especially Mazoga is he’s trying to get one of us to fight and kill him.”

“If he seeks death, then why doesn’t he simply commit suicide?”

Both Alexi and I shrugged at Viconia’s question. “In most of the faiths; especially in that of the Nine, suicide is a sin. An especially grave one at that. He is already disgraced and condemned and any hope he has is redemption through battle.”

Viconia chewed on a lip. “I can’t understand your religions. On one hand they are so weak and forgiving, and on the other they are brutal and harsh and don’t appear that much different to the worship of the spider queen.”

“That’s the church of the Nine for you.” I muttered. “Half filled with righteous zealots. Half filled with passive martyrs.”

“Which half do you fall into Kaius?”

I couldn’t help but grin at Alexi’s comment and raised an eyebrow. “The kind that quietly goes about his business and doesn’t wait for divine intervention for assistance. It wasn’t the gods that retrieved the relics.”

Rising to her feet, Viconia stretched and I could hear the way that her spine crunched. “As you two seem hells-bent on discussing theological matters, I need to stretch my legs.” Lightly, a hand trailed across my back as she moved past me towards the dirt track leading between the tents. “I won’t be long.”

As the crunch of gravel made itself heard over the sounds of the tent village preparing for the night, I placed the vambraces down and reached for one of my pauldrons. “I wish I knew what we were supposed to do now that the relics are all gathered.” I said and Alexi picked up on my weary sigh.

“I don’t think anyone, yourself included actually expected for all of them to be gathered in their entirety. Nothing like this has ever happened before.”

“And yet here we sit, waiting with our thumbs in our arses waiting for… something. Divine intervention maybe?”

“Stranger things have happened.” A half-filled jar of tallow rattled on the table as Alexi scooped out some onto a cloth and began buffing his leather under layers. “Something will happen though. Whether it be fate or whatever you like to call it, the entire Church of the Nine is seeking out the source of the attacks. Even if the Duke isn’t.”

“No. He and the others are too interested in shaking down everyone in sight for septims.” I could feel the roughness of the polishing cloth under my fingertips as rubbed down the metal plate until it slowly began to shine a blueish-black tinge under the day’s dust and grime. “I don’t know how long I will be able to keep the other relics locked away.”

“For as long as you have to.” He growled, dropping his voice into a conspiratorial whisper. “Lose the key or something. At least we know that Jaeston’s wizard isn’t able to break into the vault and I don’t think any of them trust or like wizards enough…”

In the deepening gloom a sudden shout of surprise and pain echoed, followed by a series of
impressively loud curses. Alexi and I stopped in mid motion, staring off into the direction of where they had come from with mild apprehension even as his face curled in amusement.

“Someone’s having a fun night.” He remarked, snorting under his breath before his face hardened at the unmistakable sound of breaking pottery and splintering wood as a young child began screaming and crying.

What truly caught our attention and made us kick ourselves to our feet was he drawn out scream from what was undeniably a woman’s throat and one filled with nothing but fear.

“Damn it, we left Vicky unattended again.”

Snatching Sunchild from the table and nearly spilling the rest of the contents across the dusty soil, I gave Alexi a brief glance before moving in the direction of the commotion. “When have you ever heard Viconia scream?”

His expression turned into his usual jovial one as though he was laughing at the entire world and everything in it and the smirk was almost a physical force. “Well… There was this one night where you two were sharing that tavern room next to mine…”

“You know what I mean.” Quickly, and despite his attitude he and I were moving with purpose, shifting through the tent lines in the direction of the commotion while moving through the gaggle of curious and concerned people. The screaming had turned into a muted collection of sobs that only I could hear over the growing background noise and I didn’t need my vampirism to hear the child. It took us only a few seconds to move between the table and the tent that was the source of the commotion and it was obvious that Viconia was part of it.

Bursting inside the tent we were greeted with a shambles; the handful of personal items scattered about where a crude table and set of shelves had been knocked over and broken and everything else in disarray. With nothing more than a swaying lantern hanging from the tent’s arch there was poor light but the size and shape of the tent itself ensured that anyone smaller than Falid could stand comfortably and have a surprising among of space to themselves. What it did provide us was a perfect sight to the others within the tent, a woman in her early to mid-thirties huddling on the wicker and straw cot that passed for her bed, cradling a young boy crying into her bosom and Viconia and a tall, well-built man standing nose to nose.

The woman who owned the tent was dishevelled, her hair ruffled and I could see the fresh, glowing redness of her cheek from where she had been struck and it was also obvious that her clothes had been ripped and damaged. In my eyes the evidence was already good enough for me to understand what happened, even if not for the fact that the man was literally caught with his pants down, aided by the fact that Viconia had a very determined, unwavering grip on certain parts of his anatomy.

“Get help.” I said as simply and coldly as I could manage, glancing between the woman cradling her son and Alexi as he simply nodded and ducked back out of the tent. Viconia had an expression on her face that I had seen a few times before, and one of which was during the battle against the vampires of Glenvar. As for the man in the tent his face was a comical mix of shock and agony that only men could truly feel, especially how Viconia’s grip had left his body struggling to decide between folding at the knees or lifting itself into the sky on the tips of his toes. Judging by the awkwardness of his stance I guessed that it had decided to do both at the same time.

“Viconia?”

“He was raping her.”
“I can see that.” Slowly, stepping closer to the two of them I made space for Alexi when he reappeared with one of the woman’s neighbours and a pair of sentries wearing the Red Diamond. “You stopped him?”

“What does it look like?” her arm twitched and the man openly gaped, appearing as though he was attempting to make a noise but being utterly incapable of doing so at that moment. His eyes were flitting between mine and hers, unblinking and pleading with the two of us even as he went as pale as the fabric of the tent.

“…right…” He forced out of his mouth without having the air in his lungs to expel. “…my…right…”

“Loosen your grip Viconia.” I said, moving over to him and staring at his pained expression. Whether Viconia did or not didn’t seem to make any difference and I spared a glance to the woman who was now being comforted by her friend. “Your…right? Right to do what?”

“…Servant…law…Knight…”

Alexi began to laugh but started coughing in disgust instead. “You’ll find no servant’s here. This woman, and the others are all freewomen. Imperial freewomen. Not servants or slaves.”

“You are one of the Duke’s Knights?” I asked, my own voice growling with displeasure and he nodded, quickly and feverishly as though the confession would save him from Viconia’s attentions. “What’s the punishment for rape in Cyrodiil?”

Stressing the name of the province I could feel everyone’s attentions on me but I ignored it, looking at the knights’ livery adorning his tunic and other discarded clothing. The honey yellow colour was enough to tell me that he was one of the Host of the Horn and it was more distressing that I wasn’t surprised at how it had been one of them responsible for this incident.

“Three day’s in the stocks Sir.” Echoed a voice from outside the tent and I smiled grimly at Carodus’ voice. The retired centurion had a knack of appearing in such situations to the point where I suspected him of being able to spontaneously teleport.

“The stocks it is then.” Through the pain on his face I saw the hint of anger and indignation at the punishment but Viconia’s grasp was unrelenting. “I’ll commission the carpenters in the morning, but until then, you can consider yourself under arrest.”

As the pair of men-at-arms stepped forward I could see the burning hate in the knight’s eyes being directed full force at me and I knew that his realisation of being treated like a commoner was overcoming his pain of Viconia’s grip on his genitals. Seeing the expression, I gestured the men-at-arms to stop in place and instead smiled at him as though I was going to bite his throat out with my teeth.

“That is of course, unless you would prefer me to leave your punishment to Madame DeVir…”

One look into the cold yellow irises within arm’s length was enough to decide and there was a mild shaking of the head, accompanied by the groan of agony as she squeezed just that little bit more. Despite her appearance there was iron in her muscles and many people had underestimated her strength, but the disgraced knight now had very intimate knowledge of how easily she could have turned him into a eunuch.

Without a single word, the pair of men-at-arms stepped over and caught him as she finally released her grip and let him fall. Judging by his expression it was obvious he was struggling to decide between passing out or throwing up, instead allowing the men-at-arm to loop their arms under his
armpits while he grabbed at himself protectively. It took them very little time at all to drag him out through the flap in the tent to the waiting Carodus where the retired centurion took over things with all the experience he had to offer. It was however extremely very difficult not to smile when the whole tent suddenly shook to the solid slapping sound of flesh on wood, followed by a deadpan 'mind your head, my lord' from Carodus as they moved away.

Sighing, and pressing my fingers into the bridge of my nose, I gave a quick look over the woman, her son and friend, to Viconia wiping her hand down the front of her tunic as though she had shifted through nightsoil to Alexi appearing downcast near the door.

“The Duke is not going to be happy.” He said very quietly and I nodded in agreement.

“I don’t think he’s ever happy.” With one last look to the trio of individuals on the cot, I turned and followed in the direction of the men-at-arms.

When morning came it was very much as I had expected. Before the sun had truly risen above the horizon I had received a summons to the Priory. It was somewhat amusing that I then found myself waiting until the sun was far above the tree line before I would actually stand before the Duke who appeared as he always did; dressed in his finery with the Sword of Arkay close at hand. Well before sunrise his team of servants had been busying themselves in their duties and I knew that the fact that I had been made to wait had been a calculated act. I also knew from the three days since he arrived that the Duke certainly didn’t rise before or even shortly after dawn and by the time that I found myself in his presence he had already eaten and bathed in hot scented water.

It was the cloying smell of fruit and flowers that was annoying me more than his general attitude and indifference that I had come to expect from most nobles. There was something about the way that my lungs dragged it into my chest with every breath that was making my teeth tingle and the bones of my face ache.

“So,” He said finally, moving around the recently completed desk in his office and appearing to look disinterestedly out of the window. “I hear that you ordered one of my knights into the stocks last night. Care to explain?”

Sensing the subtle threat in his tone and doing my best to stand to attention, I growled in the back of my mind. The fact that there was only sir Wirile within the room with us was not entirely a comfort and I could feel his eyes burning into the side of my skull as I stood there.

“Sir Phieine was caught raping one of the carpenter’s wives. Cyrodillic Law states that three days in the stocks is the punishment for such a crime.”

“I see.” He said after a moment’s pause, not once making a hint of turning around. It was taking all my willpower not to cough from the scent of whatever perfume had been rubbed into his flesh or look at the Sword of Arkay resting lightly on a sheet of pure silk stretched across the desk. “Witnesses?”

“Madame DeVir was the initial witness, and myself and Sir Vanevius arrived seconds later.”

“No other Horn Knights saw or can corroborate your allegations?”

“Begging your pardon, my Lord, but there are no allegations; just the truth. Sir Phieine was caught with his pants down, both figuratively and literally. As Second in Command of the Order of the Nine I have the authority to pass judgement on criminals.”

“Sir Phieine is a loyal and devout servant of the Gods.” The Duke stated flatly, his hands moving
almost of their own accord as he made the mark of the Nine Divines over his chest and forehead and I quickly did the same. Not that I did so out of any religious fervour but from the feeling that they could use any hesitation against me. “He is also of noble birth and should be treated as such.”

“Chancellor Ocato could have been in that tent and I would have judging him just the same.” I said carefully, keeping my voice as neutral as I possibly could without any hint of emotion. “The law is the law, and I will abide by it.”

“Your loyalty and duty is an example to us all.” Sir Wirile was standing just as still as I was with his hand casually resting on the pommel of his sword in a way that was supposed to be casual but looked anything but. “I expect that the woman has also been appropriately punished for her crimes?”

Alexi had tutored me during the night and this question was one that I expected. It was also one that we had been forced to deal with in advance.

“We did my lord. Ten lashes as appropriate.”

The duke remained as still as I did, staring out the window over the small collection of tents that could be seen through the glass. Sir Wirile merely grunted under his breath soft enough that mortals wouldn’t have been able to hear, but not soft enough to hide it from me.

“You truly are impartial.”

“I try my best, my lord.” This time the hint of challenge was in my tone but I kept myself smirking or otherwise grinning from sheer force of will alone. Striking a noble such as the woman had done in her attempt to defend herself was a punishable offence no matter the circumstances and as much as it pained me to do so, we had no other choice. The only consolation we could gain was nowhere within Imperial laws did it state exactly how hard the lashes had to be. After the woman’s ‘punishment’ her biggest complaint had been that it was difficult not to laugh at the way that it had tickled more than anything.

Only broken by their soft breathing, the silence dragged on and I found myself growing ever more impatient to remove myself from such an environment. Instead I stood on the spot, not letting my eyes wander anywhere except at the Duke’s back.

“How soon can the Order be ready for battle?” He asked suddenly and I was taken aback for the moment as this was certainly not a question I was expecting.

“Weeks at least.” I spoke truthfully, feeling his sudden interest despite the way that he still didn’t turn to face me and the way that sir Wirile leaned forward. “The men-at-arms will take time to form a cohesive unit and…”

“I asked how long it will take for the Order to be ready, not the peasants.”

I could feel myself blinking and feeling the same feeling of unease crawl up my spine as it had several times over the previous days. “The… peasants are the largest source of manpower we have available. With the Host of the Horn, Baron Jaseton’s esquires and the Order of the Nine we have fifty-two knights, all of which have despairingly varied levels of skill, training and equipment. If I was to be optimistic, it will take five or six weeks of training and practice to allow the cavalry to fight as a cohesive unit.”

“The knights do not require ‘training’ and their arms and armour is solely their responsibility. What they wield, wear and ride into battle is not something to concern ourselves with and as nobles they know how to fight.”
“My lord, in all respect we need to train to fight as a unit. Tilting in tournaments is different to fighting a foe seeking your death.”

“Do not deign to dictate to me the differences in fighting and honourable combat.” He snapped suddenly, showing the first signs of annoyance and temper to my words. “Have you ever fought in a battle?”

“Several, my lord.” I replied, even though I saw the verbal jaws of his trap slowly creak open.

“And how many have been in the saddle?”

“None, my Lord.”

“There. You see?” he said, finally turning and facing me with a corner of his mouth creased in triumph. “You truly haven’t fought in a real battle.”

“I fought with the Legion at Kvatch.”

The seriousness of my tone and the subtle traces of insubordination in my voice was enough to wipe the smile off his face and leave Sir Wirile’s growing a cold as a winter in Morrowind.

“Kvatch. A backwater settlement that an army of criminals and labourers failed to save. Again… not a real battle.”

The trap was waiting for me, sitting there with the bait dangling oh so temptingly and as much as it almost physically harmed me I resisted taking it. What I couldn’t resist was adding my own barb to the mix.

“Ninety-six thousand dead in a city of a hundred and ten thousand isn’t considered a backwater in Cyrodiil, although I must admit that I am unfamiliar with Highrock…”

Despite the fact that his face remained carefully neutral to my unsubtle insult disguised as formality and ignorance. Both of them knew exactly what I had meant, especially how Kvatch had once been equal in population and economically as every city within the Breton homelands.

“Very well.” He said with a slow flush working its way up from under his high necked collar. “As you appear to have the experience in mucking about in the mud with the rest of the peasants, you can have the glory of commanding them.”

“Thank you, my Lord.”

Very slightly, his eyes narrowed at the signs of triumph in my voice before he snorted. “Don’t get your hopes up Sir Desin. Infantry do not have a place on a modern battlefield and they especially cannot compete with the skill and noble heritage of Knights. Use the men-at-arms as you see fit, include those few from the Host of the Horn if you so wish but don’t expect much from a collection of savage lowborn.”

“I won’t, my lord.”

Slowly, carefully he interlinked his hands in front of him, somehow managing to puff out his chest in the movement that I supposed he thought was heroic and noble. “Have you anything further to add?”

I shook my head, carefully and formally while keeping my eyes locked ahead of me. “No, my Lord.”
“Good. Get out.”

The doors closed as they had the several times I had found myself in the priory rooms. What had been my office was now the preferred place for the Duke to receive visitors such as myself for formal matters and it was becoming all too familiar to me. Especially with the way that the door always seemed to be forcefully closed behind me by whoever was accompanying the Duke at the time.

From the various knights and servants within the priory I barely rated a mention as I moved through them. A handful of the Knights were in their full plate, their personal heraldry and that of the Duke obvious on every flowing tabard and surcoat but they barely even nodded or glanced in my direction as I moved through the building. I could feel their scrutinity though, burning into my flesh like the sword that Viconia had used to scour the marks of desertion from my arm. Already the feeling within the Order and the Priory was very different and I couldn’t help but feel poised to receive a knife or blade in the spine as I moved through them.

Alexi and Viconia, as they normally did were waiting for me in the Priory courtyard, standing in their armour on the freshly scraped cobblestones that appeared older than the surrounding building itself. They stood in the centre to ensure that they were out of the way of the numerous people moving through the gatehouse to their duties. Some people were attending to the chapel, building, repairing and restoring it to something of its original glories while the other side of the courtyard was home to several smiths going about their business on the refurbished smithy and smelters. They especially were hard at work and despite the relative early hour of the morning and the cooler temperatures I could feel the heat within seconds of stepping outside.

“Judging by your face, that went as well as we were expecting.” Alexi said as I moved over to them, and while Viconia appeared as cold and aloof as she normally did I could tell that she was burning with curiousity.

“You were right on all accounts.”

Although he pretended to swoon, Alexi beamed, showing his teeth in an enormous grin. “When you’re right, you’re right.” The smile however didn’t seem to fully reach his eyes. “He ordered Gaebel to be flogged?”

“Yes. But they seemed satisfied that it had already been dealt with.”

“Hmmm…” Viconia stepped alongside me and matched my stride as we moved towards the gatehouse. “It sounds all too easy.”

“That’s because you don’t trust anyone.” Alexi too moved alongside me and together the three of us moved as one. “But you are right. They gave in too easy.”

“You might be interested to know that I am now the Infantry commander of the Order.”

“Ha! There it is.” His chuckle was infectious and I found myself smiling despite my crawling anxiety and unease. “He thinks that he’s just given you a disservice and while technically its a demotion it works in our favour. I also guess that he doesn’t believe in knights training?”

“Were you listening in or something?”

“No, but I could guess. Have you seen half of the knights that arrived? Most of them would struggle to walk around the campsite, let alone fight anything more dangerous that their breakfasts.”

“A knight is responsible for his own training, equipment and…”
“Sir Desin.”

All three of us flinched as a giant in ebony plate stepped into our path, respectively giving us space while ensuring that it was impossible to move around him.

“Gods Falid,” Spluttered Alexi as he tried his best not to look surprised. “How do you of all people sneak around like that?”

The giant Redguard turned and briefly looked him in the eye before returning his gaze to me. He had appeared as though conjured and in my distracted state hadn’t made his presence known until we were almost on top of him. It also didn’t help any of us that he was dressed in his armour minus the helm which only seemed to increase his already considerable presence.

“Practice.” He said, his voice a deep growl. “Sir Desin, I have news.”

“Good or bad?”

Ignoring my question and the hints of sarcasm in my voice, there was the usual lack of emotion on his face and without even the slightest hint of a shrug he continued on unabated. “I have received word from my Order. The Grandmaster has decreed with the gathering of the Relics of the Eight that the Black Knights will assist in their safeguard and protection.”

“So some of your brothers will be joining us.”

“Yes.”

“How many?”

“All of them.”

I caught myself blinking at the weight that his words carried but I couldn’t help but feel a chill of apprehension crawl up my spine. “There’s a ‘but’ in there somewhere.”

Still as cold as ever, Falid continued staring without even the slightest of twitches. “I am going to recommend to the Grandmaster that the Relics be placed under the care of our Order.”

Silence fell between us, only broken by Alexi’s long, impressed whistle and the jingling of chainmail as he put his hands on his head. “Wonderful.”

“The Duke isn’t going to be impressed.” Viconia muttered, her scowl deepening.

“His happiness is not a consideration.” The Black Knight growled. “The Relics are priceless and immeasurable in power and it is obvious that the state of the Order of the Nine is untenable. Unless rectified, the Order of Talos will claim them.”

“I don’t think that the Duke will let you and your Order come in and take the Relics.” I said softly, seeing the hardening light in Falid’s eyes as he made the suggestion of a nod.

“Unless rectified,” he repeated, slower and more carefully than before. “the Order of Talos will claim them.”

The meaning was clear and I couldn’t help but consider the ramifications of his words. We had been with him long enough to know that he rarely made jokes and this simple statement was more than enough to tell us everything. Besides ourselves, Falid was one of the most accomplished and dangerous warriors and everything that we knew and heard about the Black Knights left us knowing...
that if it came to it they would wade through an ocean of blood to secure the relics. Despite their lack of numbers against the Order of the Nine and the Duke’s men I knew that there was a damn good chance that they would prevail.

“I think you have made your point.” Still, there was no change to his expression as he stood there, slowly looking between us all with all the inexorability of a mountain storm. “I don’t suppose you can offer us any form of assistance?”

This time there was a distinct shake of his head despite the lack of emotion. “No. My oaths are binding and there is no power within this world or beyond that could make me break them. My sword is at your service Sir Desin, but the relics are paramount. I, and my Order especially will not stand idly by and see them misused and innocents harmed.”

“On that we agree at least.” Viconia added, snarling and flicking her teeth with her tongue.

“How long until they arrive?”

“It’s a three-week journey from Rihad and they should be leaving in the coming days. If they haven’t already begun the journey.”

“Great… Less than a month.”

He saw my expression and it was impossible not to hear the bitterness in my tone but there was still no reaction from the giant Redguard. “The Relics will be protected Sir Desin. I would prefer it to be the Order of the Nine but that is not feasible at this time.”

Without a further word and little more than a brief and formal gesture of farewell he turned and strode away, leaving the three of us standing almost in shock and with obvious concern.

“Are you okay Kaius?”

Not looking up from where I was pinching the bridge of my nose I struggled not to grind my teeth in annoyance. “Not really. Things can’t be simple just for once, can they?”

“Life isn’t sporting like that.” Alexi replied, looking just as shaken as I was. “What are we going to do?”

“I have no idea.” The truth in my words was a punch to the gut and I groaned. “Where’s Caleb?”

“Laying low I hope. This time of the day he’d normally be training but I’ve told him to keep a low profile.”

Viconia nodded in the direction of the half-finished stables on the other side of the priory. “You can usually find him around the horses.”

“Good. I think I need to talk to him.”

“Want us to come?”

I could hear the concern in Viconia’s voice even though it was just as cold as it normally was and I shook my head. “No. I should be alright. I’ll… I’ll catch up with you both later but I think we need to get some more eyes and ears out and about.”

Alexi caught my meaning immediately and while his accustomed smile was present it was hollow. “Understood.”
Giving little more than a brief nod to the two of them, I turned and began making my way through the tents towards the stables and the horse yards. Internally I was still seething from the Duke and his cronies but I was now feeling the consuming dread and anticipation making itself felt. Falid’s words was not a threat but a warning and a promise and there was going to be little that I or anyone else could do once the rest of the Black Knights arrived.

At that moment there was little more that I could do than stomp my way through the dust and gravel, casting my gaze over the dozens of horses secured in their makeshift pens and the men and mer seeing to them in search for the individual that I sought. Caleb wasn’t anywhere to be seen, but he was obvious enough once I stepped inside the stables.

In the days since the Duke’s arrival the stables had been the only other building than the priory house itself to receive any attention from the labourers. The sheer quality and value of the Duke and his entourage’s horses demanded it and in the space of single day the last portions of the roof and walls were completed and the stalls filled with fresh fodder. Each of the horses currently occupying the stables were each worth small baronies on their own, and it was a small measure of amusement that among their number were Trygve and Ultrin.

Caleb was there, moving slowly along the outside of one of the stalls where he had led out its enormous occupant. The destrier and in turn its rider was unknown to me but the silky nature of its hide, along with the enormous coiling muscles made it obvious that it was one of the many newcomer’s steeds.

“Good morning Commander.” He said as he caught sight of me, lifting his gaze for a moment as he inspected the warhorse’s flanks. “Uh. I mean sir.”

I waved off his nervousness and his habit of calling me commander from the weeks before the Duke’s arrival. “Good morning.”

Other than ourselves, the stables were empty of everyone but horses and judging by the states of them I could understand why. Normally the servants of the Knights and those who specialised in the care of the horses spent the mornings and afternoons seeing to them and it showed. Every single one of the enormous animals were obviously freshly brushed, their stables mucked out and cleaned and not a single thing was out of place. This alone left Caleb’s presence something of an oddity.

“Keeping yourself busy I see.”

“I try my best sir.”

“You can relax a little you know.”

He paused for a moment, giving a poor attempt of a relaxed smile as he lightly tapped the horse he was inspecting on the knee. The highly trained animal was standing calmly and not moving, but it lifted its leg obediently to allow Caleb to inspect a hoof.

“Sorry.” Despite his nervousness, he showed none of it in his actions with the horse that outweighed both of us five or six times over. Like many of the other Bretonnic steeds, the destrier was enormous and bred for war. “It’s taking a bit to get used to it all.”

“That’s part of the reason why I came looking for you. I’m interested in seeing how you are coping.”

Running a finger over the hoof and inspecting the steel horseshoe nailed into it, he seemed content and repeated his actions with the opposite leg. Again the horse obediently lifted its other leg as he
repeated the same inspection.

“I’m not entirely sure how I am going anymore.” He said after some time. “Every day I wake up wondering whether everything that has occurred is nothing more than feverish dreams and yet every day I find myself here… in this place.”

“You wish to be back home?”

His laugh was muted and sad. “I don’t have a home. Never really have had one either I’m to going to be honest. Look, I know what and why you have come to see me and I appreciate everything that you and the others have done for me. But, my purpose here, the reason you all brought me here no longer exists.”

“Meaning wielding the relics?”

I could see his nod and the way that he kept his eyes adverted from me at all times, even as he moved to the horse’s rear legs and continued checking its hooves. “I’m no longer needed. I’m… useless now and I’m not entirely sure how I am supposed to feel about it.”

“You are feeling relieved and yet lost.” I said very simply, almost speaking about myself more than him.

“Yes.”

“Then what do you want to do?”

His laugh was barely audible and he shook his head. “I know that you and many of the others have never lived or even seen Highrock, but for someone such as myself having a choice in anything is… alien to say the least. Lowborn and servants have nothing to live for besides servitude and until a few months ago I believed that my destiny was to be buried a few hundred metres from where I was born. Now…”

The way he trailed off was telling even more than the dejected slump of his shoulders and I leaned against one of the central posts that was almost as wide as my shoulders. “Now you find yourself almost on the other side of the world, surrounded by knights and soldiers.”

“Living legends…” he whispered, not quite low enough for me not to hear, even with my mortal hearing.

“And what does that make you? We all saw you wield the Mace. You can easily be counted among our number.”

“Please… Don’t.”

“Don’t?”

For the first time since I had entered the stables he met my gaze and there was a hardness growing in them. “Don’t. I’m not a hero. I’m not Pelinal reborn. I am simply Caleb the farrier. I’m not of noble birth.”

“Neither am I. Neither is a large number of us.”

“I know what you are trying to do sir and it’s not going to work.”

“What am I trying to do?”
“Trying to get me to support you and wield the relics. There’s no point. I’m not the one chosen by
the gods.”

“Why? Have you spoken to them have you?”

The hardness was growing stronger in his gaze even while I met it with an emotionless stare. “The
Duke wields the sword and retrieved it himself. He even retrieved the Greaves of Mara. I am no
longer needed and I am glad of it.”

“No responsibility is a relief, that’s for certain.”

“Then why don’t you shed your responsibility?”

I wasn’t sure whether I was more surprise from the question or the insubordinate tone of his voice.
In the previous weeks he had come a long way from the young fearful man barely out of his teens
who had thrown up over my boots. There was still the streak of servitude from his lifetime of living
under the nobles of Highrock but the Order of the Nine had done wonders for his confidence.

“My responsibility. You mean my responsibility to the Order?”

He nodded, a shimmer of anger in his expression. “Yes. Duke de’Leorion is the Commander now.
The Elder Council itself authorised it. Why don’t you fulfil your duty to him?”

“Because I am not certain whether it is the right thing to do.”

Completing his inspection of the warhorse’s hooves, Caleb twisted about, grasping a stiff bristled
brush from where it had been left and commencing the long task of brushing it down. “He’s a Duke,
your rightful commander with the authority of the Elder Council behind him and is obviously chosen
by the gods to wield the relics. Yet… You don’t think it’s a right thing to do. When we first arrived I
saw how you and the others were unable to pick up or use the relics which means that it is your duty
to obey.”

“I may have been in the Legion, Caleb, but I have never been one for obeying someone who hasn’t
earned it. Yes, he’s a Duke. Yes, he can use the Sword but I don’t believe that he is worthy to wield
it.”

Slowly, Caleb’s smooth motions with the brush crawled to a halt and he lowered his head. “You
know that I initially wondered why you couldn’t… didn’t claim the relics? After arriving here… in
this place, I realised why.”

I let him continue, even as he stood with his head bowed. “You, and many of the others are
sinners.”

The way he framed his words and the severity that he instilled in them left me trying, and failing to
hold back a laugh and he turned with true anger on his face.

“I’m sorry.” I spluttered, snorting a little. “I know how serious it is to you but I can’t help it. Of
course we are all sinners, some of us are more than others. Viconia is a heathen and worships gods
that are unknown to most of Tamriel, and I deserted the Legion like the twins. That’s not to mention
the other unsavoury things that I have done in my life. I know that I am a sinner and I doubt there is a
man or woman among our number who believes otherwise. That in itself is something that sets us
aide from the likes of the Duke.”

“Because he is a pious man?”
“Because we know we aren’t worthy for the relics.” My voice was cold now and despite his indignation Caleb was listening intently. “When the Duke arrived the first thing he did was show the relics and claim the others and everything and everyone who laid before him. That is one of the reason why I don’t trust him and why he doesn’t have the relics. It’s also one of the reasons why I still believe that Pelinal’s heir is someone else.”

“Someone like me…” Caleb whispered with a combination of fear and annoyance.

“Not until it’s proved at least, but I know that there is something special about you. I am quickly beginning to know that there are very little in the way of coincidences in this world, and for you to do what you did in Leyawiin before us was certainly not one either.”

“The Duke is the rightful claimant.” He said, softer this time and while there was steel in his tone I could tell that he was trying to convince himself more than me.

“Maybe he is, maybe he isn’t.” I replied, softly and quietly turned and moving towards the door. “What you need to consider though, is that the original Knights of the Nine personally claimed the Relics for themselves and their hubris was their downfall. What makes the Duke any different to them?”

Leaving the stables, I could feel my own tenseness increasing and I felt terrible as a result of talking with Caleb. I knew and understood how he was feeling in many ways. The sorrow of losing friends and colleagues, the way that he had found himself hundreds of kilometres from the life that he had known and with the potential weight of responsibility such as being Pelinal reborn crushing the soul. I knew exactly how he felt in the latter regard, especially after Jauffre and Martin had informed Viconia and I how we had featured in an Elder Scrolls prophecy for the past two thousand years.

My mood certainly didn’t improve as I left the stables, finding Viconia leaning against the wall waiting for me. At a glance she seemed content and relaxed, merely taking in the sights while treating herself to a small bag of assorted nuts and dried berries that she had acquired somewhere. Until I had appeared she had been content in munching away on them a couple at a time but at the sight of me her expression changed and became sly and cunning.

“Oh gods, now what?”

The grin grew slightly larger and she kicked away from the wall, moving alongside me as we moved away from the stables. “I thought that you would like to know that Sir Wirile, in his infinite wisdom and mercy has decreed that only a handful of hours being pelted with rotten fruit is suitable punishment for attempted rape.”

My groan was clearly audible and I scrunched my eyes closed, tilting my head back and feeling the muscles in my neck ache in protest. “Of course…”

A crunch of a nut of some kind echoed briefly as Viconia chewed, her smile not removing itself from her face as we continued to walk casually along. “Infuriating, but also highly entertaining.”

“How is any of this entertaining?”

Her laugh was dark and sultry. “Politics… Intrigue... These are fascinating and I haven’t been involved in such matters since the fall of house DeVir. It is… refreshing.”

“I don’t consider this to be politicking. They are testing us.”

“Testing you, mrannd’ssinss. Not us. The Duke and the others are here to wrest control from you and every action and reaction is being carefully weighed. From our dealings with Detane’s assailants
and to every conversation they have with you is on purpose. They are trying to get rid of you.”

“Great. Don’t suppose that you have any advice?”

“Siyo. Keep doing what you are doing.”

It was my time to laugh but it was bitter and little more than a snort of annoyance. “That’s not helpful Viconia.”

“Only because you are too feebleminded to heed it.” Stepping deftly in front of me she pressed a hand into my chest and forced me to come to a halt and look her in the eye. “You cannot afford not to follow the weakling laws of the surface to the letter and every time you deal with any of them as such you weaken their position. They are waiting for you to make a mistake and they will be doing everything they can to force your hand. Shar curse their filthy hides, our evven’ tus was probably encouraged to do what he tried to do.”

“Evven’ tus? Oh… rapist.”

Her eyes fluttered in annoyance and she popped more dried berries into her mouth. “Rape is very much a tool. It asserts power and authority and last night if he had gotten away with it, it would have sent a clear message to everyone here who supports us. Instead, it has backfired on them.”

“He still escaped his punishment though.”

“Perhaps. It was to be expected however. Your passing of judgement was indirectly a challenge to their power. If anything I am surprised that they left him in the stocks as long as they did.”

“So we are back to square one then.”

“Shar you have much to learn mrannd’ssins.” A finger raised itself in my direction even as she jiggled the bag in search of some of her preferred treats. “Our position is stronger. You have asserted your authority and shown that infringements will be punished and that no one, no matter their rank or title is above the laws of the surface world. It has been damaged by his release but now the others will think twice before doing anything.”

“You didn’t go to that woman’s rescue last night because it was the right thing to do… did you?”

“If you mean ‘right thing’ as being all noble and good… then no. They all needed something to show them that their actions had consequences. Everything that we have heard about these knights and the Host, especially what we have seen thus far show that they are not concerned with the petty trifles of justice and laws.”

“So threatening to castrate one of them with your bare hands told them otherwise?”

“Now you are getting it.” For a few moments she chewed carefully. “Now they have something to fear. You played your part beautifully though. They know that you will not stand for such things, but they also know that not all of us supporting you play by the rules. Every time they do something, they will be looking over their shoulder and they will also wonder whether they will be caught by the likes of you… or by someone like me.”

“I keep forgetting how cold you can be sometimes.”

“That’s because you are a wael.” Movement at the far end of the street caught her attention and I saw the hardening, but expectant expression that began creasing her cheeks. “Every action has a reaction, so we must ensure that they react the way we want them to.”
Following her gaze, I saw the small collection of knights from the Host of the Horn, many wearing little more than their tunics and only some wearing any of their heraldry. One of them stood out considerably on account of the fact that his face was a mottling of marks and mild scratches from being the target of numerous thrown objects. Even from several metres away I could see the way parts of his scalp were stained with various vegetable juices, and judging by the way the others around him were laughing and the colour there must have been a handful of rotten beetroots in the mix.

It was impossible not to see the way that they were all treating the whole situation and incident as a joke, especially with his own attitude change as he looked down the street and recognised us. There was a new swagger that suddenly crept into his stride, his back straightened and it was impossible not to see how smug he was at the outcome.

Viconia however returned the smile with one of her own. There was a seductive sway of her hips as she held other free hand, revealing to the disgraced knight how she was holding a pair of walnuts in her palm. Without any hesitation she clenched her fist so hard and violently that the pair of nuts cracked and practically exploded, flicking shattered pieces of their shells in all directions.

At the sight the knight paled, his eyes widening as he averted his gaze. If it was possible for him to move any quicker without running he would have done so, turning and shoving his way through his comrades and disappearing from sight while trying to retain some portion of his shredded dignity.

“Every action has a reaction…” I said, trying not to laugh at the way the knight had fled. “That was premediated… wasn’t it.”

Viconia simply smiled, brushing the remains of the nuts on the front of her tunic as we both began to chuckle. “You know me all too well mrannd’ssins.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm currently going through a bit of stuff in real life, up to and including moving myself and the family. My chapters have been delayed and aren't as good quality as they have been and while there will be a reduction of how regularly I post I am not stopping writing or anything of the sort. (Besides the fact that the missus won't let me stop as she's enjoying the story too much herself!)
Sweat was quite literally running off me in streams and dripping from my face, leaving little more than the taste of salt on my lips as I breathed out heavily and bent my arms. As I had for the weeks before I was training alongside the knights and men-at-arms and as the days continued to steadily march along, the intensity of our training sessions increased. There was something strange and unnerving about the way how I had to force myself to remain entirely human while undertaking such exercises, bending the strength of the vampire into the depths of my soul as we all trained otherwise I could have continued on for hours with very little to show for it. Somehow it was calming forcing myself to rely upon my mortal form and strength, even though it left me trembling and sore with exertion.

“Raise!”

“Twenty-Nine!” Roared over a hundred throats in a staggered unison of fatigue. I, like the rest of them shouted the number as though words would be enough to force my arms straight again.

“Lower!” Chanted Carodus a few meters to my right. Despite the fact that a vast majority of the men and women present were more than half his age, the retired Centurion continued to lead the soldiers of the Nine in the training, lowering his body down in the push-up and holding it with only hints of trembling in his aged frame.

Looking up and over the ranks of people now in a similar position his eyes were ever searching, seeking out anyone who dared to drop to their knees or sag until their bellies touched the grass. Satisfied that no one was doing anything more than shaking and groaning in the effort to keep themselves steady his smirk grew larger. “Raise!”

“Thirty!”

“On your feet!”

In various speeds everyone staggered upwards, panting and sweating in the early morning sun and feeling the coolness of the air and dew competing for space of flesh drenched in sweat. Like Carodus I was one of the first to stand and allowed me to look over the mass of soldiers in front of us. Most were men-at-arms but there were knights scattered about, all dressed in rough, short sleeved tunics and pants that would normally be worn under their armour. To an individual they were all darkened and drenched in moisture, with dirt and grass sticking to places from the various exercises we all had done.

Carodus as always seemed ready to continue, beginning his usual pacing up and down the rows of soldiers and controlling his own breathing from a literal lifetime of experience. For the likes of myself and the few who had Legion experience this was almost akin to a homecoming but we were also experienced enough to see that his easy confidence and indefatigable attitude was mostly willpower and an utter refusal to show any kind of weakness. I knew that Carodus was the regular patient to Brelin and the other healers and that the only reason why he was able to run the three exercise sessions per day was a huge amount of restoration magicka and stamina potions.

The training and his role in it however was working exactly as intended. To the collection of recruits, volunteers and the men-at-arms that had arrived with the Duke, the sixty-three-year-old was
a relentless elemental force with the sturdiness of a mountain. While Viconia was technically the infantry commander, Carodus would be the one who would lead them in the heat of battle and his every action was bent towards proving to all of them that he could do whatever they could do. If not better.

It was proving very effective in all manners of ways. Especially the newcomers who for the most part had never received much training at all in Highrock it was quickly bringing them all to something resembling battle readiness. It was also forming many bonds, not only between the men-at-arms and those who were to be their commanders like Carodus and myself but also between each other. Every set of exercises forced them all to split themselves up into groups and forced them to work together. Those who didn’t put effort in or work as a team were collectively punished, and those who worked well and did their best were praised.

Almost every detail, no matter how tiny was taken from the Legions and it was proving its worth in training the Order of the Nine. In the three weeks since the Duke’s arrival the men-at-arms had been constantly trained, despite the Duke’s and his cronies’ hesitation and utter lack of interest in the infantry and it was beginning to show its worth. Three bouts of intense physical activities every day, one on the crack of dawn, one shortly before mid-day before lunch and a third as night encroached ensured that everyone was in a perpetual state of fatigue and exhaustion but it was improving them all. After each session Brellin and the other healers would use a combination of restoration magicka and fresh healing potions to heal the aches and pains, and in doing so would accelerate the muscle development and fitness of everyone.

Without magicka we would have been forced to train once, maybe twice a day and alternate the activities each time. Instead the men-at-arms and attending knights improved at an incredible rate, easily growing stronger and fitter in a week than what they would have been able to in over a month. Unfortunately, the fitness, teamwork and mental resilience that the men-at-arms were gaining was about the only true victory that we were having since the Duke’s arrival.

Controlling my breathing and looking over the ranks of panting, exhausted soldiers my mind was left to wander. A trick learned during the first weeks in the Legion allowed me to take a step away from the fatigue and pain of my aching body and concentrate on other matters but it wasn’t bringing me any succour. I faintly heard Carodus give praises and advice for some of the soldiers as we began to stretch out our aching limbs, feeling each and every set of exercises that we had just preformed as we did so.

My mind however was everywhere else. My nerves were especially not helping as with each passing day drew the arrival of the Black Knights every closer, and with it the almost guaranteed conflict that would result. Falid’s stated fact that the Order of Talos would claim the relics was ever fresh in my mind but so far a solution had not presented itself.

The Duke was a damaging force and the two weeks had seen a mass of desertions and departures of various people. A large number of the labourers and craftsmen had left as a result of the Host of the Horn’s bullying tactics and constant shakedown of coins and wealth and now that they had established themselves they had begun to spread in the local area. In the past week and at the Duke’s behest a number of the knights had left for the nearest towns and villages and had returned with a handful of coffers filled with various coins. If their dealings with those who had been at the priory was anything to go by then there would have most likely been some blood spilt in the process.

It was infuriating being utterly unable to act or have anything that I could do and every day left me with a little more of my authority scraped away. I knew that there was a growing number of men-at-arms and even knights who were supporting me instead of the Duke, Baron Jaseton and Sir Wirile. The constant efforts of training the Order and ensuring justice for everyone was winning over many,
including a handful of the Host of the Horn surprisingly enough.

There had been too many close calls though. Viconia had been left with a black eye as a trio of ‘unknown assailants’ assaulted her as she walked through the camp one night. No one had been identified or punished and the Duke’s official statement was that it was some of the men-at-arms who were responsible, not to mention his opinion that women were not meant to wander about unescorted anyway. The fact that three of Baron Jaseton’s knights appeared the following morning in the pest tent after ‘falling off their horses’ also apparently had no connection to the attack on Viconia but highlighted exactly what had happened during the night. No one was saying anything, especially two of the knights who were incapable of eating anything more than soup despite Brellin’s skills.

The incident with Viconia aside, their intrigues were subtle and while there was considerable intimidation and friction between his followers and the Order of the Nine it was steadily growing worse. Tents and personal items would be damaged, men and women would be accosted during the dark hours and every day the freshly built vault in the ground floor of the priory was filling with money.

“Sir Desin,” Carodus’ voice snapped my mind back inside of my body and I lowered my arms from where I was stretching out the aches as best I could. “Do you have any words for the cohort?”

‘Cohort’ was a bit of a stretch as the number of men-at-arms was well over the Legion ‘standard’ of a hundred legions, not including the two or three dozen knights with us. I did nod however, shaking my arms out and stepping forward to face them all.

“An excellent turnout this morning and I hope that you all can see some improvements in yourselves since last week. Today will be formations training in full armour. Don’t dawdle and don’t forget anything because I don’t feel like doing another fifty squat thrusts, I’m looking at you Murir.”

The tall Altmer, wearing the faded heraldry of the Host of the Horn on his chest gave an embarrassed smile but didn’t have the breath to reply. There was some amused laughter from among the group as it was something of a running joke how the High Elf seemed entirely capable of losing his head if not for the way it was stuck to his shoulders. One of the nearby men-at-arms gave him a light bump on an arm with a fist and I kept my smile hidden at how far they had come in the past weeks. Initially there had been a lot of resistance and suspicion between the two groups of men-at-arms but Carodus’ training and the leadership of those under my command had done wonders breaking the barriers down. The infantry were very close to being ready for battle.

Unfortunately, the cavalry wasn’t as coherent and other than the knights who had followed me from Leyawiin and the likes of Avita who had joined up before the Duke’s arrival there were distinct groups. Many of the Host of the Horn and especially Baron Jaseton’s knights avoided any of the training like it would infect them with bloodlung or the plague, and many I doubted had undertaken any form of training at all during their time at the priory, if at all in their lives. There were a few who participated, but I suspected most of them did so because they had been ordered to by Baron Jaseton and Sir Wirile than any other reason.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see the familiar shape of Sepula hovering close enough to show that he was seeking me out, but far enough away that he wasn’t getting directly involved and I held back a sigh. He and his services had been almost entirely claimed by the Duke and while I knew that the scribe held no love for him, his appearance always heralded some task or duty.

“Centurion Carodus, thank you for this morning’s session. I will see you all for training.”

Turning and stepping away as Carodus began directing them all in the direction of Brellin and his assistants I dragged a rough spun length of fabric I was utilising as a towel and wiped the sweat from
my face as best as I could. Without the vampire’s assistance during such sessions I always found myself struggling to raise my arms without them shaking afterwards. A year or so before I wouldn’t have felt so exhausted and sore after such a legion standardised session which simply seemed to highlight how my fitness had degraded since deserting. It was also somewhat discomforting to see how Viconia seemed far less tired than I, even though she was sweating just as much.

“How did I choose to do this again?”

Chuckling, I bent over and felt all the twinges of my back and shoulders at the motion as I dragged my waterskin from the dew soaked ground. “Because you are a glutton of punishment?”

Patting herself in the face with her own towel, an eyebrow curved and she lightly snatched the waterskin from my hands. “That man could be an excellent torturer.”

“Don’t give him any ideas.” Looking over, I saw Alexi striding over as best as he could, trying not to show how he was favouring both legs at the same time and bringing over a small collection of vials from the direction of Brellin and the healers. All of the Knights of the Nine, with the exception of Detane and the likes of Falid took part in the exercises whenever our other duties didn’t take precedence and Alexi’s face was flushed almost as red as his hair was.

“Once I reach Carodus’ age, if I have a tenth of his level of fitness I will be happy.”

“Good luck with that.” I replied to him, taking one of the potion vials with a nod of thanks. “He’s being doing this sort of thing longer than we have been alive.”

“He’s a damned sadist.” Alexi’s humour was contagious even though my mood was darkening with the approach of Sepula. “How many squat thrusts did we do? I lost count.”

“Six sets of thirty. That’s not including the same number of pushups, situps, squats, leg raises…” Removing the cork stopped from the vial and ensuring that I didn’t smell the potion I upended it and swallowed as quickly as I could. Despite my best efforts the bitter taste still felt like a punch to the mouth. “Ugh, looks like they’re including Fly Amantia again. It’s going to hours before I can get rid of the taste.”

Drinking his own vial with a similar reaction, Alexi coughed a little and replaced the cork in his vial. “At least they work, and Brellin really seems to know what he’s doing.”

Appearing in front of us, Sepula looked between Alexi and Viconia before settling his gaze onto me. As always he seemed to have an expression of intense boredom and indifference but his body language was anything but. “Sorry to interrupt Sir Desin, but I have been given a task to pass onto you.”

“What eternal glory and praise will Kaius get for this momentous task?” Alexi asked, his scarred cheek twitching in amusement.

As he always did, Sepula never seemed to know how to respond to Alexi and instead chose to ignore him. This in itself only seemed to encourage Alexi to try harder with his jokes and sarcasm around the scribe in the undying attempts to get the administrator to relax for once.

“What eternal glory and praise will Kaius get for this momentous task?” Alexi asked, his scarred cheek twitching in amusement.

As he always did, Sepula never seemed to know how to respond to Alexi and instead chose to ignore him. This in itself only seemed to encourage Alexi to try harder with his jokes and sarcasm around the scribe in the undying attempts to get the administrator to relax for once.

“Yesterday’s audit of the priory supplies has identified discrepancies and Duke de’Leorion has granted you the responsibility of handling the situation.”

“Great. What’s gone missing?”

“It’s uncertain.” The strange energy within Sepula was making me feel uneasy as he was
undoubtedly nervous and trying not to show it. “He has tasked you and several others to undertake a fresh audit today and identify the missing items so that his knights can retrieve them.”

“Well, have fun with that Karius.” Slapping me on the shoulder and plucking my empty vial of healing potion out of my grasp, Alexi laughed with a grin now entirely consuming his face. “Sounds marvellously entertaining and I will be sad to miss it.”

“I’m sorry to say, Sir Vanevius but you are one of the individuals the Duke has ordered to assist.”

Alexi’s expression was similar to a punctured waterskin and he deflated just as easily. “Wonderful, we’re honorary quartermasters.”

Not moving his attentions from me, Sepula ignored Alexi’s good humoured complaints and Viconia’s brooding presence by my side. “I have already taken the liberty of gathering a few individuals to assist you all. They will be waiting for you in the priory stockpile.”

“How soon is the Duke expecting us to start checking everything?”

“As soon as possible.” The gravity of his words was not missed and I nodded before he turned and began shuffling away.

“This is a farce.” Viconia muttered as soon as Sepula was far enough away. “No matter what is missing, de’Leorion will just use this as an excuse to acquire whatever they want from everyone.”

“Every day they come up with something new and at least they are ensuring that things aren’t boring.” Unsuccessfully trying to rinse the taste of the potion with a mouthful of water, Alexi spat on the ground and wiped his mouth. “And I had such high hopes for the day.”

Wiping my face and head from the fresh beads of sweat covering my flesh, I sighed and shrugged. “I wouldn’t worry about getting too comfortable for the morning. I’m probably not even going to bother to get changed.”

“This will piss of some of the Duke’s entourage in their oh-so-pretty clothes they wear all the time.” Alexi’s grin was contagious and he twirled himself about as though he was a debutante attending her first ball. “Let them see what a real man looks like.”

Unable to resist, Viconia grin was as comforting as finding oneself with a hungry lioness. “If that’s the case, I guess I better go and find one. Perhaps Falid will be willing to assist?”

Pressing his hand to his chest, Alexi’s expression changed to one of fake hurt and insult. “Oh. You wound me so deeply Vicky.”

“If you recover from such a grievous wound to your pride Lex,” I laughed, draining the rest of my water skin and knuckling my mouth on the back of a fist that tasted entirely of salt and earth. “We actually have work to do.”

It didn’t take long to gather a few things and despite what we had discussed we changed into fresher clothing. The priory had been almost entirely off limits for most individuals since the Duke’s arrival and it had taken less than three days of constant work, including the nights for the carpenters and masons from the Order of the White Stallion to finish their repairs and refurbishments. All other tasks had been put on hold until it was completed to the Duke’s liking, and since then only those loyal to him were allowed entry when not summoned. Baron Jaseton and Sir Wirile had their personal quarters within the priory, and the Duke had claimed the entire third floor to himself after his servants had unloaded a surprisingly large number of personal effects from his wagon train.
There was no doubt in my mind that he was stamping his authority into the region and using the Relics to advance himself politically throughout the Empire. Whoever held claim over the Relics was a political force to be reckoned with and would have the full support of the Church of the Nine behind them. Rumours were already flowing through the camp about how the Duke was considering a bid for the Ruby Throne and I could easily believe it as much as such a thought greatly concerned me.

While no longer sweating when we passed by the pair of Horn Knights guarding the front doors, we were severely underdressed in comparison. The servants and attending knights in the Priory were dressed in full opulence, their armour polished to a mirror shine and their clothes worth more than what most legionaries would be paid in a year. Alexi, Viconia and myself entered the priory without any major issues and made our way into the basement without being accosted in the slightest.

“This looks wonderful.” Alexi muttered as we stepped into what was now the main stockpile for the Knights of the Nine.

The room that Viconia and I had stayed for several days while I healed from my fight against the Ghosts had been cleaned out, renovated and was now almost entirely filled with crates, boxes and storage racks containing everything needed for such a military organisation. Sheets of spare chainmail, armoured plates, quivers and racks of spare weapons, shields, dozens of meters of cloth in their enormous rolls, and various construction materials and tools were scattered about or poking out of their various storage containers.

We weren’t the first to arrive in the storeroom and I gave a half smile at the sight of Sepula waiting for us with a young man with the complexion of a Redguard. He was possibly only a few years younger than myself but I couldn’t help but see the nervousness that suddenly gripped him tight as he laid eyes on us. It was enough, especially along with a similar level of nervousness running through Seupla that put me on guard.

“I’m thinking that we are going to have to work on your subtlety, Sepula.”

“Sorry Sir. Subterfuge is not amongst my skillsets.”

Walking close behind me, Alexi glanced between me and the rest of us, frowning as he did so. “Am I missing something?”

“We’re not down here to count nails.” Viconia added for Alexi’s benefit and the expression of understanding spread before he turned and ensured the door to the ground level was closed.

“I must apologise for the deceit. I convinced the Duke that the supplies needed to be checked and it didn’t take much for his to agree to have you all responsible for such a task. It was the only way that I could think of to get you all somewhere quiet.”

“To do what exactly?” Viconia asked, her voice growing cold as she glanced around, ever wary for ambushes and hidden blades in the dark.

Gesturing to the young man standing alongside him, Sepula grimaced nervously and nodded. “This is Lathon. He has information that you all need to hear.”

Obviously feeling our sudden interest and scrutiny, the Redguard swallowed nervously and tried to clear his throat. “Um… Yes… My name is Lathon Nermion. I am… was, a squire in in the Order of Iron.”

“You’re one of the Duke’s men.” I stated flatly, seeing the shaky nod as response.
“Yes.”

“What information do you have for us?”

His eyes were darting about, moving between all of us and glancing at the door leading to the rest of the priory as though he expected a horde of enemies to burst in. “I know about the Sword, and the truth behind how the Duke gained it.”

“Besides that the Sword is corrupted or cursed?” Viconia asked, and Lathon stared at her with an expression akin to confusion and shock.

“I don’t know about that madame, but I know that he wasn’t the one who retrieved it. It was Sir Roderic Menius; my charge who originally reclaimed the Sword and the Greaves.”

Alexi was staring at the squire and his scrutiny was hardening his face. “Where is your sire now?”

“He’s… he’s dead. He died shortly after retrieving the relics.”

“Right…” Rubbing at my face I could feel my annoyance building at the same rate as my instincts that the squire’s knowledge was of high importance. “Take a breath and calm your nerves. You’re safe with us.”

“Okay…” Taking deep breaths, Lathon wringed his hands while trying desperately not to keep staring at the door or the floor between us all. His attempts to calm himself was soon proved to be fruitless as there was suddenly an obvious drop in temperature throughout the room that left all of our breaths misting the air in front of us.

Lathon and Sepula were looking about in alarm and only Viconia and myself were showing no signs of distress as the temperature continued to plummet and mist began to form from the walls and floor. It was coiling and smoking through the cracks and the ancient mortar, but a vast majority of it was obviously billowing and flowing out of the wall where the door to the undercroft was still firmly shut.

“Good morning Kaius.” Echoed a faint, but audible voice as a new figure appeared from the steaming stonework, thin trails of ethereal ectoplasm streaming away as the ghost stepped through the wall.

“Good morning to you too Amiel. You definitely know how to make an entrance.”

The long dead knight commander smiled and nodded a further greeting to Viconia and Alexi, looking between us and the other two still living individuals who were backing away as quickly as they could. Sepula and Lathon were entirely on the verge of panic at the appearance of the long dead knight, and their fears were certainly not allayed as Amiel was joined by the rest of his former comrades.

Alexi, to his credit handled the appearance of several ghosts from the wall rather well. While he had dropped his hand to his sword purely by reflex, he was composed enough to see that Viconia and I were not alarmed in the slightest and tried his best to relax.

“We apologise for startling you all, but this may be the only opportunity for us all to speak and we too are interested in hearing what the squire says.” Amiel’s face, while transparent and a hollow reflection of mortality was friendly as he nodded to Sepula and Lathon. “There are also things we all need to discuss.”

“This is definitely good for getting the blood pumping.” Muttered Alexi, carefully removing his
hand from his sword and trying his best to remain calm as he gestured to Viconia and myself. “Does this count as a usual situation for you two?”

“You’d be surprised.” Viconia replied, her eyes narrowing. “Why do I get the feeling that there is more to all this than we think?”

“Because there is.” Sir Torolf voice was a growl and the Nordic ghost rolled his shoulders as though preparing for a fight. “This young lad knows part of the story.”

Lathon was shaking now, seeing and feeling the attention of several ghosts and ourselves and now obviously reconsidering his choices that had led him to such a situation. “I don’t know much. I just know that the Duke didn’t retrieve the sword on his own.”

“Start from the beginning.” Sir Amiel stepped forward and sat on top of one of the many crates within the room and the other dead Knights of the Nine also made themselves comfortable. My attention however was drawn to the fact that there was no longer just eight of them, as they had been joined by a ninth ghost that I didn’t recognise.

“Right…” Gripping his hands tight in an effort to stop them from shaking, Lathon tried and failed to move surreptitiously away from the ghosts as best as he could and cleared his throat again. “Sir Roderic was too old to continue his service in the Order of Iron and so as his last duty he took me along on a journey to Cyrodiil to allow me to win my spurs. Our original destination was Chorrol where we were going to attempt to lift the Gauntlets of the Crusader but along the way we encountered Duke de’Leorion and his knights. There were many more people following the Duke then; dozens of knights from various Orders, pilgrims and maybe three or four times as many men-at-arms.”

“You met near Chorrol?” I asked simply, drawing his attention away from the ghosts sitting and leaning as they listened intently to him. “How long ago was this?”

“Three months ago.” He shook himself as though he had been unable to decide whether he needed to shiver or not. “We briefly stayed in Chorrol, everyone tried to lift the gauntlets but failed and then something… happened.”

“Something?”

He gestured openly with his hands. “I… I don’t know exactly what, but Sir Roderic and some of the others received a vison while praying in the cathedral. Whatever they saw it seemed to excite them, and they all agreed that the Gods had shown them the location of the Sword and the Greaves. Some of the Host of the Horn and Sir Jaseton’s men also had the vison and together they all convinced the Duke and the others to travel to the west.”

Viconia and I shared a glance that didn’t go unnoticed by Lathon and the others. Especially Sepula who was still looking as pale as the ghosts themselves while pressing himself into the far wall. “We know a bit about receiving visions ourselves.” I added in response to their unasked question.

“It took us just over a week but between everyone who had the vison we came across an old manor house. It was little more than a crumbling ruin but Sir Roderic and the others seemed excited.”

“The Vlindrel Estate.” Sighed the ninth ghost.

“They all knew exactly where to go.” Lathon continued, his words suddenly pouring from his mouth in a rush. “It was only a few hundred metres away and nestled into the side of a hill but after some careful digging and removal of vegetation we found a tomb and managed to force our way...
His shakes grew worse for a moment while he continued to try to keep himself calm but the story was flowing from him now. “Sir Roderic led the way, and besides the two of us there were over a dozen knights following. The Duke, Baron Jaseton, Sir Wirile and a handful of each of their knights entered the tomb, but half of us didn’t come out. Within the tomb was indeed the relics, but one of those buried within wasn’t entirely dead. It killed some of the other knights before we realised what was happening, slaughtering them with the Sword of Arkay until Sir Roderic stopped it.”

“It was wielding the Sword?”

Lathon nodded. “I haven’t seen anything like it. Sir Roderic was a great warrior and extremely skilled but he could barely hold it off let alone win against such a creature. It had killed four of the Duke’s knights as though they were as skilled as children.”

“What did the Duke and others do?”

At Alexi’s question Lathon merely shrugged. “The Duke fled. So did Baron Jaseton. Only Sir Wirile stayed behind with two of the Horn knights but they didn’t go to Sir Roderic’s aid. In the end it was up to us to defeat it.”

“But you won obviously.”

His nod this time was slow and sad. “We did, but Sir Roderic was wounded. The Sword could cut through his plate and had opened up a deep wound on his side. He managed to retrieve both it and the greaves from the tomb where the thing had come from.”

“So how did he die?”

“I… I don’t know for certain.” There was no mistaking the plea for help in his eyes and the hints of tears in the corners. “After we left the tomb, the Duke declared that Sir Roderic would be renowned throughout Tamriel for his deeds and success and ordered his surgeons to care for him. The wound was terrible, one of the worst I have ever seen but it wasn’t… shouldn’t have been mortal. When morning came the next day the Duke announced to the camp that Sir Roderic had died during the night and that had passed the relics onto him.”

A cold sweat made itself felt down my spine that had nothing to do with the barrows chill in the storeroom and I knew that all the others felt the same way. “You think the Duke had your sire murdered?”

Lathon nodded, before thinking better of it and shaking his head instead. “I don’t know sir. I have no proof and nothing more than a hunch. I believe that he had a hand involved in Sir Roderic’s death and I can’t bring myself to believe that he would have died from such a wound. He was an experienced knight, and had gained his knighthood during the War of the Bend’r-mahk and I doubt that he would have simply passed away in his sleep.”

“That’s because he didn’t.” Growled the unidentified ghost and our eyes were drawn to him. “Sir Roderic Menius was killed by Cedricer Wirile at the behest of Duke de’Leorion.”

Sir Amiel saw our expressions of shock and curiosity and gestured between us all. “I apologise for not introducing you all earlier but you needed to hear the Squire’s story first. This is Sir Berich Vlindrel.”

“The knights of the Nine are whole again.” I muttered, staring pointedly at Sir Amiel. “You do realise that this raises even more questions than before.”
All of the ghosts nodded, and Sir Berich stepped forward to face us. He was shorter than Amiel and myself but was extremely well built for his size. Like the other ghostly knights, he was dressed in all the finery of the order with gleaming steel plate, polished chainmail and a tabard bearing the red diamond proudly on his chest. He also appeared to be in his early to mid-thirties; in his prime rather than age that he had died. However, what was somewhat surprising was that he appeared unarmed with no sword or weapon on his back or clasped on his hip.

“Yes, my presence here is definitely an oddity, and one that warrants explanation. The explanations will also answer a lot of other questions that you do not yet know you have.”

“How is the sword corrupted?” Viconia said, ignoring everything else and thrusting to one of the important hearts of the matter.

“Partially because of my actions and deeds while I was still among the living.” He said flatly, returning her cold stare with one of his own. Unlike some of his long dead comrades, Sir Berich was bareheaded and his hair hung down over his ears, framing a sharp boned face that was distinctly Colovian. “You have heard most of the squire’s story and it appears that I and the others will need to fill in the blanks.”

Making a short, sharp gesture at Lathon, Sir Berich’s expression softened and he appeared to be struggling with guilt. “The creature that he described was in fact my corpse, twisted and corrupted by the curse bound into the Sword of Arkay and the weight of my sins.”

The uncomfortable silence was short as he seemed to sag, a sad smile creasing his face as he looked between us all. “For close to two hundred years I have lain within my family’s mausoleum, trapped within the decayed remnants of my mortal form where the sword’s corruption soaked me to the core. But, thanks to this young man and the late Sir Roderic they managed to defeat me, destroy my physical body and cleanse me of the curse.”

“But the Sword is still cursed though,” I said carefully, feeling his attention turn to me. “What is it exactly, and how did a relic of the Nine get corrupted in the first place?”

“For that explanation I have to go right back to before the Order of the Nine was founded.” Sir Berich sighed and for a moment a lighter mood crept into his expression. “I was eighteen when the Sword and Greaves first came into my possession. The lands around the family estate had always been home to various vagabonds and brigands but one summer a group of necromancers somehow managed to plunder an Ayleid ruin and set up camp. Seeking glory and excitement, I tracked them down and stopped them in the middle of a ritual and found that some of the items they had looted from the ruin had been the Sword of Arkay and the Greaves of Mara.”

“What was the ritual?”

“I never really found out, nor am I knowledgeable enough to understand what their intentions were with the Sword. Whether they were simply seeking to desecrate the holiest artefact of the God of Birth and Death or they had other plans I don’t know. At the time I thought that I had stopped them, and all the years that I wielded the relics I never considered that they might have actually succeeded.”

Stopping for a moment, he looked between Sir Amiel and Sir Caius, breathing out heavily enough though he no longer had a mortal body or a need for such earthly concerns. “My pride and arrogance cost all of us so much. Never did I stop long enough to consider my actions, and especially in my youth I was heedless to everything but glory and fame. I now know that while the curse or taint or whatever it is within the sword wasn’t responsible for my actions, I assisted taking the Sword down the road to evil. The Curse was completed and took hold of the Sword on the day that I slew Caius on the Priory steps. I baited him, knowing his temper and then I killed him when he drew against me.
I killed him in cold blood with the holy Sword itself. I could have disarmed him or wounded him, but in my pride I slew him and went to war.”

Sir Caius gestured to Sir Berich as he fell silent for a moment. “My death it seems was the catalyst for the sword’s corruption to take hold. Since that date it began spreading its corruption into Berich, up to and beyond his own death.”

“You all have felt its power.” Sir Berich added. “You can sense the foul energies and the way that the sword calls to the darkness in your souls. Right now that dark power is eating its way into the Duke and all those around him and if the other relics are joined with it in its current state…”

Purposefully letting his words hang leaden in the air I could feel my stomach drop and my entire body tense as though I was preparing for battle. Judging by Alexi’s and Viconia’s expressions they were feeling the same thing and I found myself beginning to pace back in forth in frustration.

“Waiting for the Black Knights to arrive is looking more and more attractive a proposition.” Alexi muttered, and by the tone of his voice I don’t think any of us, himself included, knew whether he was making a joke or not.

“Short term it will help, but the Relics are needed against Umaril. As is someone who can actually wield them.” Stopping for a moment I looked over the ghosts, focussing my attentions on Amiel, Berich and Casimir in particular. “You all were able to use the relics that you claimed while you were alive, did you not?”

All three of them nodded, while Casimir looked a little uncomfortable being reminded of the years he had the gauntlets and the way he had lost them. “We did. Anyone pure of heart enough or who repents their sins honestly and truthfully can wield the relics with varying degrees of success. The theory we all had during our lives was that when Pelinal was struck down, the Ayleids didn’t carve his body into eighths and scattered them throughout their empire, but rather scattered the relics instead so that the Alessians couldn’t use them in their rebellion. We are proof that anyone can wield them, but to truly unlock their full potential you need something more.”

“Yes; you have to be pure of heart but you also need to be chosen by the Eight Divines as being a worthy soul.” Amiel said softly. “While the relics are powerful, none of us proved capable of using them to their fullest.”

Alexi, Viconia and I all seemed to have a thought at the same time and looked at each other with realisation. “Caleb.”

Almost as a single entity, the ghosts nodded. “That young man is one of a few worthy enough to use the relics as more than just weapons and armour. There are others within Tamriel equally worthy but he is the only one you have at hand who can use them as conduits of the gods’ might.”

“Time is running out.” Sir Ralvas said, his Morrowind accent thickening his words in comparison to the other knights. “Even now we can sense the Unfeathered. The barriers have weakened enough and he walks Tamriel somewhere to the east. He will gather his strength and unleash an assault on the faithful that they will not have the strength to defend against.”

“Well, aren’t you all the bearers of morale and happiness?” Alexi spluttered. “On one hand we have a desecrated relic with the ability of corrupting the other relics, and on the other we have a reincarnated monster that only one or two people can kill.”

Sepula and Lathon were watching the conversation we were having with wide eyes, glancing between all of us as we spoke and it seemed that only Viconia seemed to be silent and deep in
thought. As Alexi tried his best to deflect the foreboding and doom with his usual good humour and I tried my best not to feel entirely overwhelmed with it all, Viconia was thinking her way through the challenges.

“I don’t suppose that we can call for help from someone. Jauffre and the Blades perhaps? What about Count Hassildor?”

Only the ghosts seemed to lack any surprise at her simple query, while Lathon openly gaped at the casual mention of the Blades and Alexi started snorting in bitter laughter.

“The Blades can’t help us; they have their hands full as it is. I also don’t think that Janus can do anything for us either. Duke De’Leorion technically outranks him after all.”

“But aren’t we technically in part of his county?”

“Well, yes. But De’Leorion is on the council of the King of Wayrest which gives him the ear of a King. Militarily and economically, Skingrad is more than a match for a single Breton Kingdom, but this is a war of politics. Besides that, we don’t have the time to be able to waste toing and froing in a diplomatic war.

“I agree with Lex then. It’s a good thing that the Black Knights are coming.”

My mind was suddenly filled with the images of what would happen when a group of men like Falid arrived to claim the Relics. There would be blood spilt, there was no doubt about it and whatever the outcome there would be no one left to deal with Umaril.

“No… If the Black Knights arrive with the Order in its current state, they will claim the Relics and there won’t be many people left standing afterwards. If we force their hand and try to claim the Relics ourselves the Duke will use his political sway to have us declared outlaws and probably excommunicated. Hells, he probably won’t even have to do anything, we’ll be declared thieves and heretics by the church just from having the audacity to take them. I wouldn’t want to try to make our way from here to wherever Umaril is hiding with every zealot and priest in Tamriel looking for us.”

“Why not kill De’Leorion and remove him from the picture.”

Lathon and Sepula were the only two that seemed to react in any way different to indifference and Lathon especially was spluttering at Viconia’s casual mention of murder. “Kill… A Duke? Has your mind been addled by Sheogorath?”

“He’s still mortal is he not?” Viconia shrugged, her eyes as cold as the temperature within the storeroom as turned to Sir Berich. “The Sword hasn’t made him immortal or anything?”

The wight shook his head. “Not that I am aware. If its enchantment included eternal life I suppose I wouldn’t be here the way that I am.”

“Killing him will raise too many questions and there’s no guarantee that Sir Wirile or Baron Jaseton will not simply claim the relics themselves. My guess is that the corruption of the Sword has allowed anyone to wield it which complicates things somewhat.” I trailed off, scrunching my face in concentration and feeling my guts becoming little more than a ball of solid ice. “He needs to abdicate or step down as commander of the Order and also give up his claim on the relics. Preferably publically.”

“Even if I had never met the man,” Alexi began, leaning against a small pile of crates. “I doubt that he or anyone else in his position would simply give up such prestige and stature. I don’t know of any force on this earth that could persuade or coerce him into doing something like that.”
A niggling thought in the back of my mind finally succeeded in making its presence felt and I stopped my slow pacing along the floor, turning and looking Sir Berich in the eyes. “Just how and why exactly are you here?”

If he was taken aback from my question he didn’t show it beyond a tiny shrug that left his tabard fluttering slightly in an unearthly breeze that no one alive could feel. “I don’t understand how, but with the destruction of my cursed body my spirit was freed to join the others. When we formed the Knights of the Nine we swore oaths that our souls would be bound to the fate of the relics and despite everything that happened, they still bind us.”

Rubbing at my face in concentration, I looked between him and Sir Amiel hovering close behind the man who had once been both a friend and bitter rival during their mortal lives. Sir Berich’s appearance was not as entirely surprising to me as Viconia and I had lain eyes on Sir Amiel’s remains in the flooded Shrine to the Crusader and his presence merely confirmed it. The oaths that they had sworn to protect the Relics and serve the Gods were binding indeed.

Slowly, a thought began to blossom within my mind and I could feel my heart racing as a result. I could feel my excitement building as I thought over it, looking at all of those around me, alive or dead with a smile breaking out on my face.

“I… I think I have an idea…”

Chapter End Notes

Well, all of the characters from the Knights of the Nine DLC are gathered and the end of the questline is on the horizon. I am currently in the process of moving house but I intend on posting the next chapter in a fortnight's time.

Most of the characters within the Knights of the Nine were extremely... Flat and two-dimensional in my opinion. The DLC had all of my favorite themes when it came to knights and chivalry and the likes but it could have been done so much better. I have obviously changed and expanded upon the backgrounds but I have kept their core features from the game intact.

Avita - Priestess of Kynareth (ex legionary because you don’t want a woman of the cloth by your side when facing a reincarnated Ayleid demigod)
Carodus - ex-legionary (In game it states that he did "two-tours of Stros M'kai". What the hell is a "Tour" of duty in the Elder Scrolls universe, Bethesda?)
Brellin - was an ex-sellsword in game, I made him an ex-gladiator instead and a healer.
The'dret - was some random that you rescued from Fort Bulwark during the Shield quest and you knighted him... because you felt sorry for him? I dunno.
Areldur - Priest in the Chapel of Stendarr who didn't have the courage to curse himself in game. I gave him some courage and a promotion to bishop as a reward
Geimund and Gukimir - The brothers state that they have Legion experience when you recruit them in game, but instead of Kaisus knighting every vagabond that manages to walk to the priory I have given them more suitable roles.
Sergius Turranius - is the blacksmith of the order in game. While he's not going to play much of an active part I gave him a cameo.

The cast is gathered, the stage is set and the main lead is awaiting around the corner, it is
almost time for the curtains to be raised and for Umaril to make his long awaited appearance.

Kaius just has to deal with the Duke and his cronies first. haha.

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