The Name Lost in Time

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Summary

Unlike those wealthy children gathered at the College of Winterhold to be taught the arcane arts, Yrith was taken in out of pity. Her life in the academy is full of struggle. But as she meets Singird Larkwing, the uncompromising master conjurer, they start to uncover a dark plot that was meant to cast all of Winterhold into Oblivion.

Notes

I don’t own Skyrim or any of the lore characters or places. I owe the pleasure of engaging in this beautiful world to Bethesda Studios.
This story is slightly Harry-Pottery. Just slightly. :)

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# The Name Lost in Time

**Rating:** Mature  
**Archive Warning:** Graphic Depictions Of Violence  
**Category:** F/M  
**Fandom:** Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, Elder Scrolls, Original Work  
**Character:** Faralda, Urag gro-Shub, Drevis Neloren, Arch-Mage (Elder Scrolls), Dovahkiin | Dragonborn, Hermaeus Mora, Sheogorath, Yrith, Ravencroft, Singird Larkwing  
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Unlike those wealthy children gathered at the College of Winterhold to be taught the arcane arts, Yrith was taken in out of pity. Her life in the academy is full of struggle. But as she meets Singird Larkwing, the uncompromising master conjurer, they start to uncover a dark plot that was meant to cast all of Winterhold into Oblivion.
The wind howled and wailed through the crevices in the cold stone walls, blowing the snow inside the small room through the gaping window. Opposite to it sat a scrawny Breton girl clad in a set of simple, brownish novice robes, leaning to the wall behind her. Cold air filled the room and tiny cloudlets of steam rose from her mouth with every breath. She did not seem to mind them. In her numb fingers, she was gripping a book, eyes fixed on the lines of text, inhaling deeply the fresh air.

Winterhold was a place known for its murky gloom and raging snowstorms. It was grey and harsh, but it had a beauty to it unrivaled by any other place on Nirn. Magic was in the air, and upon its foundations was built the world's most famous and prestigious school of arcane arts. Strange powers whispered and beckoned to the soul. While most people feared them, a few courageous ones found their beauty and dedicated their life to them, even if it meant spending their entire life in a place forsaken by the divines.

Despite always reveling in the mysteriousness of the place, Yrith Ravencroft was not one of them. This place was not her home. Most mages at the College of Winterhold had come on their own free will, pursuing some higher goals such as power, immortality or greater good. For Yrith, things could not have been more different. Her entire life, she wished for but one thing. To be that simple little girl she had been before this all started and her parents were devoured by flames. That wish was forever buried in the past. And now the only thing left were books and stories of brave heroes whose heart was stronger than hers.

She jerked her head a little to her side and her silky raven hair slid down from her shoulders, spreading a dark blanket over her back. She was sitting there lazily, her feet playing with the chair nearby and bouncing it against the bed on her side. She had a feeling that this moment of tranquility would not last forever. She was skipping a class. One that she hated and refused to attend.

Suddenly, she froze and strained her ears. As if answering her own thoughts, a pair of footsteps resounded from outside. They approached quickly and stopped just before the entrance door to the room. She knew what would follow.

She jumped up promptly, quietly sneaking under the bed until not an inch was visible of her. The book she had been reading lay safely under her belly. For a moment, everything was still. The person outside waited, as if giving her time to prepare. She held her breath. The door opened.

A pair of well-kept leather boots with imprinted delicate ornaments made their way to the center of the room in nigh absolute silence. She watched them cautiously, her hand over her mouth. The tips of the boots turned to point to her hiding place. A clear, vivid voice spoke.

"Get out of there at once."

The sentence was firm and calm, just as its speaker. She could recognize this clear, elven alto any time. It belonged to Lady Faralda, the renowned master of destruction magic and currently her foster mother.

Yrith waited. She would not give in just yet, despite knowing the only possible outcome. She suppressed the need to shift on the cold, hard ground and listened. The wind cried its lament. She could hear the flip of the papers on her desk. It had stopped the newcomer for just two heartbeats. On three, a hand slipped under the bed in a flash and caught the rim of her robes, pulling her out with surprising strength.
“I see that some things never change.” Yrith stared into the slender face of an Altmer lady in periwinkle master robes, amber eyes narrowed in piercing reproach. She quickly turned away, feigning sudden interest in one of the papers lying about. It was entirely blank. "I believe it is time for your classes?"

"And I believe it is time for your guard duty, or whatever task of significant importance you might be assigned to," Yrith retorted. For that crispy touch of self-satisfaction, she added smirk. She could feel Faralda’s intense gaze at her. If she hadn’t known better, she would have believed that Faralda could cast destructive magic not only with her hands, but also with her eyes.

"My responsibilities are none of your business, young lady, and if you value your freedom and the comfortable life you’ve been granted here, you will be on your way at once. Consider yourself lucky that you didn’t get a detention."

"None of the other students get detentions for skipping classes!"

“Very well. Feel free to return when you have the coin to pay for your studies and we might set you up under different conditions.” The elf shrugged and gave a cool smile that she reserved just for Yrith. The girl could feel the sting of her nails digging into the skin on her hands.

"I never asked you to enroll me here as a student," she grumbled.

Faralda opened her mouth to reply but closed it again. Struggle reflected in her eyes. She took a breath and straightened her back, as if trying to loom as high above the tiny girl before her as she could. And yet, she failed to keep up her act and suddenly looked so, so small.

“One word, Yrith,” she whispered. “Why?”

There were so many ways to interpret the question. Why don’t you attend your classes? Why are you acting like this? Why don’t you ever tell me anything? Why can’t you be like the others?

They all led to the same answer. An answer that Yrith was terrified of giving.

She averted her gaze without a word. Say nothing and they will know nothing, she told herself, like the countless times before. She let her guardian wait in silence. A fresh gust of wind whipped her face and made her eyes mist with tears. Locks of raven hair fluttered about her face, turning her view into a peculiarly smudged haze. Cold, biting numbness slithered under her skin. Then everything stilled momentarily, save for the quiet rustle of paper falling on the ground. Faralda gave a slow nod.

“I see,” she said. “Words aren’t enough for the two of us anymore, are they?”

Face devoid of any emotion, she turned around and left the room. The flipping sound of her robes soon faded in the distance. Yrith stood there, blank look fixed on the open door. The hinges groaned in the storm and the words of Lady Faralda kept ringing in her ears. This was not right. This was so not right.

She took a few dazed steps and collected her satchel with trembling fingers. A few moments after, she would be pacing through the College courtyard to the Hall of the Elements, where her most hated class took place.

The storm raged on. Mind clouded and preoccupied with thoughts, she failed to notice the frost forming on her lips and eyelashes, nor did she feel the gale trying to sway her very person. The College grounds were almost as dark as the night itself and the veil of falling snow concealed the fountain of bright blue light in the middle of the courtyard, but the image of Lady Faralda’s resigned face that she was imagining covered the scene. She passed the bizarre figure of a white-haired sturdy
orc dressed in the typical adept mage robes heading in the opposite direction. She would have ignored him completely, had he not called out to her.

“Late for the lecture again?”

His rough baritone cut through the swishing sound of the wind and caught her by surprise. She staggered, tripping and losing a shoe that was too big for her foot. She groped for it absent-mindedly, hopping around and barely keeping her balance. When she finally found it and straightened her back, her gaze rested upon Urag gro-Shub, the College librarian that was unanimously considered a local curiosity by guests and mages alike. He gave her a hint of a smile.

“Well, good luck with your first impressions!” he beamed.

Her eyebrows shot up in an unspoken question, but the Orsimer simply turned away with a wave of his hand and stomped through the accumulating snow. She stared at his silhouette slowly fading in the murk, forgetting momentarily the reason she was standing in the middle of a raging blizzard. As she snapped back to reality, she stumbled ineptly through the courtyard to the massive brass gate of the Hall of the Elements. She pushed on the wing that hummed almost inaudibly with magic.

It gave out a painful whine that carried through the vast foyer and further to the center of the building. She cursed in her thoughts. The day before, she had lubricated the hinges. Someone must have been lurking around, wiping the oil so the treacherous doors would give her away. She had a few suspects. The first one to come to her mind was a fiery-haired Dunmer with obnoxiously affected voice and even more obnoxious personality. He belonged to the more competent sort of students and was never too hesitant to brag about it. Cain Aldaryn was without a doubt the most hateful character she could think of, and the one that always made her blood boil.

Coincidentally, the said Dunmer was now standing next to the fountain of blue light shooting to the skies through the tall tower ceiling, a sneer twisting on his smug face. He was holding his chin with two fingers and his eyes shot her a derisive glance.

“Well, well, look what the cat dragged in,” he drawled. Every head around, the classmates that had flocked to him like a pack of starving skeevers, turned to him and then to Yrith. She could feel the thrill. They were ready to laugh at his next word. And the word came promptly. “A midget. Filthy,” he scrutinized her half bare feet, the limp, discolored robes and a mop of tangled hair sprinkled with snowflakes, “soaked and very much late for the class. Then again… it is so very nice to see you here in conjuration. To what do we owe this honor?” The crowd did not disappoint. She scowled and circled them.

In the far corner of the octagonal room, the pale blue light revealed a tall, dark-haired Nord man. Realizing she had not seen this person before, she frowned. She looked around, searching with her eyes for Master Gestor, but the conjuration master was nowhere to be seen. The Nord approached her, his pace steady and reserved, eyes firmly fixed upon her. The students went silent and watched in anticipation. He stopped.

“Yrith Ravencroft, I presume?” The voice, albeit hard as steel, was somewhat alluring, deep and melodic, and there was a touch of crispiness which sent shivers down her spine. Before she could stop herself, she looked directly in his eyes.

The man before her was not someone she would expect in these parts. Tall, with long black hair almost as dark as hers plaited in a single loose braid, and even darker eyes which stared at her attentively, elegantly crowned by fans of long eyelashes. His face was slim and his nose straight, looming over a graceful curve that formed his lips. He was rather thin for a Nord, but still well-built for a mage, the hard, elongated muscles on his arms emphasized by his sleeveless silver robes with
yellow lining. His skin was slightly tanned, an indicator of long days spent under the skies.

“M-master Gestor is…” she hinted a question without answering his. He knit his eyebrows in apparent displeasure. Inadvertently, she took a step back. His eyes slid down to her feet. Suddenly, she became painfully aware that one of them was not properly shod. For the slightest of moments, she could see one corner of his mouth twitch. His eyes screamed disgust.

“Retired as of today,” he replied coolly. She took a moment to study him further. A face shaved to nigh perfect smoothness. Brows that were definitely shaped by hand. Carefully coiffured hair, not a single strand sticking out of his braid. He would probably look better if the braid was put over his shoulder. But for that, he looked… almost too symmetric. And very, very clean. He noticed her look and his eyes narrowed.

“I do not like my students coming late to the classes,” he added.

“Yes, I was, uh…” She quickly turned away and pinned her eyes to the closest broken tile on the floor. Her mind searched frantically for a way out. His gaze felt heavy and petrifying. “T-textbook. I was… looking for my textbook.”

“We don’t have a textbook,” he reminded her quietly. There was a low chuckle from the side of her classmates. She shuddered. The Hall of the Elements was always quiet. She wished the gale would deafen her and drown the loud beat of her heart, but there was nothing but a faint, distant whine.

“My… restoration textbook.” She knew everything about her exposed her. Her trembling voice, her stooped shoulders, clenched fists that she had not even registered before. She forced herself to proceed. “I lost it and then got so absorbed in looking for it that I just…”

“Came late to the class,” he concluded colorlessly. “Well, I do hope you don’t lose your textbooks very often.”

She stared at him incredulously, forgetting herself momentarily. A flush of embarrassment flooded her cheeks. The knuckles on her hands turned white as the snow outside and she pressed her lips tightly together to stop herself from retorting. Eyes on the ground, she stepped aside to join the crowd that was now roaring with laughter.

“So, Miss Ravencroft,” he spoke again and she could feel the undertone of sly amusement in his melodic voice. She raised her head unwillingly and her gaze met his. Her mind could not settle between embarrassment and anger. A part of her wanted to run away while the other wished to crush him. And then there was the tiny voice that urged her to scream and make everything around silent and insignificant. She did neither. “Since you came late, can you step forward and conjure a familiar for me? I wish to demonstrate how the qualities of familiars can vary based on their summoner.”

She froze in place and felt her heart sink. She is quitting this damn place. She is absolutely positively quitting!

“I… I can’t conjure a familiar, Master…”

She could almost feel the tension in his long, deep exhale. “Singird Larkwing. I’d say you could at least come to class knowing the name of your teacher.”

The class laughed louder. Yrith resisted the urge to put her hands over her ears.

“Well, if you can’t conjure a familiar, then you’ll just have to give it your best shot. Step forward, please.”
She shot him a furious glance and spent all her energy trying to convince herself that stomping angrily would not do her any good. Unwillingly she shuffled to the teacher’s side and faced the heartily entertained class. Then came that moment when everyone fell silent and waited for her demonstration. She carefully avoided every single pair of eyes. Without thinking, she stretched out her hands and waved her arms wildly. Not a spark of magic came out of her fingertips. Nothing happened, aside from the Nord teacher sighing almost theatrically. An opinion formed in her head. Of all the teachers in Winterhold, he was already by far her least favorite.

“Tell me, Miss Ravencroft,” he accentuated her name with a hint of scoff, “how long have you been studying here?”

“A-almost six months… sir?”

“Six. Months.” He clicked his tongue, seemingly deep in thought, but his eyes hadn’t left Yrith for a split moment. She shifted her weight nervously, waiting for what was to come. The class watched and no one dared utter a sound. “Six months should be enough to master bound weapons and atronachs for even the least talented of all. And yet, here you stand, flopping your arms like a crippled bird, trying to summon a familiar. Can you tell me how a creature is summoned? In theory.”

She shook her head.

“Or where you need to focus to draw the energy from your soul?”

Another shake, slower than the one before. She hypnotized his feet. They were clad in a pair of perfectly clean boots made of smooth leather with no decorations save for the neatly tied shoelaces. The knot holding the one on the right was a mirror image of the one on the left. A corner of her mouth twitched.

“Do you know where you direct your energy when you summon a creature?”

She kept staring at those annoyingly clean boots motionlessly. His sigh gave her a clear idea of what his face looked like.

“I see. Mister Aldaryn, would you like to… fill in and display your talents?”

There was a shuffle at her side as the fiery-haired dark elf moved past her. He did not forget to shove her on his way and gave her a smirk when he turned to face the whole class. He tucked up his sleeves as though he was preparing for a fist fight and rubbed his hands.

"Watch and learn,” he drawled quietly at Yrith and then winked at a tall blonde elven beauty in the small crowd of students. The girl giggled and eagerly returned the wave, wiggling her waist suggestively. Yrith imaginarily stuck out her tongue.

Cain Aldaryn stretched out his hands, arms in perfect parallel, and narrowed his eyes in concentration. A moment after, a howl echoed through the octagonal chamber and an ethereal wolf-like creature formed before him. It stood there, awaiting orders, oblivious to the applause that came from the ranks of his master’s classmates. All except Yrith who just barely suppressed a snort. Master Larkwing nodded in appreciation.

“I will now summon my own familiar,” he turned back to the class, “and send it against Cain’s. What I want to show here is the difference between our familiars’ strength. Watch closely as I summon it and try to analyze the differences.”

Yrith turned away. Why in Oblivion had she decided to come here? She had no intention of watching people conjure, let alone learning to do it. She despised the subject from the bottom of her
heart and she had a good reason for it too. She winced as her classmates gasped and cried out with surprise. The air was filled with growling and scratching. She could swear she heard a ripping sound as well. A memory threatened to surface, but she quickly pushed it back to the depths of her subconsciousness.

Then, the sounds died out. She raised her head to see Singird Larkwing’s familiar standing victorious by its master’s side. The teacher – to her utmost displeasure – was staring directly at her with a stone hard, unreadable expression. She shuddered. She was about to avert her eyes again, but his look suddenly shifted to the Dunmer before him.

“Thank you, mister Aldaryn,” he said and gestured toward the crowd. Cain stepped back to join his friends and let the teacher continue. “As you could see, if you were watching, that is,” he shot a glance at Yrith and several chuckles rose from the crowd, “my familiar was stronger and more tenacious in combat. Even if our familiars had not fought each other, mine would have lasted longer.” There was a loud crack as the translucent creature returned to its home plane. “In my class, you will learn about the true nature of conjuration. That it is not just a simple act of summoning a creature or an object from another realm, but it also includes controlling it and giving it strength. That you can control the sharpness and durability of your bound weapons with your magicka, and make your summoned creatures stay with you for infinity. We will also touch on necromancy, but this dark art ought not to be taken lightly. Only those skilled enough in other branches of conjuration will be allowed to practice it.”

He paused for a moment and smoothed his clothes. After a moment of cautious scrutiny, he cleared his throat and continued.

“For now, I want you to research familiars and atronachs and write down their characteristics. Please, include statistics such as the scale of their strength depending on the conjurer’s level of advancement or the amount of magicka you need to invest in different types of creatures. This should give you a general idea of what to expect in this class and help you understand the very basics of conjuration that some of you seem to be… lacking.” His eyes met with Yrith’s. She promptly turned away.

“Class is dismissed.”

There was a disgruntled murmur among the students followed by the flipping sound of paper as they took out their notebooks and wrote down the instructions. Yrith could hear words of protest rising from the crowd including “Ehh?! We have homework?” and “Just you wait till I tell my parents!” She had a very clear opinion on the matter of her assignment which she was not willing to share. With a shrug, she turned to leave and almost crashed into her new conjuration teacher who flew past her like an arrow. She nearly tripped as she quickly made way and offered his back one last scowl.

For the second time, she set out for the door. And once again, she was stopped. This time, it was Cain who, wearing a twisted, arrogant smile, blocked her passage.

“Hey midget!” he called to her. She gritted her teeth and refused to look his way. After three heartbeats of pondering, she decided to circle him as quickly as she could. He pretended to let her. Then, suddenly, his hand shot forward and he grabbed her by the collar, turning her to face him.

“Let me go, Cain,” she hissed.

“Let me go, Cain, she says,” he drawled affectedly. His classmates roared. The blonde elven beauty, now standing by his side, giggled and clung to his arm, pressing the whole of her tall, delicate body against his hip. Yrith scoffed inwardly. The bastards always get everything they want, don’t they?

“Say, midget, you wanna join us for a cup of tea? Discuss our homework? Wouldn’t you appreciate it, having been absent for such a long time?”
He winked at her and she snorted with disgust.

“Please, Cain. If you cannot resist this insuppressible urge of yours to spout your absolutely nonsensical pack of lies, could you at least try to sound more convincing? I am truly sorry but I fail to see your point.”

“Ah, there she goes again,” he purred and grinned. A set of dazzling, white teeth contrasted his ebony skin. “The walking book act, accusing me of pretense. Don’t you at least have the manners to say thank you when someone offers you help?”

“Not if that someone holds me up like a skeever for slaughtering! Now if you don’t mind, the book would like to keep walking, so would you please be so kind as to let me go?”

“And if I say no?”

“Please don’t. Or I’ll…”

“Or you’ll what? Call your parents? Oh, that would be a disaster, wouldn’t it?”

“Cain…”

“Go ahead, call them. Why don’t you? Oh wait… your parents aren’t around anymore, are they? Look at me, I almost forgot!”

Yrith’s face turned deep red with burning flush. She put both of her hands on his and snarled inarticulately. The crowd surrounding the two of them cheered and whistled. Yrith realized that a circle had formed around them and there was no escape. She could feel her heart beating its way out of her chest.

“Let. Me. Go.” The words coming out of her mouth sounded strangely alien to her, calm and quiet unlike her usual tone. She looked directly into the Dunmer’s crimson eyes and her grip tightened. The elf winced ever so slightly, but quickly reclaimed his composure. His sneer widened.

She did not waste another word. One twist of her hand was enough to send the surprised, unprepared classmate to the ground. A cacophony of screams echoed through the tower. People cheered and shouted and clapped their hands. The tall, blonde elf stared at Yrith with utter shock, one slender hand covering her mouth. Cain lurched to his feet and bared his teeth with a quiet hiss. Yrith was about to make for the door, but he blocked her way. She took a step to the side and he followed immediately. She would shove him away but he tackled her hair, pulling her closer and jerking her head backwards. She screamed and kicked him in the knee. He screamed back.

“S’wit!” he cussed and staggered back, arms stretched so he could protect his wounded leg. Yrith looked at him with unconcealed contempt. She had last heard this word back in Daggerfall where the few Dunmer that lived there roamed the streets in gangs and stole from those who least expected it. “People who use such words are not worth your time, Yrith,” her mother had told her. “They are sad and jealous of what we have.” Supposedly, Cain was nobility. He had everything one could ask for and nothing to be jealous of. She concluded in her mind that even mothers can be wrong from time to time.

The nobility threw a fist. She dodged it and prepared to walk away. The circle of people around her were of different opinion. They pushed her back to her opponent the moment she wanted to elbow her way to the door. Upon the next assault, she tripped him so he fell face down on the cold stone floor. He slowly raised himself on his hands and turned his head to her. His eyes shot daggers.

“That was the last straw, midget,” he breathed. Then he rose and lifted his hands. At first, she
thought he was about to hit her, but he did not move an inch. Instead, a silver screen of frost appeared around his fingers. She backed away until she could feel one of her classmates’ breath on the nape of her neck. Gods knew she was not prepared for a magic battle. And Cain excelled in destruction like none other. The nasty hands behind her thrust her back. The Dunmer’s arms stretched and she covered her eyes when a shower of tiny ice particles landed on her skin, leaving behind a sea of minuscule wounds and cold, numbing sensation. She could feel the energy leaving her body and groaned quietly with pain. Eyes closed, she sank to the ground and shakily covered her face in retreat. Then a voice tore through the air, and the moment it did, warmth returned to her limbs.

“What in Oblivion is happening here?!”

She looked up and saw the crowd making way for the dark-haired Nord who had left the room just a few moments before. His face was carved in stone, his gaze pinning both antagonists to the ground. Hotness flooded Yrith’s cheeks, taking turns with waves of petrifying chill. She wanted to crush the butterflies in her stomach. Beside her, Cain put up a mask of indifference that failed to conceal his own struggle. The teacher stopped just a few inches from them.

“The moment I walk into the infamous College of Winterhold, I see students coming late for classes, unable – or unwilling,” he put a strange emphasis on the word and shot Yrith a piercing look, “to cast even the most basic spells, and on top of that, they brawl amongst themselves? Nine Almighty, what has become of this institution?”

The two delinquents responded with absolute silence. Even the people around them did not dare utter a sound. The occasional shuffle of feet on the floor sounded almost thunderous.

“I suppose discussion with my fellow teachers is in order,” Singird Larkwing said with a somewhat refusing-to-resign sigh. “For now, detention for the two of you will have to suffice. You are to retrieve the fish from the nets down on the shore every morning and evening for one month. Until then, all shifts will be relieved of this duty. Any questions?”

“What?!” Yrith gasped and the shame of the past moment was replaced with exasperation. She jumped on her feet and looked into the dark mirrors of the teacher’s eyes. “For a whole month? You… you can’t do this!”

“Oh, I can do a lot worse, Miss Ravencroft, and believe me, I will if I deem it necessary.” He returned her look with twice the amount of coldness of the giant iceberg down in the Winterhold bay. She gritted her teeth almost painfully.

“But…”

“Miss Ravencroft, one more word.”

She gave him an aggrieved look but fell silent at once. Cain was staring at her angrily, his fists clenched so tightly that the ebony skin on his knuckles had turned almost white. Yrith could not decide whether to direct her rage at the Dunmer, or the Nord teacher whose eyes were now not so secretly smiling with satisfaction. In the end, she settled for the latter. Without another word, she stomped out of the room, thinking fires of Oblivion and pits filled with nasty hairy spiders.

The Arcanaeum, the great library of the College of Winterhold, was a place of eternal repose, warm, soft flickering candle light and heavy dust-filled smell of paper. If the rest of the College was wild and filled with passionate cries, sparkling magic, and ferocious snowstorms, the Arcanaeum was the safe haven where everything was still and quiet, where one’s mind could find peace after a long day.
Amidst all that lived an old, sturdy orc with broad shoulders and sharp fangs that stuck out of his mouth like horker tusks. His daily attire was a worn-out yellow robe patched in so many places that it seemed to bear more stitches than the actual linen, and what remained of his snow-white hair was neatly arranged into a tight bun. When Yrith entered the typically octagonal room with pillars separating the inner study hall from the outer circle where all the tomes and hidden secrets lay, the librarian was sitting beneath his desk, eyes fixed on a thick book, muttering something under his breath. For his sake, she made her shoes clatter as she approached. He raised his head and a grin spread across his brute face.

“There is my little curmudgeon,” he called to her. A green-skinned hand groped over the desk in search for a bookmark. It found a slip of thin wood decorated with a knot of fine red fringes and inserted it in the book, then closed it cautiously, as though it was the most precious thing in the world. Yrith believed that to this particular librarian, it might as well be. “So. How did it go?”

“Why didn’t you tell me we had a new teacher?” she pouted, crossing her arms over her chest. He let out a soft, amused sigh.

“But I did, didn’t I?” She snorted. The orc failed to contain a chuckle. “What is it? Couldn’t quite hit it off with Singird Larkwing?”

“That man is a beast.”

“Now there’s a thing we will agree on. Anyway, you’ve come for a reason, have you not?”

Yrith quickly straightened her back, arms lining with her hips, and cleared her throat. A candle crackled as if trying to undermine her authority and she gave it a reproachful look. She took a breath.

“Yes… yes, of course. Master Larkwing. Do you know where his office is?”

The orc raised a white, thin eyebrow. “Asking about his office, are we? Well now,” he gave her the typical Urag gro-Shub impish look that, as she knew, was reserved just for her, “I have no clue. He moved here early in the morning and I spent all of it carrying books to the upper floor of the Hall of Countenance. And when I arrived there, Nirya was going rampage because her favorite enchanting device was moved out. Like that wimp ever uses it anyway.” He snorted theatrically. Yrith smiled.

“Thank you,” she purred as she leaned to him over his desk.

“No idea what you’re talking about. No books today?”

“Maybe later.”

“Who are you and what have you done with Yrith?”

The girl snickered. She threw a glance at the bookshelves encumbered with tomes, old and new, some fancy, others plain and ragged. She knew them all by sight and most of those containing a story she had read. She also enjoyed randomly flipping through the heavy encyclopaediae and discovering the enchanting secrets of the world, engulfing herself in history lessons or learning how her Direnni ancestors handled their trade. The grimoires or magic handbooks that made up half of the library, however, she had never even touched.

“You are intrigued.” The orc studied her face with amused interest. She quickly pinned her eyes to the desk.

“I… might come back later. Anyway, Urag, need anything downtown? Seems like I’m going for a stroll later.”
“Outside?” In the librarian’s voice, Yrith noticed an undertone of something peculiar, a feeling he very rarely expressed. It made her pause for a moment before replying with uncertainty.

“Y-yes. That’s what I said.”

“Alone?”

“With Cain Aldaryn,” she said through clenched teeth.

The orc slammed the desk and nearly made Yrith jump in the air. The books hopped, papers went flying, and a lit chandelier would have set the place aflame had he not caught it in the last moment. “That demented ogreface gave you a detention!” It was not a question.

“W-well, sort of…”

It took several deep breaths for the orc to soothe his rage. Then he shook his head.

“A new set of quills from Birna’s, if you’d be so kind. But Yrith.” He leaned over his desk and put his broad, bear hands on her shoulders. “Do not stray. Do not stay there any longer than necessary. All right?”

“But why…”

“You’ve heard the rumors, right?”

“But that’s just some lunatic trying to frame the College! What reason would they have to target one of us?”

“Don’t tempt fate. Keep it safe.”

“Right, I will. Now if you’ll excuse me.” She turned to leave and set a quick pace.

“Yrith?”

She stopped but did not bother looking over her shoulder, hypnotizing her long, flickering shadow instead.

“Have you made any friends yet?”

“Stop asking. I’m not talking to that lot.” With that, she left the Arcanaeum. The sad, weary sigh behind her back mingled with the painful creak of the old, rusty door.

Sneaking through the Hall of Countenance always provided a great challenge. Yrith took pride in being able to sneak anywhere and everywhere without anyone noticing her. Fortunately for her, Drevis Neloren, the local illusion master, did not take the trouble to put up protective spells to prevent anyone from sneaking in this particular area. Perhaps it was simply not worth his time, for this place was never quite vacated. But Yrith always managed to find a blind spot. The darkest place is under the candlestick, they said. The statement was wonderfully true.

She waited. If teachers kept crossing the core chamber of the tower, surely discussing some very important matters on their way, she would simply wait longer. She waited for the quiet lull, back pressed to the outer wall, pretending to read a book. It came. And unlike any sneak thief from the infamous Riften guild, she ran. Her footsteps were silent as a cat’s and movements just as stealthy. The fountain of blue light at the center of the tower hummed and crackled, drowning the last bit of sound she could have made. She conquered one staircase and then another, until she reached the
upper floor.

This part of the tower used to be deserted. No one used the enchanting device or the laboratory that had been there. Now, they had been moved to some remote and most likely forgotten corner of the College while a new room had been constructed in their place in a breathtakingly short time. Yrith stared at its entrance in disbelief. The room itself must have been at least twice the size of a normal teacher’s chamber. She pressed an ear to the lacquered wooden door, but no sound came from within. She cautiously grabbed the handle and pulled. The wing turned in absolute silence. She reveled in the absence of the sound.

One peek informed her there was no one in the room. Slipping behind it, she finally inspected it in full detail. The girl laughed to herself. The room was a perfect mirror to her new teacher’s personality. Not a speck of dust lay on the thoroughly polished furniture. Several columns of books were perfectly aligned with the edge of the desk they were placed on. Every door or drawer was shut tight, and even the positioning of the shelves seemed to follow a very regular pattern. She dedicated a few moments to a silent meditation on how in Oblivion this uptight Nord could ever survive among his kinsmen. Then she shook her head and rubbed her hands. Time had come to deliver her chef d’oeuvre.

One look and she knew what she had to do. She carefully shuffled the books. From the depths of his wardrobe, she withdrew several of his robes and mixed them with the neatly folded shirts and tunics, wondering in the process why he would need so many clothes in the first place. Several items on the shelves, an hourglass with crystal clear sand, a paperweight in shape of a moon made in dwarven metal, and a strange soul gem with curling ornaments carved along its edges, switched places. When she was done, she nodded in satisfaction, admiring her own work.

“Detention for being cornered, is it?” she drawled to herself. “Well, I'll see to it you get your own.”

She took one last book and patted its smooth cover made in blue-dyed leather. *Soul Recreation by Telvas Adinor*, said the imprinted title. Just as she was about to place it on a pile with books of different size, a sheet of paper slipped from within and fluttered to her feet. She picked it up and curiously glanced at the robust, formal-looking script that covered the page.

*Singird Larkwing,*

*It is with great regret that I inform you of the death of your beloved parents. They passed with honor, providing aid to fellow citizens in need. Their remains will be kept in the Temple of Talos in Windhelm until their collection.*

*I would like to offer my deepest condolences for your loss. May their brave souls forever rejoice in Sovngarde.*

*I remain,*

*Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak of Windhelm*

Yrith stared at the letter for a long while, holding her breath. A bitter memory crept into her mind and she quickly shushed it. Her hands almost automatically clutched and crumpled the paper, but she stopped herself at the last moment. She carefully inserted it back in the book and gently put it back where it belonged. With head slightly bowed, she left the room, refusing to look back.

The storm had subsided and the heavy clouds had moved to hinder the sailors who were brave enough to traverse the Sea of Ghosts. The ruddy sun disc hung over the imposing statue of Azura
that crowned the western horizon. The Daedric mistress of balance, ruler of day and night, stood tall
on the mountain ridge that separated Winterhold from the Pale, slender hands that held the sun and
moon reaching toward the sky. Yrith could only discern its silhouette against the rose-crimson dusk.
This was her time. The moment when the blue of sky yielded to the red, when day broke into night,
when the winds were at standstill before changing direction. The point of balance.

Yrith sighed. In her mind, rage and doubt were in perfect balance. The heated discussion between
Singird Larkwing and Lady Faralda she had overheard just a few moments before had left her full of
frightening confusion. The word *expel* had been said more than once. Until then, she had been
convinced that whatever was going to happen to her, she would not care. It would not matter. No
one would ever miss her, and that was how it was supposed to be. She couldn't have been more
wrong.

For this very reason, she was now standing at the foot of the bridge arching above the Winterhold
strait. It was generally advised for people crossing the narrow, crumbling bridge not to look down
into the icy depths. Very few magicians were quick enough to protect themselves with magic, and
those who were usually ran out of soul energy before the fatal fall into the dangerously shallow
waters below. A folk tale spoke of a thief magician who, using a hundred soul gems he had taken
from the College, barely managed to save his life and ended up wounded on the shore. But he could
not call for help, for he had robbed the Arch-Mage and that was not a crime to be pardoned. In the
end, the man was eaten by a pack of horkers.

Yrith stepped on a wobbly cobblestone and looked right into the mist under her feet. She shuddered.
Slowly, she raised her head and turned her gaze toward the other side. The remains of the once
proud city of Winterhold lay before her, a handful of cozy cottages with dimly lit windows and
smoking chimneys whose thatch roofs were covered in a ruffled blanket of shimmering snow. She
took a step and looked down once more. She could hear the soft crackle of ice from below. She
hypnotized the drifting mist and her stomach knotted.

“What in Oblivion are you doing?” a voice behind her cut in her thoughts. She gasped and stopped
herself from falling by sheer will. With back straightened and hands clutched behind, she turned
around to face the fiery-haired Dunmer with his typical self-important sneer. Only then had she
realized she had been holding her breath.

“N-nothing,” she said. He raised a brow, but the curiosity in his face was carefully hidden behind a
mask of contempt. Her eyes slid down to a stained linen bag hanging over his forearm.

“Taking a shortcut, are we? Go ahead,” he nodded to the misty abyss. “And while you’re at it, take
this.” He threw her the bag. She caught it instinctively but then looked at him in outrage.

“I’m not your servant!”

“Oh. That’s strange, I thought you were here to fetch my wine. And please, mind your step. I
wouldn’t want to sully my shoes.” He entered the bridge, stepping lightly on the crumbling stones.
Some of the walls around it were missing and most of it was covered by thin layer of ice sprinkled
with snow. She was certain there was an alteration spell that would keep her safe. She was also
certain she could not cast it. With a sigh, she followed her classmate’s footsteps, secretly sticking out
her tongue at his back. The Dunmer did not seem in the least frightened, walking in a calm, steady
pace, head erect like true nobility.

The city of Winterhold welcomed them with the smell of burning wood and roast spreading from the
local inn, The Frozen Hearth. Not too many voices were heard from there, however. Dagur, its
owner, along with his ever loyal wife Haran, frequently complained about poor business and
considerable lack of customers, but the love for their home kept them from chasing opportunities.
Back in the day, she would visit them on the way to the now non-existent fishery and exchange stories about their lives. Before lunch time, the place always carried the mixed scent of broth and freshly baked pie. Haran stormed the inn in her old, holey apron which bore so many stains that the original color was indiscernible, dusting the tables with such passion that it never failed to put a smile on Yrith’s face. Dagur danced around her and sang aloud and horribly out of tune. Yrith, hailing from a land of artists, naturally suffered, but she loved the man too much to tell him. At those times, the cozy little inn was filled with mirth and laughter.

She paused and took a pensive look at the old, chipped entrance door. The signboard at its side creaked and made her feel nostalgic. She barely ever caught a glimpse of them now, being mostly confined to the College grounds.

“Are you coming, dog?” the affected voice of her classmate cut in her thoughts with a snort. “You’re lucky I forgot my whip today.”

She pursed her lips but gave no answer. Instead, she passed him in hurry and left the obnoxious Dunmer behind. She could hear quick footsteps and shallow breath as he sped up.

“Hey! Look at me when I’m talking to you!”

She waved her hand at him nonchalantly and decelerated to a relaxed gait. “It seems you’re not quite as successful in... taming me, when there’s no one around to hold me down for you,” she remarked and made sure to put a great deal of amusement in the statement.

“And you’re quite audacious for someone who just received a detention and can’t even cast sparks.”

“A detention that you received with me.” She shrugged. She could hear him snort.

They passed several ravaged buildings. While the road was full of footprints in the grimy, compacted snow, the ground around the ruins was covered in velvety white blanket untouched by man. Even animals avoided the shattered remains of the once majestic city. The Great Collapse, a disaster that had met the city some eighty years before, had left behind painful memories and eerie atmosphere that invoked melancholy and fear in everyone who ever approached the scene. Yrith looked at the split beams pointing toward the darkening sky and frowned. It was almost as if there was magic in the air. Even the Dunmer, having caught up to her at last, struggled to maintain his smug expression.

“I spend half hour with you and I already feel drained,” he pointed an accusing finger at her. “Let’s get moving, shall we? I want to get this over with. A dinner would be a welcome bonus.”

For once, she agreed. She gave a silent nod and they quickly started descending the slope leading to the fish nets. Cliffs on both sides, they entered a murky ravine. In the distance, a great iceberg protruded from the dark sea waters. The ice around them filled their ears with soft crackling occasionally drowned in a distant splash. The peculiarly regular sound traveled between the walls as though a restless cricket hopped from one side to another. A sudden chill tickled Yrith at the nape of her neck and she shuddered. Instinctively, she turned around. The gusts of wind raised ethereal columns of snow and amidst them glistened tiny particles of ice.

“Pfff, the midget is scared?”

She pierced the Dunmer with a look and clutched the linen bag he had made her carry.

“You wish,” she uttered. As she threw the bag over her shoulder and took another step, a hand grabbed her. She nearly jerked to the side but refused to give him the pleasure. He spoke in a deep, low voice, head slightly bowed.
“Have you heard the tale of the Lone Demon?”

“What in the name of the Eight are you talking about?”

“The Lone Demon, the fallen divine. Neither aedra, nor daedra. He was cast out from Aetherius to Oblivion and from Oblivion to Nirn. The homeless god.”

“There is no such entity. I’ve read the entire Winterhold library and no books speak about him.”

“Well maybe there are no books about him. After all, his very name was lost to the ages when it was changed. He wanted a different world. A world without bigger and lesser, without differences, wars and struggles. A world no one but him could comprehend. When Nirn was born, he wanted to cast all the daedra, aedra and Creators alike into it and rule it as a single god. For that, he was banished, cast onto Nirn himself and stripped of his divinity. But there is a rumor,” his voice turned into a mere whisper, “that after sunset, when the night drowns day and stars and moons struggle for dominion, he lurks in the gloom and takes souls for pleasure.”

“Yeah, right,” she snorted. “Great story. Maybe you should become a writer.” She threw up her hands and sped up. The crackle resounded in the ravine, louder than before. Shivers ran down her spine. She reflexively searched for the source of the sound. The ice sparkled and sputtered. And moved. Her eyes widened.

“You know,” he continued in low voice, bending slightly to look at her from below, “he especially loves the souls of young girls. They have so much… life in them.”

It moved again. It was almost by his ear.

“C-Cain…” she managed to produce.

“What? Aww, did I scare you, midget? Are you afraid for your soul now?”

It shot forward. An ethereal snake-like skeleton of pure ice.

“Behind you!” The Dunmer laughed.

“Trying to scare me, midget? Well, nice try but…”

“Turn around, you trollhead!” she cried. At last, the Dunmer looked over his shoulder. He gasped and took a few quick steps back, nearly tripping over a knob of hardened snow.

“What the… that’s an…”

“Ice wraith!” she shrieked. “By the gods… do something! Do something!”

Cain bit his lip and backed away, until a wall stopped him. Eyes wide with fear, he raised his hands in between heavy breaths and a sphere of flames enveloped them. He shot as soon as the spell was fully charged. The fire bolt hummed through the air. For a moment, Yrith thought time had stopped. She held her breath and so did Cain. The missile hit the wraith, but before the two of them could cry out with joy, it hissed and dissolved. The Dunmer forced himself to draw breath and shot again. And again. And twice the fire fizzled and vanished as soon as it touched the creature. It lunged at its attacker and dug its frosty teeth into his cloak. The dark elf screamed, and his legs gave way. Yrith's scream matched his.

“No!” he yelled. The ice wraith wound about him. He stared at it hopelessly, the young novice he was. His back pressed to the ice wall behind it and feet buried themselves in the snow. Yrith stood
there, trembling and panic-stricken. The creature prepared for another strike. This time, it would aim for the flesh. This time, it could be fatal. She must not allow it. Overcome the fear! Fear will not save him now.

She knew what to do. She gritted her teeth as she stretched out her arms, letting the stained bag fall in the snow. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and let the energy flow. For a split moment, she was one with the universe. Her thought flew across the planes. It searched in the vast sea of dimness. Fire, it called. I need fire! Violet sparks emerged from her hands and a creature appeared before her. She opened her eyes and stared at the flame atronach she had summoned, a graceful being contrasting the surrounding darkness with the golden light that imbued its body. She did not need commands. It knew what to do.

The first ball of fire flew past Cain. The crackling, hissing ice creature backed away swiftly. The Dunmer gasped and tried to integrate himself into the wall. The second ball hit the target. It ignited, the fire of Oblivion itself eating its flesh. At last, third ball sent the creature to the ground. It shattered to a small pile of ice. The atronach, looming over it, twirled in a pirouette.

There was a moment of silence. Neither of the two students dared move. Then the loud cracking sound announced the fire elemental had returned to its home plane and Yrith finally looked at her classmate. They opened their mouths at once.

“Are you–”

“You just–”

Cain rose abruptly and pointed a shaky finger at her.

“What in Oblivion was that?!?”

“That was an ice wraith that was unnaturally close to the city,” she breathed.

“You know what I mean.”

“No.” She raised her hand in silent warning. “I don’t. As far as I’m concerned, you saw nothing, you know nothing and this,” she threw her arms about, “never happened.”

“Oh reaaally?”

Yrith stared at him in disbelief. The smug expression, strangely sharp in the moonlight, had returned to his face.

“You little… an ice wraith attacks us. I just saved your godsdamned butt! And you…”

“Oh no,” he shook his head and a grin spread across his face, “you didn’t. Because, you see… that never happened.”

“You…”

“Now, what would I have you do? Be my slave? Teach me magic that you obviously handle well? Or something… entirely different?”

“You… you know what?” she spat, angry sparks in her silver eyes that even Lady Faralda would feel envious of. “Just…” she grabbed the bag at her feet and threw it at the Dunmer with all her might, “do your stupid detention and choke on that fish! I’m not doing this.”
With that, she stomped away, feet fighting the drifts of snow the wind had blown in her way. She was shaking with fury. He called after her. She refused to listen. Or perhaps her restless thoughts drowned the sound of his voice and she could not hear it at all.
Yrith gave the box she was holding in her hand a pensive look. Urag gro-Shub would not accept anything less than this. It was carved in smooth larch wood, and coated in fine leather on its edges. Gilded corners held a series of thin glass panels, through which she could see numerous quills of various shapes and sizes. It glistened in the flickering candlelight, casting light upon the dimmed columns of the library. She carefully deposited it on the librarian’s desk and earned herself a heartwarming smile.

“Thank you, you’re a lifesaver,” the orc said. He snapped the book he’d been reading shut and admired the craftsmanship. “Three more copies for the sake of science, would you believe it? And the amount of paperwork to be completed for the new students! Erm, not that I’m blaming you, of course.”

She smiled and threw a glance at the pile of papers lining the desk. “If you need any help around here…”

“Nah, you go and study as you should. Speaking of which, can you believe the Arch-Mage wanted me to teach history?”

“Well, that would be a class I’d always attend, at least,” she quipped and patted one of the many books on the table. Its faded, once deep red cover had a hoarse texture, weathered by the many years of its existence and countless hands that had held it. There are two things that gain on value with age and raggedness, her mother had once told her. Teaware and books. Her mother had had a weakness for tea. Yrith had one for books.

“You silly, stubborn girl,” the librarian sighed. Then, he pointed at her hand and quirked a brow. “How did that happen?”

Yrith raised the limb to take a look and suppressed a gasp. Her sleeve was torn, the fraying edges wet with melting ice, most likely a remainder of the ice wraith attack. Water dripped on the lacquered desk, creating a tiny puddle. She met his inquisitive gaze and felt color retreating from her face. “I don’t know,” she stuttered. She knew.

He tilted his head to the side and his eyes narrowed, but he chose not to comment. Instead, he gripped his unfinished book and nodded toward the entrance. “It’s getting late. Hurry up and get some sleep. Don’t miss your classes tomorrow.” The last sentence was pronounced with the educational accent she knew from Lady Faralda. Yrith’s gaze wandered to the tall windows. A soft whine came from the outside, and the glass tablets quivered ever so slightly, but she could see nothing except for a veil of impenetrable darkness.

She opened her mouth to growl back, but her attention was swayed by the book he held so dearly. Two things rang the imaginary alarm bell inside her mind. First, her friend had not offered her any books, as was his habit. Second, the book in his hands was one she had never seen before. Thick and heavy, with pitch black cover and silver lining on its edges. Not once had the orc uttered a word of it.

“What is that?” she asked, pointing her finger at the tome. The sleeve hung over the table like the branch of a weeping willow. She instinctively tugged at it. A ripping sound informed her she had her work cut out for her. She let out a resigned sigh.
“This?” He lifted the thick volume. Yrith did not fail to notice he cautiously hid its title. “Some crappy piece of pulp fiction that someone had left here. Nothing for your delicate taste. At least I have something to keep me warm when I run out of firewood,” he added with a chuckle.

Her inner alarm screamed at her. If there was one person that would never harm a book, she would bet on Urag gro-Shub. She studied his face. His mask was carved with extraordinary care, revealing nothing of his thoughts. Knowing the orc’s nature, she decided to put the subject aside. For now.

“Well, have fun with it then,” a smile formed on her lips. Too wide, she criticized herself in thought. Too late. “I’m going to bed.” Her fingers reached for the ripped sleeve and touched the skin on the other hand. She shivered upon the cold touch.

“Good night, Yrith. Take care. And remember what I told you. Or you’ll turn into a grumpy hermit and grow grey hair before I kick the bucket.”

“Don’t talk about things like that so casually,” she said softly. “You’re the only one I have here.”

“And that’s the problem, you silly,” he grumbled.

Not knowing how to respond, she shook her head and left the Arcanaeum, slapping one hand with the other to prevent herself from tearing the robe entirely.

Upon entering the Hall of Attainment, she froze. Most of its occupants were gathered in the lowest level of the main hall, faces pale as the blue light from the magical fountain in its middle lit them. All of them were laughing and chattering, eyes turned to the tall figure standing on the low stone wall surrounding the azure pool. Yrith could not see very well against the light, and most of her view was blocked by the crowd, but the clear, accentless male voice coming from the center did not sound familiar. Curiously, she pressed herself to the wall by her side and listened.

“… and then I saw him walk out of the tent, and the kid repeated ‘He came out of the Elder’s backside!’ From then on, much to my father’s displeasure, everyone called the place ‘The Elder’s Backside’.” The figure bowed slightly and the fountain behind him flickered merrily, letting out a spray of glittering sparks as though it was trying to add to his mirth. The crowd roared with laughter. Then the stranger turned his head toward Yrith and she could feel his eyes on her, watching her over the heads of her classmates.

“We have a newcomer!” he exclaimed. The crowd turned to Yrith who immediately wished to disappear. A number of sighs echoed through the central hall. Leyna Travi, the blonde Altmeri girl who had so affectionately clung to Cain Aldaryn just a few hours before, stepped out of the crowd, elegantly shook her head to make her white-gold hair fly around her like a veil, and let out a scornful snort.

“Oh, her,” she said. “That’s just our midget. Don’t waste your time on her, Qassir. She’s useless, unbearable and there’s not a single good thing about her.”

“Now now, let’s not be too harsh.” The figure jumped down in a swift, elegant leap and walked straight to the motionless Breton girl. An aisle formed in the crowd almost automatically. Yrith watched him warily, measuring how quickly she would have to react lest he tried to lunge at her. Instinctively she clenched her fists, but his pace stayed calm and relaxed, treading through the hall with somewhat reassuring composure. As he approached, she used the time to study him.

The blue light revealed a tall Redguard boy, not much older than Yrith or her classmates, with long hair plaited in a great number of thin braids. In his unusually symmetric oval face shone a warm, welcoming smile aimed directly at her.
She frowned. A Redguard? Here at the College?

She looked him up and down. Her eyes stopped at the standard novice robes that he had apparently obtained in a rush as they were too short for him, revealing much of his slender arms and legs. He did not seem to mind, however, nor did he bother with putting on any shoes. Just the sight made Yrith shiver with cold.

He stopped a few feet from her, leaning against the cold wall. Yrith resisted the urge to wrap her arms around herself.

“So, you’re one of my new classmates, I take it?” he said in an overly friendly tone. “What’s your name, little urchin?”

She stared at him, quickly pressing the arm with torn sleeve to her hip. Back in Daggerfall, urchins were a very specific sort of people – one that no one envied and no one wanted to become. She frowned in apprehension.

“What’s my name? What’s your name?”

“Ahh, right,” he laughed and straightened his back. “Qassir Tahlrah. At your service.” In one graceful movement, he dropped a curtsy and his hair swept the ground. Yrith did not miss his left hand copying the curve of his back while the right hand was placed on his abdomen. His legs crossed for a split moment before aligning themselves in a parallel. He had perfect mastery over western High Rock manners. She blinked in surprise, freezing momentarily.

“Have I startled you? Would you rather prefer the style of Hammerfell, my homeland? Or the local fierce Nord greeting?”

“No, that’s… uh. Well. Yrith… Ravencroft. My name. Is Yrith Ravencroft.” She refrained from formalities, aware she was expressing superiority that she was not entitled to.

“Really,” he mused as he closed the distance between them. His face was inches from Yrith’s, studying her with keen interest. Strangely unable to turn away, she took the time to study him back. Their eyes met. His were almond-shaped with irises of unusual, deep blue color, as far as she could guess in the pale fountain light.

Finally, he pulled back. Yrith realized she had been holding her breath and exhaled deeply.

“Yrith has a nice elven ring to it,” he said. “I don’t want to ruin the sound. I think I’ll still call you urchin.” He winked mischievously at her and reached out to ruffle her hair. She stepped aside to avoid contact and contained a scowl.

“Why thank you,” she pointed sharply. “Now if you’ll excuse me…”

“Leaving already?” The Redguard looked genuinely saddened. Yrith had her own opinion on the genuineness of certain expressions in certain situations. “How about you join us? It’ll be fun!”

“I must decline.” Her lips widened in a mannered smile. “Thank you for the kind invitation.” She lowered her head with a hand on her chest, testing his knowledge of her homeland’s customs. He simply nodded.

“Looks like I won’t be able to convince you tonight. What a shame. But oh well, you know what they say. There’s always next time. See you tomorrow, little urchin!”

He danced past her and hopped back on the wall, balancing on it while maintaining his tempo. The
crowd laughed again and his face widened with a silly grimace. Yrith stared at the strange classmate for a while before retreating to her room.

That night, Yrith had a strange dream. Before her lay a book with cover black as night, modest silver lining being its only decoration. It bore no title, nor the name of the author. She would stare at it for a long time. The faint, flickering candle light would fade before it touched its surface as though the tome was feeding on it. She was sitting in her room, but it was strangely quiet. No wind wailed from outside. No papers flew around and landed on the floor. No footsteps from the octagonal corridor.

Then, the book whispered to her. Quietly, almost inaudibly. She lowered her head to listen in, but could not discern any words. Yet she knew it was an invitation. With a hint of hesitation, her fingers touched the cover and lifted it.

Before her was the universe. Vast and deep, yet so small. It was in the palm of her hand. Suddenly, it surrounded her. She walked among the stars, silver and gold, some fading, some newly born, children of Mundus. Masser and Secunda greeted her with warm light. She saw the Sun, casting warmth onto Nirn. She saw lights of so many colors it made her eyes twitch. And then she saw life. She heard it and felt it. Innumerable beings, merging into a single, great entity. Plants and animals, creatures so small one could not see them at all, souls that were long lost, and those that were being born. They were all part of her. She felt every single one of them, mingling together as though none of them mattered. And yet, each of them did.

She felt small children of men playing by the sea shore and laughing. Two men clashed in fierce battle, pressing shield against shield in attempt to sneak a blade past the enemy’s defenses. An elven woman laughed while the Argonian slave at her feet whined and cowered in fear. A dragon roared in anger and excitement, his breath searing the thatch roofs beneath him. A burning villager cried in pain and begged the gods for mercy. A horde of skeevers scurried through the field, tiny minds filled with a single thought – to survive. A lone cliff racer was searching for its nest that had been put down along with the tree it had been sitting on, overcome with uneasiness.

Emotions flooded her and filled her heart. She could smell them. Breathe them. Happiness, torment, joy, pain, security, doubt, anger, peace, love, hatred, loyalty, envy, lust, and indifference. Everything was in her. They became a mountain she could not climb. They blinded her and made her lose her mind.

It was all a single moment. Time had stopped. The urge to laugh would not cease but she could not laugh yet. The pain stung in her limbs, heart and lungs. She wanted to scream but gasped for air. She felt the blade that had cut through her belly and made her want to pass out instantly. But it was frozen in that single split second. Nothing would move. Nothing would pass.

Then, she heard a whisper inside her mind. It was filled with bitterness of someone that had been betrayed and broken. Her hairs would stand on end, hearing the sour, spiteful, voiceless tone. It grasped her heart and paralyzed it.

“Thou shalt have the world thou desired. Thou shalt live the life thou created. Thou shalt cry tears of blood. And blood thou shalt drink.”

Everything went into motion. Yrith felt herself laugh and cry at the same time. She exploded in ecstasy and broke in terror. She could not recognize the emotions anymore. Her mind went blank.

She sat up, eyes cracking open at once, panting and shaking. Don’t cry, she repeated to herself. Don’t scream. It was a dream. Just a dream.
Breathless, she pulled herself to the window and took a peek outside. The College courtyard was still dark, lit only by the pale blue focal point in its middle. An occasional snowflake fluttered about it before landing by the imposing statue of Arch-Mage Shalidor. She pressed a hot cheek to the cold glass covered in a mosaic of silvery ice fractals. Her breath steadied and she finally felt calmness spreading through her body and mind.

She forced herself out of her bed and with a spark of magic so weak it could not harm a fly, she somehow managed to light a candle. An hourglass standing on one of the few shelves on the walls told her she still had a few hours until dawn. But she was now completely awake. Trying to take her mind off the strangely realistic and painful dream, she grabbed a book and dug into her blankets. 

_Frog Prince and the Lizard Witch_, said the weathered title that had once been imprinted in gold. She instinctively opened it exactly at the page where she had last stopped, but before her eyes could settle on the soothingly curling script, she heard a knock on the door. Her eyebrows shot up. Who in Oblivion would disturb her at this hour?

She set the book aside and watched the old, studded door with caution. Another knock came, this time with urgency that had not been there before. Slowly, she slid into her slippers and trod to the door. Hand placed on the handle, she hesitated. There was a third knock. It was ruthless with no feigned politeness.

“**I know you can hear me, midget, so open the door before I bust it!”**

The hand sank to her hip. With a sour scowl, she resolutely returned to her bed, blew the candle out and buried herself deep under the blankets until not a hair stuck out.

The knocking continued. After a while, the Dunmer on the other side of the door lost patience. There was a humming sound as he called on his magic, a click, and the door flew open. Through the several layers of fabric, she could faintly discern approaching light. The blankets flew off in one swift movement.

“Morning, midget. Rise and shine!”

Cain Aldaryn loomed above her, fiery hair dark against the ball of light floating over his head. Cold air made her limbs numb and she shivered.

“I’ll show you shine,” she uttered dryly. “Has it ever occurred to you to check the clock before you go for a visit? Or do you not have those in Morrowind?”

“We do. And they welcome new day long before the barbarians from High Rock part with the old one. So get up before I make you. We’ve got work to do.”

Yrith jumped on her feet, fists clenched and eyes narrow in rage. Cain rewarded her with a sneer.

“Oooh, so you can do it if you want. Splendid. Let’s go.”

“I told you I’m not…”

“Oh you are. I still know something I shouldn’t. And the rest of the College still doesn’t. Yet.”

He crossed his arms over his chest, displaying a disturbingly innocent grin which, in fact, was not innocent at all. Yrith clasped her hands together, preventing herself from punching him.

“Get out,” she ordered.
“No book talk today? But no, I think I will stay here.”

“Get out!” she hissed. He opened his mouth but his eyes traced her hand, grabbing the rim of her night robe. For a moment, she thought his ebony skin turned the usual ashen color of his kinsmen. Then he turned around and marched from her room, slamming the door behind him.

“I’m giving you one minute!” he informed her.

From somewhere in the corridor, she could hear another person shout “Quiet down there! People are sleeping here!” She chuckled under her breath.

A minute later, he was dragging her through the courtyard. It was deserted save for a couple of crows that had decided to settle under one of the bushes lining the walls. She staggered as he pulled the collar of her ancient, worn coat, barely keeping her balance. Grabbing his hand, she thought of shaking him off, but then she smiled and let herself sink to the ground. The Dunmer stopped. At that moment, Yrith thought to herself that his incredulous stare, like a clueless horker, was worth the stinging of the cold snow.

“What in Oblivion are you…”

She shrugged without a word. He released her, turning on his heel.

“Whatever. Don’t stay behind.” And he paced ahead. She smirked and followed, still silent but content. For the whole trip through the city of Winterhold, down the ravine and back, they did not speak to one another. That is, until the obnoxious elf decided to open his mouth again.

They were a few ells from the city’s lowest house. Yrith, naturally, was the one carrying the bag full of fish. The moist froze immediately on its surface before it could soak through her cloak. The Dunmer was walking two steps behind her, making her look over her shoulder every now and then.

“What? Afraid I might kick you?”

She pressed her lips tightly together, refusing to react. They reached the houses. A young Nord boy with a mop of tousled chestnut hair, no more than ten years old, peeked out of a door, shooting them a suspicious look. Then she heard him hiss “Mages, pah!” And the door shut close. She gave it a pensive look. No one liked mages, especially now that there had been several murders all around the province, all apparently done by the means of magic. Yrith did not know what to think of it. She did not consider herself a mage, but the constant accusations did not put her in good spirits. She picked up her pace, eyes fixed on the bridge ahead.

“So, I was thinking,” Cain tried again. Yrith wished she knew a spell that would temporarily deafen her. “I’m not really feeling like doing our next conjuration assignment. What do you say…”

“Dream on,” she grunted.

“Well, apparently you’re not that worried about what might happen then.”

She turned to him abruptly, stopping at once and making him crash into her. He lost his balance and caught her robes. They both fell over to the ruffled snow, ending in a bundle of limbs and bodies, covered in white from top to bottom.

“You kids, what are you doing over there?!” a guard called to them. Yrith rose on her elbows, shaking her head wildly to get rid of the snow in her face. Then she noticed Cain leaning to her, much closer than she would have liked. Smirking, she kicked him in his shin and jumped back on her feet.
“Why you…” He brushed the frost off of his hair and shoulders. She concealed a grin, noticing how his previously well-groomed spikes of fiery hair had gone down limply, tiny drops of water on their ends.

“Quite right,” she said with a simple shrug. “I’m not worried. Not when it comes to you, at least.”

“Hah. And why not?”

“Because your pride couldn’t bear exposing someone who is better than you. Especially me.” She quickly checked the state of the fish bag and set out once more. The guard was still watching her and she gave him an innocent smile. He stood there motionlessly, making her wonder what his face looked like underneath that bucket-like helmet of his.

“My what?” she heard an exasperated cry somewhere behind her. “How dare you talk like you know me?”

“Right. Then you don’t pretend you know me. Unlike you, I didn’t come here on my own free will. I have no reason to even try to become a mage.”

Before she could say another word, he was at her, pushing her down into the snow again. His right hand was on her shoulder while the left one reached for her neck, grabbing it mercilessly until she gasped for air, his eyes gleaming furiously. She dropped the bag on the ground beside her. The spilling fish produced a squelching sound, strangely alien in the never-ending winter.

“You think it was my choice?” he breathed. His hands trembled. For the first time, Yrith looked right in his eyes. There was blind rage in them… and hurt. “You think I just packed my things one day and came here, determined to become a mage? You… you know what? You’re right. I shouldn’t waste my time with losers who can’t even grasp reality and do their best to make it their life.”

With that, he walked away, leaving her to her confused thoughts. She lay there in the snow, with small cloudlets of hot air coming out of her mouth, finding herself unable to move. What in Oblivion was that about? For the first time in history, Cain had seemed like a human, so to speak, but she was not sure if she liked it that way. She was used to being insulted by him, but this time, it actually stung.

“Are you all right?” she heard a voice above her. Her eyes met two dark holes in a steel bucket-like helmet as she cocked her head backwards to take a look at whomever had spoken to her. “That boy… did he try to do anything to you?”

She exhaled and sat up slowly, reaching for the bag and the spilled fish.

“Who knows,” she muttered absentmindedly. The guard stood there in silence, apparently not realizing that she could not see underneath the helmet. Finally, she forced herself on her feet and staggered to the College, bent under the weight of her load.

The College courtyard was swarming with people. Students rushing to their classes and seminars, teachers preparing for their courses, residents simply greeting the new morning. The statue of Shalidor was now holding two balls of light in his hands, one like pure fire, the other an orb of crystal clear ice. It meant that both Masser and Secunda would be in full moon that night.

Next to the statue stood a small group of people, surrounding a Redguard boy. She remembered the last night and hurried to the kitchen. Friendly as he was, she did not feel the desire to talk to him.

A few moments later, everyone was assembled around the blue fountain in the Hall of the Elements, waiting for the restoration class to start. Qassir was deep in conversation with their only Khajiit
classmate, a gaunt, bronze-furred girl named Ha’risha. Yrith knew her to resent her own kind and refrain from speaking like the rest of the catfolk, always referring to herself in first person. But that didn’t stop her from twitching her pointy ears and whiskers or whipping the floor with her tail in excitement. Surprisingly enough, Cain stood aloof, glaring at his so-called friends who now devoted all their attention to the Redguard. He smiled angelically to everyone around, laughing at everything they said. Then he saw Yrith and sent her a wave. She earned herself a few glares and hisses and quickly turned away, cheeks flushing red.

An elder Breton woman entered the room. As always, Yrith stared enviously at the restoration teacher’s hairstyle. A complicated maze of straw-colored tails and braids ending in elegant thin tips that just barely touched her shoulders. Yrith could imagine that Master Colette Marence spent all of her morning working on her hair. That, or she invented a new spell for it. Either way, she was a beauty, even in her age. And despite that, men constantly failed to notice her. Perhaps they did not like her unusually high-pitched voice, reminiscent of the creaky hinges of the entrance door to the Hall of the Elements. Just as Yrith thought about it, its echo filled the octagonal room.

“Greetings, class,” she said as she walked through the small crowd. “As this is the first lesson of the day, I would like to welcome our new student who will be joining us for the first time. His name is Qassir Tahlrah. He came to us from Hammerfell. Everyone, please, be good to him.”

There was an applause. Yrith remembered several people joining them like this, but never before had her classmates cheered this loudly. She shot a glance at the Redguard. A soft smile played on his lips. One that revealed nothing of his thoughts. Colette Marence clapped her hands and the class went quiet.

“Thank you. Now that we are properly introduced, we can start the class. Pair up. Of course, having a new student also means that one of you will have to pair up with Yrith.”

Yrith sighed inaudibly. When it came to working in pairs, she was always the one to practice her magic with the teacher. That was about to change and she was certainly not looking forward to being teamed up with some spiteful classmate of hers. Her eyes wandered from one classmate to another. Tanya Verus, a slight Imperial girl with two adorable chestnut pigtails, was the only one who did not seem openly hostile. She was pinning her elvenly shaped eyes to the floor as usual. Nobody was pleased. Except…

Her new Redguard classmate stepped out of the crowd, the smile still curling on his lips. “I don’t mind pairing up with the urchin,” he said in a sweet voice.

Yrith suppressed a twitch in her eye at the sound of her nickname.

“Urch… I take it you are aware that she’s… not exactly known for her magical prowess then?”

There was a clear hint of displeasure in Master Marence’s voice. Quiet chuckles filled the cold air. Yrith felt the urge to leave immediately.

“So I heard. But teaming with someone skilled would be boring, right?” Qassir laughed and gave Yrith a wink as he joined her. She pursed her lips, uncertain whether she should feel pleased or offended. Then she caught a glare directed at her person and her gaze met with the golden eyes of Leyna Travi. They stared at each other for a lengthy moment.

“Very well,” Colette Marence concluded and clapped her hands, causing both girls to snap back to reality. “Everyone sit down then. It’s meditation time.”

Qassir threw a glance down to his feet, now shod in soft, padded boots of a very much unidentifiable greyish color. “Do we…?” he suggested with raised eyebrows.
“Yes, we sit on this cold, inhospitable floor,” Yrith shrugged. With just a hint of mischief, she watched his expression out of the corner of her eye.

“Oh,” he said simply and gave an innocent smile. Yrith tried to hide her disappointment. “Strange that you take it so well. I thought it was warmer in Daggerfall.”

“How did you know I came from Daggerfall?”

“Heard it somewhere. I think it was one of your classmates?”

“I never talk to them. Especially not about myself.”

“Oh. Then maybe just a lucky guess.” He laughed, earning himself a reproachful look from Master Marence. Head bowing slightly in apology, he seated himself on one of the grey floor tiles. Yrith frowned. She did not like his smile. She did not like it at all.

They closed their eyes. The meditations they did before every restoration class included delving deep down into one’s soul and reaching for inner source of energy. “When healing or defending, you must have absolute control over your power and emotions,” Colette Marence reminded them. “Your magic is but an extension of yourself. It is one of the many ways you can interact with the world and communicate with it. Keep in mind that whatever you do with magic, people affected by it can feel every single bit of it. If your healing is inconsistent, you might, on the contrary, harm the person you are trying to heal. If your ward wavers, it might cost you your life. In restoration, simple mistakes may prove fatal.”

Yrith took a deep breath. Her mind was filled with mingling thoughts, mostly of her new conjuration teacher and the strange Redguard who knew more than he should. “Clear your mind.” It was easier said than done. Her soul felt like raging ocean in a storm. It was simple to conjure an atronach that came to her from an entirely different plane. To control her own soul, she would first have to confront it. And she was painfully aware of the fact that she kept running from her own feelings. Even more than that she was aware of the Redguard sitting next to her who, in spite of having his eyes shut tight, seemed to register her every movement. She opened one eye to take a peek. He followed immediately, lips quirking in amusement. His mouth moved.

“Can’t concentrate?” she deduced.

She replied with a shrug.

His hand reached for hers. She felt the urge to pull away but resisted reluctantly, curious what would follow. His fingers touched her and slid up toward her wrist. She took a deep breath, thinking of stopping him, but his hand suddenly ceased its movement. She threw a wary look around, but no one was watching. She caught an occasional sigh or hum, but all the eyes were shut tight. Colette Marence was sitting on the stone edge of the light fountain, taking deep breaths with the rest of them. Qassir’s fingers wrapped around her wrist tightly. She jerked and turned to him abruptly. He shook his head, still wearing that strange smile of his. Her eyes closed on their own, as though some invisible force had made them. All of a sudden, a flush of energy flowed into her, clouding her mind into a soothing haze. She was slowly forgetting where she was and what she was doing. Silent force flowed around her, washing away her every thought like purifying water. No sooner did she open her eyes and gasp in surprise than another clap of Colette’s hands announced the end of the meditation.

She stared at her partner in confusion.
“What did you do?”

“Oh, just some harmless trick I learned at home,” he said. His smile stayed at its place. “I only directed your energy the right way.”

“Harmless? You just trifled with the energy of my soul. That can hardly be considered harmless! One step further and I could take you for a necromancer!”

“You’re not dead.”

“That’s not the point!”

Yrith could not imagine the Redguard’s smile getting any wider, but that is exactly what it did at that moment. He leaned to her and whispered in her ear.

“I hear you tend to seek refuge in the library. For someone who can’t cast spells, you’re quite knowledgeable. Good. That’ll make my job so much easier.”

Questions and more questions erupted in Yrith’s head. But no, she would not give him the pleasure.

“I don’t read books on magic,” she hissed.

The Redguard looked amused. She clenched her fists. How she hated it when people had fun at her expense. She looked away and silently prayed for salvation. As if answering her call, Colette Marence filled the room with the creaky sound of her voice.

Their next task was to practice ward spells. One person was supposed to shoot weak and harmless missiles while the other one had to block them with a ward. Yrith first took on the role of the attacker, enjoying that, for once, the strength of her magical missiles was not considered too weak. No one would scold her for not being able to cast a strong fire bolt. On the other hand, Cain had to apologize several times as Leyna Travi, his partner, stepped sideways to avoid getting hit by a brightly flaring fire bolt. It dissolved into a myriad of sparks when it collided with the protective barrier surrounding the whole Hall of the Elements.

Becoming the defender was not something Cain was looking forward to, and neither did Yrith – for a completely different reason. While Cain simply did not like to defend, Yrith couldn’t do it at all. She could see Qassir had perfect control over his magic. His sparks were harmless and consistent. When Yrith failed for the fourth time, the twinkling shower tingled her bare hands but did nothing more. She sighed. Qassir walked to her, wearing a look full of compassion. For some reason, she felt annoyed.

“Don’t worry,” he told her gently, “not everyone is good right from the start. Take it easy. You feel that clutch of energy around your heart?”

She nodded, having mastered that part when studying conjuration.

“Tug at it, pull some of it out and use it, as raw as you can. You don’t mix it with any other energy or substance when creating magical shields, and you don’t transform it. It’s just you and your own soul. Might be hard at first, but you’ll get the gist of it eventually.”

Another nod. She recalled someone telling her before, but she had never cared enough to use the knowledge. But now she was feeling something that was entirely new to her. Looking in her partner’s deep blue eyes and smiling face, she did not want to lose to him. He managed to mock and encourage her at the same time. Why would she let him do that?
She frowned and concentrated. She reached for her soul, feeling the stirred emotions inside. Her mind touched the dark edge of the subconscious she had always been scared to confront. From the depths of her very being, she could hear own voice. *The blame is on you. You do not have the right to live.*

She pulled away at once and felt color retreating from her face. For the first time, her teammate was not smiling, a deep wrinkle forming between his furrowed eyebrows.

“Are you all right? You look like you’ve just had one of those netchling elixirs… you know, the ones that Brelyna brought… heard quite some stories about ’em.”

Yrith gave him a weak smile and quickly concealed her fear.

“Let’s continue,” she said.

He nodded and a spray of cute tiny sparks was shot at her. Promptly, she reached for her soul and found the energy, but it stirred and bubbled, drowned in a flood of conflicting emotions, and she retreated, stepping back before the Redguard’s spell. He frowned, looking perhaps slightly disappointed. Or maybe deep in thought. She sighed and shook her head.

“Let’s try it once more,” he said, and there was a hint of something she could not identify in his voice, something that sent shivers down her spine. Was it excitement? No, that couldn’t be right…

He raised both of his hands and blazing flames enveloped his fingers. She winced at the sight, noticing that the spell looked much stronger than any she had ever seen anyone use on the College grounds. She hesitated, hypnotized by the fire. She should step away. Avoid getting hurt.

She could not move.

He hinted a smile. It was full of strange, non-hostile wickedness. She stared at him, holding her breath, and her hands instinctively shot upward in a defensive pose.

Then, a fireball shot from the tips of his fingers and charged at her at a blinding speed. She heard sudden screams around her, and for a moment, she saw death embracing her in its cold grip. Her mind went blank and she gasped. Time had stopped. She reached for the energy in her soul.

*You do not have the right to live! Leave! Magic is not yours to command!*

“No,” she breathed. “This is my soul. My magic. And I want to live!”

And she took a generous portion of what she had locked away herself.

Raw magicka spread into a round force field in front of her. It hummed and its edges flickered. A strong stable shield formed before her, absorbing the power of the fiery sphere at once. It dissolved into a blazing shower that slowly faded away. The shield followed. Yrith stared at her own hands incredulously, turning them as if she was looking for a hole that had let the magic out.

Then she fell down on her knees with a gasp, covering her mouth with her hands as her classmates gathered around her. Her heart was pounding so fiercely that Qassir’s voice sounded faint and distant.

“See? I knew you could do it!”

Raising her head, she saw him grinning at her until Colette stepped in her sight.
“This… this…” she stammered and Yrith could only imagine how shocked her teacher must have looked, standing with her back turned to her, trembling heavily. “Detention,” she whispered at last. “I will not see this kind of conduct here ever again, or you are out of here before you can say ‘netch’. Yrith may be… may have been incompetent, but she is still our student.”

“So… do I get to collect fish as well?” Qassir asked. Even in this situation, he managed to maintain his utmost innocent look.

“I believe two people are more than enough to take care of that,” came the stern reply.

“Awww,” he sighed as he picked up his backpack. “I was actually looking forward to joining you.” He winked at Yrith mischievously and walked away with grace, not a single movement of his revealing that he had just been given a detention. Just like the rest of her class, Yrith stared at him in disbelief, unsure of what to make of it all.

Chapter End Notes

So sorry that it took me so long to write this chapter. Life’s a bitch, as they say. Two months of sickness, desperate hunt for a job… well, I am pulling through but it took me a lot of effort.

Off to sleep and hopefully polishing my next chapter. Hoping to see you next time!

Mirwen
Singird Larkwing was not pleased. Not even two days had passed since he had arrived in the College, and the world was already upside down. Back in his student days, rigid discipline had been his only motivation. To arrive late for the class, neglect one’s studies, or disrespect a teacher would have been out of question. Now there were so many who did the latter… and one managed to cross all the lines at once. *We lost support from the jarls,* they’d said. But to invite brats from wealthy households and let them trample on the College’s honor and tradition? The world must have gone mad.

The newly appointed conjuration master tried to comfort himself with the thought of safety and access to infinite knowledge within the College walls, but the sight of the many books and clothes, now lying scattered all around his chamber, made his hopes fade. No, this was not the safe haven it had used to be. Someone had ransacked his room, but no matter how hard Singird looked, he could not find what was missing. He triple checked that the letter from Jarl Ulfric was in its place. He reread it several times and held it up against the light of his moon-shaped paperweight that glowed in pale, turquoise light whenever it became dark outside. It was without a doubt the same paper he had received on that dreadful day, the very document that had made him leave home and seek answers in Winterhold.

He put it back in the book about soul recreation. From the depths of a drawer below his desk he withdrew a thin notebook. A seam of silver string held together a number of blank papers in a plain hard cover wrapped in pale blue fabric. It was a journal, or, to be precise, it was *supposed* to be a journal. Master Gestor had urged him to make it to help him relax and pour out all his troubles. Singird had never written a single line in it, but the sight of the blank pages flipping under his fingers had a strangely soothing effect on him.

Leafing through the notebook, he listened to the soft rustle of the paper. And then, suddenly, he grabbed a quill and wrote on the first page:

*How can I find an answer when I don’t even know the question?*

He stared at his own words, waiting for the ink to dry. Then, he snapped the journal shut in one resolute gesture and gave his room a stern look. The mess was making him anxious.

“Discipline,” he breathed to himself. He furrowed his brows in concentration before flapping his sleeveless arms. A telekinetic wave seized one book after another and moved them to their rightful places. The clothes that had been lying about seemingly folded themselves and flew to their respective drawers and shelves. The hourglass with crystal clear sand sat in the middle of its shelf, dominating the room once more. In just a few moments, the room was clean, items on the desk organized into symmetric figures and all surfaces were rid of the last speck of dust. Singird sighed in relief, grabbed his journal and the satchel containing all his research notes and made for the door. It was time to take matters in his own hands.

His former master’s chamber was deserted. Singird rolled his eyes upon looking at the desk across the room, or, rather, the pile of books, scrolls, containers and various ingredients that hid it from his sight. Several circular translucent objects lay on the ground next to it and there was a puddle of strange green liquid which spread from a chest beneath the bed. Singird suppressed a scowl and instinctively swept the dust from one of the shelves. Despite himself, a soft smile curled on his lips. It
“If you’re looking for Phinis, he went to the Arcanaeum,” a voice spoke from behind. It was quiet and composed, yet sharp enough to give off the impression that its owner is not someone to be trifled with. Singird quickly put on a serious face.

“Miss Ervine,” he said, turning around to face a stern looking Breton beauty with features almost as sharp as her voice. In spite of her small size, she was blessed with the gift of natural authority. That was Mirabelle Ervine, the Master Wizard of the College. “I see. I suppose it is time to visit my old orcish… friend. How are the older students faring?”

“The progress of their research is… satisfactory,” she replied coolly.

“I hope it is. Last time I remember, that Khajiit, J’zargo, caused an explosion and somehow managed to spawn some hairy… things in the still. I thought the College was short on coin, not looking for reasons to buy new equipment.”

There was not a spark of warmth in the air. The two mages stared at each other through the doorway, eyes narrowed and lips pressed tightly together. To an outsider, it might have appeared as though they turned into a pair of statues, motionlessly frozen in time. Then, Mirabelle spoke and her quiet voice carried dangerously through the hall.

“I believe that is my responsibility, Master Larkwing. Your job is to deliver quality education to our students.”

“Speaking of which, Yrith Ravencroft…”

“I am aware. You made sure you informed the whole College. Miss Ravencroft is here on Lady Faralda’s expense and it is solely her decision whether she stays here or not. Now if you’ll excuse me, I shall be on my way.”

“The Arch-Mage must schedule a meeting if I file an official complaint.”

“That she must. I’m sure she will find a suitable date for it, considering the gravity of the problem.”

“Then I believe there is nothing to worry about.”

“Certainly.” With a heavenly smile on her lips, Mirabelle Ervine left the room.

Singird followed her closely, face carved in stone. He picked up the pace to calm himself down, letting the wind cool his face that struggled not to flush in outrage.

It had been quite some time since Singird had last seen the imposing College library. Once again, he admired the countless shelves of neatly organized books lining every wall. They were held by massive stone pilasters supporting the tall vaulted roof. He always had a weak spot for Cyrodiic architecture. It was tidy, full of carefully designed symmetry and regular shapes, a result of accurate planning. Suddenly feeling inappropriate, he inspected the state of his robes, assuring himself that the rim was smoothed out and no thread hung from the seams. When he was certain that everything about him was perfect, he entered the lit inner circle of the Arcanaeum. Such a beautiful place… if it weren’t for the librarian.

Urag gro-Shub was sitting at his desk, immersed in a giant tome with pitch black cover. The orc was biting his lower lip with his large yellowish teeth, providing an amusing sight to behold. Upon hearing footsteps, he raised his head. Singird’s eyes slid sideways, purposely ignoring him. Instead, they fixed themselves on the balding Breton sitting in a dark corner beside Urag’s desk, eyes on a
The orc at the desk cleared his throat meaningfully. The two of them paid no heed to him, far too absorbed in their little moment of nostalgia.

“So, what brings you here?” Phinis asked. “Surely you didn’t come here just to make yourself some coin, did you? I bet the jarls in the cities could offer you much more than that.”

“Coin?” Singird laughed almost bitterly. “No, not really. I am in search of something… and someone. Speaking of coin, the College is overflowing with slackers. Is the situation really so desperate that we need to accept brats from snob families and even Lady Faralda’s freshly found foster child?”

“Well, we’ve… seen better times. No support comes from the cities anymore, Singird. The College is struggling, we have no means to continue our research… and no one who would appreciate it. As much as I hate meddling in politics, we could use an influential figure right now. But you know, there are rumors… until recently, we had generous support from Jarl Balgruuf of Whiterun, Jarl Elisif of Solitude, and Jarl Laila of Riften. I believe they were hoping that some of us would return the favor once the war broke out. But all of them called off their caravans at the same time. Even if there have been murder cases involving magic recently, it all seems far too convenient to be a coincidence. There has been unrest among the College staff. Rumors that the College has been… compromised.”

Singird frowned. “Then my news won’t please you. My…”

“Well, we apologize, sir,” Singird uttered, barely suppressing a scoff. “I mean… it has been a long time.”

The Orsimer knit his brows at the quasi-apology, returning to his book with a more than conspicuous sigh. “Haven’t changed one bit, eh, Larkwing?”

With his back to the librarian, the Nord grimaced to his teacher. “In fact, I have been looking for you, Master Gestor. There is something I would like you to look at. Perhaps you could help me with this?”

From the depths of his satchel, Singird withdrew a folded piece of paper. He invited Master Gestor to the lit table in the center of the room where he spread it, smoothing out the folds. It appeared to be some sort of a diagram. Lines and curves entwined and crossed each other in a complicated circular ornament. At a closer look, it resembled a constellation of stars, each heading in certain direction. All the lines met in the center of the circle, forming a dark hole. Every crossing was carefully marked and captioned and there were notes and formulas scribbled all around the circle. Phinis’s eyes
widened in astonishment.

“Singird,” he breathed, scanning the web of thin ink lines again and again. “What are you trying to… actually, who are you trying to… this is… rare. I can’t even imagine how long it must have taken you to put this together… especially outside of the College. And you’ve come all the way here to ask me for help with this?”

“That is what I was hoping for.”

“I can’t, Singe. You know I can’t. I don’t have the power. You would need an extraordinarily powerful conjurer to assist you as a medium, and the last one capable of such a deed passed away some eighty-two years ago in the Great Collapse. Unless, of course, you would like to have a dragon do you the favor, and I doubt any of those beasts would be willing to comply. But, well… you could always ask the Arch-Mage. I’d say being the Dragonborn’s sister has its perks.” He gave his student a mischievous wink and earned himself a scoff.

Singird did not like to be reminded of his last encounter with the new Arch-Mage. Saying “it did not exactly go as planned” was a very euphemistic way of describing it. He sighed.

“I… you don’t understand,” he said as he leaned toward his teacher. “My family… throughout the last five generations or so, there have been…” he lowered his voice to a whisper, “mysterious deaths and disappearances. But all the traces lead here. I need more information.”

“Deaths? Singe… is your teaching here just a guise to avert prying eyes?”

“Yes and no. I was hoping to find a miraculous child among the new students…” he trailed off, shaking his head.

“And that’s why you agreed to take the job in the end, I see,” Phinis nodded. “But they’re just children from rich families, Singird. Many of them were most likely sent here to make way for their siblings who are about to inherit the family fortune. Aren’t you expecting too much of them?”

“Never say die, they say… but I give up. If it were up to me, I’d have half of them expelled this very moment!” Singird unwittingly raised his voice, clutching his fists. Urag gro-Shub, still sitting at his desk, took his eyes off his book and shot him a warning look.

“Now now…”

“Especially Yrith Ravencroft. The useless little…”

“Whoa whoa, careful now,” the orc growled. His eyes clashed with Singird’s. Phinis shifted his weight nervously. “You dare touch her, Larkwing, and you’ll be sorry. The fact that you don’t recognize her worth doesn’t mean she has none. Everybody needs to sort out their life from time to time.”

“Ah, I see she’s got herself some admirers. Well, she’d better sort out her life before she’s out of here.”

Urag rose, his eyes gleaming dangerously at the Nord. Phinis quickly followed him, positioning himself between the two antagonists.

“Please, let’s all just calm down, shall we?” He waved his hands like an enchanted scarecrow. “Master gro-Shub, you don’t need to worry, nothing will happen to Miss Ravencroft. Singird, I don’t think you need to go that far. Just… try not to take things too seriously…”
“It’s she who doesn’t take them seriously enough!”

“Oh, chill, sourpuss, the baldy’s right,” Urag cut in curtly. “Stop eating lemons and try looking on the bright side for once, will ya?”

“Baldy?” Phinis raised his brows, staring at the green skin which presented most of the librarian’s head as his white hair slowly gave way to it.

“Sourpuss?” his pupil joined him, looking like a living definition of the word he had just questioned.

“What can I do with you two?” Phinis shook his head in resignation. “Singird, why don’t you look at some of the books here? Urag made a copy of the Seer’s Testaments recently. You know, the ones written by Dorion Trith before the Great Collapse. It’s quite fascinating how one can predict things to come so easily.”

“If you say so, Master Gestor,” the Nord gave in reluctantly, following his master to one of the alcoves surrounding the outer circle. Most of its space was taken by an old pain-peeled desk dominated by a column of books. Singird could not overlook that their edges were lined with absolute precision. Urag gro-Shub was the only one beside him capable of arranging them like that. But he was an orc, for the Nine’s sake!

Phinis took a book from top of the pile and handed it to his pupil. He accepted it and examined its contents. It was written in a neat script with elegant curves and thin lines arranged in perfectly straight rows.

“The writing is satisfactory,” he nodded. “Considering who’s responsible for it.”

The orc snorted in outrage. “Says the Nord mage. By Malacath, thank you for reminding me why I don’t like you.”

“Please,” Phinis tried to no avail.

“Anytime, greenskin.” The young mage was staring at the page before him, reading the same sentence over and over again.

“Mind your tongue, saucebox,” the orc hissed.

Phinis Gestor stared at them, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Just let me know when you two are finished,” he sighed. “I’ll be down at the Hall of the Elements. In the meantime, maybe you could ask some of the students there to teach you more of an adult approach.”

Singird raised his head to defend himself, but his teacher was gone, his footsteps slowly fading away. With a resigned sigh, he returned to the book.

Seer’s Testaments was an interesting work concerning the attitude toward magic in the next hundred years, taken from year 119 of the fourth era. Although the book had been written more than eighty years before, the author, Dorion Trith, had been quite accurate in his estimates. Under normal circumstances, Singird would have loved to read about the development of magical awareness as it was currently the most pressing issue of the College, but right now there was that tiny voice in his head, continually repeating the words of his master.

>You would need an extraordinarily powerful conjurer…
The ritual he was about to perform was of utmost importance to him, but even Master Gestor with his vast knowledge of magical studies and those concerned with them could not recall a single person powerful enough to assist him. The name of Falion of Morthal had not been mentioned at all. How could it be that hard? He only wanted to…

… do something that your parents and even the parents of your parents failed to do, reminded him that annoying tiny voice.

“Oblivion take it,” he grunted as he stood up.

“No swearing in the library,” Urag notified him dryly.

“Silence, orc. You just made that up.” Singird carefully placed the book back on top of the column and made for the door. Urag gave him a scowl as he passed him.

“Maybe I did.” Singird would not have dreamt of an orc with an angelic expression, but that was exactly what he saw.

He shook his head in resignation, deciding against quarrelling further, and left the room. A gust of fresh air reminded him of how cold Winterhold could be. It was almost summer time, but here in the far north, there was no sign of it. Falkreath, his hometown, was situated in a valley full of greenery and burbling creeks where ice and snow melted in the summer and gave way to carpets of grass, cushion plants, daisies and lavender fields. The sun shining through the pine branches was warm there. Here, the only thing that could warm him was a tankard of good old Nord mead. And now that he thought about it, that was not a bad idea at all.

As always, the city of Winterhold was quiet. No children running around, no pitchers shouting over each other, no hags gossiping around every corner, no barking dogs and definitely no jugglers. A drunk man was quietly singing to himself before the Frozen Hearth, but that was all the entertainment one could hope for. Singird entered the cozy inn and took a seat right by the entrance. It was always safer to be near the exit lest an incident occurred. Even if this was the last place on Nirn where one would expect it.

“Ah, the young Larkwing,” said the ginger-haired waitress wiping the table next to him. She had round, rosy cheeks, big hazelnut eyes and a wide smile that welcomed him like her own. Haran was her name, and she was the only one Singird could forgive for wearing a tattered apron whose color was indistinguishable under the many stains it bore. Not to mention it was awry. She promptly set the cloth she was holding aside and fetched him a tankard. “The usual, right?” She did not wait for an answer. “I knew you would come. I think the whole collegium has been here in the past few days. Everyone’s talking about you.”

“Truly?” The Nord accepted the mead with gratitude and took a sip. The familiar warmth that spread in his throat was both thrilling and soothing.

Haran sat down and leaned over the table. “Oh yes, you’ve raised quite the uproar among the teachers. A prodigy coming back, the youngest teacher in the College history… not to mention your latest… encounters with some of the students. All eyes are on you, my friend.”

“I am not sure whether I should be pleased or offended,” Singird muttered more to himself than to the twittering lady across the table.

“Oh, come on, little Singe,” she quipped, “it’ll pass. Just give it some time.”

Little Singe. He hadn’t heard this name for quite some time. And even though he glowered at her
sulkily, deep inside he was pleased.

“Do you believe that? Have you seen the students?”

“Well, two of them passed through the city last night and this morning. I know one of them quite well. But otherwise no, I haven’t. They don’t let us, normal people, to the College grounds. Raises quite a suspicion, I must say.”

“You don’t need to worry. We only don’t want to be distracted from our research. Anyway, those two were on detention.”

“Detention? Nine Almighty, Singird, you sure don’t lose your time.”

The door opened with a creak that split the ears, stopping Singird from defending himself. A figure entered the room, one that would be best described as gigantic. A Nord man with a thick mop of wheat-colored hair, one lock plaited in the typical Nord braid, and an equally thick beard. His body was nothing but steel-hard muscle scantily clad in a set of studded armor. A great two-handed axe was attached to his back. Around his neck hung an amulet of Talos and the wristbands he was wearing bore the image of the Stormcloak bear with a spiral under its eye. He would have appeared to be a standard Nord if not for his unusual size. Singird immediately recognized him and jumped from his seat.

“Toddvar!” he raised a hand to get his attention. “I was not expecting to see you around here. Long time no see.”

“If it ain’t our magical prodigy, Singird the Crank!” the man beamed as he pulled another chair to Singird’s table. He shook his whole arm, took off his axe as if it were a child’s toy and seated himself with arms behind his back. “Ah, I say it every time, but the chairs never come in proper sizes. Haran, m’ dear, could you fetch this parched man a bit o’ ale?”

“Right away,” the rosy-cheeked waitress replied and promptly served a tankard of golden liquid. The huge Nord rewarded her with a wide smile and a nod.

“Now that’s the stuff,” he praised. “Been on me feet all day. How goes it around here? Heard you teach kids now, Singe.”

“He’s been here two days and already sent two of them on detention!” Haran laughed. “Busy man, isn’t he?”

“I’d expect nothing less from him!”

It was very hard for Singird to maintain his serious expression. He almost let a corner of his mouth twitch, but fortunately prevented it in the last moment.

“I caught them fighting,” he defended. “Well, the Dunmer can at least cast spells properly, but Yrith Ravencroft? You should…”

“Wait a moment. Yrith? Yrith is getting punished?”

“You know her, Toddvar?”

“Well, we all know her, dear,” Haran said. “Back when her folks were still around, she was the brightest soul in the city. Always with a book or helping around, learning whatever there was to learn. Hand work or text, she took it all in. Her folks moved here with her a few years back. Came from High Rock, they said. And they brought a whole library with them. Also concocted remedies
for our sick. The whole family was a bit eccentric, true, but not in the bad way. We all welcomed the
girl. Sweet little darling, she was. Always alone too. Poor thing.’’

“That doesn’t sound like the Yrith Ravencroft I know. Except for the last part.”

“Aw, c’mon, Singe, you wanna tell me that Yrith can’t cast spells? That Yrith?”

“That is what I am saying, yes.”

Toddvar wriggled in his seat and leaned over the table. The chair let out a painful squeak. “That
makes no sense, Singe. I recall her studying some magic. She always struggled for her parents’
attention and did everything to make ‘em notice her. And the Yrith I know never stops halfway. If
she was reading books on magic, then she can do magic. I can assure you, sure as I’m sitting here.
Haran, sugar, do you have a bigger tankard?”

The ginger woman laughed and swiftly served him a flagon. Toddvar’s smile widened as he grabbed
it and downed it in one go.

Singird frowned, recalling how the girl had waved her arms in his class, as though she was flapping
wings. An amusing sight for an observer, and a miserable one for a teacher. She had not expressed
the slightest hint of effort. But if she could cast spells, why would she lie about it?

The door opened once more, and a pair of guards entered the inn. Both took off their helmets at
once, revealing a curly red-haired boy with round face and round nose speckled with countless
freckles, followed by a scarred veteran whose chestnut fringe cast a dark shadow over his hard,
bearded face. The snow falling off their helmets and shoulders informed everyone inside that the
notorious Skyrim weather was throwing a tantrum again. The men waved at Toddvar and gave a
small nod.

“End of shift? Good work, lads,” the Nord giant returned the nod.

“Rare to see you around, Toddvar, sir. Come to check if the city’s still standing?”

“Ulfric doesn’t neglect his holds, lads, you of all people should know that. Come sit with us. Singird
here will entertain you with some stories from the College.”

Singird knit his brows, not quite in the mood for entertaining. The younger guard looked at him with
eyes gleaming with life and curiosity. He was just a boy, hardly reaching maturity.

“I didn’t know Ulfric recruited children,” he growled.

“ Eh, no, sir magister,” the youngster shook his head with all his might and proudly stuck out his
chest, “I joined myself. I stood at the front door of the Windhelm barracks every day for three months
before they finally let me prove my worth. They made me hunt an ice wraith here in Winterhold. I
returned in two days and now I’m finally here. It’s exciting to protect the land, no?”

Singird struggled to keep his feelings hidden. He was just a boy.

“Speaking of which,” the redhair continued, “you said you were from the College? Are those two
safe?”

“Those two?”

“The two young novices that came through the city last night, sir. You know, ice wraith so close to
the city, that’s not a common sight. It sure startled me, and I’m a soldier! I was about to run to their
aid, but that atronach they conjured handled it for me. I must say, you sure train them well.”

“What?! Yrith was attacked?!” Toddvar jumped up, making his chair fall like a cut down tree. Singird felt color retreating from his face.

“An ice wraith? And you are saying they defeated it with an atronach?”

“Yes, a fire atronach, sir. Three shots were all it took. It was thrilling to watch!”

Singird beckoned for the guard to join them and took a deep breath. “Please,” he said, “do tell me more.”

Chapter End Notes

For all Elder Scrolls/Skyrim lovers, lore freaks and other individuals that like to nitpick on the details… (others can skip this part) I have altered the lore of Skyrim to fit my story. It takes place after the Eye of Magnus quest, but some things are different. You might have noticed that Mirabelle Ervine is still alive and you will see that the Dragonborn did not become the Arch-Mage. While the former is a very minor detail that I included on a whim, the latter is essential for the story. So please, bear with me. Let’s make it a slight AU. :)

As usual, many thanks to Tildemancer (previously dart0808) for the beta!

Mirwen

P.S.
Singird: How can I find an answer when I don’t even know the question?
Tildemancer: Well, you pull a Deep Thought and request seven million years to calculate. Then you give the answer 42.
It was a beautiful night. Masser and Secunda were forming a near perfect eclipse, the latter shrouding most of the former, revealing only a thin circle of partially lit craters. They were watching over the still land of Skyrim like a freshly wed pair, surrounded by myriads of glittering diamonds forming a hazy veil of nebula on their background. The sea of dark, which they dominated, was lined by the colorful aurora on its edges. It was a once-in-a-lifetime sight. Yrith had been preparing for it with all she had. She had read an incomplete collection of astronomy books that the Dwemer had left behind and some proactive wizard had gathered, calculating the position of the moons. She had studied all the constellations she would see in the sky that night. And sure as the shimmering lights of sundry colors lining the horizon, she remembered them all.

It wasn’t so long after dusk and the Night of Wonders would continue for several more hours, but Yrith was unsatisfied. She felt alone, abandoned. Her only companion was an elegant figure made of pure fire, silent save for occasional crackle. A circle of wet ground formed around it as its heat melted the snow.

Instead of the sky, Yrith was watching the window of a one-story house, lighting the snow below in gentle gold. The milky glass prevented her from seeing what was inside, but she did not need a single peek to know that the room behind it was occupied by two people bent down at a desk, drawing diagrams, calculating formulas or tending to their alembics. Two people whom she wished to be outside with her, and the two that kept rejecting her at every occasion.

A gust of wind rose to whip her face and she closed her eyes. She would open them again to look at the skies, but they were dark, as though someone had hid them behind a black curtain. She blinked to make sure that she didn’t see wrong, but the image remained the same. Alert, she glided with her eyes over the road leading southward along the shore, the snowy cliff ahead, the city houses which looked like a child’s puzzle blocks from the distance, and her own house. The light was still coming from the inside. She heard a clinking sound of glass falling on the ground and breaking into thousand pieces and stiffened as though she had been the one to break it. If there had been any chance to talk to her father, she had just lost it. Alembics were costly, and it usually took him a few days to come to terms with the fact that he had to make an extra investment.

She turned to the atronach at her side, ready to complain to the silent creature, but the words stuck in her throat as soon as her eyes found it.

Its crackling changed into a wild thrum and she watched as the fiery creature suddenly darted toward the house, leaving behind a blazing trail. For a moment, she gaped at it, frozen to the ground, but then it dawned upon her with the force of an avalanche. It went for the house.

“Wait!” she called, ignoring that it could not understand words. She took off, hoping to stop it before it wreaked havoc in the wooden building. The wind was her enemy, slowing her pace and making her task seem impossible. Something was amiss. A dreadful feeling overcame her as she rushed along the line of fire, and then, a blast made her halt. The window shattered and the others followed. The light flared and blinded her, then it passed and darkness took its place.

She stood there, forgetting her breath, and stared into the singed wooden frame. For a moment, all thoughts left her and there was nothing but absolute silence. She did not want to enter the house. And yet, she felt the urge to do so. Her parents are inside. Why can’t she hear them? Why isn’t
anyone calling for help? There should be swishes and blasts, sparks of magic in the air, swearing…
why is it so quiet?

Reluctantly, she took a step forward. Then another. Her tread soon turned into blind rush. She
tripped over the threshold at the main entrance but paid little attention to it, gathering herself
immediately. The corridor to the laboratory seemed endless and she wished for it to just disappear.
The walls around her were strangely coarse on touch and gravel crunched under her boots.

And then she was there, in the lab. Pale moonlight lit a rectangular area beneath the window, but
apart from it, the room was dark. She staggered to the desk, searching for a lamp, but it was shattered
beyond recognition. There should be a spare in one of the cabinets. She fumbled about them,
swiping a handful of powdery substance from their surface. At last, she found the lamp and lit it with
shaky fingers. Her eyes wandered to the floor and widened in horror.

Silence took over her, the dreadful, paralyzing kind of stillness as though time had stopped, ceasing
her breath. Then it felt suffocating, a hard lump settling in her throat, spreading and pressing and
taking all the space it could. A stab came through her heart, piercing harder than the finest white-hot
steel. And then her voice tore through the heavy, burnt air with deafening force.

Before her lay the singed remains of what once were her parents’ bodies, drowning in a flood of
potions fallen from the shelves and blanketed in shards of shattered vials, sparkling in the light of her
lamp. The furniture was black and deformed as the lacquer covering it had melted in the fire, the
once beautiful decorations now vague and vitiated. A foul odor filled her nostrils and she didn’t even
try to chase it away.

Her knees gave way under her trembling weight and she fell on them, covering her face with her
hands, shaking with sobs.

“No…” she whispered shakily. “Please… don’t die… tell me you’re not dead… please… please…”

Then her whole body felt heavy and she fell face to the ground, soaking her hair in the potions mixed
with dirt and cinders, the countless pieces of glass cutting into her skin.

“I killed my parents,” she wailed, suffocating on her own words. “I killed them… this was not
supposed to… I couldn’t have… I should have died instead… I should just die…”

And then all went dark.

Yirith screamed and sat up abruptly, beads of sweat rising on her forehead.

“Gods dammit, midget!” she heard a voice above her and jerked as someone grabbed her by her
shoulders. “I swear that one of these days I am going to shut you down. Now get up!”

Her eyes snapped open, staring for a moment without focus before she realized that a fiery-haired
Dunmer was sitting next to her on her bed, leaning to her in attempt to wake her. He wore the same
expression as always, smug and without so much as a trace of sympathy. With a start, she backed
away, bumping into the wall behind her.

“You!” she hissed, fighting the embarrassed flush that was warming her cheeks. “What in Oblivion
are you doing here?”

“That’s my line,” he snorted, seating himself too comfortably for her liking. Again, he took his chin
in his thumb and index finger. Yrith was starting to hate the gesture. “You’re supposed to be at
Larkwing’s class at the moment. So rise and shine!” The last word was nearly spat. Yrith scowled.
“So you’re only here to nag? Well, thank you very much, the door’s over there and I prefer you on the other side.”

“I was sent here by Larkwing, okay? I’d say I’m enjoying it just as much as you do so…”

“As if you ever enjoyed anything beside bragging in front of your groupies. Get out of my room. Now.”

“I’m not leaving until you get that butt of yours out of the bed and move it to the Hall of the Elements. I don’t want another detention. Especially not with you!”

“Wanna watch me change then?” Yrith could not help but smile inwardly. This scene was somewhat familiar.

“Ew! Fine, I’m going!” he retorted as her rose and made for the door. “I’ll be waiting right outside your room.” He let in a gust of cold air from the corridor before he snapped the door shut.

“No peeking!” she told the door sternly as she opened a chest at the feet of her bed.

“Who would want to peek at you?”

With a frown, Yrith scrutinized the novice robe that she pulled out of the chest, examining the stitched sleeve and the few stains that she had not managed to wash away. Unlike the rest of her classmates, she only had one robe and it had not even been made for her. Everyday usage and fights with classmates had taken their toll on it. Yrith would have liked to buy a new one, but she could only dream of having the coin to do so.

She scowled and sighed as she recalled her dream. Just how many times had she relived it? The pain of that moment was so vivid in her memories, making her despise herself above all else. So many times she had questioned whether she had the right to live. Perhaps she should have perished in the flames along with her parents. Perhaps Lady Faralda would have been better off without her.

That night she had had an argument with her father. A part of her believed that he had seen the good-for-nothing that she was. A useless wimp who can’t even use magic properly. She clutched the robe she was holding in her fingers.

“What’s taking you so long?!” a voice from the outside called to her. “Are you sewing a new robe for yourself or what?”

“Exactly!” she snapped, suppressing the welling tears from surfacing. Grabbing a quill and a few sheets of paper, she hurried out of the room. Cain was sitting on the edge of the magical fountain, his usual self-righteous smile curling slightly on his lips. He rose without a word, accompanying her in silence, but she noticed his eyes fixed on her face.

“What? Is there something on my face?”

“No, but that spider in your hair looks like a decoration fit for your style,” he said with a nonchalant shrug.

“What?!” Her hand shot up, fingers digging in the mop of her hair. Cain’s lips curled up in a malicious grin.

“Right,” she shook her head. “Spiders don’t even live here.”

“Well, lucky for me then that your hand is quicker than your wits,” he jibed.
She turned away from him with a snort, stomping her way outside and on to the Hall of the Elements, combing her hair with her fingers in the process. He followed her in tow but she refused to look back at him until they joined the circle of students waiting for them by the blue fountain. Singird Larkwing was standing next to Tanya Verus, the taciturn half-Altmer girl. Upon their arrival, the teacher gave Yrith a reproachful look, his eye narrowing into a pair of dangerous cracks.

“I don’t suppose you were looking for a textbook this time, Miss Ravencroft,” he told her coolly. “Mind enlightening me in terms of your delayed arrival?”

She stared at him, barely noticing her hands clenching into fists as she realized the mockery in his tone. He knew all too well that she could not forge a lie in front of Cain, who knew the truth.

“I slept in,” she muttered. A half-truth, for she had not been planning to attend the class at all.

“I beg your pardon?” he asked quietly. Yrith stared at him, cursing him with every Daedra name she could recall. Gods knew that he had heard her well.

“I apologize,” she said unconvincingly, making it sound more like a hiss. “I slept in and didn’t wake up until just a while ago.”

She could hear whispers and low chuckles all around her.

“Very well,” he sighed. “I guess it would be too much to expect you to have brought your homework with you?”

She decided against giving him an answer, her gaze now drilling through the floor underneath her feet. Any word she let out would only increase her humiliation.

Fortunately for her, the teacher did not spare more than a brief moment before addressing the whole class.

“As I was saying earlier, today you will begin learning how to summon atronachs. Fire atronachs are the most common and easiest to conjure, so it is advisable to start with them. All of you should be able to summon a familiar now, but familiars answer to even the weakest calls. This time, combine what you wrote in your essays with my instructions to grasp the basics about the Oblivion elementals. Each of you will try to summon your own fire atronach. I will observe and correct your mistakes in the process. Start practicing now.”

“Look what you did,” Cain snapped quietly at Yrith. “I missed his explanation. How am I supposed to practice now?”

“I could care less,” she shrugged, crossing her arms over her chest.

“You’re unbelievable…”

There was a humming sound and then a number of ah’s and oh’s rose from the crowd. The two of them turned their heads to the source of the commotion, spotting a slender figure of a fire atronach, floating in elegant circles in front of Qassir who was now the center of all attention. Indifference reflected in the Redguard’s face, but when his eyes rested upon Yrith, he gave a wink and hinted a smile. She turned away, finding interest in one of the grey floor tiles.

“Excellent work,” Singird nodded in acknowledgement. “This is exactly the result all of you should be getting. Don’t forget that fire is your key today.”

“Bah,” Cain snorted. “If certain someone hadn’t been wasting my time lolling in her bed, I would
have done better.”

“Oh certainly. It’s definitely not your jealousy speaking through you, no,” Yrith scoffed.

“Silence, worm,” he growled. Yrith watched him stretch out his arms and call his magical energy, but it faded in a heartbeat. He repeated it, and then again, his brows closer and closer together with each try. She folded her arms over her chest, leaning to a wall, and watched him, a faint smile playing on her lips.

“Amused?” he hissed and gave her a death glare.

She shrugged. There were several hums around them, announcing that a few more classmates had managed to outstrip Cain this time.

“This is your fault!”

“Well, you could have, you know… read about it in advance.”

“Unlike you, I’m not a bookworm.”

“Not my problem.”

A number of shouts and swishes announced that two students had set their atronachs against one another. Singird Larkwing rushed past Cain and Yrith, his robes flapping about him like broken wings of a moth swept by a windstorm. Yrith winced as a fire bolt missed her by inches. It hit the wall behind her and dissolved into thousand tiny sparks before vanishing entirely. A few ice bolts from the teacher made the elemental disappear, forcing the students step back to escape the blast that followed. Yrith frowned. The explosion felt too familiar for her liking.

“Fools,” Cain said, shaking his head. Again, he raised his hands, attempting to summon his own atronach, still to no avail.

“You two will come to my office this evening to receive a detention.” Singird Larkwing’s eyes shot daggers as he pointed at the two offenders. One of them was Dorien Lafayette, a slight Breton boy with eyes almost as sharp as the tip of his nose, and the other was an Altmer girl known as Jearis Finoran whose chestnut firelock cast a deep shadow over her face, concealing her expression. Yrith doubted that any of them felt the tiniest hint of remorse. “If anyone as much as tries to pull something of this sort again, I will see to it that they receive severe punishment. Are we clear?”

The class was quiet. The students waggled nervously in their places, most pinning their eyes to the ground or hypnotizing the blue fountain light.

“Where is your answer?” the teacher demanded.

“We pay for this, you know,” Jearis uttered, one hand at her hip.

“Irrelevant. It is quite saddening, Miss Finoran, that I have to remind you of the fact that the ones paying for your studies are your parents. By all means, do let them know about this little incident. I would very much like to hear whether such conduct is acceptable in your household.”

Jearis’s eyes flared with anger, but she said nothing in response. Master Larkwing nodded.

“Now then. Let us continue our lesson. Mr. Aldaryn, that was a good attempt, but try to take a firm stance and give your soul energy a wide passage.”
“Y-yes sir,” Cain mumbled as he spread his feet. Yrith raised a brow as soon as the teacher turned away.

“Well, good luck with that,” she laughed dryly, eyes drifting from one classmate to another. Three people flinched away from a gusher of sparks someone managed to produce instead of a full-fledged atronach. It almost seemed alive, waggling in place, but faded moments after it had come to existence. Master Larkwing hurried to the conjurer, brows knit together. Yrith could not hear the words addressed to the poor student, but she was certain it was not a praise.

“What do you mean?” Cain inquired.

“I mean that the instructions he gave you are completely useless.”

“At least he gave me some instructions. Unlike certain smarty-troll.”

Yrith sighed, eyes still on her classmates and teacher. No one paid the slightest attention to them. With a hint of hesitation, she turned to Cain. “Very well. Just… try to imagine you’re a part of Oblivion,” she whispered.

“I… what?”

“Simple. Instead of directing your call to Oblivion, spread your conscious and make it overlap. Realms are not only physical, they have a mental aspect too. It’s enough to touch its edge. Then imagine the creature you want to summon and call for it. Since your mind will already be a part of Oblivion, you won’t have to search for it. It will find you and come to your side on its own.”

The Dunmer snorted, face twisted in utter disbelief. “You must be joking.”

“Whatever you say,” she purred. “Don’t say I didn’t help you.”

“But… how?”

She rolled her eyes. “For someone who never stumbles, you’re quite thickheaded. Hmm, let’s see. While your body is anchored here on Nirn, your mind is not. If you concentrate hard enough, you can feel the world around you, no? It’s like… when you close your eyes, your hearing improves to make up for the lost sense. But you can train yourself to use this improved hearing even with your eyes fully open and alert. Your body is capable of it and your mind can process all the information it gets. Just like that, you can also use your mind as your sixth sense to feel everything around you. Everyone can do that to some extent, that’s how emotions get through. But there is a way to reach further. Oblivion is just another realm in the world. If you spread your consciousness wide enough, you can sense it and even send it a thought. That’s where your spark of magic comes into play. You need to tune it so that it reaches the right creature. Flame atronachs are attracted to fire, so that’s where your thoughts should be.”

“You can’t be serious. Spread my consciousness? That’s impossible!”

Yrith threw up her arms. Another atronach emerged just a few steps from Cain, causing him to produce an anxious growl.

“There’s no way I could…” Cain took his chin in his fingers, staring into the blue beam of light in the middle of the room, deep in thought. “No, but maybe…”

A deep violet orb that seemed to drown the surrounding light enveloped his fingers. He knit his brows in concentration, released the energy from his hands. The familiar hum informed Yrith of his success.
“See?” she said, triumphant smile playing on her lips.

“Except I didn’t exactly follow your instructions,” he sneered. “Whatever you were trying to pull, it didn’t work. But I guess it was a good hint if nothing else.” With his back straight, he let the derision into his face once more.

“You little…!”

“Very good,” Singird Larkwing praised as he suddenly materialized next to Yrith. She yanked to the side, nearly colliding with the wall. “I am happy to see that my advice helped you, Mr. Aldaryn.”

Yrith shuddered visibly. Master Larkwing’s tone would freeze an ice wraith, had one been nearby. The teacher gave a look that revealed nothing of his thoughts. Then, his eyes met Yrith’s and she felt the weight of her feet drag her down. Forgetting her breath, she stared into those dark pools, mind clouded with uncertainty. No sooner did she sigh in relief than the teacher left, eyes still tracing her from the distance.

“What was that?” she rasped, more to herself than anyone else. The Dunmer shrugged. Yrith stared at the teacher’s silhouette as he tended to her classmates, shifting her weight. “This place should have some chairs or something,” she grumbled.

“So you’re just going to watch?”

“Yes. Got a problem with it?”

“Why? Do you enjoy having others look down on you so much?”

Feeling restless, Yrith leaned back against the wall, scratching its coarse granite surface to occupy her hands. “That’s none of your business,” she said.

“I suppose,” came the unconvincing reply.

They watched in silence as their classmates continued their efforts. The beautiful Leyna Travi was demanding attention from Qassir, tossing her head to make the veil of white gold hair fly about her. For a single moment, Yrith spotted a trace of anxiety run over Altmer’s slender face, but it had passed so quickly that Yrith assumed her mind was playing tricks on her. Her eyes flicked to Cain who stared at the couple, a deep wrinkle forming between his brows. That too might have been her imagination, but it seemed to her that the obnoxious Dunmer looked very alone.

Her train of thought was interrupted by the voice of Singird Larkwing, announcing the end of the class.

“That will be all for today’s lesson. While most of you grasped the basics about atronachs rather quickly, some of you have a long way ahead. I would advise you to work on your conjuration technique as much as you can. Do not hesitate to ask me or your classmates for help. In our next class, we will practice some more and learn how to make your atronachs stronger. Class is dismissed. Miss Ravencroft,” he added before Yrith could bolt out, “you will accompany me to the Hall of Countenance.”

Yrith felt color retreating from her face. She turned to the teacher, barely suppressing a glare.

“Well, good luck, midget,” Cain said as he patted her theatrically on the shoulder.

“One of these days,” she hissed, “I’ll wipe that smirk off your face.”
“Oh, please do!” With that, he danced away. Yrith was ready to shout something back, but the presence of Singird Larkwing made her reconsider.

They waited for the other students to leave and followed them through the main entrance. Once outside, Yrith drew in the fresh air, oblivious to the fact that the rising columns of snow promised another storm. While the Nord teacher carefully picked his route to avoid any possible inconvenience, Yrith let her feet sink into the snow and the wind lash her cheeks. They would later turn the beautiful rose color that every noble woman hated, and she proudly wore. Her mother had had the same beautiful rosy cheeks which she nurtured by the means of a self-made ointment. Over the past six months, Yrith had developed a habit of stealing grease from the kitchen to substitute for it. A beautiful woman is one that is tough and healthy, her mother used to say. A soft smile spread over Yrith’s face as she recalled it, but her teacher’s deep frown made it quickly disappear.

They entered the Hall of Countenance and passed several teachers. All of them threw curious glances at the Nord, some approving, some almost enraged. There was no indifference among the collegium, as though Singird Larkwing had only come to sow discord. Unwittingly, Yrith gritted her teeth.

Master Larkwing’s office was as clean as Yrith remembered it. Before entering, the teacher made sure to magically remove all traces of snow and water from his and Yrith’s clothes, shoes and hair, triple checking for spots he might have missed. Yrith felt a strong urge to roll her eyes but managed to contain it. When they finally entered, she was feeling cleaner than ever in her life.

The room was lit by a moon-shaped glass paperweight emanating pale turquoise glow. Yrith’s eyes drifted to the window only to discover that the outside world was now shrouded in thick darkness. She could see a torrent of snowflakes twirling in a fierce dance before they vanished under the sill.

“Sit down,” the teacher ordered her curtly, pointing to a cushioned chair standing by his desk. She obeyed in silence, waiting for what would follow. With a sigh, he leaned over the desk, too close for Yrith’s liking.

“Now, Miss Ravencroft. Do you know the reason you are here?”

“No, sir,” she said quietly.

“Then take a guess.”

“Because I came late to the class?”

He laughed bitterly as he turned to her. She clutched the edges of the chair with both hands, eyes boring into his soft leather boots. “Ah, yes, you did, didn’t you? Thank you for reminding me. But no, there is a different reason.”

Yrith glanced around. The order in the room had been restored. Books, clothes and gadgets had returned to their rightful places, forming the cleanest and most organized universe she could imagine. Could he know that it had been her?

“I don’t know,” she replied shakily.

“I do not take kindly to lies,” he breathed as his face drew closer to hers. She wanted to avert her eyes but found herself unable to do so. “Cain Aldaryn is not one to hide his talents when he can boast about them. When the two of you arrived, I was done with explanations and Mister Aldaryn could not summon an atronach. A few moments later, he did it. It was not a feeble creature that would shatter upon the slightest impact. His atronach was strong and solid, not one he could conjure
on first attempt without previous knowledge or experience. So here is the question, Miss Ravencroft. How did he do it?"

Yrith’s vision blurred and faded. The rosy cheeks that would have brought her pride and pleasure turned white as the purest alabaster. She could feel her heart beat its way out of her chest and the pain in her fingers as she tightened her clutch on the chair. On this day, her secret would be revealed. She knew it, and yet she could not bring herself to tell the truth.

“T-I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she rasped.

“No?” he drawled. “Then explain this to me. Yesterday, I chanced upon a guard in Winterhold. This particular guard was quite concerned about the wellbeing of two students he had seen attacked by an ice wraith the night before. According to his words, those two students had warded the creature off by summoning a fire atronach. And I know only one pair of students who could have been wandering outside at such a late hour. Add the fact that Mister Aldaryn could not summon an atronach today. So I am asking you, Miss Ravencroft. Who was the one summoning the atronach on that night?"

Yrith could not suppress the tears welling in her eyes. She felt their hotness sliding down her cheeks and salt on her lips. She wanted to cover her face, but her hands would not move.

“Crying won’t help you,” the teacher said coldly, “but words could.”

There was a moment of silence when the two of them listened to the storm outside and Yrith’s quiet sobbing.

“So?” he insisted.

“I did,” she whispered at last. “I summoned the atronach.”

“So why,” he asked, and for some reason, Yrith sensed a sudden trace of softness in his voice, “why did you lie about not being able to conjure?”

She felt her own breath betraying her. Words would not leave her mouth, unable to surmount the lump in her throat. Let it out, a voice in her head whispered to her. Let it end and you will feel better.

She watched as her teacher drifted away, withdrawing a cup from one of his cupboards. A pot followed which he magically filled with water and heated. A moment of fumbling about his drawers resulted in a bundle of leaves which he promptly made into tea.

“Here,” he offered as he slid the cup toward Yrith. She took it in her hands, clutching it close to her chest and absorbing the heat, but did not take a single sip. A lone tear dripped into it with a silent splash.

“I… did not want people to discover… that I killed my parents,” she finally managed to produce.

There was a moment of silence before Singird Larkwing let out a long, deep breath. “I… beg your pardon?”

“It… it was an accident! I felt lonely and wanted a companion. I didn’t want to hurt anyone! But it… it just suddenly went rogue and…”

“You accidentally killed your parents with an atronach?”

“Yes,” she breathed, finally taking a sip. In spite of the despair she was feeling, she had to appreciate
the light flowery undertaste of Master Larkwing’s tea. It reminded her of the tea market in Daggerfall. She remembered its scent from a stall that had belonged to an old, tiny Khajiit woman who only appeared every tenth Turdas. Every time Yrith visited the stall, the smell of tea and coffee wafted through the air, carrying tastes of sea and jungle. She found pleasure in sitting around and listening to old tales, mostly about the treacherous paths in Valenwood forests and the customs of the aboriginal Bosmer folk. The old Khajiit owner always welcomed her and offered discounted goods that she had saved especially for her. Yrith found the memory strangely soothing.

“Did you see the atronach kill your parents?” the teacher continued his questioning.

“No… I was outside when it happened. It just… entered the house on its own and went straight for the laboratory.”

The window quaked, strained by the violent wind. Through the tiny crevices on its side, Yrith could feel the cold trying to invade the room. Master Larkwing padded it with a few pieces of cloth and lit several candles which immediately drowned the paperweight glow and filled the room with the tiniest bit of warmth.

“These windows are old,” he remarked in a conversational tone, as though the two of them were having a simple tea party. “Everything here is old. I wonder how long the magic holding this place together is going to last.”

Yrith stared at him, clueless as to how she should react. She took another sip and felt the warm liquid melt some of her fear.

“Are you going to report me?” she uttered. She could barely hear her own voice over the constant wailing and clatter, but it reached its recipient nonetheless.

“Should I report you?” The teacher’s calm voice suggested a different question than the one asked. A slight shiver ran down Yrith’s spine as she looked into his unreadable dark eyes.

“I don’t understand the question,” she replied truthfully.

“So you don’t.” A soft smile spread over his lips as he took another piece of cloth and started wiping the window sill. “Would you show me your atronach, please?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Your atronach. Summon it for me.”

“Right here?”

“Yes.”

Yrith reluctantly put down the cup and stood. The strain and anxiety had taken its toll on her. She felt weak in her knees, as though she had run a very long distance, like she had done so many times back in Daggerfall when her Nord neighbor was pursuing her for stealing his precious figs. I sure have a history with the Nords, she thought to herself.

Following the very instructions she had given Cain before, she let the violet orb of magic envelop her hands and give passage to a fiery creature. The elemental’s flare chased away the remnants of the cold. Singirid Larkwing nodded as he studied it, carefully inspecting every inch of it. Yrith waited in silence, eyes drifting from her atronach to the nape of the teacher’s neck and back.

“Let me make you an offer,” he said at last as he turned to her.
He paused to let Yrith ask, but when the question did not come, he continued.

“For my silence, I want you to promise me something.”

Yrith stared at him in tacit question.

“Promise me, that from now on, you will not neglect your studies. You will show unprecedented
diligence and strive to place at the top of your class.”

The girl blinked in surprise. “Diligence? Is that all?”

“Don’t be fooled by how trivial it sounds. I will not go easy on you. You will work ten times harder
than others and earn your place at the College. Don’t forget that you are not paying for your lessons,
and as much as Lady Faralda patronizes you, she has negotiated all kinds of reliefs for you. I want
you to make them count.”

Yrith yanked to the side as the loud crack announced the departure of her atronach. The warmth
receded, and she suddenly felt the need to rub her arms. Despite herself, she smiled at the teacher.

“You’re not as heartless as I thought you to be,” she blurted out before she could stop herself. In an
instant, her hand shot up to cover her mouth. The Nord knit his brows.

“I shall pretend I didn’t hear that,” he said in a reserved voice. “There is one more…”

The howling from the outside had subsided to a soft whine, revealing a shuffling sound from the
corridor of the Hall of Countenance. Yrith could swear she heard footsteps. Master Larkwing was
one step ahead, assaulting his own door a little too fiercely. One look outside of the room revealed a
deserted staircase and an equally vacant corridor. The Nord’s hands glowed red with a spell which
Yrith suspected to be Detect Life, but the following moment he only shook his head.

Carefully shutting the door, he enchanted it with violet aura and returned to his desk.

“There is one more thing I want you to do,” he continued as he scribbled something on a piece of
paper. “Your assignment. I am prolonging your deadline till tomorrow’s dusk. These are the books
you will use for your research.”

He handed her the paper. *The Threshold to Oblivion* by Dina Methic, *Two Minds in One* by Duncan
Finch and *Bound Creatures and the Tale of Lost Souls* by Yzzik Nchuah, it said. Yrith raised a brow
at the third name, clearly of Dwemer origins.

“It might take you a while to persuade the orc to hand you the last title,” the teacher added with a
more than apparent hint of displeasure. “The College owns the only copy ever found on Tamriel.
Although, knowing gro-Shub, he made a duplicate which he guards with his life.”

Yrith smiled. That was Urag, all right.

“I will be going then,” she said, nodding. As she stepped into the corridor, she turned back. “Master
Larkwing?”

“Hmm?”

“What about my classmates?”

“If they ask, go ahead and point them to me. I doubt any more questions will follow.”

Me too, she thought with a good amount of sarcasm. Inadvertently, she bowed and backed out of the
You did not finish your tea!” she heard him call as the door snapped shut. She shrugged, wending her way to the Arcanaeum.

Back in his office, Singird Larkwing hardly suppressed a laugh. Deep down, his conscience was biting him for blackmailing the slight Breton girl. Above all, if his reasoning was correct, he had had her believe in a lie. He threw a glance at the unfinished cup of tea and lifted it to his lips. He loved its scent, regardless of the fact that this tea had been smuggled to Skyrim by one of his friends, a Khajiit fence called Ri’saad. In his life, Singird had allowed himself a single exception from his puritanism, and that was supporting Khajiit caravans. To him, drinking smuggled tea was close to a family tradition. One of the few things that his late father had left behind.

The Nord drew in the smell, and without taking a single sip, he dumped the tea in the sink. As much as he loved its smell and taste, finishing someone else’s tea was not an option, despite his mind yelling at him for wasting.

After returning the cup and the rest of the room to its originally perfectly clean state, he left, only to stop two floors below, by the entrance to his Master’s chamber. With a momentary pause, he knocked on the door.

The head of Phinis Gestor appeared in the door a moment later, sizing him up for a good moment.

“Ah, Singe, I was just… well, come in,” he invited. The Nord entered and was immediately welcomed by the warmth of the joyfully crackling hearth. He could not miss that his teacher was wearing his night robe. A cozy armchair was placed by the hearth, next to which stood a low table with a steaming pot and a cup. Upon Singird’s arrival, the Breton master readied another cup and poured in some dark liquid that remotely resembled tea.

“Come and sit down, dear Singird,” he invited, pulling another chair toward the hearth. “Have a tea.”

“I don’t remember this room having a hearth, Master Gestor.”

“Oh, I have made a few tweaks,” Phinis stated with a hint of pride in his voice.

“Since last night?”

“Well, with the help of half of the College, I admit.”

“An illusion?”

“Quite convincing, isn’t it?”

“Quite so,” Singird concurred as he seated himself. “Will it last?”

“Not for long, but I think I can afford a moment of bliss from time to time.”

Singird’s eyes found the window and the snowy murk behind it. “I suppose.” He took a sip from his cup and suppressed a sour scowl. If he could allow himself a moment of criticism, he would deny that this liquid had anything to do with tea.

“So, Singe,” Phinis said as he sprawled in his armchair, legs spread comfortably over the thick rug underneath it. “What’s on your mind?”

“Let’s see,” the Nord began, carefully sliding the cup away from him, “I have run into a curious
problem. Say, Master Gestor. What can you tell me about Yrith Ravencroft’s parents?”

“I presume you have a good reason to ask?”

“That I do.”

“To be honest, not much. They were always a bit of mystery around here. Didn’t talk to other mages too much, except for when they needed supplies. Our Enthir was usually the one to provide them and they paid him handsomely. Enough for him to donate a portion of it to the College, and you know Enthir’s love for gold. I know they talked to Lady Faralda every now and then, but she rarely shared. They were alchemists of sorts, but apparently quite skilled in magical craft. Rumor has it that they concocted elixirs that were thought to be forgotten and invented spells of unimaginable power. How much of it is true, I don’t know.”

“Such powerful people must have had enemies, no?”

“Enemies?” Phinis groped about the satchel conveniently placed between the chair’s legs and pulled out a pipe and a small linen sack. He began to skillfully stuff the pipe with dried leaves. Singird frowned at that, eyes drifting to the closed window, but stayed silent about it. “None that I know of, but that doesn’t mean they didn’t exist. Your questions are piquing my curiosity.”

“I will get to it, Master Gestor. But please, let me ask one more question. If I summon an atronach, is there any possibility that I lose control over it?”

The Breton mage fired a single spark at the pipe. It hissed and faded, but he did not continue, raising his head to face Singird, brows quirked in surprise. “What kind of question is that, Singird? Have the students blown your wits away?”

“Just pretend that I’m one of them for a moment, please. If there is the slightest possibility, tell me. I need to know.”

“You know there isn’t. No, an atronach cannot go rogue. A dremora, perhaps, if you mess up and forget that you are summoning a bound creature. But an atronach? They are simple creatures and cannot exist on Nirn without a soul bond.”

“Good. So, if you had a situation where one summons an atronach, the atronach leaves its master’s side and kills that master’s ally, how would you explain it?”

“Hmm,” Phinis mused as he returned to igniting his pipe, “that’s a tough one. I’d say that either that person wasn’t an ally, or there was another person who managed to incite the atronach.”

“I came to the same conclusion,” Singird nodded, staring at his cup. His hands felt awfully unoccupied. He decided to check for dust on his robes. Naturally, he found none.

“Where is this all going, Singe?”

The young Nord sighed and cupped his face with his hands. “I promised not to tell anyone, so you must promise me that you will keep this an absolute secret.”

“You could have told me sooner,” Phinis remarked, releasing a circle of smoke which flew directly toward Singird. The Nord took a moment to admire the regularity of the shape.

“I had to know,” he insisted. “You can still say you don’t want to know the rest.”

“Singe, my dear. Who do you take me for?”
“Your call then,” the Nord shrugged with a smile.

“Cheeky lad. Go on, please.”

“Last night, someone from outside of the College hinted to me that Yrith Ravencroft might be a skilled conjurer, despite the image she has been making for herself. Naturally, I had a hard time believing it, but I did a bit of digging out of curiosity. I learned a few things about her family. That the Ravencrofts treasured their only daughter above all else and also that she craved her parents’ attention and fought for it on every occasion. She had worked hard to perfect herself in every way and the townsfolk found her likeable. That made me wonder why such a fine lady would turn into such a slacker.”

He paused for breath, watching the illusionary cinders before him.

“So today, after our conjuration class, I had her confess. She feels responsible for the death of her parents. If she was telling the truth, she had conjured a fire atronach and lost control over it. The creature left her side, entered her house and killed her parents.”

Phinis exhaled as he let out a cloudlet of white smoke, “Yrith Ravencroft, skilled in magic? That is indeed hard to believe.”

“I saw her atronach, Master Gestor. That girl is a powerful mage.”

“If you saw it with your own eyes, there’s no denying it, I suppose. Still leaves the question of whether she couldn’t have been lying to you about the death of her parents.”

“Then she would have put on an exceptionally good act. I don’t think she’d have a reason to let people scorn her had she known the conditions of controlling an atronach.”

“So… let me get the facts straight. Since there are no other options, you think that Miss Ravencroft’s parents were murdered.”

“I am quite certain of it.” Expression stone-hard, Singird reached for the cup and downed it, instantly regretting it.

Phinis let out a deep sigh, leaning back in his chair with eyes open ajar. “Let me ask you again, Singird. Where are you going with this?”

“There might be a murderer in Winterhold. Possibly even here among us.”

“And your self-righteous nature commands you to take action. You are aware that you will be the one paying with your life if they get ahead of you?”

“I am also aware that there have been cases of magical murders all around Skyrim that the College keeps being accused of. And Miss Ravencroft took the blame for the death of her parents. I can see a pattern there.”

“But the College has nothing to do with it, Singe. These are rumors and assumptions, nothing else.”

“Even you, Master Gestor?” Singird growled, fighting the urge to stand and slam the table. “They think her parents died during an experiment while she blames herself for their death! You were the one convincing me what a good girl she is! And you were the one complaining that the Jarls don’t support us anymore! Now you’re meditating over a pipe in front of a fake fireplace, speaking of rumors and assumptions! What are those weeds you stuffed in there anyway? They smell horrific!”
Phinis raised his hands, half in defense, half in a gesture of peace. “Singe, please. You go looking for trouble, you get more than you bargained for. For the love of the Eight…”

“Nine. And no. Go back to your happy-go-lucky lifestyle and pretend this conversation never happened. I will continue doing what I believe is right.”

The old conjuration master put his pipe down and sat up, eyes gleaming in the flickering light of the fire. He looked at his apprentice, putting up a soft smile. “I have always admired your determination, Singird. I think I’m getting too old for this. I have lost the passion I once had and you still possess. I apologize. But if this is what you believe in, then I shall believe in you. I’d be a terrible master if I refused to help my most precious student, wouldn’t I?”

Singird stooped his shoulders, suddenly feeling defeated. “You’re almost making me feel guilty, Master Gestor,” he said.

“Then you better make it all worthwhile.”

Singird let out a bitter laugh. Worthwhile was not a word he would associate with solving a case of murder.

“By the way, Singird, did you tell Miss Ravencroft?”

“About the murderer? No. If she knew, she would surely go looking for them.”

“She will find out sooner or later.”

“She will, but the later the better. She promised to study diligently if I keep quiet about this.”

“You still haven’t given up on that ritual of yours, have you?”

“Naturally.”

“You monster.”

“Your compliment is much appreciated.”

Chapter End Notes

So… revised chapter four is over, though knowing myself, I’ll come back to edit it a few more times. This one has been incredibly difficult to write. Don’t get me wrong, I enjoyed every single line of it, but it was challenging as I wanted to fill it with inconspicuous hints about various stuff that’s going to happen while also introducing a bit of Yrith’s past and background. Making Singird stick to his OCD and puritan nature also took me a bit of rereading and editing, but it is becoming easier with every chapter I write. I think I somehow made Phinis Gestor a different character than what he was in the game, but since he was barely ever there and only had a few lines, I had to improvise a bit. And so he became like this.

I feel slightly guilty that I haven’t given much space to Lady Faralda, but I’m going to work on it. Not sure when she’s going to have her grand debut though.
Those who read the previous version might have noticed that I have made some significant changes to this chapter, like changing the entire environment of Yrith’s and Singird’s conversation and basically rewriting all the lines and everything between them. The contents are the same, but it feels a lot more polished this way. The last part with Phinis is an addition that originally took place in the following chapter in a completely different way, but I felt it would fit better here.

Anyway, that’s it for the chapter. Thanks to everyone who liked, followed or even left a comment, every bit of support is appreciated! (Not that I’m forcing you. Not at all. I don’t require your unlimited attention and love, and I… GIMME DEM COMM… okay, I think I should go.)

As always, many thanks to Tildemancer for the beta!

Mirwen
The Mysterious Tome

Thank the Divines I brought my coat, Yrith thought sardonically, shaking whole clumps of snow down from her robe. Wet as a drowned skeever, she did not dare take one step further. Urag was generally quite benevolent with her, but not even she would be permitted to touch a book with wet hands. And so she stood on the threshold of the Arcanaeum, drawing in the scent of dust and old paper. In her mind, she was desperately thinking of a way to ask him for the books Master Larkwing had ordered her to study without having to explain the circumstances. The memory of Urag’s heated words addressed at the young teacher and the Nord’s scowl at the mere mention of the orc librarian conjured a soft smile on her face. Despite all the harshness and tease, there seemed to be a kind of mutual understanding between the two. One they might have not realized themselves, but she could sense nonetheless.

Quiet footsteps echoed through the tall library, and when she strained her neck to find their source, she noticed Urag gro-Shub counting the volumes on one of the bookshelves. He was holding a thin book, scribbling something in it every once in a while. The orc was nodding to himself, humming a tune that felt familiar, although she was certain she had never heard it before. As she tried to recall it, the orc turned around and spotted her.

“Yrith!” he called to her, waving at her with the paper. “What are you doing out there? Come on inside, it’s a lot cozier in here!”

She stepped into full view, spreading her arms to show the water dripping from every inch of her. Urag nodded in understanding, rushing to her side. “The weather sure is pleasant this time of the year,” he grumbled. “You need to learn your spells, Yrith. Simple heat is probably the easiest thing I know.” With that, he waved his hand as though he was conducting a bard concert and within a blink of an eye, a gust of warm air whipped all the water away.

“Thank you,” she said, combing her disheveled hair with her fingers.

“Anytime. What can I do for you today?”

“I need to take a look at something. May I?”

“Anything I can help with?”

“Well… not exactly, I’ll just wander around for a bit and find what I need.” Yrith was painfully aware that the smile she put up was the most unconvincing thing in history. She tried to scurry past Urag as quickly as possible, but the old orc grabbed her sleeve and turned her to face him.

“Well?” he drawled, lowering his head to give her the kind of suspicious look that a parent gives a child when they know their offspring is hiding something from them. She waited for him to articulate the question, but he stayed silent, letting the weight of the moment press her. And he did right. It felt almost suffocating to bear the quiet, worse than having to answer uncomfortable questions.

“Will you let me go, Urag?” she peeped. The orc smiled, revealing fangs that would scare away any ordinary human. Yrith was everything but ordinary, although she did feel a tug of disconcert at the sight. The teeth had nothing to do with it.

“Fine,” she gave in with a sigh. She handed him the paper she had received from Master Larkwing, her fingers trembling slightly. “I need these.” Her eyes sought out the floor, tracing the symbol of the Winterhold Eye made of neatly cut tiles.
Urag stared at the paper too long for Yrith’s liking, his poise slowly becoming a frown.

“Does Larkwing find this amusing?” he growled, almost ripping the paper as he clutched it.

“Urag?”

“Is he threatening you? Demanding something he shouldn’t? You know, if Larkwing’s giving you trouble, you can just come and…”

The sight of the old Orsimer fuming in outrage for her sake brought a smile to Yrith’s face. She chuckled, putting her slight hands on his bear arms.

“One moment you’re telling me to study, the next you are worried that I actually could?”

“Larkwing’s an exception,” he harrumphed, then waved the soaked paper in front of her face. “Do you even know what these are? They’re not your average textbooks. These are reference texts for the most seasoned magicians who want to go beyond impossible. What’s that dimwit of a troll thinking?!”

“Really?” She felt a tingle at the nape of her neck, a slight hint of thrill. For some reason, all of her fears suddenly dissolved, as though a burden had been taken off her shoulders. She did not know whether Master Larkwing was ridiculing her or if he in fact expected great things from her, but whatever the answer may have been, she was ready to accept the challenge. With poorly concealed excitement, she said: “Could you add a few ordinary textbooks then?”

“Yrith, what in Oblivion did he tell you?”

The dreaded question suddenly did not sound that threatening. “To study diligently,” Yrith shrugged.

“So you’re just going to do as he says?”

“Why do you have a problem with it, Urag? Didn’t you always wish for me to fit in here?”

“And you never seemed to care. So why now?”

Yrith paused, pondering her answer. She let the orc wait for a moment, listening to the sighs of the wind from outside and quiet crackling of the candles. Then she raised her head, gazing in his wild but gentle yellow eyes. “Because I want to,” she said simply and, much to her own surprise, realized it was true.

Urag was taken aback. He let go of her and stepped back, sizing her up with an intense stare. Then he nodded, slowly.

“I’ll get you the books.” And he scuttled away into the section that Yrith had, up to this moment, refused to visit.

Opening the first book, Yrith found a new world. She had always had a passion for literature of any kind. Beautiful letters set neatly on yellow pages, containing all the world’s wisdom and tales. Back when her parents had still been around, more than once she had snuck into the family library, snatching a book so she could read it in secret. That was how she had learned to conjure. One book, *A Man of Two Faces*, she had stolen so many times that her parents decided to give it to her, providing it with an inscription at the beginning.

*To our beautiful daughter with love.*
She smiled at the memory, setting her eyes at the task at hand.

The three books Singird Larkwing had ordered her to read were by no means uninteresting. She soon found herself absorbed in them, forgetting the existence of the outer world. They mostly focused on working with soul energy and transcending planes of existence, as though mirroring what Yrith had explained to Cain earlier. There was also a part explaining the possibility of conjuring a creature directly from one’s soul, but apparently, there were too many risks involved and most of those who had tried it had suffered a very slow and painful death. Yrith shuddered at that, withdrawing a paper from her satchel to take notes. In her concentration, she could not even see people come and go as they threw curious glances at her.

A few hours later, she let out a loud gasp, realizing she was late for Illusion. She earned herself a reproachful scowl from Urag who was balancing on a ladder before one of the shelves, trying to rearrange the books on it to fit some more between them.

“Urag, can I take these with me?” she called to him as quietly as she could.

“You’re really taking it seriously then? Well, if that’s what you decided…” he hinted a smile. “Go ahead but make sure to return them in time!”

“Sure!”

Yrith set out for the door, but then hesitated. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted the mysterious black-covered tome Urag had been so secretive about. It lay on his desk, partially covered by papers but still in clear sight. She took a step closer, examining it. Its dark cover was coarse and worn, the silver lining on its edges disrupted in several places. The pages appeared as though they had been ripped and mended many times.

Her eyes flicked to the orc. He was so immersed in his work he did not see anything but the books before him. A pillar stood between him and his desk, conveniently blocking the view. Quietly as a sneaking sabre cat, she leaned to it and swept the papers carefully aside. It took her some effort to slide the heavy tome between the ones she was already holding, but the orc did not seem to notice a thing. She bit her lip in concentration and danced away on her tiptoes, leaving the orc librarian in the dark.

The afternoon dragged like a pack of horkers in the mud. The Illusion class was the same as usual. Drevis Neloren, their Dunmer teacher, had a strange habit of engaging in a dialogue with his own person. Some people joked about him practicing illusion magic on himself, resulting in split personality. The truth was he simply loved his subject so much that he had a tendency to contemplate aloud. Yrith found it mildly amusing, but this time, her thoughts were with the black tome waiting for her to uncover its secrets. She barely caught a word of the lecture, and when it finally ended, she was one of the first people to bolt out, scooting directly to the Hall of Attainment. On her way, she almost crashed into J’zargo, the Khajiit adept who proudly announced on every occasion that one day he was going to become the Arch-Mage. She quickly apologized before gathering herself, earning herself a twitch of his furry cat ear.

Just after she had entered the student dormitory, she was stopped by one of her classmates, a slight Altmer boy with crème-colored hair and olive skin. His name was Aernil and Yrith knew him to be one of the most conceited and detestable people around. This time, for a change, his usually smug expression was replaced with a somewhat forthcoming smile. Yrith raised a brow in question. The octagonal room quickly became crowded with all her classmates, forming an almost perfect circle around them. Much to her surprise, Cain stood in the center with face carved in stone while Qassir was leaning to the wall, keeping aloof from the others and enjoying a moment of peace. She
frowned. Her stomach sent her a warning tickle.

“You know, Ravencroft… Yrith,” Aernil said in a gentle tone, “if I’d known what that Dunmer did to you, I wouldn’t have been so mean. I’m sorry.” He extended his hand for a shake. “How about we make peace?”

Yrith stared at the hand, confused. She looked at the faces surrounding them, some eager, some sullen, several of them just as baffled as she was. Cain was staring blankly at them, but somewhere behind that mask, Yrith could spot a mixed feeling of anger and grief. “And what might you be talking about?” she asked with utter cautiousness.

“Come now,” the Altmer chuckled. “You don’t have to hide anything from us anymore. We know you’ve been able to conjure all along but were afraid to show it. But it’s okay. We understand now.”

Yrith struggled not to gasp. How did they know? Who had told them? It could not have been Singird Larkwing, could he? He promised. He wouldn’t… or would he? She threw a glance at Cain, but denied that option immediately. The fiery-haired Dunmer looked weary and shaken. She could almost hear him praying for this to be over.

“How do you…”

Ha’rishia, the bronze-furred Khajiit girl, appeared by Aernil’s side, gently patting Yrith on the shoulder. “Everyone knows that Cain has been exploiting you. Weren’t you the one who taught him to conjure that atronach today?”

Yrith tried to study Ha’rishia’s face, but guessing a Khajiit’s feelings was the same as reading the face of a slaughterfish. She could see nothing in those golden eyes. To her, it seemed that the Khajiit were always smiling.

Ha’rishia was quickly joined by a Bosmer boy with dark, curly family tattoo on his left cheek. Nelarin, the one who liked to follow the class leaders. If Yrith should pick one person who excelled at spreading rumors, it would be him.

“I saw you talking to him,” he nodded. “And that shield you cast in Restoration… you’re actually quite good at magic, aren’t you? You helped Cain, right? And then he scoffed at you and blackmailed you so you would keep quiet about it.”

Yrith could not believe her own ears. Her expression hardened. Her hands clenched into fists, eyes shooting daggers. Quiet but clear, her voice resounded in the corridor. “Weren’t you friends with him?”

The Khajiit laughed. Her laughter reminded Yrith of the sound of a saw working its way through a log. It was just as unpleasant as its owner. “With Cain? One could hardly admit to something like that after what he did.”

Yrith studied the friendly faces around her. They wore smiles on their lips and whispered words filled with compassion, all directed at her. Urag would be happy. She had finally found friends. They were eager to accept her, willing to overlook everything that had happened up to this point. And ready to discard a friend for it too.

A memory flicked through her mind. One with Ha’rishia, talking passionately to Qassir, the audience favorite. Then the Redguard, flashing smiles at Yrith on every occasion. The dots connected.

She took a deep breath and straightened her back. Facing the broad-shouldered Khajiit girl, she looked tiny and helpless. And yet, she stood her ground, making sure her face showed exactly what
she was feeling.

“Out of my way,” she whispered.

“Yrith?” Ha’rish peeped, keeping up her act of innocence. “Are you all right?”

“I said out of my way!”

“We’re trying to help! We want to be your friends!”

“If you want friends, then look there!” she spat, pointing at Cain. The dark elf was still standing there, the flickering shadows on his face, sharp in the blue fountain light, emphasizing his unease. Their eyes met and she saw nothing of his usual haughtiness. “I have nothing to say to you! Now if you’ll excuse me.”

“What’s your problem!?” the Khajiit girl hissed. “Is this how you treat your allies?”

“Calm down, Ha’rish,” said Nelarin, putting a hand on the catgirl’s shoulder. “She’s just confused. No wonder, after everything she’s been through.”

“Confused? Allies?” Yrith fumed, shaking her head in disbelief. “I have no need for allies who throw their friend away like an overused sock the moment he’s not of use to them anymore. Get lost!”

“But…”

Fine, she thought. They think she is good at magic. Then let’s keep it at that.

She raised her hands as though she was preparing to cast a spell and turned her palms toward the three obnoxious classmates.

“Get lost!” She added a hint of a fire spell for effect.

They backed away, eyes wide with fear. Yrith stomped her way to her room without another word, eyes still hovering over Cain. When he averted his gaze, she slid over to Qassir and hardly resisted the urge to freeze in place. The braided Redguard, still casually leaning to the wall with his hands cushioning his head, watched her intensely, lips quirking into a mysterious smile. Shivers ran down her spine as she broke off the eye contact by sheer willpower. Quickly as she could, she disappeared in her chamber, slamming the door behind her. Then, she slid down with her back to it, releasing an exhausted breath.

Ah, she thought to herself as she let the books slide from her lap to the floor, I did something incredible.

She closed her eyes and waited for her breath to steady. The last three days she had been a subject to Meridia’s twists of luck, Sheogorath’s jests, Vaermina’s nightly horrors, Mephala’s treachery and Dagon’s wrath. Just what had she done to upset the Daedra?

She flexed her fingers, forcing herself up. Her weak fire magic was enough to light a few candles and provide some coziness to the room in the form of warm, flickering light. She threw herself on the bed, wrapping her arms around the black tome she had stolen from the library. Not only will Urag be angry at her for rejecting her new so-called friends, she will incite his anger even further with this little feat.

She brushed the thought aside, setting the book on her pillow. Her fingers ran over the black cover of
the large tome, gently sliding along the silver lining and neatly impressed ornaments. She threw a quick glance at the hourglass on one of the few scarce shelves on the walls, estimating the time she had until her scheduled trip to the sea. Assuming she could afford a while for herself, she opened the heavy leather cover and caressed the pages with the palm of her hand, reveling in the coarse feeling of the paper on her skin. She lay comfortably on the soft blanket, propping herself on her elbows, and her eyes focused on the jagged script that filled the pages. She shuddered a little as it was reminiscent of the daedric script, but read the first page nevertheless.

*Riding the Currents of Time* by Septimus Signus.

She turned the page to reveal a sheet covered in close text, its appearance almost screaming about the excessive amount of information included. Her eyes followed the first line immediately.

*Introduction*

The book you are holding in your hands is not just some ordinary piece of literature. It is in your possession because the gods wish so, and the first moment you came into contact with it, it became a part of your destiny. Be aware, dear reader, that from now on, your life is going to undergo a significant change.

Have you heard of the Elder Scrolls? Some say they only exist in legends. Some say they are a part of us. Some say they do not belong to this world while others will tell you the exact opposite. There are rumors that state that these scrolls transcend time. Curiously, all of the above solemnly swear that the knowledge contained there is forsaken and dangerous.

I have dedicated my life to the research of the Elder Scrolls, and I might be the first one to discover that anything and everything can be recorded there. In fact, anything and everything is recorded there. There is no such thing as a limit to an Elder Scroll. Their exact number is unknown and perhaps even nonexistent, their contents vary in both character and density, from the simplest things such as explanation as to why people cook their food to the complex matters like the concept of life and death, the origins and downfall of dragons or the Universal Principle (which I explain in my other works). I assume that the ultimate Elder Scroll would contain information about the origins and termination of individual kalpas. The key to understanding the Elder Scrolls, however, lies in their omnipresence and the ambivalence of the Truth.

If you say that an Elder Scroll is a unique object of certain specific attributes, it is just as true as saying that it is only a simple scroll with a simple message. If you say it does not exist, it is just as true as saying it exists and is right here. What people fail to understand, however, is that their omnipresence, their existence and nonexistence, incorporates not only the concept of “where”, name it place, location, position, or even sphere, realm, plane or universe, but also of “when”. Strangely enough, there is no difference between “where” and “when” for an Elder Scroll. It can be found at any time in any place, shifting its position not only forward or backward, up or down and right and left, but also before and after.

When thinking about how time is no more than another dimension for an Elder Scroll, I could not help but think why it is different for us. If an Elder Scroll can move in time freely, why can’t a person do the same? Many years I searched for an answer to this, trying to find a way to travel in time. I have discovered an old Dwemer document concerning this problem, but gained only the general outline as it was incomplete. I had to look for my information elsewhere, in realms unknown to most of the mortals. As a result of my efforts, this book was created.

It is meant to give its reader a complex understanding of the concept of time as well as a solution to traveling to the past and future. I paid a terrible price for its completion however, for the knowledge stored in this book is taken from my master. It was his utmost protected secret, which I dared steal
from him and convey to whoever finds my work. If you are reading this, chances are that I have parted from your plane of existence.

You must be asking yourself why I didn’t save myself from my master’s wrath if I knew how to travel in time. When reading this book, you will discover that moving in time is very energetically expensive. The magic as you know it, the so-called official arcane arts within the boundaries of people’s tolerance and acceptance, do not apply here. It is fairly easy to move an inanimate object in time, but to move a living soul, a sacrifice has to be made. The size and nature of the sacrifice depends on many factors, including the size of the soul, its inner energy, the time distance you want to cover etc. Always remember that nothing is free in this world.

You could then argue with me that the Dwemer, among many other things, discovered certain ways to minimize these sacrifices. Indeed, they did. But I will tell you one absolute truth that no Elder Scroll can deny. When you read this book, always remember this one sentence. Carve it into your mind and don’t ever let it slip, for without being aware of it, you will condemn yourself.

You can never escape your destiny.

Now that you know all that you need to know, let us move on and take a sip from the bottomless well of knowledge. Happy reading.

Septimus Signus

Yrith’s hands were trembling, her mind overwhelmed with a flood of emotions and information. She had stolen a book about time travel from Urag’s collection! A book that could perhaps grant her unbelievable power if she desired it and was most likely kept secret from the public. Perhaps not even the collegium knew of its existence.

She remembered the name of the author, for Urag had mentioned him several times. According to what she knew, he had been an extraordinarily skilled mage, unfortunately obsessed with Elder Scrolls and some long lost Dwemer knowledge to the point where he could not hold a proper conversation. But this work seemed like a masterpiece, something that would, as Urag liked to say, open an entire new realm of research.

For Yrith, it held another meaning. She forced herself to take a deep breath and settle down, fighting the flush of excitement taking over her. If she could use this method, if she could travel in time, she would be able to undo the gravest mistake of her life. She could go back and warn her parents, or maybe prevent herself from conjuring the atronach. She could change things for the better.

Her eyes were fixed on the open book, scanning the prologue over and over again, and every time she did so, her resolve strengthened. This was a gift from the heavens and she was going to accept it with open arms. She knew what she had to do now, it was clear as the summer sky in Cyrodiil. She was going to bring her dead parents back to life.
Avalanche

Yrith’s gaze wandered outside of her window, following a single snowflake fluttering toward the crimson-lit statue of Shalidor. Days passed slowly in Winterhold, like the lazy floes bobbing in the Sea of Ghosts. As the middle of Sun’s Height approached, the weather stilled itself into mild snowfalls and evening clear skies with gentle rose-colored cloud lines along the western horizon. Sun’s Rest was quickly approaching, promising a long-awaited extra day of leisure.

Tonight’s walk to the shore should literally be a breeze. Yrith was expecting a pleasant stroll filled with warm air from the south. Even the city had become slightly livelier, with people leaving their abodes for hunts, fishing or trading trips down to Windhelm. There were rumors of the Stormcloaks preparing for a great battle, causing people to rush their businesses so they could come back before the first sound of war drums would carry over the mountains. Reports of sudden Imperial assaults and kidnappings occurring at random places all over Skyrim spread like wildfire, which the sworn Stormcloaks denied, claiming them to be false gossip meant to make people doubt the Stormcloak protection.

Yrith rarely took any of the political gossip to heart, but she could feel the tension in the air. The magical murders the College had been accused of did not exactly help either. On every occasion, people were turning on each other, spouting accusations and blaming their own brothers for betraying their homeland. As if someone had put a curse on them, Yrith thought bitterly. Even her parents had fought more after they had relocated from Daggerfall. Many times she had wondered why they had moved in the first place. Upon her inquiry, the only answer her parents had given her was: “Because the enemy is near.” Yrith had never learnt who this supposed enemy was.

She picked up her coat and blew off the single candle that had been permitting her to read. The book that lay open on Yrith’s table was the fifth book on the art of Conjuration she was devouring. In all the other subjects, she was still but a hopeless novice, but when it came to Conjuration, she was not willing to provide Singird Larkwing with any reason to mock her or reveal her secret. And, in some remote and sneakily hidden corner of her mind, there was that tiny voice that was telling her that it would be worth it to stay on his good side.

With a hint of a smile on her face, she left the room and made for the College entrance, stopping by the kitchen on her way to pick up the fish sack.

Cain was waiting for her outside, leaning to the low wall surrounding the first circular landing before the bridge to the city. He was staring at the sea, eyes tracing a pack of horkers lazily smacking their flippers against the wet sand. The last few days he had mostly been silent, rarely speaking to anyone at all and keeping to himself when the rest of the class, save for Qassir, Tanya Verus and, for some reason, Leyna Travi, busied themselves scoffing at Yrith for being a pitiful lying skeever. The look in the Dunmer’s eyes had changed, becoming somewhat distant and difficult to read.

But when Yrith approached him, he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, hinting a smirk.

“You’re late,” he stated.

She glared at him, a thought crossing her mind that she had preferred him to be that distant, silent elf. “I am late by seconds,” she snorted.

She expected him to retort, but the Dunmer simply turned around, marching down the bridge. She followed his footsteps, watching him with one brow quirked up in bemusement. His back was bent and shoulders stooped down, a sight she was not used to seeing.
Walking through the city, Yrith watched the dangling shop signs and deserted courtyards. It was quiet, save for their own footsteps and cold wind brushing the treetops. Cold wind from the north, she realized with a frown. Not what she had been expecting. She looked around, as though the answer would lay there in plain sight, but found nothing. Soft glow came from the windows of the surrounding houses. The chill in the air had driven the citizens back into the warmth of their homes. But there was something else, an ominous presence in the air. Something she could not quite put her finger on.

They left the city and entered the ravine. Yrith listened to their footsteps just to have something to focus on, eyes locked on Cain’s heels. Cain’s left, her left, Cain’s right, her right, one, two, three, four, one… until there was one more pair. She stopped, looking over her shoulder. Nothing.

“What?” said Cain as he turned around to face her.

“I thought I heard…”

“Hmm?”

“Nothing,” she waved her hand to dismiss him. “Must be my imagination.”

The Dunmer rapped the stone wall looming above them with his fingers. It gave a soft echo that lingered in the air before fading into nothingness.

“Are you afraid?” he asked her.

She tried to search for mockery in his tone, but found none, although his expression was as unreadable as ever. She shrugged.

“Do you remember how I told you about the Lone Demon?”

“Again?” Yrith scoffed. “Don’t you think your jests are getting old?”

He laughed, gesturing for her to follow him down to the shore. “They are, are they not?” He let the sentence hang in the air, calculating his footsteps so he would not slip on the icy path. Soon, they could hear the fierce splashing of the sea from below, combatting the harsh wind. As Cain walked on the pier and bent down to pull out the fishing net, she heard him sigh.

“You see,” he said, “most Dunmer families worship the Daedra.”

“And?” Yrith held out the sack so he could fill it. She closed her eyes as the cold water showered her face, and licked the salt from her lips.

“It is common for the Dunmer to have clan patrons they can pray to. The higher ranking Dunmer worship the Tribunal, but they are inclined to choosing one particular deity they prefer. We are scorned by the rest of the world for this. Especially by the Altmer.”

“Well… yes, I know that. But why are you telling me?”

“My family is different. We do not worship the Daedra.”

“Let me guess. The Lone Demon you were talking about?”

He nodded, forgetting the net he was holding. “Indeed. There are no written records about the Lone Demon and we are forbidden from ever mentioning him in writing or depiction.” There was another sigh, longer than the one before. He threw a fish into the sack with ferocity that made Yrith wince.
“Compared to the Lone Demon, the Daedra are saints.”

Even against the darkening sky, Yrith could see the struggle in his face. She said nothing, deciding to let him speak on his own.

“I hate my home,” he said. “It is filled with anger and strife. And I hate this place too because it’s just about the same.”

“And what does it…”

“… have to do with the Demon? Everything! He exists to sow discord amongst people. His purpose is to turn them against each other, to teach them pain, despair, and anger. To torture them in life and rob them of their death. That is what my family does. That’s what they do!” he gestured toward the dark, jagged silhouette of the College, flapping the fish in his hand. He threw it into the sack and ran his fingers through his hair. Watching him, Yrith was happy that she did not share Singird Larkwing’s obsession with cleanness. “Mother said that the Lone Demon is in every person’s heart. But… seeing you stand up to them, I think he avoids yours.” He averted his eyes, hypnotizing the fish.

The sight made Yrith laugh. “All this just to say a little thank you?” she quipped.

“I am not saying thank you, okay? Just that… I approve of what you did.” He pursed his lips like a small child grumbling to his mother that his favorite toy had broken.

“Indeed,” Yrith said, eyes glistening with amusement. “Your approval was just what I was waiting for.” They finished collecting the fish, Cain setting up the nets again while Yrith tied the sack shut with a rough bast string.

“Less than usual,” Yrith commented, knitting her brows as she scrutinized the poor catch. She threw it over her shoulder and set out for the city. As she approached the cliffs forming the ravine, she heard footsteps again. Heavy as they were, audible even in the incessant murmurs of the sea, Yrith assumed them to belong to a guard. She looked up at one of the cliffs as the sound suddenly changed into a quiet rustle and then slowly escalated into a rumble.

“Wha…” Cain hinted behind her. As she turned around to face him, she could see him staring above her. Slowly, his eyes grew wider, fear reflecting in his face.

“M-midget!” he gasped.

“Yes?”

“G-get out of there!” he blurted out, pointing up at the cliff. “Get out! Now!” He bolted toward her, struggling against the soft, wet sand.

Yrith looked up. A mass of snow, pitch black against the dark sky, was sliding from the cliff, casting a threatening shadow at her and all about. She forgot her breath, face mirroring Cain’s fear. She released the sack, looking for the quickest escape route. It was too late. There was none. She would never make it.

“No!” she yelled the first word to come to her mind. She could feel her feet grow heavy, unable to carry her away.

“Midget!”

He drew closer. He would be brought down along with her. She knew the snow around here. It
never melted. It was ancient, hardened by never-ending winter into massive blocks of ice. And all that ice was falling on her head.

Instinctively, she raised her hands. They flared with magic, then spread it around, forming a shield that shimmered in the dark. She stared at the mass of frosty substance sinking to where she stood. For a split moment, it seemed to stop in midair only to show her the hopelessness of her situation. And then it hit.

The impact broke the shield and made the ice shatter. The next wave took the form of icy rubble, sending her to the ground and burying her frame. She could feel the air getting squeezed out of her lungs, and the sound of Cain’s shrieks grew distant.

She couldn’t move or breathe. Cold spread through her limbs, penetrating her every muscle. She wanted to cry out, but the only result would be a load of snow in her mouth. She wanted to reach out, but the weight on her body wouldn’t let her move an inch. And so she lay there, motionless, mind heavy with spreading darkness. Out of all possible options, she would have never imagined herself to perish in an avalanche.

And then, just as she was about to fall into a hazy slumber, a gust of fresh, salty wind whipped her cheek. Cain was frantically removing the snow, setting her free from her icy prison. She gasped, drawing in the air and shaking in pain as the senses were returning to her.

“Can you walk?” he asked, his voice trembling. She stared at him, unable to process the words. The sound was there, but her mind would not function. The only thing she was aware of was the dull pain spreading through her body. She pressed her lips together and clenched her fists to contain a moan. Her eyelids felt so heavy.

“No, Ravencroft! Come on, open your eyes! Snap out of it, we have to get you up there!”

“I’m so tired,” she whispered.

“I know. You’ll get to rest. But first you need to get on your feet and use them. Can you walk?” He pulled her up into the sitting position, forcing her to squint at his face. His expression was hard and uncompromising, though she could see a hint of concern in his scarlet eyes.

With his aid, Yrith tried to stand. She hissed as a flash of pain cut through her leg like a white-hot blade, but managed to shift her weight on the other one, leaning against Cain for support.

“The fish…” she mumbled drowsily as he dragged her away. He chuckled bitterly, flicking her forehead.

“Go ahead and grab it if you’re up to it.”

She had to smile to that, but could not find the strength to utter an intelligible reply.

They ascended the slope, slowly, carefully. Yrith struggled to keep going, clutching Cain’s shoulder every time she had to put her weight on the injured leg. The cold bit into her flesh and made her shiver. She fought against the slippery path, her breath shallow and eyelids heavy with exhaustion. By the looks of it, Cain was in a similar situation, desperately trying to keep her from falling while barely holding up against the beaten ice.

Yrith knew that every step would get them closer to the College, yet she felt as though they were just trampling the ice in one place. She stopped squinting toward the smoke rising from the chimneys in the distance and focused on her feet instead. At least she saw the ground move underneath her which gave her some assurance of their progress.
After a short while of silent walking, Cain suddenly came to a halt. She gave him a questioning look, but the answer came promptly.

“Blazes, urchin, what happened to you?!”

On the road before them stood Qassir, face twisted in genuine shock. He hurried to support Yrith from the other side, gently sliding a hand under her upper arm. Cain greeted him with a not so forthcoming snort.

“What are you doing here, sandman?”

The Redguard hinted a shrug with his free hand. “Why so angry?” he taunted. He gave the Dunmer a curious scrutiny, then stopped at Yrith’s limp leg. “You know, when you stand up there on the hill, looking at a cliff, and the next moment half of the said cliff is gone, it does raise a suspicion.”

“Spoken like true outlander,” Cain snorted, face turning into a spiteful glare. “You go to a faraway land and the only thing that matters to you is to be there when something happens. If only you had made yourself useful and gone back to the College to send help.”

“Which you certainly seem to be in need of,” Qassir gave a sagelike nod. “So here, let me help.”

With one smooth movement, he gently took Yrith in his arms as though she weighed no more than a paper doll. He flashed Cain his brightest smile, white teeth mirroring the surrounding snow. The Dunmer’s eyes shot daggers. Yrith looked up into the Redguard’s face and he responded with a playful wink. She quickly averted her gaze, feeling her cheeks redden regardless of the chill still paralyzing her body.

“No worries, urchin,” he assured her with his usual grin. “This Redguard has you. We can leave the Dunmer to his own fate.”

“But…” she breathed, but flinched at the sound of the Dunmer’s outraged voice.

“What is your–”

“The fish,” Qassir said, nodding toward the pile of crumbling ice and snow on the sea shore. “You wouldn’t want to let that go to waste, would you? Go ahead and fetch it. I shall escort the little urchin to the College.” The smile he regaled Cain with, however innocent on the surface, was the most wicked thing Yrith had ever seen. She suddenly felt a strong urge to punch the Redguard in the face, and perhaps she would have done so had she not been feeling so weak.

“I don’t think s–”

“Be seeing you,” Qassir called to Cain as he set out, holding Yrith lightly against his chest. “Apologies for stealing your beloved, but it seems she needs slightly better care than you can offer.”

With that, he sped up, leaving the dumbfounded elf behind to fight the drifts of snow and merciless wind with the darkness of the night as his only companion. The girl in his arms stared at him in shock, unable to utter a word. Her disbelief only deepened when she shivered and her escort instantly pressed her closer to his body to warm her up.

“W-why?” she stammered, her slightly doubtful eyes fixed on his mysterious smile. “Why would you…”

“How kind of you,” he said, eyes shimmering in the moonlight. “Always defending that person, even though he would never have done the same for you.”
Despite herself, Yrith snorted, feeling slightly more awake than moments before. “I am not defending him!”

“That what are you doing?” he asked and she could feel a touch of amusement in the statement. She waggled in his arms and hissed as her leg promptly reacted by sending a flash of pain through her body.

“Just the right thing,” she mumbled.

“The right thing, eh?” He stared into her eyes, forcing her to shift her gaze to one of the misted windows they were passing. After a few moments of heavy silence, he let out a soft chuckle. “You know,” he said, sounding distant, “in the big picture, the right thing may not always be as right as you think.”

Yrith froze. She knew these words. She had heard them so many times before. Her father used to repeat them to her whenever she had done something foolish and tried to defend it with “the right thing.” The last time had been moments before his death.

“What do you know?” she uttered through gritted teeth.

“Seems like I touched a sore spot, didn’t I? I am sorry.” She stared into his face. He did not sound apologetic at all. Yrith let out a quiet huff but chose to leave the statement without reply. Talking to Qassir was meaningless. She closed her eyes, simply wishing they’d arrive soon. They spent the rest of their journey in silence, only listening to each other’s breaths and the Redguard’s light footsteps.

The evening dragged on. Curiously enough, Singird Larkwing had spent the last few days more occupied with searching for information on the Ravencroft family than with his own research.

Winterhold had access to information from all over Tamriel. Urag gro-Shub was known for his thirst for knowledge that he expressed by hiring numerous scouts and adventurers who would occasionally bring him long lost books or records snatched from various governmental offices which tended to be, naturally, marked as classified information. The existence of these files was an open secret to the College staff, as the College of Winterhold was exempted from any state laws as long as the unlawful acts were kept within the College grounds.

To Singird’s astonishment, there were several boxes of Thalmor reports and dossiers, secret messages from Ulfric Stormcloak to his commanders and allies, copies of the White-Gold Concordat and both Treaties of Stros M’kai, and even reports from some raids in Valenwood that Singird had never heard of before. Birth certificates and records of people crossing any province border in Tamriel were also included, containing even the hidden Khajiit caravans. But the Ravencrofts weren’t there. They weren’t on any of the Lists of Recognized Magi that every magical institution in Tamriel was keeping either. There were no records of them ever existing. He traced several Ravencrofts in High Rock and some in Cyrodiil, but none of them seemed to be related to Yrith’s family.

Singird thought of asking Urag gro-Shub about them directly, but chased the thought away when he imagined the scowl on the orc’s brute face which was sure to follow that question. He could ask Miss Ravencroft herself. But he needed her to trust him, and he could hardly achieve that by bringing tears into her eyes again.

With a sigh, he snapped the last box shut and returned it to its rightful place. It was way past sunset and he could not wait to enjoy his evening cup of tea along with a pair of smuggled rockies, as the Skyrim folk liked to call the infamous rock-solid cookies from High Rock, popular for their strong,
spicy flavor. He left the Arcanaeum, taking his favorite route to the Hall of Countenance through the College roof.

The fresh wind and starry sky did wonders to his mood. He took a short moment to lean against the stone wall surrounding the roof and let his eyes wander freely over the snowy moonlit landscape. Up from this height and distance, the mountains on the western side and the small isles surrounded by thousands of floes on the south-east looked so small, as though he could simply crush them with his fist.

He glanced upon the shore and frowned, distrusting his own eyes. The area around the fishing piers appeared to be buried under a thick pile of ice and snow while the cliff above it had lost a good portion of its original volume. Knowing everything around Winterhold was protected and held together by powerful magic, he blamed the night for tricking his eyes. He blinked to clear his sight, but the image stayed. With a shrug, he turned away, mind drifting to his favorite tea.

He had just entered the Hall of Countenance when an echoing yell from below made him freeze. Curious about the source of the commotion, he hurried to the brightly glowing focal point and bent over the low wall surrounding it, just in time to hear the screechy voice of Colette Marence, the Restoration Master.

“By the Eight! Mister Tahlrah… Miss Ravencroft, what on Nirn happened to you?!”

Singird froze, staring at the column of blue light as the realization sank in. A wave of cold gushed over him. Despite himself, he darted toward the stairs, nearly sliding down to the lowest level. Several doors opened as he ran past them, revealing curious faces of his fellow teachers, but paid them little attention.

Down by the entrance door stood Qassir Tahlrah, Yrith Ravencroft resting in his arms, obviously shaken and wounded. Colette Marence was giving her person a careful scrutiny.

“What happened?” Singird asked as he joined her.

“Master Larkwing,” said Colette without lifting her face. “Later. She needs treatment. She is already quite late; this leg is going to take some time to fully heal. Mister Tahlrah, if you would please take her to my room.”

“Wait. Where is Mister Aldaryn?”

“Somewhere on the road,” Qassir hinted a shrug. Singird stared at him, finding only indifference in the Redguard’s face. He had to exhaust all of his self-control on preventing the sudden outburst of rage from dying his face crimson.

“Somewhere on the road,” he repeated quietly. “I saw a crumbled cliff down by the shore. Is he still there? Is he wounded as well?”

“Cain was fine when we left him,” Yrith said, her weak voice almost drowned by the incessant humming of the blue fountain. Singird let out a small sigh of relief.

“Mister Tahlrah, please,” Colette urged, holding the door to her room open for him. The Redguard gave a slight nod and entered. She turned to Singird. “Master Larkwing, if you would please wait here. We’ll be done in a moment. If a cliff really did fall down, then we need to head down at once and restore the magic protecting the place. I would appreciate your assistance.”

“Very well,” Singird muttered before watching Colette’s back disappear behind the door. He stared at it motionlessly, pondering the tingling sensation on the nape of his neck he always felt when things
were about to go awry. He drew a deep breath and seated himself on the fountain wall, allowing himself some of the comfort that he liked to deny the students.

The door opened in a few moments, revealing Colette in a fur-padded overcoat and expressionless Qassir. They exchanged a few quiet words before the Redguard scuttled away, leaving the two teachers alone.

“How is she?” asked Singird, jumping up. Colette shot him a semi-amused look.

“Ah, the detention student? Suffering from guilty conscience, are we?”

He shot her a piercing look. “Not at all.”

“You’re a terrible liar, Master Larkwing,” she laughed as she opened the door, letting the cold breeze ruffle her carefully coiffured hair. “She’ll pull through. The worst damage was done to her mind, though. I can hardly cure that.”

Singird nodded, following her outside. “Not even a Master of Restoration such as yourself can mend one’s soul, eh?”

She chuckled softly. “I have been researching that, in fact. But soul studies are quite a difficult discipline, even for a mage veteran.”

“I suppose. Do you mind sharing your experience?” They entered the bridge, squinting against the wind. Singird shot a glance at the stormy sea, waves wearing caps of white foam reflecting the moonlight.

“I would,” Colette said, carefully searching for the safest route with her feet, “but so far, it has been quite difficult to piece the information I need together. I had to put all the Restoration books aside to fully engage myself in soul studies. Not to mention I have to make two copies of everything I write because someone constantly keeps stealing my notes.”

“If you need assistance with finding the culprit…”

“Ah, no,” she waved him off, finding purchase by clutching the wall on her side. “It’s not that bad. The Collegium is not willing to acknowledge the art of Restoration as a real discipline of magic, though. And I strive to change that.”

“So, how far have you gotten in your soul studies?”

She laughed. “That is a good question. In the great tangle of information I’ve sorted through, very few parts are actually relevant. I’d say the most useful one was about each soul being a specific manifestation of the world. It may sound simple, but it is not.

“You see, a soul can interfere with other souls and influence them, but it can never control them. When I heal a person’s body, I can feel their bones and tissues, I can hear their heartbeat, and if I send in my magic, I can patch the body up, just like I would patch up a piece of garment. But that is all possible only because I know the anatomy of one’s body and, to some extent, I can change it at will. A soul is not like that. It has no tangible structure, nothing you could see or feel with the primary five senses. We can feel a person’s emotions through a variety of impulses, but mending a soul with magic would require a completely different approach. You would have to seek its origins and find out what formed the soul into what it is now. But if you had this information, nothing would be impossible. Not even bringing a soul back from the dead. I can imagine how something like this could easily get out of hand.”
“To bring a soul back from the dead…” Singird stared at her in silent contemplation. “Miss Marence, if you don’t mind me asking, where did you learn this?”

“Oh…” Colette hesitated, seemingly troubled by something. Singird studied her soft features and the dark shadows in her face contrasted by the pale moonlight. They passed a guard giving them a small nod. Colette looked over her shoulder at the steel-clad man as though she was afraid he’d listen. She put up a soft smile with a hint of guilt and mischief. “You see,” she spoke at last, “I… sort of snatched them from Urag gro-Shub’s personal collection.”

Singird could hardly contain a chuckle. “The one whose existence he always so ardently denies?”

“That one, yes,” she affirmed. “I noticed he always goes to sort new and returned books at the same hour, so whenever I need something I can’t find elsewhere, I go consult his little treasure. So far, I’ve always managed to return everything before he could notice it was missing.” Singird noticed a spark of excitement in the eyes of his colleague who apparently took unexpected pleasure in tricking the orc librarian. That was a feeling he could easily relate to.

“One should not underestimate the Restoration Master,” he quipped. “So? Which book was it?”

“It was called Soul Genesis. There was no author, but it was labeled with the symbol of the Association of Wizards and Alchemists.”

“Association of Wizards and Alchemists? Is there such an institution?”

“Truth be told, before I started rummaging through Urag’s collection, I hadn’t heard of it either. There seems to be no trace of them anywhere, although he owns quite a lot of volumes with their seal. Apparently, Miss Ravencroft’s parents were members as well.”

“Hold on. There are mentions of her parents too?”

“Quite a lot of them, actually. They were active contributors to the soul magic studies back in the day. I wish I could have a copy of their series of essays on compact regeneration of soul and body. One of them spoke about how one can use the connection between their soul and body to maintain their health, both physical and mental. Although some of the things the Ravencrofts researched are rather disquieting. Apparently, they were one of the few people who knew how to concoct the Spirit Blight.”

Deep in his mind, Singird grinned and made a mental note to find out Urag gro-Shub’s schedule. Those few minutes of talking to Miss Marence meant more to him than the last few days he had spent buried in books on his own. He now had a clear lead for both his research and the Ravencroft mystery, and sure as the night sky above him, he would use it.

“I have heard of that one,” he said. “The only poison that can literally melt your soul into nothingness.”

Colette nodded grimly. They had left the warm lights and smoking chimneys of the city behind. From the distance, they could hear the whispers of the sea. “And the one that can only be countered by another strong poison,” she added.

“Still, considering her parents’ prowess…”

“Having some trouble with young Yrith?” Colette teased with a good-natured smirk.

“That depends on what you call trouble,” he smiled back.
“The usual,” she hinted, amusement gleaming in her eyes. “But she sure knows how to surprise.”

“Oh?”

“Well, let’s say that for the pitiful performance she’s been giving in my classes, she sure can make her wards count when it comes to it. That cliff would have killed her if it had not been for her magic.”

Singird’s smile faded, replaced by a concerned frown. “Then let’s be grateful she has it. I don’t suppose it would improve the College’s reputation if the world learned we lost a student in an avalanche.”

“You don’t seem surprised.”

He let out a somewhat bitter chuckle, stopping just before the crumbled cliff. The Falcon’s Beak, as the locals liked to call it, had lost its head. All that was left was a dangerously grinning jaw of glistening ice teeth. “I am beginning to think that there are less and less things that can surprise me anymore,” he said, shaking his head at the sight.

“Aren’t you a bit too young to be saying that?” she gently nudged him between the ribs, causing him to scrutinize his own robe and smoothen it immediately. A corner of her mouth twitched. “Let’s survey the area first. It is a little odd for the cliff to fall off by itself. It has been a few months since we recast the protective charm, and that spell is supposed to last for years, if not centuries.” She made a step toward the crumbling remains of the cliff, but Singird promptly grabbed her arm.

“Wait. We should muffle ourselves before we trample the place down.”

“Fair point,” she nodded. No sooner did they take off than they both cast the muffle spell, preventing their steps from being heard or leaving footprints.

The two of them struggled against the blocks of ice in their path, having to use magic to prevent themselves from falling or touching the ground several times. Singird strayed a little from his companion, studying the snow around the perimeter.

Time dragged on, but neither of them found a trace of anything suspicious. After a few hours, when Masser decided to take refuge beyond the western horizon, the two of them reunited, worn and less than happy.

“Nothing,” Colette shook her head. “Perhaps our enchantment was simply faulty.”

Singird knit his brows. It was not his habit to admit defeat so easily. Had it not been for Colette, he would have searched past morning. He gave an unsatisfied sigh.

“What do we do now?” he asked.

“It is becoming late,” she said, eyes drifting to the night sky. A soft veil of silvery green nebula started forming on its northern side, making the College seem like a dark, menacing fortress looming over the land. A chill in the wind made her visibly shudder. “We should reinforce it in case some foolish citizen decides to go sightseeing. Then we wait until morning.”

“Very well. After you, Miss Marence.”

Singird watched as Colette stretched out her arms, releasing her magic and letting it envelop the broken cliff. He promptly followed. After a lengthy while of draining their souls of their magic, the two of them set out for the College. For the last time, Singird looked over his shoulder at the jagged
structure, threatening against the colorful horizon. He let out a deep breath, exhaustion weighing heavy on his shoulders. He nearly staggered over the gravel-like snowy surface around the cliff, eyes fixed on the thin line that separated the area from the smooth, foamy texture ahead. Suddenly, he froze, putting a hand on Colette’s shoulder.

“That,” he pointed to the line. “Do you see it?”

“You mean the–” Her hand shot up to her lips. “Divines preserve us!”

“Divines preserve us indeed. This whole time we have been looking in the wrong places.” Singird stepped toward the line, bending down to examine it. “Quite a clean cut,” he remarked grimly. “Most definitely caused by controlled magic.”

“But who could have done this? Why would someone want to compromise the College when we struggle to even survive?”

Singird left the question unanswered. He could not articulate his suspicion before Colette Marence. What a convenient coincidence that the Yrith Ravencroft who had been made to appear as though she had killed her own parents and attacked by an ice wraith that had strayed far from its territory was now an unfortunate victim of a very unlikely avalanche. He clenched his fists unwittingly. No, this was no coincidence. Whoever the culprit, they were not after the College. They were directly after Yrith Ravencroft.

“Whoever it was,” he mused, “they must have been exceptionally gifted in the arcane arts. Or there were more of them. How many of you took part in the last maintenance?”

“At least five members of the Collegium, if memory serves me right. Needless to say, we did not rely on our magic alone.”

“And to interfere with the local magic…”

“… you must be someone recognized by it,” she finished.

“Who else is recognized apart from the teachers and students?”

“Well, anyone who has ever gained authorized entry. Residents, former students, guests…”

Singird sighed, rising back to full height. “Let us go. There is nothing for us to do here.”

Colette gave him a look of concern, a deep wrinkle between her brows marring her beautiful face. “Rest in ease, Master Larkwing,” she said in a soothing tone, touching his forearm. “Come morning, I shall have Master Neloren examine the area for magical residue. We will get to the root of this.”

He gave a small nod, doubting her words as he did. Without another word, they returned to the College, each deep in thought, oblivious to the passing lights of the city of Winterhold or the crackling ice covering the ramshackle walls around the College bridge. Singird headed straight for his room, crashing on his bed without changing. For once, he did not care. His mind was too occupied with other things. He had no time to think about the dirt he had brought in on his person.

Just before sleep took him, he made a promise to himself. The next day, he would sneak into the library and steal his share from Urag gro-Shub’s precious collection.
This is a new chapter that wasn’t in the first version but it’s super important. And… I wonder how many of you are going to hate me for this chapter and its implications. “Mirwen, I didn’t know you liked such cliché… Mirwen, I thought you were a decent person!” Ha! No, Mirwen’s fantasies are far from decent. Well. Enjoy. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Pain. Stabbing, piercing, searing, white hot and dead cold at the same time. That was all she felt. An endless universe of inferno, darkness that instead of dulling all the senses penetrated them and locked her in a cage of eternal agony. There was no laughter this time, no happy memories, no smiles or tears of joy. Only torment tearing her apart.

She wanted to call for help, for someone to hold out a hand for her, but no one would listen. People fought and cried, each in their own little world of despair, and she could feel them all. She felt the women weep as they lost their husbands and sons in the war. She felt the men cry in pain, calling to their wives, knowing they would never see them again. She felt the horses falling under their riders, and the mice and small creatures being trampled into the ground under the heavy steps of their hooves. She heard the funeral chimes, the laments of the bereaved and the laughter of those sowing death. She saw the headsman’s ax fall on the father’s head and heard the son cry. Traitors walked free and spoke the laws while those with honor fell in the dust.

And their souls shattered, too weak to follow the path to Aetherius. They hurt. They withered. They ceased to exist.

She wept with them, feeling her own soul being torn to pieces. She wanted to live. To survive. She had to live!

There was hope yet, she knew. She had to rise. She would put an end to the suffering. She would break the eternal loop. A voice filled her head. Terrifying, paralyzing, deafening thrum that was not of this world.

“Thou shan’t save these souls. It is what they have brought upon themselves. Thou art powerless, mortal. Thou shall face death and succumb to it. And people will weep and loathe. So the stars have foretold.”

Then, the pain swallowed her a-whole and she let out a deafening cry.

With barely any sleep to ease his weariness, the new day welcomed Singird Larkwing with the usual Winterhold murk. He awoke moments before sunrise, throwing a drowsy glance out from his window. There was the sea, covered by a field of gently bobbing floes, barely discernible from the distance. Somewhere down, hidden behind the sill, was the still unrepaiored cliff. He heard voices from outside his room, assuming that Colette Marence had called alarm and prodded half of the Collegium to venture out for inspection and mending. Despite the dark circles forming under his
eyes, he found himself unable to fall back into his slumber. Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, he rose, examining his person.

Unsatisfied with the state of his robe, he changed it for a shinningly white tunic and a surcoat of deep blue color like the ocean depths, cleaning himself with a spell. The Nine knew he could use a hot bath, and nothing warmed more than a wood fire free of magic, but one could rarely afford such a luxury in Winterhold. With a sigh, he smoothed out the fabric of his new attire and made for the door.

By the time he left his room, the central corridor of the Hall of Countenance was deserted, half of the rooms belonging to the teachers opened. He strode down, peeking curiously into some of them, only to be disappointed by their unwelcoming emptiness. Upon reaching the ground floor, a sudden scream made him wince, eyes flicking to the door to Colette Marence’s room which was still shut. Brows knitted in alarm, he approached it and landed a knock.

There was no answer but a soft, almost inaudible sob. Recalling the last night, he assumed Yrith Ravencroft was still there. With a trace of worry nibbling on the back of his mind, he knocked again, louder than before.

“Miss Ravencroft?” he tried, but once again, no reply came from the inside.

He opened the door to find a trembling huddle of blankets and furs sitting on the bed. There was not an inch visible of the girl buried somewhere deep underneath them, and despite himself, Singird found the sight amusing.

Pondering what might have caused her to hide like this, he scanned the room. His eyes traced a table covered with neatly organized bundles of herbs and vials, standing just next to the bed. On the window sill lay a tray with half a loaf of bread and some Eidar Cheese, clearly untouched. Some feast, Singird thought, commending Master Marence for sparing her patients no expense in a land with no crops to be harvested or fed to cattle.

There was a basin of clear water and a folded pile that revealed a bedroll upon closer inspection. The shelves on the walls held mostly practical objects like an hourglass, mortars and pestles of various sizes, flasks and retorts, clean and protected with the slightest hint of magic to prevent them from scratching or staining. The only closet in the room was tightly shut. There were no signs of anything suspicious and Miss Ravencroft clearly hadn’t left the bed either.

He approached her, hand landing lightly on the rim of her blanket. “Take off those furs, Miss Ravencroft. There is nothing to fear here.”

Contrary to his words, she pulled the blanket closer to her body. It emphasized the shape of her person, back bent and arms wrapped around her knee while her other leg lay slightly twisted on the bed. Singird stared at it, taking guesses whether she was in pain.

“Are you going to stay like this for the rest of your life?” It took him all sorts of effort to adopt a tone that would not sound too unkind, but the only response he received was an uneasy waggle. With a bit of impatience, he tugged at the blanket. “Or are you assuming I am the same sort as your classmates, scoffing at every little thing and taking delight in watching others squirm with uncertainty?” He was painfully aware of how unprofessional he was being, badmouthing the students in front of her, but his words finally seemed to fall on fertile ground.

An eye peeked out from underneath the blankets, glistening with tears. She watched him with utter caution, slowly removing the outer layer of her covers. She was shy and hesitant, struggling to contain her sobs, and he could see pain mingle with shame in her face. This was not the cheeky
mischief he had met on his first day as a Winterhold teacher. The sight sent a very unpleasant tingle down from the nape of his neck.

He sat down beside her, watching her in silence. She curled up in the corner of the bed, trying to hide her tears with the back of her hand and stay as far away from him as she could. He tried to move closer, but she would cower at his slightest movement.

“There is nothing to fear,” he repeated to her quietly, passing her the tray. “Care for a bite?”

She shook her head in denial, but he put it next to her nonetheless.

“Taking care of your health is one of your responsibilities as a student and a living person, Miss Ravencroft.” He gave her a piercing look, fighting the softness that tried to creep into his voice. Her brows furrowed, lips twisting in a gnarling scowl, but still, she did not utter a word.

This side of her irked him. The silence that came whenever something was amiss. She would never share, never trust. Convincing Miss Ervine to trust him would be easier than this. He sighed.

“Are you in pain?”

Hesitation. She seemed to genuinely ponder the answer and Singird frowned at that. One does not usually need to contemplate on whether they hurt or not. She slowly shook her head, but he spotted a hidden sign behind the gesture. She was not true to him.

They spent a while in silence. He waited, watching her as her breath steadied itself. Gradually, the fear receded from Yrith’s face, replaced by a wariness of sorts. Her eyes roved around the room, scanning, examining. They paused at the bedroll, then rested on the window.

“Master Marence went to mend the cliff,” Singird explained. She gave a slow nod. “I need to discuss the rest of your detention with you, but that will wait until you are well enough to do so. We can’t possibly let you wander outside now that the local magic has been disrupted.”

There was an unspoken question in her eyes. He waited, but she kept her tacit approach, the only answer being her body language.

“Questions should be asked, not kept and taken to the grave with you,” he said, reproach in his voice. She bit her lip, then took a breath.

“If…” she finally spoke and her voice was quiet, as though she was afraid of being overheard by uninvited guests. “If they’re mending it, then why can’t I go out?”

Singird frowned. Out of all the questions she could have picked, she had to ask the one he could not give a clear answer to. She had always been truthful to him, yet he could not return the favor. Guilt was gnawing at him, forcing him to reason with himself. It was in her best interest, after all. But that wasn’t entirely true and he knew it.

“One would assume you’ll be relieved at the prospect of not going out anymore,” he said in a light, conversational tone. He watched as she averted her eyes and pursed her lips.

“I do, but… that still doesn’t answer my question.”

Singird cursed her obstinacy. She would not be satisfied until she got what she wanted.

“We can’t be certain what caused it. We shall have to investigate.” It was close to the truth as it could be. He waited for her reaction, but a simple nod was all she gave. He felt relief at that, and the fact
that she did not seem shaken by the events of the previous night.

“Say, Miss Ravencroft,” he said, deciding to risk a few questions, “did you notice anything out of the ordinary before the cliff fell?”

“Out of the ordinary?”

“Yes. Something that could have caused the cliff to tear off. Weather conditions, unexpected occurrences, people… or just anything that caught your attention.”

She frowned in concentration as she tried to recall everything that had transpired, then slowly shook her head. “Nothing but a guard passing by.”

“A guard?” Winterhold was a small settlement where rumors spread fast. If a guard had been there, then, surely, he and Miss Marence would have been stopped by the one they had met on their way, would they not? “And they did not help?”

“Hmm… they were up by the cliff. I don’t think they even knew we were there.”

“Then how do you know it was a guard?”

She shrugged. “Even I can recognize the sound of a walking mountain clad in steel when I hear its footsteps.”

That hardly sounded like someone prone to magic, Singird admitted to himself, but what did he know? There was no rule stating that a mage cannot walk from head to toe in steel or possess skill in both magic and the art of sword. Then again, if it had been the same person who had killed her parents, they commanded illusion spells so powerful they could have easily tricked young Miss Ravencroft into thinking she heard a guard. He let out a deep breath. He could imagine easier tasks than to work against such a potent illusionist.

“I’m sorry I can’t be of help,” she murmured.

He looked up, snapping out of his thoughts. She was eyeing him with keen interest, a little tense in the shoulders, but no more afraid. She would be fine. He stood up and smoothed out the bed sheets where he had been sitting.

“I will be going,” he said, gesturing to the door. There was something in her eyes that made him hesitate. A plea, perhaps, a tinge of that fear he thought to have disappeared. She did not want to be left alone. “Miss Marence will be here in no time,” he assured her, words coming out strangely distorted as he could not decide on his tone.

“I want to get some books…” she began, but he silenced her immediately with a raised finger.

“Out of question. Rest, Miss Ravencroft. And eat,” he added sternly, forcing the tray into her hands. “I will come to check up on you regularly to make sure you are taking proper care of yourself. Though I do hope this moment of leisure doesn’t make you forget our agreement.”

The raven girl gave him a semi-defiant look, but behind that mask he could see amusement. So she was well enough to be entertained at his expense. He opened his mouth to scold her, then closed it with a sigh. Just this once, he would let her off the hook.

“Could I ask you to bring me some books from the library then?” she asked and he knit his brows, instantly regretting his decision.
“Are you in a place to ask a teacher for errands?”

“I just thought I would do some studying, since…”

He gave her a withering look. “Rest.”

The order came firm and he said no more. He left her to herself and let the door snap shut behind him. The library was his next destination. Urag gro-Shub would surely be awake by now, providing him with a chance to do a little observation. As he strode across the corridor and through the courtyard, he devised a plan in his head. After all, the library was not a bad place to spend an entire day. And perhaps he could pick up some ‘light’ reading for the young Miss Ravencroft to occupy herself with while he’s at it. Just in case.

He froze as he reached the foyer to the Hall of the Elements, hand on the scuffed brass handle of the entrance to the Arcanaeum. Just what have I become? he thought to himself with an internal scoff. A nanny?

The next two days passed in a flash. Yrith Ravencroft had been moved back to her own room in the Hall of Attainment, but Singird always found the time to go see her. It proved a difficult task, as her room was almost never empty. Curiously enough, quite a few people found interest in the Breton girl.

Aside from Colette Marence who always came to change her bandages and bring her a health potion along with a bowl of meat broth, and Lady Faralda who checked up on her foster child regularly, there was also Cain Aldaryn who supposedly brought Miss Ravencroft notes from the classes and liked to stay longer than necessary. Qassir Tahlrah too visited her frequently and with no apparent reason. Singird felt slight contempt toward the boys, grumbling inwardly that children these days had no decency.

On the fourth day, he was readying himself for another visit. Lurking in the Conjuration section of the Arcanaeum, he sifted through the tomes to find appropriate literature for her. The way she devoured books like a dragon does a man brought smile to his lips. During his visits, they mostly talked about Conjuration. Her approach was unusual. She claimed to be able to extend her mind into Oblivion, which, as far as he was concerned, was impossible for any ordinary mortal. But if, by any chance, it was true, she could indeed be a great asset to him. Soul studies. Things that he and Miss Marence could not do… what if Yrith Ravencroft could?

His finger slid over the back of a book. The Conjuration section did not have much to offer to Miss Ravencroft anymore. There was only so much books could give her. He scanned the shelves of neatly arranged volumes, then his eyes drifted elsewhere. An idea formed in his mind.

He passed the orc librarian, grumbling something under his breath as he sorted through the books. His usual zeal was replaced with agitation of sorts. Singird was slowly coming to terms with the fact that he would not be able to look into his secret collection anytime soon. Perhaps Miss Marence had been discovered. For the past few days, Urag gro-Shub had seemed distracted and irritable, and worst of all, he had been sitting on his books like a hen on its eggs. And so Singird focused on providing Miss Ravencroft with as much knowledge and information he could, considering it a future investment.

Singird cut through the Illusion section, then stopped in the small corner dedicated to Mysticism and soul studies. The book he pulled out was old as time, its original color indiscernible on the threadbare cover. Only its spine bore a fading inscription. *Soul Integrity: Shaping the Reality.* This would do. And if Yrith Ravencroft were to suddenly miraculously improve in Alteration, then Master Tolfdir
owed him a tankard of Nord Mead.

He turned to the librarian, just in time to watch him place the last book and return to his desk. The orc’s eyes were shooting daggers.

“Just what do you need, lemon face?” he flared up, waving a paper in Singird’s direction. The Nord sighed.

“I’m taking this to Miss Ravencroft. And thank you,” he hinted a curtsy. Pity that Orsimer did not flush, for it would have made this whole display that much entertaining. Urag scowled and bared his teeth.

“No, you are not. She is not getting books from me anymore.”

“Oh? Since when are you two arch-enemies?”

“None of your business, the door’s over there,” the orc retorted. “And while you’re at it, take this to her.” Inserting the paper in an envelope, he sealed it and handed it to Singird. He took it, inspecting it curiously, but the wrapping paper was thick and far from transparent. The orc kept his hand extended. “The book, please.”

“In that case, I am borrowing it,” Singird said with a casual shrug.

“You are not allowed.”

“You wish to stand in the way of my research and the College’s progress?” Singird hinted a smile, barely keeping himself from fully expressing it as the orc grew absolutely furious.

“Go add that to the Anuad, Larkwing. Who are you trying to fool here?”

“Very well. Then I am returning this.” He held out the envelope. Urag hissed like a sabre cat, then threw up his arms and turned away, waving Singird off.

“Whatsoever. Go eat some troll dung,” he growled.

“My pleasure and good day to you too,” Singird sang, leaving the orc to his rage. Even at the bottom of the stairs, he could still hear him muttering under his breath.

Singird had never been great with Alteration magic, but curiosity had gotten the better of him. He twirled the envelope in his fingers, pondering what in Oblivion could have caused that orc to act so furious at the expense of young Miss Ravencroft who he obviously adored. He carefully slid a thread of magic under the seal, separating it from the wrapping. The paper inside slid out into the palm of his hand and he grinned inwardly with satisfaction. Unfolding it, he gazed at the single line that was written there.

You’ll return the book or else. Urag

The script was jagged and sloping, not the usual tidy Urag gro-Shub writing he was used to. That must have been some book.

He entered Miss Ravencroft’s room to find her shaken yet again. More often than not he found her cowering in some unspoken fear, but she obstinately refused to explain herself. Instead, she changed topic or let him keep up the conversation, forcing herself to regain her composure while he did. She had trouble sleeping. He could see it in the weary look in her eyes, her stooped shoulders and shaky
movements. But every time he asked, she averted her face as though she was feeling ashamed. And Singird grew concerned.

She was gripping a book, staring blankly at the pages. Upon his arrival, she raised her head but turned away quickly, gentle flush spreading across her cheeks. If it was like this, he would just have to get straight to the point and leave her with no choice but to confess.

“This is the third time,” he said with an overdramatic sigh. “Miss Ravencroft, if you are unwell, you are allowed to say so. I’m sure Master Marence would find a suitable remedy.”

She shook her head, putting her book aside and wrapping her arms around a pillow. Again, she let the silence linger heavily in the air. He took the chair just beside her bed and seated himself, lowering his head to her level.

“Whatsoever you are dealing with, I want you to tell me,” he insisted, resolute hardness coating his words. She was forced to look at him, eyes red rimmed and tired.

“It is nothing,” she mumbled and he could sense her uneasiness.

“This nothing keeps you sleepless and weary. Do you not trust me?”

She kept gazing at him, silent doubt in her eyes.

“I will not laugh,” he assured her. “I will not scorn you. If it is truly nothing, as you claim, then I shall admit to that and drop the subject.”

She bit on her lip. Her eyes drifted somewhere behind him and he knew she was simply avoiding looking him in the face. She took a breath. Then another one. No words would escape her lips, just like back when he was forcing her to speak of her parents. Was it that serious?

That time, he had bribed her with tea. But there was no tea in Miss Ravencroft’s room. There was nothing that would give her comfort. Even the chair he was occupying was old and creaky and had no cushion to make him feel at ease. The walls were barren, the desk could only hold a portion of her study materials and the floor was cold and grey with no furs to provide warmth and the gentle feeling of coziness. He vaguely recalled his own room had looked like this in his student years, giving him a reason to spend most of his time in the Arcanaeum.

Singird groped about his pocket, withdrawing a crumbled rockie wrapped in a piece of paper. That was all he had.

“Here,” he offered, extending his hand. “Perhaps a taste of home would make you feel better.”

She took it and turned it in her trembling fingers for examination. Then she nibbled at it and a hint of smile played on her lips. She gave a silent approving nod.

“So?” he suggested.

“It’s just… these dreams I have,” she uttered softly, fingers digging into her pillow.

“Dreams?”

Hesitantly at first, she told him of her nightmares. As she went on, her voice grew steady and more pleading than unsure. She spoke of all the souls she could feel, of the pain piercing her body. She told him of all the emotions that infested her mind and threatened to swallow her every time she dreamt. Feelings poured out of her and Singird felt overwhelmed. By the time she finished, she was
clenching her fists and tears rolled down in glistening streaks over her face. Singird clutched the edges of his chair.

“Just to clarify,” he said, “the pain you felt was… real? Did your body ache?”

She nodded, tasting the salt on her lips.

“Have you told anyone?”

“N-no! They… already think I’m a freak. I don’t want to…”

“It could be an illusion spell. We should have you examined.”

“I don’t feel like I’m under an illusion.”

“Well, that would be a poor spell if you could recognize it.” He gave her a smirk and her cheeks turned red like a ripe apple. “Many a life shattered under the stubbornness of their own masters. Do not let a fickle emotion threaten your life, Miss Ravencroft.”

She paused and fidgeted in her bed. “Why do you care anyway?”

He knew she was feeling cornered. At the first sign of urgency from his part, she would snap and bite back. He sighed. “Have I ever given you a reason to doubt me?”

“You have not, but that doesn’t explain why you do it.”

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. He had no right to question her trust. He had not earned it. His interest was based on his own selfish reasons, and he would be lying to himself if he thought he cared for her. And she was no fool. She saw it in his eyes.

“We are digressing,” he tried.

“Are we?” she snarled. “If I perished right now, not a single tear would be shed. Or can you prove otherwise?”

He stared at her, incredulous of her words. Not even he would go that far. Her words were offending him and, curiously enough, hurting as well.

“Are you listening to yourself?” he breathed, hands clenching into fists. His head was filled with rage. He would have pinned her to the wall, had his dignity allowed it. “Will you tell that to Gro-Shub’s face? Will you say that in front of Lady Faralda? Old Toddvar downtown was singing praises of you! Even that Dunmer boy seems to care. How dare you scoff at the affection they have for you!”

“I… I…”

“Is this what you’ve been doing here all the time? Pondering whether your life is in vain?”

“I was just… I thought… that no one would love a good-for-nothing like me.” Her voice was almost inaudible, as though she feared her own words. And maybe she did.

“Indeed,” Singird replied coolly, “no one would love a good-for-nothing like you.”

She stared at him, forgetting her breath, and he could see a fresh supply of tears welling in her eyes. The sight sent a sting of guilt Singird’s way, but he masked it with a somewhat gentle smile.
“But you do you and it is solely up to you what you become. Those people have a reason to think you are not the good-for-nothing you believe yourself to be.”

She clutched her pillow, gaze drifting beyond her window. There was nothing there but the usual snowy greyness. “How can you say that to someone who killed her parents?”

Yet again, she was forcing out a truth he could not give. He would not be putting her in danger. Not any more than she already was. It was a poor excuse crafted just to soothe his conscience, but true nonetheless.

“Because,” he said, the ice in his tone melting entirely, “I saw your eyes when you spoke of that day, and they were not the eyes of a murderer.”

Instead of receding, the tears now flew in rivers, falling in glistening drops from her chin. She cried a lot, this one, and he was not good with tears at all. He waited, watching her in silence. They were staining her robe and the blanket she was creasing in her fists, and he felt the urge to wipe them off just so they would stop. He stifled it, letting them flow. She hinted a smile through the pouring streaks, as though a great burden had just been taken off her shoulders. He made an attempt to return it.

“Reconsidering now?” he asked, handing her a handkerchief he withdrew from the depths of his robe. She took it shakily, but let it rest in her hand without using it. He frowned in disapproval, but let her have her way. A nod was the only answer she gave.

“By the way, Urag gro-Shub sends you a message. He seemed to be quite angry with you, so perhaps you could start by mending that.”

Her eyes widened as she unfolded the note. She clutched it, fingers tearing into the paper like hungry talons.

“Thank you,” she murmured unconvincingly. He quirked his brows, but did not ask the uncomfortable question. Instead, his next words surprised even himself.

“Say, Miss Ravencroft… how do you steal a book from someone like Urag gro-Shub?”

She raised her head, searching for mockery in his face. Tears stopped falling and the trickles dried out on her cheeks. She semi-chuckled, flushing with embarrassment.

“Well… I’ve never really thought about it but… I’d say it’s easy to steal from someone who trusts you…” she trailed off, averting her gaze. Singird let out a snort.

“I suppose. Larceny and honor don’t go together, eh?”

“You… don’t sound angry at me.”

“Because that is between you and gro-Shub.”

“So… why are you interested?” She was reading his face, he was certain of it. She knew he had not asked just so he could scold her. Interest sparked in her eyes, and despite himself, Singird found that quite amusing.

“Because he has something I need and pretends he doesn’t.”

She laughed in earnest. “That does sound like Urag.”
“Well, unlike you, my options are limited,” Singird said, still not believing his own words. But somehow, they had a miraculous effect on Miss Ravencroft and he welcomed it.

“Do you want me to help?”

“Absolutely not. You are in enough trouble already.” And how could he ever tell her that he was searching for clues on her parents? “I need something from his secret collection, and who knows what would happen if he caught you again.”

“Secret collection? Which one?”

Singird’s lips quirked up at the question. Young Yrith had no idea what she had just offered.

“The one containing books with the stamp of the Association of Wizards and Alchemists,” he said, eyes fixed on her in anticipation of her reaction. She froze and sized him up, and he could almost feel the questions exploding in her head. But she was not sad as he expected her to be. Only curiosity reflected in those silver eyes, and he felt a touch of relief at that.

“The AWA?” she asked.

“You know them?” Another sting of guilt followed the lie. Singird forced himself to stifle it.

“My parents worked for them.”

“They did?”

She nodded, smiling with a touch of pride. “They were spellbrewers.”

“Spellbrewers? And that is…?”

“Hmm, well… they…” even as she was deep in thought, her smile widened into a brightness he had not seen on her before, “they weaved magic into things. They could create books that would swallow your entire person, or shoes that would let you get from Daggerfall to the southeast of Black Marsh in one day. They could draw magicka from thin air and brew it into a potion at will.”

Singird did not even try to contain himself as his eyes widened in astonishment. What she had just described was outright impossible. Children often like to exaggerate. This must have been the case.

“You must have quite admired them, didn’t you?”

She pursed her lips and threw him a piercing look, a sulking child act at her best. “You are mocking me!”

“No. If I was mocking you, even your hair would catch on fire.”

“And here I thought…” she trailed off, sealing her lips, eyes pinning the floor.

“Yes?”

“Nothing.”

“As you wish, Miss Ravencroft,” he said with a soft smile. “I shall be going, but before that, take this.” He handed her the book he had taken from the library. She took it and examined it, then looked up to him with a raised brow.

“Soul Integrity? That’s not… a Conjuration book, is it?”
“No, but it should help you with your studies.” How easy it had become to lie to her. It had taken him four visits to master the craft. And she was unsuspecting, grateful for every single book he had brought her and every little bit of support she received. He felt a sudden urge to leave the room as soon as possible. She brightened with thanks and he felt a stab in his chest.

“I’ll have it read by tomorrow then,” she said and with utmost care placed the book on top of the small column raised on her desk. Singird nodded, rising to his feet.

“Until tomorrow then. Rest well. I will be informing the teachers of your nightmares, so do expect a visit.”

With that, he left, letting out a long, weary exhale as the door snapped shut behind him. For a short while, he let himself just breathe to regain his composure. The Hall of Attainment was empty, its occupants out for a class, and he was grateful for it. He turned to the door and froze. Lady Faralda was standing there, deep frown on her face and a hand on her hip. He stared at her, lowering his head in a greeting, but she did not return it.

“You have certainly been spending quite a lot of time with my foster child,” she commented, voice cold as ice.

“Perhaps,” he gave a cautious reply.

“A word, if you please, Master Larkwing. In my room.” He studied her face but could not read anything of what was in there. Lady Faralda was as good at concealing her thoughts as any high elf. Measuring up to him in height, with stern look in her eyes and features as sharp as though they had been carved with a chisel, she commanded respect like no other member of the Collegium. Fortunately, she and Miss Ervine were on good enough terms to not blast the place into the air when a dispute arose between them. Not even Singird dared oppose her, and so he simply nodded and followed her in silence into the Hall of Countenance. She led him into her room, closing the door behind her as soon as they entered.

“What is this all about?” she demanded, turning to him without offering him a seat. Her voice was calm and velvety as always, with no apparent tension, and that alone unnerving.

“Whatever you might be talking about?” Despite himself, he was decided not to give anything for free.

“Oh please, Master Larkwing. Yrith has been hurt carrying out the detention you gave her. I remember you spouting threats about expelling her just as you arrived. And you are the only teacher who keeps visiting her every single day. Auri-El help you if you lay a finger on her.”

Singird clenched his fists, look turning stone-hard. If this was a contest of wills, so be it. “Then why don’t you ask her what we do?”

There was just a momentary hesitation before Lady Faralda spoke, her voice a tone colder than before. “Because I want to ask the initiator.”

“Even if you will not get the answer you seek?”

“Oh I will, I assure you.” Her fists mirrored his own. Realization dawned upon him and he could not deny himself a triumphant smile.

“You will not ask her,” he said as he leaned against her own cabinet, “because she would not talk to you.”
“You will not dare...”

“Oh I will dare. Tell me, Lady Faralda, how much do you even know about your foster child?”

“Enough to be willing to feed her, and that is all you need to know. I, on the other hand, have asked a question to which I still don’t have an answer.”

Singird sighed, discarding the smirk that he had not even realized he wore. “Lady Faralda, please, for once, take off that mask of ice and stone and talk to her with an open mind. She will give you the answer.”

“Are you ridiculing me?”

Searing, red anger, churning and fighting its way out. And he would let it. He glared at her, face twisted in fury. “You are ridiculing yourself! For all that pride you have, you do not even realize the danger she’s in! You are blind to her reasons and to whatever led to her acting the way she does!”

“Indeed. While you know everything, don’t you, Master Larkwing? The young Nordic prodigy cannot be wrong.” In spite of her words, Lady Faralda was unsure on her feet and her eyes wandered around the room, searching for nonexistent support. Singird drew in a deep breath.

“For the Nine’s sake, you two are such a hopeless case.” She opened her mouth to retort, but he would not let her. “She said to me that no one would care if she died. And the fool of me told her off for discarding you so easily! I’m starting to wonder what came over me.”

There was silence. Everything in the room was still and Singird could swear that she had ceased breathing. Her mask was shattered. Faralda gaped at him, motionless as though a blizzard made her freeze in place.

“She said what?” she asked at last.

“You heard me.”

She gestured toward her chair. “Sit down, please.”

Singird sized her up, pondering whether it meant she was willing to listen, or just that it would be a long discussion. Reluctantly, he seated himself, watching as she sat on the bed across the room.

“What else has she told you?” she asked, amber gaze on his face. He shook his head.

“That I will not share. Whatever she told me, she can tell you as well. But I will tell you what she does not know and I do.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Miss Ravencroft is in danger. Someone is aiming for her life.”

She let out a snort. “How entertaining. Please, tell me something new. And just for the record, I thought you were the one. What proof do you have of it?”

“Proof? It’s...” Singird paused, unsure how to continue. He had promised he would not reveal her secret. Miss Ravencroft had the right to tell Lady Faralda herself. To deny her that chance would be equal to a stab in the back. He sighed. “Her parents were killed,” he said at last. “I can’t tell you how I know. I made a promise to her not to reveal what she’d told me and I intend to keep it. But I know. She was supposed to be made the culprit.
“After the first night of her detention, a passerby guard told me she had been attacked by an ice wraith and she confirmed it. Those creatures are no fools, they know better than to approach human settlements. It had strayed far from its territory… or it had been planted there intentionally. And a few days ago, a cliff broke off and fell. I think Miss Marence and Master Neloren are already investigating this, but the only thing we are certain of is that the magic protecting the cliff had been breached. I hardly think it a coincidence that Miss Ravencroft was the one to take the blow. Would that be enough of a proof to you?”

There was a moment of silence when Lady Faralda searched his face for any kind of trickery. Then, she gave a slow nod. “You sound true and I shall believe you. But that brings a question. Are you investigating?”

“I am indeed.”

“And how far have you gotten?”

Singird let out a bitter laugh. “Straight to the point, huh? Close to nowhere. I assumed the best way would be to search for information about her parents. But she is sensitive about it and I can’t even be certain she knows what I am looking for.”

Lady Faralda rose and opened the door to look around. She cast a few spells and Singird could register a Detect Life, Detect Death and a few other detection spells he did not recognize. She then closed the door shut and sealed it with magic, casting shields and various protection spells ensuring their privacy. Then, she turned to Singird with a firm resolution in her eyes.

“One can never be careful enough,” she said. “I do hope I am not making a mistake by trusting you, but I must admit you have gotten much further than I have over the past six months, and with no initial information too. I will share what I can.” She sank back to her seat, looking worn out and much older than moments before. “Tell me, Master Larkwing. Have you ever heard of the Association of Wizards and Alchemists?”

“That name seems to come up in conversations a lot lately,” he nodded.

“Truly? Who else knows of them?”

“Miss Marence and, from what I can assume, Urag gro-Shub.”

“Miss Marence, hm? Then let us hope we are safe.” Or so she said, but Singird was quite certain she was going to seek out the Restoration Master and interrogate her. “Do you know what the AWA stands for?”

“Unfortunately not.”

“They are a secret organization that covers itself up with a not so secret identity. In truth, they have many identities. The AWA itself forks off to all the provinces in Tamriel under the guise of a simple guild of mages and alchemists that does nothing but provide simple services for those who pay for them. But there are departments that are much more than that. The AWA seems to rise and fall every now and then and that’s why no one pays much attention to their existence, but these fluctuations are strictly planned. There are, however, branches that have lasted for millennia and no one had ever even attempted to connect them to the AWA, such as the College of Whispers or the Psijic Order.”

Singird nearly fell off his chair, eyes widening in disbelief. “I beg your pardon?”

“Indeed, I found the information just as shocking as you do. There is, however, a connection. Do you know what Yrith’s parents did for living?”
“Spellbrewers, whatever that might mean. I have just been told.”

“Correct. Spellbrewing is… to put it simply, the art of manipulating the world around you directly with your magicka. It is a dangerous craft and you can rarely find anyone who is capable of performing even the basics. You see, the magic that holds the cliffs around the College is simple. We create an invisible shield and mechanically bind the matter in place. But hand it to Yrith’s parents and they will change its structure. The matter will be imbued with magic from the inside. It will be, if I use a ridiculous simplification, alive.”

“But that is… impossible.”

“It is not, but a single spell costs a tremendous amount of energy. There are people who know how to get around it to some extent. The Ravencrofts did too.”

“Which is why they had enemies,” Singird concluded, but the elf shook her head.

“No. They had enemies because they sought them.”

“What do you mean?”

“I wish I could tell you more, but I cannot. I served as the AWA’s contact point, but that does not mean they let me in when it came to their secrets. The AWA is immensely interested in places holding large amounts of magic, and the College is one of them. But, unlike their other branches, the core institution is strictly political. Whenever a political conflict arises, they send their agents to investigate. There is something, or, possibly, someone they seek, but that is all I know. I am sworn to cooperate in their interest for a financial compensation – which, by the way, is what keeps Yrith fed and taken care of. The Ravencrofts were such agents. They came in search of something, but never shared more than they had to. And I believe that something is what got them in the end.”

“So you have no clue whatsoever?”

“I wouldn’t say that. We know it is something highly magical and powerful. We also know that it has to do with places of magic and the AWA is after it. It would probably help if I could enter the Ravencrofts’ old house, but it is protected with magic. I think the only one who can enter it is Yrith herself and anyone she allows to.”

“Then our objective is clear.”

Faralda shook her head. “No, Master Larkwing. That will come when we run out of options, but do not drag her into it. I shudder to think she can’t even protect herself from normal magic, let alone that… thing.”

To that, Singird had to laugh. Faralda shot him an incredulous look, but he only smiled. “Lady Faralda, I can assure you that Miss Ravencroft is fully capable of protecting herself.”

“Do not delude yourself now. She is unable to cast a proper flame spell. How can she protect herself from a real threat?”

“That is what you say. Care to bet on it?”

“I do not bet,” she replied coolly, “and I would certainly not be so foolish to bet on my daughter’s incompetence. But you make me curious.”

“Lady Faralda, you have not put a single drop of faith in your foster child. Give her a chance and she will shine.”
“Skill does not depend on faith, Master Larkwing.”

“There are cases in which it does.”

She half sighed, half laughed. “Human wisdom eludes me,” she said. “But you say so, then I shall give it a try. Just this once.”

“And I shall sanctify it,” he quipped. Lady Faralda shot him a look, one brow arched in disbelief.

“Master Larkwing, I think you’re in no position to be saying that.”

He chuckled, withdrawing a septim. “Care to bet on it?”

A corner of her mouth twitched. A sight Singird thought he would never see. “I do not bet.”

Chapter End Notes

I am giving up on trying to stick to the original game setting. I mean, I still try to honor the lore and stuff, but as far as buildings and such go, I just can’t. First off, the College rooms are different from the inside than they appear from the outside. Secondly, there are things without which the structures in Skyrim simply cannot exist. Like it or not, even the mages have to eat and relieve themselves from time to time. They also have to get their food somewhere – and no, I don’t think Skyrim magic supports pulling food out of thin air. I did not mean this when I spoke about “Harry Potter touch”. :) If they do research, they need appropriate space and equipment for it. And so on and so forth.

(Could go for ages about various places. My favorite is the Honningbrew Meadery which is not only entirely different on the outside than it is from within, but it’s also constructed in a way that would mean certain death for its inhabitants lest a fire broke out or a rogue got in. Just… priceless.)

So if there is a place that doesn’t quite fit what you see in-game (like windows into the College courtyard ;)), don’t mind it. Yes, I know. It is all intentional.

So, about this chapter… it refused to write itself so stubbornly I was thinking that this was the end of me. I had to include it as it contains a lot of important information, but it was just so difficult to put together. I have 20 pages of scrapped text from this one. That’s about 12k words. And I am so, so sorry for the delay.

But at least the clues are there so… do your best, guys! There are two essential clues about the culprit and I’m looking forward to your guesses. By the way, the culprit has already been introduced, though there are more sides to them and piecing all together won’t be easy. I wish you guys good luck!

On another note… I GOT A NEW JOB! Starting next Wednesday, I’ll be an analyst in an IT company. Finally! That said, I do apologize if I can’t keep up my schedule and more delays occur. I think it will take some time getting used to, unfortunately. On the up side, it means my life is going to become more stable and that in turn might turn in the story’s favor.
As always, thanks to Tildemancer for proofreading my chapter.

Take care!

Mirwen
Yrith yawned as she blew out the candles, rubbing her weary eyes. The darkness outside gave way to an auroral dawn, all too soon for her liking. Her body was stiff from lying down on her belly all night with her head buried in a book. She felt slightly annoyed. Contrary to her expectations, she had a lot less time to read when she was down with an injury. People just wouldn’t leave her alone. Whether it was Lady Faralda, Colette Marence, Cain, Qassir or, for some unfathomable reason, Singird Larkwing, she almost always had company. After a few days, she decided to keep her reading to the night time. At least it would keep her from the nightmares.

This morning, she would finally start attending classes again. To her discontent, her first class would be Destruction which she was sure she would fail. Lady Faralda had no tolerance for disobedience, so skipping it was out of question. Conjuration, on the other hand, she was confident at. Sadly, she hadn’t had the time to demonstrate it to Master Larkwing, and the blasted teacher took every opportunity to remind her not to forget their “agreement”. Though she had to admit she appreciated his care and the fact that he brought her books every time he came to visit.

Lately, he had supplied her with books on soul studies. She had curiously read them all and rejoiced. Singird Larkwing wouldn’t have known, and she secretly wondered why he had decided to switch to them instead of Conjuration books, but these were a valuable addition to the Currents of Time she had stolen from Urag. They were less magic and more science, focused on inner energies of a person and how they could influence the outer world. Most of them only contained theories and passive knowledge of certain phenomena, but combined with the work of Septimus Signus, Yrith could see a clear pattern. The outer world was a reflection of the inner one, and with enough power and determination, it could be reshaped. The question was, how to put it to practice. So far, even the Currents of Time eluded the answer and she had a feeling there was some hidden reason behind it.

With utmost care, she closed the book and hid it under several layers of papers under her bed. She wondered to herself how she had managed to hide this mess from Singird Larkwing all this time, and it brought a smile to her lips. Perhaps he would have let her off the hook even if he’d know what she had stolen. But now she had to face an angry Urag and she was not ready to give the book away yet.

Inhaling deeply, she readied herself. Lady Faralda, strangely generous for the past few days, had given her a new set of robes and a pair of soft buckskin boots which she took a great deal of time to admire. They fit perfectly, and she danced around in them happily, reminiscing about her mother and her dancing lessons. Yrith had never been a good dancer, but the lessons had been one of the scarce occasions on which she was allowed to have her mother’s attention all to herself. Prior to each lesson, her mother had always given a lecture on Breton culture and how that particular dance had come to existence. There were traditional dances celebrating the growth of crops and those that were refined for balls and social events. Performers also had their own dances, but her mother had strictly refused to teach them to Yrith, claiming them to be “too savage for her good upbringing”.

Yrith smiled at the memory as she readied herself, preparing a satchel with papers and a quill. She knew she would not need them. Sadly, Lady Faralda never made them write anything and the whole lesson would be Yrith’s failed attempts at producing a decent flame. But organizing her study aids helped her mentally prepare for the first day she would spend outside her room. At last, she gave her hair a quick combing and took a deep breath, stepping out into the corridor.

Early as it was, the common areas of the College were deserted. She stopped by the washroom and the dining room to pick up her breakfast before anyone else could hinder her. Her diet returned to the usual fish meals and dried fruits from southern holds of Skyrim. No bread and cheese or meat broth
anymore. At these times, Yrith thought of High Rock and its markets full of people shouting over one another, offering fruits and spices both local and exotic. Things could not have been more different in Winterhold.

The corridors and courtyard were deserted, the only person lurking around being the annoying gossip-loving Altmer called Nirya who was usually assigned the kitchen duty. Now she was temporarily replaced by Cain carrying out his detention. Yrith looked away when she passed her. The haughty elf despised her, just as she despised Lady Faralda, and Yrith soon discovered the feeling to be mutual. Nirya tended to use the word Arch-Mage in her every sentence, emphasizing how important she was to the College’s highest authority. The Breton girl doubted the Arch-Mage even knew of Nirya’s existence, considering she rarely even left her quarters. Most of the College considered their head a mystery, and for some reason, all the members of the Collegium shuddered the moment they had to go talk to the woman. Yrith herself had only seen a glimpse of her and never heard her utter a word. At times she pondered whether the Arch-Mage even paid attention to the College and its occupants.

Deep in thought, she entered the Hall of the Elements, only to find she was not the first. Leaning against one of the pilasters in the octagonal fountain room was Qassir, eyes scanning a paper which he promptly folded and hid in his sleeve upon her entrance. For a split moment, she could have sworn she saw a deep, pensive frown on his face, but he quickly replaced it with his usual mirth.

“As good as new, eh, urchin?” he said with that unsettling grin of his as he came to her. Yrith suppressed the urge to turn around and walk away and shot him a look.

“What do you want me to call you then?”

She shrugged. “Just Yrith.”

“Well then, just Yrith,” he quipped, tempting her to glare at him, “How are you on this fine day?”

She circled him, seating herself on the edge of the light fountain. The magic behind her tickled her neck and made her hair flutter about her person like a swarm of butterflies. It was a pleasant feeling, as though she could hear the College whisper to her.

“Same as the last night,” she muttered. Qassir had been her second most frequent visitor, after Singird Larkwing. Why he cared so much, she could not understand. He could have all the fame in the world. People loved him, but for some reason, he always found the time to talk to her, even if she gave him more than clear signs of her disinterest. He would always smile at her, always give hints she could not understand. She felt uneasy in his presence.

“And last night, you said the same about the one before. You’re not very prone to changes, are you?” The blue light flickered merrily in his eyes, giving him a somewhat ghostly appearance. He sat beside her, not waiting for her invitation. She did not respond. He pinched her cheek and she winced, this time letting her annoyance show. “Reporting a grumpy urchin with a clear lack of sleep!” he announced loudly, and she rolled her eyes.

“Qassir,” she groaned quietly, rubbing her temples, “just what do you want?”

He paused, and she listened to the silence, only defined by the humming behind her. There was an almost inaudible sigh before he spoke. “You’re not very fond of me, are you?”
She scowled. “I’m not very fond of people who don’t answer my questions.”

“Well then,” he said with a light, good-natured smirk on his face, “let’s say I just want a good friend? One that will stay true?”

“If that’s what you want, then why,” she raised her head and their eyes met, “do you talk to them?”

She did not need to specify. He frowned at her, this time not attempting to conceal it. “I will tell you a secret.” He leaned to her and she could feel his breath on her ear. “There are times when you simply need to get on everyone’s good side.”

“Right,” she hissed. “And that includes mine, doesn’t it?”

“Now now…”

They were interrupted by the sudden jumble of noises as the gate to the Hall of the Elements flew open with a long-drawn creak. The two of them shifted their gaze toward the entrance and saw most of their class approaching, chattering and laughing. Ha’risha, their new self-appointed leader, walked proudly at the front, whiskers twitching at something Aernil was telling her. When the group reached the fountain, they stopped, all gathering just one step behind Ha’risha. The bronze Khajiit put up a self-important sneer, scoffing in Yrith’s general direction.

“Well well, trying to snatch up some undeserved attention, Ravencroft?” she drawled and waited for her comrades to laugh. “If only Qassir had more than pity for you.”

Yrith rose to her feet, gritting her teeth. Qassir jumped to her side, but she pulled away, moving toward the crowd and straightening her back. Despite herself, she flashed Ha’risha her brightest smile.

“Please, don’t feel envious of me. All you need to do is skip some classes and be as bad as you can at everything you do. Success granted.”

The Khajiit bared her canines, preparing to retort.

“But then again,” Yrith continued just as she was about to speak, “there’s also the part where you have to play the poor victim of her bully classmates. Best of luck with that.”

The Redguard behind her let out an unconcealed chuckle and so did a few people on the other side. Ha’risha threw them a withering look over her shoulder, eyes flaring with rage. Without turning to them, she placed a quiet threat that carried through the hall like a paper glider.

“Whoever is on her side,” she pointed a hooked talon at Yrith, “step out and be warned.” She did not elaborate, but a few people behind her visibly shuddered. There was a moment of silence. Then, two pairs of footsteps separated from the group, one belonging to a fiery-haired Dunmer, the other to a stunningly beautiful high elf. Yrith stared as Leyna Travi joined her side with the grace of her own, her eyes like two beads of purest gold glistening in the fountain light. Ha’risha’s bronze fur bristled in outrage.

“I’m surprised the Dunmer even dared show his face amongst my friends,” she said. “But you, Leyna? What kind of machination is this? Tell me you jest.”

Leyna’s beautiful face hardened, an impenetrable mask with eyes of piercing frost. “You who damn your own people,” she said in that spine-chilling sharp whisper that carried through the whole room, “you who turned your back to the Moons and ridiculed the mother that gave you life just to live with a wealthy father who was granted a pretense of power by our people, you do not speak to me of
jests. Go ahead. Throw away your name and shave your fur. You are a disgrace to your own kind.”

“How dare you…!”

“Ha’risha,” Aernil whispered, moving his hand to stop the Khajiit from launching. “Leave her. She is hardly worth your concern.”

The look Leyna gave to Aernil sent shivers down Yrith’s spine. There was more than distaste in the way the two of them regarded each other. They did not exchange one word, but a message was clearly delivered. Now, more than ever, Yrith was glad she was not part of struggles for wealth and power.

“Suit yourself,” Ha’risha spat at Leyna, passing the elf with her head high up, followed by the rest of her group.

Yrith’s gaze shifted between Cain and Leyna who were now standing at her side, brows arched up in question. The Dunmer let out an amused snort.

“I must say, Leyna,” he said as he sized the Altmeri girl up, “that was quite a performance.” He lowered his head, hinting a curtsy.

“Oh I know,” Leyna shrugged nonchalantly, tossing her head as only she could.

Cain rolled his eyes and muttered something inarticulate, but beneath the disdain, there was a genuine smile. He gave a quiet snort, then turned to Yrith and his face shifted into a frown. “So… uh. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but… looks like we’re in the same boat now, so let’s pair up for the class. Outcasts like us should stick together.”

Yrith stared at him. That certainly did not sound like a compliment, but before she could give him a well-deserved caustic retort, Qassir stepped in, sliding himself between her and Cain.

“So sorry but the spot is already taken.” Yrith did not have to look at his face to know exactly what kind of smile he was wearing as he said this. Cain huffed in protest, fists clenched as though he was preparing for a brawl.

“Step aside, wise guy. You can pick whoever you want and they will follow you to the Deadlands. So leave the odd ones to themselves.”

“Exactly,” the Redguard countered with a soft, amused chuckle. “I can pick whoever I want.” He spread his legs in a semi-fighting stance, shielding Yrith from Cain’s view.

“Don’t pretend to care, sandman. You just want to look better compared to her.”

“And you certainly care when you just don’t want to look as bad.”

Yrith could not believe her ears. She glared at the two boys, hands on her hips and nostrils flared with rage. And once again, she was interrupted, this time by her newly found Altmeri ally who put a slender hand on her shoulder and gave her a placating smile. She then turned to the boys, smile transforming into a smirk.

“Pardon me, gentlemen,” she sang and made them instantly look her way, “but as you are clearly busy with more important things, I shall be escorting the lady from now on. Have a lovely day.” She lowered her head and lifted the lower part of her robe like a skirt, hinting a bow. Yrith arched her brows in question, but the elf simply grabbed her and dragged her away, leaving the confounded boys staring at them.
“You…” Yrith started, unsure how to react.

Far out of the boys’ earshot, Leyna let Yrith go, smoothing up the Breton girl’s sleeve. She let out a deep breath, leaning to the wall and gesturing for Yrith to follow her.

“I must have startled you,” she said, smiling, but her eyes did not reflect it. Yrith expected to see contempt in them but was surprised to only find something she assumed to be sadness. “Don’t worry. I am not playing with you. Though I will understand if you suspect me.”

“Right…”

“But at least I did not insult you like those two,” she tried.

Yrith knit her brows at that. Leyna Travi had insulted her many times before, and she pondered asking the elf whether she had suffered a memory loss.

“By the way,” the elf flicked her another smile, “welcome back.” She extended her hand. Yrith stared at it and hesitated. But then again, she thought to herself, she had nothing to lose. As long she avoided trusting her entirely. At last, she took the hand and clutched it.

“Thank you,” she said with a hint of uncertainty. “So, about pairing up…”

“That is what I’m here for,” Leyna nodded. “You wouldn’t want to team up with one of those blockheads, would you?”

Yrith laughed at that, seating herself on one of the window sills. “May I ask you a question?”

“You don’t have to ask to do that.” The blonde’s eyes were welcoming and Yrith flushed with embarrassment.

“Why the sudden change?”

Leyna bit her lip and sighed. “I guess I realized that night when Ha’risha and Aernil first cornered you that I do not find this whole atmosphere enjoyable. My father…” she paused and there was visible pain in her eyes. Yrith realized she had seen this look on her before. There was something gnawing at the Altmeri girl. Something grave enough to haunt her for weeks. “My father always said I mustn’t stray from the path of justice. I think he’d be sad if he saw what I’d become. I did you wrong and I shouldn’t have.”

Spoken like a true Altmer, Yrith snorted inwardly. The Altmer may admit a mistake. But they never apologize.

They did not have to wait for too long until the arrival of Lady Faralda. The teacher rushed into the room, her robes flapping around her. She scanned the class and Yrith knew then she was counting. Lady Faralda never had a list of students with her, never took a paper and a quill. She simply did not need to put down any notes to absorb and remember every little detail. When she finished, she gave a curt nod.

“Good morning, class,” she greeted. “And welcome back, Yrith.” Her voice softened a touch before returning to its stone hardness. “Today, we are going to practice lightning. All of you should have mastered fire and ice by now, but lightning is an entirely different category. It is harder to master and more versatile. While fire and ice can only affect the outer shell of your target, lightning can drain its soul energy. Combine fire and ice and you get lightning.

“Today’s pair work will be different from the usual. This time you will not fight each other. You will
work as a team instead. One of you will do the frost part while the other will heat the water created in
the process. The purpose of this exercise is to make you understand how this works. I believe you all
know the theory by now, so let’s move right on to the practical use. The coordination might be
difficult at first, but teamwork is an essential part of magical practice, so learn to master it. Now,
spread around the room, please. You will be firing at the walls, and none of you will direct a spell at
a classmate or you’re out before you can say troll. Start now.”

Yrith paled and sighed. “All of us should have mastered fire and ice by now… yeah, right. I… I’m
afraid I’ll drag you down.”

“Nonsense. Well, just between us, I’m not too good at Destruction either.” Leyna gave her an impish
look.

“I don’t think you’d be a competition,” Yrith smirked.

“Well then, let’s put it to a test. I will cast an incomplete ice spell. Well, water, to be precise. You
need to quickly heat it up so that I can cool it down again. When the freshly formed ice particle clash,
that’s when lightning will emerge. Think you can do that?”

“Well, but… quickly means I have to use a lot of power, no? I don’t have this kind of power. I can
barely light a candle.”

“Hmm, let’s just try, shall we?”

Leyna’s fingertips sparkled blue before casting an orb of water. It spun around as the elf tried to hold
it in place with her magicka. She nodded encouragingly at Yrith and waited. Yrith stretched out both
hands, producing a flame. It flickered weakly before fading out and the Breton could feel heat
spreading in her cheeks.

“I don’t think I can…”

“Don’t worry! Just…”

They both jumped in surprise when they heard Cain’s voice. The Dunmer was spitting in rage,
glaring at his Redguard partner who seemed to enjoy himself for some reason.

“We are supposed to be training! So would you just…”

“If you insist,” Qassir purred, his tone annoyingly calm. He cast a ball of water, but before Cain
could react and heat it, Qassir pulled away and struck the wall with a lightning of his own. Cain
bared his teeth as his hands clenched into fists.

“You…”

“That is enough,” Lady Faralda cut in, eyes narrowed into slits that Yrith was all too familiar with.
“Shouting about like babes in their cradle years. I have given you a task, have I not?”

Cain lowered his head obediently while Qassir gave a reserved nod.

“And I don’t see you fulfilling it. Be glad I am not Master Larkwing. Each of you would have a
month’s worth of detention by now. You will now split. Mister Tahlrah, you will join Yrith and help
her master her spells. Since I have seen your lightning, I presume you do not need any help with that.
Mister Aldaryn, you will team up with Miss Travi and train your lightning according to my
instructions. Do I make myself clear?”
“Crystal, Master Faralda,” Cain nodded quickly, and with apparent relief, he scuttled to Leyna’s side. The elf sighed, and so did Yrith as she shambled toward the smiling Qassir. Lady Faralda sized each of them up before leaving to survey other students.

“You just always have to have your way, don’t you?” Yrith growled, not even trying to conceal the animosity in her voice.

“Indeed.” His smile was angelic. And so, so unnerving.

“Didn’t you say it’s good to be on everyone’s good side?”

“Whatever might you be implying?”

“Him,” she said, pointing a finger in Cain’s direction. The Dunmer seemed quite content with having Leyna as her partner, producing a flickering ball of fire to heat up the Altmer’s water bubble. Then he suddenly looked at Yrith, eyes reflecting a silent invitation. She quickly turned away, back to the waiting Qassir.

“Well then,” he gave a little too pompous shrug, “have you heard the saying ‘exception proves the rule’?”

Yrith snorted. “How do I make you lose interest?”

“You don’t. Now, I was supposed to teach you some Destruction, wasn’t I?”

“How do you teach Destruction to someone who has no power? The only thing I’m good at is Conjuration. Obviously, it’s that easy to summon a creature and maintain the connection.”

Qassir raised his brows, regarding Yrith with queer curiosity. She shifted nervously on her feet. What was it with these long, hard looks people enjoyed giving her?

“No power, eh? Then would you explain to me how you survived an avalanche with a single ward?”

“Well, that…”

She felt the Redguard’s hand pat her gently on the head and suppressed the urge to pull away. He was smiling like a father giving a lecture to his favorite son on how to use a chamber pot, making her feel very much out of place.

“I don’t think lack of power is your problem,” he said. “Look. You want to create strong fire? Then look at it like this. Fire is not destruction. Fire is life. It is warmth and light. So you can light a candle, yes? Then instead of creating that small flicker of light, think of lighting a ballroom. Or warming up the whole house so your family can escape the winter cold. What will you do?”

Yrith took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Drawing magicka from her soul was the first step to almost every spell ever invented. Just like with wards, she would delve deep into herself, pull the energy out and transform it into whatever she needed. In this case, it was fire. There was nothing tricky when it came to simple fire. Magicka would clash with the air, create a spark and ignite a flame. Its strength depended on the amount of magicka invested. But that in turn relied on the caster’s ability to control their power. And every time Yrith looked into her soul, she could only feel turbulent chaos she was afraid to touch. Calm, she needed to be calm.

A fire that would warm up a house, she thought to herself. An image of homely coziness and winter night spent in the family circle or nestled down by the hearth with a book in her hands. That was something she could agree on. A fire to give life. A fire to preserve and provide comfort. A fire that
felt right and welcoming.

As she opened her eyes, she saw a flame dancing merrily in the palm of her hand. It was bright and strong and brought a sheepish smile on her lips. Qassir nodded.

“See? That wasn’t so hard.”

Yrith moved her hand and the flame followed, controlled by a tiny stream of magicka. She could not take her eyes off of it.

“So now you want to direct the flame at the wall,” Qassir continued. “Aiming can be difficult at first, but if you only want to create a simple flame spell, guiding it along your stream of magicka should be enough.”

Reluctantly, Yrith stretched out her hands, but as soon as she aimed at the wall, the flame flickered and died out, leaving but a trace of warmth behind. She felt a tug at the back of her mind, a feeling that prevented her from releasing her spell. A fear. Not a fear of something harming her. A fear of herself. She raised her head and gave Qassir a hopeless look.

“Well, urchin. You need to light the fire somehow. The firewood in the hearth won’t start burning by itself.”

“It will, if you’re crafty enough…”

“People have invented magic so they don’t have to be crafty. Try again, urchin.”

Yrith did. The fear grew stronger, reminding her of the night when her parents had died. Then the fires of Oblivion and her dreams. She looked around at her classmates. Many of them were now firing lightning at the surrounding walls, and the College took in their magic with soft hums. The College was always grateful and forthcoming, accepting magic as though it filled her with life. But people could not do this. As soon as she would fire at a living being, her magic would take their life and send their soul to Aetherius. She would truly cause destruction. She shuddered.

The class dragged on and Yrith grew tired. The final clap of Lady Faralda’s hands announcing the end of the lesson was like the chime of salvation to her. She let out a deep breath, waving Qassir goodbye as she quickly scurried away. She was almost at the gate when Lady Faralda’s voice stopped her.

“Wait just a moment, Yrith,” she called to her as she hurried to her side, opening the gate and offering Yrith a passage. The girl stepped out with hesitation, waiting for her foster mother to join her. “How… how are you feeling today?”

Despite herself, Yrith found the sight amusing. So, Lady Faralda, the graceful Altmeri Destruction master, was now asking after her health, and she clearly had a hard time even articulating the question. In a way, she reminded Yrith of her father. He too did not handle emotions well, and he was a Breton.

“Good, I suppose,” she shrugged as the two of them adopted a slow pace toward the Hall of Countenance. The snowflakes were falling gently on their heads, creating veils of silver frost as they tangled into their hair.

“No nightmares haunting you this night?”

So she knew. Yrith was wondering if Singird Larkwing had not forgotten. He had not brought up the subject ever since she had first told him about them and no teacher had come to check up on her
either, but it was not like that uptight Nord to ever forget anything.

She pondered the answer. How could she tell Lady Faralda that she avoided sleep?

“Not this time,” she muttered, trying to not let her guilt show.

“Master Neloren is waiting for you in his room. Have yourself examined. Miss Marence claims she is unable to cure nightmares. I can’t assure you that you will be cured at all, but at least Master Neloren will be able to tell if you are possessed and how grave it is.”

Yrith shuddered at the thought. Lady Faralda certainly knew how to unsettle a person. She nodded in response, choosing not to voice her thoughts.

“And don’t forget to visit Master Marence later. She has a potion for you. I will see you around.”

There was a pause. They entered the Hall of Countenance, welcomed by a wild crackle from the fountain. Sparks of blue light glimmered around it, fluttering like a swarm of Luna moths. Yrith stared at the strange display, but Lady Faralda’s voice made her turn away from it.

“And Yrith?”

Yrith quirked her brows, waiting for what would follow.

“I’m glad to see you make a progress,” Lady Faralda said, then rushed to her room, leaving the girl there without waiting for an answer.

A smile formed on Yrith’s face by itself as she stood there, staring at the door closing behind her foster mother. Had she just praised her?

Master Drevis Neloren was bent over something on his table when Yrith entered his room. Without so much as looking at her, he invited her to sit down. She took his chair and felt immediately grateful for it. As she scanned the room, the images on the walls made her head spin. They were full of strange diagrams, models that were static but seemed to be spinning, twisted figures and shadow plays. Just next to the paper he was so intently reading stood a ball that changed colors, seemingly turning itself inside out incessantly. Yrith was certain she saw something move just beside it, but that something was just a mass of quivering air whose shape she could not quite make out. Just as she watched it with eyes narrowed in concentration, taking guesses at what it could be, Master Neloren folded the paper and turned to her.

“Pardon the mess,” he said and there was more pride than remorse in his voice. “This room is usually clean and cozy, but I was in the middle of something… just a moment please.” He waved his hands and the images shifted and changed before Yrith’s eyes, taking on different shapes and colors, some disappearing entirely. The most disturbing moving fractal diagram changed into a simple picture with a fireplace in it. Though Yrith could swear the fireplace still flickered and glowed, it was a welcome change. The ball on the table turned into one of those crystal balls with snow inside she had seen so many times in the Daggerfall markets. The room was nothing like moments before and she stared at the walls incredulously.

“No need to be astonished,” Master Neloren chuckled as he pulled another chair toward her. “That’s just a simple chameleon spell. Skyrim mages are not very fond of it, but I received some scrolls from Cyrodiil and decided to test it. It works wonders. Much better than invisibility, if you ask me. You don’t need to maintain it. It’s enough to slightly alter the surface of whatever you want to hide or change, and it stays that way. Simply brilliant.”
He kept watching her as though expecting acknowledgement. Yrith gave a slow nod. “Quite so,” she supposed.

“Sorry, I am rambling. You’ve come to have me take a look at you, have you not? Then take the bed, please.”

She raised her brows, slowly shuffling toward the bed as he led her.

“I know it sounds strange, but it will be safer. I don’t want you falling on the ground if something happens, not to mention I prefer having you relax. Illusion is quite a delicate craft, if you ask me. Never underestimate the effect of illusion spells. But before we start, can you tell me about those dreams you have? What do you see in them? How often do they come? And how long do they last?”

The whole speech was given in such a speed that Yrith stared at the Dunmer teacher for a long while before she was able to process everything he had said. She sat down on his bed, caressing the dark blue velvety spread that covered it. It was warm and pleasant on touch, and that itself made her feel quite at ease for some reason.

“Well,” she said, inhaling deeply to gather her thoughts, “they didn’t come too often at first, but now they come about every other day and it is getting worse. It’s like… I feel more and more feelings cramped inside me, wanting to get out. Like I am going to explode any moment.” She did her best to tell him everything, but talking to Master Neloren was not like talking to Singird Larkwing. As she forced the words out of her mouth, she realized how much she had come to trust the starchy Nord. No one had ever gotten so close to her, and it unsettled her as much as it made her feel safe.

When she finished talking, Master Neloren was muttering something inarticulate under his breath. She waited, watching an empty place on his wall where a picture used to be. Upon closer inspection, she realized it was still there, but the colors of its surface were adjusted so it seemed to have disappeared. Simply brilliant.

“Well then, Miss Ravencroft,” Master Neloren spoke at last, “I need to make something clear. I will examine you, but you need to let me into your soul. This experience may be quite unpleasant and it also involves the possibility of having me read some of your thoughts. I can only promise you that everything I learn here will stay in this room, save for the state of your health which I need to report. Would that be acceptable?”

Yrith stared at him, trying to read his features. Contrasting the light coming from the window behind him, she could barely see his face at all, and his ashen skin and crimson eyes did not help either. She did not like his conditions. Exposing her secrets again terrified her. But if she refused here, she would certainly turn into a coward in Master Larkwing’s eyes. And that might be even scarier. She bit her lip and took a deep breath.

“All right,” she said, her voice hoarse with unease. “Let’s do it.”

“Good. Then lie down please.”

She did and felt the velvet take her, inviting her to close her eyes. She resisted, watching as Master Neloren bent over her and placed his hands on her temples.

“Make yourself comfortable,” he told her. “I will now enter your mind. It will tingle, and you might feel some of your old fears and ails, but the process itself is quite harmless. Do not try moving away from me. You will be fully conscious, so if you feel like you can’t take it anymore, let me know and I will stop.”
Yrith nodded, feeling a lump settle in her throat. Master Neloren had just placed at the top of her list of the most terrifying people in Winterhold. She closed her eyes, and immediately, she felt magic penetrating her skin.

It was a strange feeling, not unlike the fountain of blue light tickling the nape of her neck, but much stronger. Strands of magicka crept through her person, claiming her soul. As the first memory emerged, she gasped.

It was one back from Daggerfall. Her father scolded her for snatching a book. It spoke about Elder Scrolls and how they are made from the fabric of time. It was supposedly an important book, but the six years old Yrith could not have known.

The memory jumped to the night her parents had died, then to the first encounter with Singird Larkwing. It followed her day in quick pace and stopped at the ice wraith incident before jumping again. Some more sessions with Singird Larkwing, then the embarrassing classes where she could barely touch her magicka, not to mention produce a spell. People cackling and shortling, laughing at her expense, and the insuppressible urge to escape. The pain in her leg when the avalanche buried her, and at that moment, Yrith winced and stifled a moan. The feeling of utter loneliness at those rare moments she was left alone in her room while recovering. And her dreams. Pain that overtook her body and made her sweat in fear. Master Neloren stopped there, making her relive moment after moment. She cried with pain and clutched the velvet cover underneath her. No more…

“No more!” she screamed, and the pain immediately receded as he pulled away. She was crying, shame fighting fear, but amidst her own tears she could see that she was not the only one who was shaken. Even Master Neloren was panting, clenching his fingers into tight fists. He pulled a chair closer and let his body sink in it.

After a moment of silence, he let out a heavy breath. “Well, that was… quite surprising to say the least.”

Yrith forced herself to sit up, breath steadying as she slowly regained her composure. She wiped the tears off of her face and the image of Master Neloren turned from a smudged haze to a crystal-clear view.

“Did you… did you find anything?”

The Dunmer teacher let out a bitter laugh. “If I found anything? There is so much I found I don’t even know where to start. Well, let’s see. The good thing is you are not possessed.”

“And… the bad thing?”

“I can’t help you with your issue.” Yrith gave a sigh of disappointment, but Master Neloren shook his head and continued. “Don’t take me wrong. There is a solution, but I can’t provide it. Neither can anyone else. Except yourself, that is.”

“What does that mean?”

“Let’s see. How powerful do you think you are?”

Yrith raised her brows. The question itself sounded ridiculous, but given he’d just seen her memories, she could not understand its meaning at all.

“Not much,” she muttered.

“Obviously,” he snorted, and she stared at him, half offended and half shocked at his
straightforwardness. He chuckled at that, only to irk her further. “A while ago, I would have certainly agreed with you. But this… this changes everything. Say, Miss Ravencroft, how do you summon a fire atronach?”

She stared at him in question, then shrugged. “Quite normally. I spread my consciousness and call it to my side.”

“You see, what you just described contradicts the word normally. Normal people have to send just a tiny strand of magicka to Oblivion and seek their target. To spread their consciousness is unthinkable for them, simply because they don’t have enough power to do so. Miss Ravencroft, you are lying to yourself. You are well aware what you can do. Even if you can’t see it in the way you conjure, there are still your wards. And the flame you cast in today’s Destruction. So why do you think you can’t cast an aimed spell?”

She shook her head in silence.

“Think, Miss Ravencroft. You know the answer.”

“I thought we were supposed to talk about my dreams,” she mumbled, gaining herself a reproachful look.

“We are. It is related.”

“But I don’t…”

“Why could you create that flame today?”

Yrith frowned, trying to recall the class. A flame to warm a family. That was why. “Because… I was not thinking of harming anyone.”

“Exactly. So why can’t you cast proper spells?”

“I… I’m scared…”

“See? You do know what’s stopping you. Now, any normal person would be thrilled to learn they have such power. But I suppose it won’t please you. In any case, you can’t just run away from it, Miss Ravencroft. Your magic is different. You need to tame it and keep it under control, or else it will consume you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, let’s say there are currents of magicka coursing through the whole world and even across dimensions. Most of them are weak, tiny sparks of magic that can be left behind by anything that breathes or is imbued with magic. They are nothing unusual. At some places, the magic is stronger, like here, in Winterhold. There are others – the Throat of the World, the White-Gold Tower in Cyrodiil, or our Red Mountain in Morrowind. The Crystal Tower also used to be such a place of power. These places leak their magicka into the world and thus are connected to it. The closer to them you are, the more you are influenced by their presence, but is also the other way around. As their magic flows along the currents of magicka, they are affected by the outer world. You are like a walking place of power. Your magic is leaking, but unlike these places, you can feel it. You can feel everything it touches, and it may not be a pleasant feeling at all. It reflects in your dreams. The things you see… they are quite possibly real.”

Yrith’s eyes bored into Master Neloren’s. Was he being serious with her? She could not conceive what he was telling her. It was simply impossible. She took a while to process his words, then her
stomach knotted when she fully realized what he meant by ‘real’.

“No way,” she breathed.

“Quite shocking indeed, but there is but one explanation for the dreams you have, and it corresponds with everything you have lived through. You are afraid of your own power, and that alone stops you from excelling in your studies.”

“But you said I need to… tame it?”

“You do. It will only get worse if you do not gain control over your magic. Stop skipping your classes, Miss Ravencroft. We will help you conquer it.”

“But what if I…”

“There are no what if’s. You have all the awareness you need. Now you only need one thing, and that is to put trust in us.”

“I’m… scared,” she repeated, now fully voicing her concerns. Strangely enough, she felt relief as the words left her mouth, as though she had been waiting for the chance her whole life.

“I know. And you are right to be scared. After all, only a fool wouldn’t be. You were right about Destruction magic, but it is not called Destruction for nothing. Think of it this way. Before the avalanche took you, you gathered fish every day. What was it like to kill those creatures?”

“I… didn’t really think about it… they were for food after all.”

“Correct. You found purpose in killing them. But by doing so, you took their life. That was magicless destruction. Magic is no different from taking a blade and slashing it. How you use it is solely up to you. You need to realize that Destruction is meant to destroy before you use it, just as you need to know it when you’re wielding a blade. Even the firewood you burn when creating the homely warmth used to be a beautiful tree. Never forget that.”

Yrith dropped her eyes, pinning them to the floor. That was her own philosophy working against her. Master Neloren was right and it was vexing. She had nothing to counter that, and so she stayed quiet, waiting in an uncomfortable silence. It seemed to her that there was a colorful pattern on the floor, but she could not be sure with the chameleon spell on it. She fixed her eyes on it so she would not have to think about what to say.

“Well, I think we are done here,” Master Neloren nodded as he rose from his seat. “Just a piece of advice for you, Miss Ravencroft. If possible, do not speak about your power to anyone. Many would be thrilled at the prospect of having a mere portion of it.”

She nodded, gathering herself up. When she reached the door, she stopped, throwing the teacher a pensive look.

“Master Neloren?”

“Yes, Miss Ravencroft?”

“I heard a voice in my dreams. It seemed to speak to me.”

“Ah, that,” he said with a sigh as he cleaned his desk with a single wave of his hand. “That is the one part I don’t understand. If my guess is correct, someone has a very strong magical connection to you and they use it to communicate with you. Be wary of it, these connections may prove fatal if the
person on the other end of it means harm. As I said, Miss Ravencroft. Do study and learn to control your magic. Learn to protect yourself.”

She nodded her thanks and left the room. The fountain on the other side of the door was now shooting blue sparks all around, hissing and crackling, the column of light dancing ferociously from one side to another like a tornado. Master Neloren rushed outside before she could close the door behind herself, pulling on a strange pair of gloves with a star-like ornament in a rope-patterned circle at the back of the hands.

“Polluted again? It’s been days since I cleaned the focal points!” he grumbled to himself, raising his hands and plunging them deep into the pillar of light. “We’ve been having so many uninvited guests it’s uncanny. I swear Enthir’s gonna have it one of these days!”

Yrith’s brows quirked up at that, but Master Neloren did not pay her any heed. With a shrug, she left the Hall of Countenance and let the cold air from the courtyard hit her in the face.

She froze as soon as the door snapped shut behind her. Just before her stood Urag gro-Shub, a number of books under his massive green arm, and his face hardened as he looked down at her. She took a step back and crashed into the door, its studding boring into her back.

“So,” he said slowly, his voice sharp at the blade of a knife, “I don’t suppose you’ll share with me where certain book from my collection went?”

Yrith was silent. Urag’s eyes were pinning her to the ground and she found herself unable to turn away from them. He was beyond furious. There was another feeling which she couldn’t quite identify, but it certainly wasn’t glee.

“No, I suppose not,” he answered his own question. “Well then. Shall I bust into your room and take it myself? Of course, then you’ll be risking that I’ll take more than that.”

Yrith took a deep breath, struggling to prevent her voice from trembling. “Urag… can’t I have that book just a while longer? Please.”

“You sure are cute and your eyes are pretty, but my books are worth more than that. So cut the charade.”

Yrith stared at him and felt panic conquering her thoughts. So this was how Urag looked when he was angry. She bit her lip, clenched fists pressed close to her body.

“I… I know they are. But… this is really important to me!”

“It is, isn’t it? But a no is a no. Now give it back.”

“I can’t.”

“I am not giving you a choice, in case you haven’t noticed. Stop trying my patience or…”

“Your patience?! Honestly Urag, there are things that are more important to me than your patience! I…” Yrith gasped, not believing her own words, and her hand shot up immediately to cover her mouth. She had nowhere to run, unless she wanted to go back to the Hall of Countenance and answer to the teachers who would surely side with Urag and perhaps give her a detention. She did not want to fight him. But she had to have her parents back!

The orc took a few breaths, clenching his fists and releasing them again as though two sides were struggling against each other in his mind. “Look, Yrith. That book is dangerous. Return it to me
before you hurt yourself.”

“I will not!”

“For heaven’s sake, Yrith! Time goes on and there’s a godsdamn reason for it! Don’t go defying the world’s fundamental rule on a whim! You don’t…”

“You think I’m doing this on a whim?! I too have a godsdamn reason to defy it!”

“But certainly! Just because you refuse to accept what happened and blame yourself for things you couldn’t have done…”

“Yes, I refuse, all right! But how could you ever…” She froze, eyes widening in disbelief. “Wait… who told you I was blaming myself for anything?”

“Well, that…”

Yrith gave Urag a long, piercing look. Now she was the one with reproach in her eyes, and the Orc librarian looked so small and helpless, like a lost child.

“Look, Yrith…”

“No,” she hissed, “I will not look, nor will I listen. You and your wisdom! To Oblivion with it! Just…” she took a few breaths, searching for words, but could not find the right ones to express how she felt. With a sigh of resignation, she shook her head. “Never mind,” she said and circled the orc, refusing to look him in the face.

Rage swirled and gurgled in her, dying the surrounding snow red. Trusting Singird Larkwing was the biggest mistake she had ever made. Did he find it amusing to go around and tell her secret to others like it was the news of the day? Or did he simply think that telling Urag did not count?

“Yrith!” the orc called from behind, but she ignored him. Deep inside, guilt was gnawing at her. Urag had every right to be angry with her, but she couldn’t bring herself to face him. Not now. She paced across the courtyard and into the Hall of Attainment, letting the door shut with a loud thud. And there he stood just before her, the person she wished to hit in the face.

Singird Larkwing’s eyes mirrored surprise at her sudden appearance, but he chased it away with a slight shrug and nodded her a greeting. She snorted as she made toward her room.

“Enjoying yourself giving out my secret?” she spat.

“I… beg your pardon?” She had never seen such a shocked look on his face. Somewhere deep inside, she might have felt sorry for him, but that feeling was entirely stifled by rage.

“What a fool I’ve been! I thought you had your morals and all. But obviously, you’d do anything to humiliate me!”

“Miss Ravencroft, what are you talking about?”

She glared at him, knuckles on her hands turning white. “But if you thought Urag would scoff at me like you do, you were wrong,” she hissed through gritted teeth. Then she turned on her heel, rushed into her room and slammed the door behind her, leaving the conjuration master staring at it in confusion.

Still clenching her teeth, she tossed her satchel on the ground and hit the wall with her fist. It took her
several deep breaths to regain a hint of composure.

As she turned around, she gave a long, thoughtful look to the bed on the other side of the room. Somewhere underneath it was hidden the book that had started all this madness. Now she was scared to even approach Urag to return it. She really had a knack for pushing everyone dear to her away.

With a sigh, she sank on the floor, seating herself with her back against the door. If only her parents had never died. Then she wouldn’t have had to deal with this.

Ever since that incident, she had never gone back to her house. She did not know if Lady Faralda had put her parents’ ashes away, or if there had been any change to the house. She had seen it many times from the outside and it seemed to wither. Now, she felt a sudden urge to go see it. Master Larkwing had warned her not to venture outside of the College. But she could care less what that traitor said. The mere thought of him made her blood boil.

She tilted her head back, hoping the coldness of the door would chase the anger away. It felt somewhat soothing, and so she closed her eyes and let herself get absorbed in the feeling.

After a while of silent rumination, she gathered herself, muffled herself up in her coat and left for the city.
Just when he thought everything was developing smoothly, an accusation came from the side of Miss Ravencroft like a bolt from the blue. A misplaced one to say the least. Singird was confused, angry and, even if he did not want to admit it, hurt. Despite planning to use her, he did not remember doing anything that should hurt or enrage her. Besides, he was a teacher. This kind of behavior was unacceptable. How could she. How dare she!

He turned on his heel and glanced over his shoulder to give her door one last look. It was pointless to stay here. She would not speak to him, of that he was certain. But he was going to have a good word with the one who had made her doubt him. Urag, she had said? He sighed. Any other name would have been better than gro-Shub’s.

The blue fountain he had just passed gave a wild crackle. Paying it no heed, he stepped out into the cold. His attention was quickly drawn to her sister, the fountain before the spread arms of Arch-Mage Shalidor. The blue stream grew wilder with every passing moment, swirling and crackling, and the surrounding snow created tiny tornadoes around it. The courtyard soon appeared dark and stormy, despite the gentle snowfall dyed light pink in the sunlight that surrounded the College. Singird felt his braid skip in the sudden gust of wind that whipped him. With a furrowed brow, he glanced over the premises of the Academia, finding the other focal points just as ferocious.

He hurried into the Hall of Countenance and just as he entered, his eyes found Drevis Neloren, engulfed in the blue light, raised hands clad in his ornate tuning gloves. He was battling the stream of magicka, carefully combing the light strands, taming them and funneling them with the precision of a dwemer automaton, yet new and new streams gushed from the ground, threatening to swallow him.

It took Singird a few moments to recover from the initial shock before he jumped to the Dunmer’s side, raising his hands with a ward spreading to cover his back.

“Master Neloren,” he yelled, trying to clamor down the deafening hums and crackles. “How can I help?”

“By putting that down, foolish boy!” the Dunmer returned, too occupied with fending off the magicka to turn around. “You’re only giving it more fuel. Do you want to kill us?”

Singird retreated, letting the ward fade. This was just what he was missing. A grumpy old Dunmer telling him off for trying to aid him.

“Is there anything else I can…”

“Oh! Oblivion take it!” the master of Illusion relieved himself, ducking as a particularly vicious current poured where his head used to be moments ago. “Yes, Master Larkwing, if you want to help, come here and give me your hand. How much energy can you take?”

“Uh… I beg your pardon?”

“Magicka. What is your capacity?”

“I have not calculated…”
“Oh, for crying out loud! Just come here and give me your hand!”

As soon as he extended his hand, Drevis Neloren grabbed it, creating a small rune on it, not unlike the star on his gloves. It glowed bright blue, the same color as the wild stream, and Singird suddenly felt a wave of energy entering his body. He staggered, gasping in shock, and for a moment, a myriad of stars danced before his eyes.

“What…” he tried to catch his breath, grabbing the knotting stomach with his free hand. “Where in Oblivion does all this energy come from?”

“You young ones,” Master Neloren grumbled as he let go, “you know nothing of this place. Back in my day, our masters taught us history and all kinds of magical sciences. Magic is not just simple waving of your hand, throwing spells around and wasting your magicka on a whim…”

His fingers moved swiftly through the current, weaving and guiding it to the skies. It sputtered and wriggled, but slowly, it became more and more docile under his hands. When he finally removed them, the fountain was back to the elegant pillar it used to be. The Dunmer let out a relieved breath.

“Pardon me, Master Larkwing. I got carried away, for the magic, you see… it comes from the College herself. It is a defense mechanism against possible dangers or intruders. If I was her Protector, I could have tamed her easily. But like this…”

“Protector? That isn’t just a myth?”

The Dunmer raised a white brow. “A myth? What did your parents fill your head with?”

Singird suppressed a frown. There had not been much conversation going on between him and his parents in their life. They had pushed him to master the arcane arts as well as the art of combat, to be critical toward himself and strive to be successful. They had taught him to read and to interpret texts, to tell blueberries from nightshade, to know a lark or nightingale when he heard one. They had fed him and taught him the value of hard work. But he had never been encouraged to believe in myths and heroes. Whatever people whispered amongst themselves could not be true unless he had a solid proof of it. The tale of the College’s Protector was one of such gossip tales.

It spoke of a great mage who would eventually become one with the College. Literally, it would mean that the magic holding the great structure together would be at their disposal. The Protector’s task was to shelter the College from harm, whilst she would do the same for them. No harm could come to the College as long as they were alive, and they could use the College’s magic to protect themselves, but only to protect and not for selfish purposes. Using her magic to their own benefit would result in severe punishment.

“Shame on you, Singird Larkwing,” Drevis Neloren grumbled, beckoning to follow him outside, to the next tempestuous focal point. Singird winced as the Dunmer’s words tore him from that little corner of his mind. “To become the College Protector is a great honor, and that honor once belonged to your family. Although, I must admit, Ulfar Larkwing was quite underappreciated, thanks in no small measure to his personality. But he did not fail to protect us when the Great Collapse struck Winterhold. Now, can you take in more magic?”

Singird stared at him with a dropped jaw. “Ulfar Larkwing? My great-grandfather?”

That was not a name he was expecting to hear. Ulfar Larkwing, the very reason Singird had come to Winterhold in the first place. As much as he was unwilling to believe in myths, a single mention of his great-grandfather was enough to convince him they were true. After all, the man himself was a myth. The only one Singird believed in. The only one his parents had believed in.
He let out a breath. This conversation could not have been a coincidence. After all, Singird did not believe in coincidences.

“Yes, that one. It was when my hair was still more ebony and less silver, and my head was much lighter.” Master Neloren pulled up his sleeves and flexed his fingers, eyes following the path of the fountain currents. “So can you take in more magic?”

“I suppose. What was he like?”

“Master Ulfar? Well, he was… eccentric. Spent most of his time in books, and when he wasn’t reading, he liked to whisper to himself. Rumor had it that he was trying to enchant things with words. I doubt it. If that was true, he would have gone to the Greybeards instead. Now stand here, please.”

Singird stepped to the place the old Dunmer was pointing at, letting him proceed with the fountain and fill him with magic again. It was a strange feeling, exhilarating, yet frightening. His own person drowned in the magic, yet he felt the power in his hands and wondered if he could now expand his consciousness into Oblivion just like Miss Ravencroft. Was this how she always felt?

Master Neloren continued his work, directing the streams again until the fountain was calm. “Well, I think I will have to find a new assistant for the next one, or else you might end up like Miss Ravencroft.”

“So I am now on par with her?” Singird smiled. What a strange coincidence, that Master Neloren’s thoughts matched his. But then again, there was no such thing as a coincidence.

The Dunmer laughed. “Now don’t get your hopes too high, Master Larkwing. That was an exaggeration on my part. Miss Ravencroft’s power is far beyond our grasp. Speaking of which, I wanted to talk to you about her.”

“You did?”

“Yes, well… could you come with me to my room for just a moment?”

Singird quirked up a brow but followed him without a word of protest. Master Neloren’s chamber was the plainest-looking room he had ever seen in all of Skyrim, yet he knew his eyes were deceiving him. The Dunmer was known to experiment with anything and everything he had ever gotten his hands on. As though reading his thoughts, the said elf pulled something unseen away from his desk, beckoning for him to sit on it. Singird waited with his brows still raised, earning himself a chuckle.

“Oh, do pardon me,” Master Neloren said, summoning a sphere of dark violet light. As he released it, a chair appeared before Singird and he accepted the invitation.

“Strange,” the Dunmer mused, scratching his chin. “I would have sworn Miss Ravencroft saw it when she was here. Perhaps I accidentally let that self-concealing spell act up.” He groped about his cupboard, withdrawing two tankards and a bottle. “I am afraid my glasses have not so mysteriously disappeared,” he commented as he poured a dark, murky liquid into the tankards, “so these will have to do. Here you go.”

“What is it?” Singird asked as he accepted the tankard, failing to conceal the suspicion in his voice.

“My sujamma spiced brew. Do have a taste. It is not poisoned, nor flavored with any kind of hypnotic.”
Sujamma, of course. The traditional Dunmer drink that made every Nord’s tongue burn. Fortunately, Singird was used to exotic beverages and managed to earn himself a nod of acknowledgement as he took in a mouthful.

“What did you want to talk about, Master Neloren? Does it have anything to do with Miss Ravencroft’s dreams?”

“Indeed it does. Or, rather, with their root cause. I notice you have discovered it for yourself, yet failed to realize the two things were connected.”

“Truly?”

“Her power, Master Larkwing. She is leaking it because she has no place for it anymore. That said, her magical capacity is… how to put it? Interdimensional, maybe. If she spreads her consciousness, she can easily reach Oblivion. Perhaps for her, reaching Aetherius would take about the same amount of effort as reaching Oblivion for us. She is like… a divine walking Nirn’s surface. Alas, she is mortal. Do you understand what that means, Master Larkwing?”

Singird frowned. He didn’t want to admit he did not understand. Thinking wrinkled his face, but that was all he achieved. “So, how is it affecting the dreams?”

“I thought you a bright one. What she sees are occurrences around Nirn. Her magic leaks, but stays connected. She has not transformed it or released it in any way. It touches everything and reacts to it. She can feel the pain of others, as well as their joy.”

“That’s… impossible.”

“I would have thought so too if I hadn’t experienced it myself. Master Larkwing, can you imagine what will happen if she dies while holding onto this power?”

Singird could not decide if he paled at the prospect of Miss Ravencroft dying, or at the thought of what would come next. Powerful mages always left something behind and it was rarely pleasant.

“We would all…”

“Exactly. Unless you drain her of her magic first, she is going to take us with her. If she truly perishes, that is.” Drevis Neloren allowed Singird a moment to process the dreadful thought before continuing. “Now, I know her power appeals to you. Ever since you found out about her atronach, she’s had your full attention.”

Singird opened his mouth to defend himself, but a wave of the Dunmer’s hand silenced him.

“You probably expect me to scorn you, just like Lady Faralda or Urag gro-Shub would. Or just like you secretly scorn yourself, for that matter. Don’t look at me like that, your face says it all.” He sipped from his own tankard. His silence annoyed the young Nord. Fortunately, it did not last long.

“But in all honesty, I don’t care. If you plan to use her power, go ahead. Use it all up, though I doubt you will manage to do that. Or teach her to exhaust it herself. Train her so that she uses it for the most trivial tasks. I don’t give two septims about which path you choose – just pick one that will not put us to a miserable end. I will support you as long as you make sure we survive. So, do we have a deal?”

There was lull, filled with quiet sipping, before the obvious question came. “One question, Master Neloren.”
“Yes?”

“Why me?”

The Dunmer chuckled, obviously having expected the query. “She trusts you. More than you would admit.”

Singird gave a bitter snort, finishing his drink with one mighty gulp. “That was before. Not anymore.”

“Don’t make a fool out of me, Master Larkwing. I spoke with her this morning. I was there with her, in those moments you reached out to her. Quite peculiar. You see, in her memories, all faces are blurry and obscure. All except her parents’ and yours. She remembers every detail of it and can trace the slightest hint of the, what do you call it? Gentleness? In your eyes. Humans are fickle, true, but even in a human, trust like that can’t be extinguished that easily.”

“Master Neloren… what in blazes are you suggesting?”

“What does it look like I’m suggesting?”

Singird took a breath to steady his heart and mind. “If you’re so worried about her sending us to Oblivion, then why didn’t you convene a committee?”

Drevis Neloren gave a hoarse laugh, pointing at the window. “You already know the answer, Master Larkwing. It is out there… but maybe not quite. She has been attacked repeatedly. I am no fool. The one who does this is close, perhaps listening within our walls. They are witted enough to have managed to escape our attention for over six moons. Public knowledge of her power could lead to catastrophic conclusions.”

“True, I suppose.”

“And since you have already taken the initiative to investigate the matter, I believe I am putting her in the right hands.”

Singird pierced the Dunmer with a sharp look, trying to read in his crimson eyes. “You know awfully lot about my activities here.”

“It seems your mind is clouded beyond reason. I told you I saw her memories. And by that, I mean all of them. Mastery of Illusion magic comes with a few perks. But we are digressing. Do we have a deal, Master Larkwing?”

Singird clenched his fists. This was not fair. Every answer would mean certain defeat. To control Miss Ravencroft and strip her of her freedom entirely, or to let her run free and risk her life along with the whole College?

“So, if I go back to my previous questions,” he said, carefully choosing his tone not to sound too demanding or too soft, “did you even tell Lady Faralda?”

“You avoid answering my question,” Drevis Neloren sighed. “But to answer yours, no, I did not. Lady Faralda is an Altmer. I do not mean to sound prejudiced, but elves… they are unpredictable. I should know, being one of them.”

“Pardon my audacity, Master Neloren, but that sounded awfully close to an insult to yours truly and my kinsmen.”
The sound of the Dunmer’s cackle filled the room. The air quivered. Singird could swear he saw a picture flicker where it hadn’t been moments before and then disappear again. A picture of the battle for Imperial City with men standing on top of the walls, gripping kettles of molten oil, and armies of elves outside, holding their magically lit hands up. “Many consider predictability a fault. I do not. Predictable means you always know where you stand. Human faces are like open books. Revealing, teaching us lessons that would have otherwise been inaccessible to us. It means dependable. Would that word suit your ear better?”

“Considerably,” Singird nodded. “But given you know us so well, you should be aware of how our conscience works. I can promise I will do whatever I can to protect both Miss Ravencroft and the College. But when our paths clash, I won’t restrict her.”

“That will suffice. She will follow you.”

“I do hope your… predictions will not turn against you, Master Neloren.”

“I have trust in my judgement. After all, it has not failed me for those few hundreds of years I have been here. Now, I should go calm the rest of the College, shouldn’t I? And I believe you too have your work cut out for you.”

“Indeed. Can I ask you one last question before we part?”

“Shoot.”

Singird smiled at the expression. The Dunmer were known to pick up every piece of slang they heard in the streets. Master Neloren, despite his literacy, seemed to be no exception. In spite of his words, Singird would exclude his race from the rest of the mer. After all, their ancestry said it all. The Dunmer were all but unpredictable.

“You don’t seem to be so smitten with Miss Ravencroft’s power. I’d say a master of the arcane arts such as yourself would surely desire it.”

“Perhaps a master of the Conjuration school, or one specializing in Destruction. Alteration depends heavily on power capacity and Restoration exceeds them all. An unskilled illusionist may wish for power. I, on the other hand, don’t need it. A true illusionist knows that the real art depends on your how you use your power, not how much of it you spend. When you face an enemy, you use their own power against them. That is why most thieves specialize in it. They are masters of intricacy – and that is exactly what I do.”

“For that, you seem quite open with me.”

“Then I am doing a good job.”

The smile Master Neloren gave Singird was literally disarming. The Nord paled a tone and his eyes shifted elsewhere. Naturally, he would know how to appeal to Singird, and also how to disconcert him. Now, more than before, he felt embarrassed and defeated. He hid it behind a mask of stony indifference, although he knew now that the Dunmer could likely guess his every thought.

“I suppose I should be going,” he muttered evasively, rising from his chair.

“I wish you luck, Master Larkwing.”

“Likewise,” he nodded.

When they entered the corridor of the Hall of Countenance and the entrance door snapped shut
behind the Dunmer, Singird let out a deep breath of relief. Now to hope Master Neloren is as true as he claims.

Before he could think of what to do next, an angry yell nearly made him jump in surprise. Out of her room shot a fuming Colette Marence, deep wrinkles lining her otherwise beautiful face. A stray lock of hair had broken free from the complex entanglement of braids on her head. She froze before Singird, taking a breath and clearing her throat.

“I, uh… sorry for…” she threw up her arms and pointed to her room, “that. Master Larkwing, did you see someone sneaking out of my room?”

Singird raised a brow. “Certainly not. Has more of your research gone missing?”

“That too, but I’m missing a few valuable potions and some ingredients that I’d gone to great lengths to obtain. Ancestor Moth wings, Void salts… the fool thought they could trick me if they only took a portion. Hah! I have my stuff counted to the last speck of glowdust!”

“Ancestor Moth wings and Void salts? Just what sort of draught are they planning to make?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to know. The only thing I do want to know is who did it.”

Singird shook his head in apology. “I did not see anyone, I’m afraid.”

“Indeed. Sneaky little thief. I am off to ask Enthir. I swear the thief-friend and his Khajiit groupies are going to be the death of me.”

“Good luck, Miss Marence.”

The slight woman hinted a bow. “Don’t you forget you promised to help with the research,” she reminded him gently. He nodded as she stormed out, following Drevis Neloren’s footsteps.

A moment after, Singird too took the same path. He knew where he needed to go.

When he arrived in the Arcanaeum, Urag gro-Shub was literally buried in books. Empty shelves dominated the pile that soon revealed a silver-haired robed Orsimer, muttering curses under his breath. The orc was beyond his usual grumpy disposition, angry veins popping on his temples, but behind that mask of rage was something else – a hidden sadness, desperation.

Singird approached the orc in silence, taking a while to examine the unusually disorganized library before he cleared his throat theatrically. The librarian winced, raising his gleaming eyes to meet Singird’s. The Nord frowned at the conflict he saw in them, something he would not have been able to connect with Urag gro-Shub before, and almost felt sorry for the green brute.

“Oh great,” the orc growled, trying his best to hide behind a mask of anger. “Of all the people on Nirn, you are the last I want to see, Larkwing. In case you have not noticed, I’m in no mood for conversation. Now scram.”

“I can see that,” Singird stated matter-of-factly. “But if you don’t mind, I wish to talk, and I wish to do it now.”

Urag clasped his hands together, the single clap thundering through the tall halls of the Arcanaeum. “Wonderful!” he spat. “Would you mind telling me since when the world bends to your will?”

“Since the first orc became a mage librarian. And before you say another word, I want to ask about
Yrith Ravencroft. Do I have your attention now?"

The orc huffed, picking up one book after another, moving them quickly to the shelves to clear his path. Then he took three steps toward Singird, stopping inches from his face. He raised a green fist, eyes spitting fire.

“You want my attention?” he whispered. “I’ll give you so much you’ll regret it. I tell you what, Larkwing. Never mention her name before me. Never talk to her and never even look her way. You’re playing with fire here.”

Singird scoffed, not moving an inch. “How adorable. So protective of her you are, yet a man of violence toward one you could stand side by side with. I hope this bad mood of yours has nothing to do with the fact that I’ve just been accused of revealing certain secret of hers to you. As far as I know, I am the one who should be agitated, and for a damn good reason too.”

“Oooh, Larkwing is swearing now. Should I be af… wait a moment. What did you just say?”

“That I ought to be in a bad mood. And…”

“No, not that. You mean to tell me that of all the people she could have picked, she told you? She told her secret?”

“Finally,” Singird said with a deep sigh. Unwittingly, he took a book and put it on another one, edges perfectly aligned. His fingers found the spine of the next one.

“Stop that,” the orc grumbled, grabbing his hand. “You’re breaching my system. And answer my question.” Then he shook his head, clenching a fist. “Actually, don’t. I can very well imagine what happened between you two. You extorted it from her, didn’t you? She would never tell you willingly. She wouldn’t even tell me.”

Singird put up an unreadable mask, his eyes pinning the orc to the ground. “What does it matter how she told me?” he said quietly. “Are you mad at me for gaining her trust where you failed to do so? But I have lost it and I am not happy about it.”

“Well, be amazed. Your happiness, or unhappiness, for that matter, doesn’t bother me one bit. Now get out of my library.”

“I refuse.”

“Shall I remove you myself then?”

“One word is enough,” Singird pressed. “I just need to know how you know.”

The orc snorted, grabbing the first book he touched to let its velvety surface calm him. “You do, don’t you? Trust me, even if I told you, you wouldn’t believe it.”

“Then you have no reason not to tell me.”

The glare that came from those yellow eyes almost made Singird wince. He took a breath, forcing his face to remain that impenetrable mask he so liked to wear and so rarely managed to maintain.

“Fine,” he uttered dryly. “Have it your way. She told me herself. Happy now?”

“Are you pulling my nose?”

“No, but I’m soon going to pull something else. I told you you wouldn’t believe it. I did as you
asked, so get lost.” Urag waved the book as though he was trying to chase Singird away with it. The Nord sighed, ready to retreat, but then his eyes caught the ornament imprinted in the lower part of the book cover. A flask standing on a maple leaf with three letters embedded in it. AWA.

He froze, eyes slowly rising from the weathered imprint to the orc’s face. This was a chance he could not afford to miss. “I don’t recall seeing this book here before,” he stated innocently, as if it was natural for anyone to know all the books in the library from top to bottom. In truth, the only three people who did were himself, Urag gro-Shub and Yrith Ravencroft.

“I gave you what you wanted, Larkwing. Now…”

“What do you want for that book?”

Under the green of his skin, the librarian paled. He took a breath, then clutched the book, his fingers almost penetrating its cover. Singird could swear he saw a spark of magic before it sank into it.

“What is your problem, Larkwing? Is your mind set on slowly draining the sanity out of me? What is this book to you? And what is Yrith to you, other than one of the many pitiful students you so pompously scoff at?”

Singird gave a sour smirk. “And what is she to you other than a lost kitten that you found and took pity on? We could go on and ridicule each other’s reasons. I am proposing another way.”

“What could you possibly offer for her that I can’t get elsewhere?”

The question brought a smile to Singird’s face. How he could find the confidence to so soundly utter his next words, he did not know. Later on, he would laugh at their folly, but at this moment, he stood proud. “An impartial mind. Single-mindedness in protecting her. Those traits that men and mer alike take for granted but are in short supply nonetheless. Laugh at me all you want, but I am not the careless bastard you believe me to be. After all, she opened up to me.”

“Of course, and now you think you’re special,” the orc snorted, a corner of his mouth twitching to reveal several of his yellow teeth. “Am I supposed to be impressed? You’re a young sprout who’s barely reached his manhood. You know nothing of this world, Larkwing, and even less about the things you just cannot change.”

“And I will continue to know nothing unless you actually tell me something. I am no fool, gro-Shub. Even if you’re an orc, your face says it all. You’re dreading something and it concerns her. So…”

Urag’s glare took the words out of his mouth. The orc pressed the book into Singird’s hand, eyes shooting more than fire and daggers. “Take the damn book and get. Out.”

“So are you…”

“Get! Out! Now!”

Singird backed out of the door, eyes widened in actual fear. Never in his life had he seen the orc so angry. Yellow eyes flaring with rage and pointy teeth bared like a roaring sabre cat, his muscular posture seemed to fill the whole library. He could cut the tension with a knife and delve it into the orc’s fury where it would remain standing.

The Nord was grateful for the chilly air that welcomed him once he left the building. He clutched he book tightly, teeth gritting more with agitation than the cold. He always wished to respect the old librarian, yet found himself unable to as the Orsimer brute reminded him of his ancestors, Malacath’s loyal fighters, astute warriors who were as strong as they were relentless. It was the animosity in the orc’s tone that discouraged Singird every time. Now, however, he had a feeling that Urag’s anger
was not directed at him. Not even at Yrith Ravencroft. Something else disturbed him, and Singird felt as though it was almost in his grasp. Almost.

He locked himself in his room. There was a report from the advanced class students, Onmund, Brellyna and J’zargo, waiting for him to correct it, but he set it aside. There were also notes from Colette Marence which she had asked him to help with, but at this moment, other people’s concerns, such as a bit of lost research, seemed pitiful compared to the matter at hand. With a sigh, he opened the book on his desk, carefully smoothing out its pages.

*Tongue of Might* by *Collective of Authors*, the title page said in an ornate script. As Singird turned to the next page, the letters became simpler and easier to read, written with careful precision which reminded him of Urag gro-Shub.

*Preface*

The book you are holding in your hands is not just an ordinary textbook. It is a millennia old text that has been continually revised and supplemented with knowledge of each passing generation. It is a well that holds the key to our past, present and future.

Some people believe words hold the true power in this world. Not just the words in the dragon tongue, but any words. We do not believe. We know. Others believe the Divines are real. And once again, we are certain of it. Dragons be our witnesses that every word written in this book is true as the dawn and dusk, for Akatosh, the Dragon God and the head deity of all Divines, spoke the Tongue of the Old when he bestowed his gift upon St. Alessia. The same tongue that was used when Anu and Padomay created Aurbis from their own discord. It is 29th of Sun’s Dusk, year 188 of the Fourth Era, and up to this day, few can understand the tongue and none can use it.

While the dragon words of power can without a doubt create storms and disintegrate one’s soul most effectively, the Tongue of the Old is capable of altering the reality itself. It can create rifts in matter, cast souls into nothingness or assemble them from it. It can shift time, split it into timelines, rejoin them and even create time loops without end or beginning. The nature of this tongue is so complex that even the most powerful mortals can grasp but a few words and it takes them more than a lifetime to comprehend them, for each and every one of them carries the weight of an infinite number of realities which intertwine, coexist and, at the same time, are in constant conflict. To an ordinary mortal, paradox is the exact opposite of reality. To a divine, it is its nature.

This book is a collection of findings that various scholars have been assembling throughout history. Its purpose is to cover the basic knowledge of the tongue. However, do not expect a vast research material, dear reader, for even the most capable ones were only able to record but a few lines.

If you ever stumble upon any piece of information that is not written in this book, please, record it. Perhaps one day, this tome will lead to the salvation of men, mer and beastfolk alike. Perhaps one day, we shall all live in harmony.

Singird sat still and breathless. Lady Faralda’s words about the AWA were enough to make him feel overwhelmed, but a tongue of the divines was something he would not have imagined in his wildest dreams. Gathering his determination, he chased away his doubts. There would be enough time for scoffs and disbelief later. What mattered was that he was holding a book published by AWA in his hands.

He caressed the paper and sifted through the pages, searching for names. Carefully, chapter after chapter, he scanned the titles and captions, prefaces and conclusions, keeping a quill ready for notes. Yet, he found nothing. Throughout the whole book, there was not a single name, not even a pseudonym or a reference. Singird cursed his luck. A book without names was as good as shoes
without soles. Just what kind of credibility would such a book hope to achieve?

Ready to set it aside, he flipped the pages for the last time just to punish the insolent tome, as if it was its fault that no names were recorded in it. And just as he did, a tiny spark of magic let loose a folded piece of paper which had been attached to the inner side of the cover. As he opened it, his eyes rested on a line written in the familiar calligraphic style. Singird recognized Urag gro-Shub’s handwriting.

*The walls have ears and time won’t bring the dead back. It only takes more lives.*

Singird stared at it for a while. At first, he thought the message was meant for someone else. Perhaps the old orc had accidentally used it as a bookmark and forgot it in the book. Then he read it over and over again, finding more sense in it every time he did. He had misjudged the orc. They stood on the same side.

The walls have ears… did that mean there was something the librarian was afraid to tell him? But how was he supposed to understand the rest? And did it have anything to do with Miss Ravencroft? If so…

*Time won’t bring the dead back…*

Could that mean her parents? Then the last part would mean her. But he already knew her life was in danger. What was he missing? There had to be some kind of clue the orc had given him. Singird bit his lip, a gesture that he had probably caught from Miss Ravencroft. It seemed he had somehow managed to gain the librarian’s trust, but it made him none the wiser. Urag gro-Shub would not associate himself with Singird. He made no effort to do so, and the only help Singird had received from him was a book and a scribbled note.

He picked the book up and studied it. Just an ordinary book with lots of seemingly forbidden knowledge inside. If only he could believe the orc had had a reason to pick this exact book. Singird opened it again and started reading. Then his eyes drifted elsewhere, frowning at a sudden recollection. How had Master Neloren said it?

“*Master Ulfar? Well, he was… eccentric. Spent most of his time in books, and when he wasn’t reading, he liked to whisper to himself. Rumor had it that he was trying to enchant things with words. I doubt it. If that was true, he would have gone to the Greybeards instead.*”

“No, he wouldn’t,” Singird mused aloud, but he already knew his assumption was wrong. He let out a deep breath, burying his head in his hands. *He would. Lust for power runs in the family.*

He stopped his fingers from burying deeper in his hair, not wanting to damage his perfectly kept braid. A smile formed on his lips. If anyone could see his face, they would likely run away with their tail between their legs. He smiled like a mad treasure hunter who discovered a pile of gold and then realized there was a dragon sitting on top of it a moment too late.

What a peculiar coincidence that Urag gro-Shub would hand him a book that would let him closer to discovering the secret of his family. The same Urag gro-Shub who would not lift a single finger for him. What a strange concurrence of circumstances that the investigation of Miss Ravencroft’s case led him back to his own ancestors. But was it really so?

At this point, Singird was ready to believe that his encounter with Miss Ravencroft had a definite cause. After all, there was no such thing as a coincidence.

Singird lit a candle and began reading anew.
Merry Christmas, everyone! Well, almost.

I apologize for the extra long delay. Life has been busy these past few months. Work, work, more work… it has been fun though. My colleagues are the best I could hope for – those kind of people who would rather starve to death than go to a meal without you (confirmed, they did it!), my work is interesting… and I’ve been promoted. After three months which was my probation period. Like holy cow, I did not expect that!

On top of that, I got married so… yeah, life’s been fun, mostly. At least I’m glad I can finally say something other than “I was sick for a long time”. :)

Anyway… for the story. I wonder how many of you are going to scold me that this looks less and less like Skyrim. Well, actually… I am making it fit into the existing lore, but you’re going to find out later. Other than Mirabelle Ervine who is supposed to be dead and the Dragonborn being replaced with his sister as the Arch-Mage, I don’t think I made any changes to the original lore. I prefer to extend, not change entirely.

For those who read the first version… well, this is where I start taking a different path. Not that I’ve changed the story, but, well… I realized there are many ways to write a story and the one I picked this time makes me a lot happier.

And I have a question for all of you. In the first version of this story, I had a chapter with Alteration class. It was totally unimportant for the story itself, but it felt pretty good and featured Yrith getting good at magic and actually making friends in her class. I introduced some of her classmates and made them seem more alive. But still… it didn’t really progress the story. So… do you think I should include it, or should I skip it? Whenever I think of it, I end up arguing with myself. On one side, I think it’s good to let the readers have a breather and help them know my characters better. On the other, some people don’t like it when I include stuff that’s not directly related to the plot. I dunno… help, please? :D

Anyway, for those who have stayed with me – thank you! Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Many thanks to Tildemancer for proofreading my story!

See you guys next time!

Mirwen
Yrith paced over the bridge, paced through the ancient ruins of Winterhold, paced past the remains of the last house, not changing her tempo, not straying or granting a single look to the scarce passersby. Her freshly cured leg kept sending warning signals to her, but she paid it no heed. She was furious and cared for nothing more than letting the rage out as soon as she could. Two faces flashed in turns before her eyes, a white-haired orc and a young Nord, both pointing an accusing finger at her. They didn’t understand. No one understood.

Through the veil of clouds, sunlight caressed a snow-covered roof and broke into a myriad of glittering stars as it fell on the crystalline icicles sinking from its edges. She halted, eyes resting on a barred door, and let out a deep sigh. Why she had decided to come here, she did not understand. The place was full of memories, both distant and overwhelming. She looked over her shoulder, searching for the cliff that had once felt the first spark of her own magic. Her eyes found the trail of her first atronach, long buried in snow but still clear in her memory.

Her gaze returned to the house, standing there with its withering walls and shattered windows, abandoned and lost to the time. Cobwebs wreathed the doorframe, making it seem to have swallowed half of the door wing. She reached for them, then pulled back, not wanting to touch them. Instead, she released a tiny strand of magic through a shaky finger, inspecting it, testing its strength before using it to remove the webs. It worked, and she felt a tiny bit of self-satisfaction from it. The things she could do if Master Neloren was right. She would never have to listen to Singird Larkwing. She would never have to listen to anyone.

She grabbed the door handle and fought the frost that kept it in place, first by sheer force, then another strand of magicka. She turned it into fire, a tiny flame that would let her back home. There was no malice in it and it was satisfying. The door gave way and she entered, setting foot on the threshold of her old home after more than six months of absence.

The house had not changed. There were still the same depictions of various magical and alchemical experiments on the walls, there were shelves full of books lining the corridors, and drapes with simple flower patterns over the gaping windows, torn, filthy and heavy with frost. The floor was scorched and dust had settled in the corners. Back when Yrith’s parents had been alive, there would not be a single speck of it, but now the house was barren and dreary, and the feeling of comfort it had once offered was long lost.

Yrith proceeded further inside, more because she did not want to stop than out of need or curiosity. The place reminded her of the pain in her heart. The past came to life once more and she walked in her own footsteps until she reached the laboratory. Only now the cinders were long cold and the bodies of her parents had been removed. There were still shards of vials and torn pieces of paper laying about, remnants of her childhood. She squatted, grabbing a handful of ashes and glass fragments. One of them cut the side of her hand and she watched thoughtfully as a drop of blood appeared in the wound. Then, suddenly, she heard footsteps in the house and froze.

They approached through the main corridor, light, womanly. She pressed herself to the wall in silence, hands stretched toward the entrance to strike if need be.

She let them sink back to her hips as the slender figure of Leyna Travi emerged from the doorway.
With brows knit tightly together, Yrith rose back to her feet. “What are you doing here?” she asked, trying not to sound too unfriendly or suspicious which was exactly how she was feeling.

The Altmeri girl raised her hands in a gesture of peace, lips curling in a hint of apology. “I was just…” her eyes wandered as though the right words were waiting for her somewhere on the floor, “wondering where you were going.”

“Did you… follow me from the College?” She couldn’t have overheard her conversation with Singird Larkwing, could she? Or worse, with Urag…

“Yes, but… don’t take me wrong,” the elf waved her hands all too fiercely, “I did not stalk you or anything! I was just curious where you were going. And… had nothing to do.”

There was the strange undertone of uneasiness, something Leyna Travi had been expressing quite frequently the past few weeks, and perhaps subconsciously. Yrith wanted to ask about it, but failed to find the right words. She sighed, pondering what to say to her new elf friend at all. They spent a while staring at each other’s feet, the awkwardness of the moment weighing on their shoulders until Leyna broke it at last.

“What is this place anyway?” she asked, switching to a light, conversational tone. She scanned the room, fair brows quirked up in something between curiosity and poorly concealed distaste. A corner of Yrith’s mouth twitched.

“This,” she said, “is… was my house. My parents’ place.”

Leyna drew in a quick breath and gave Yrith a look full of sympathy. “I… I’m sorry. I didn’t know you’d actually lived here before.” Her eyes roved around the room. Yrith could almost feel the struggle in her mind.

“Whatever you want to say, say it,” she sighed. “I prefer people spitting in my face to not knowing where I stand.”

Leyna laughed. For a brief moment, the worry left her face, leaving behind a soft smile, so uncharacteristic for her kind. “Your honesty is quite soothing in the vast sea of pretense we have to face up there,” she waved her hand in the general direction of the College. “I did not want to… spit in your face. I was just wondering about what happened to your family.”

Yrith’s eyes slid over the ashes on the floor, the singed shelves and tables, broken alembics and dried-up potions. “My parents died in an explosion,” she muttered evasively.

The elf gave her another sympathetic look, her golden eyes darkening once more. “Say, is it… difficult to live without parents?”

Yrith searched hard for contempt in Leyna’s face but found none. There was genuine concern in her question, as well as something else. Was it fear? Or perhaps Yrith’s mind was just playing tricks on her?

“Unimaginably so,” she said grimly. “Worst thing is, no one really understands how you feel.”

Leyna paled, eyes sliding down to the floor. She turned away, eyeing the curtain of icicles in the window. Yrith could swear she saw something glisten in the corner of her eye.

“Why are you aski—”

“You know,” Leyna interrupted, “it gets… lonely here. Can you feel it too? The strange veil of
solitude that enshrouds us and fills us with the feeling of separation? You weren’t here when we assembled. Most of us were… well, still highborn children, naïve, full of pride and derision toward the whole world. And also filled with bitterness. Those who were not outright deported did not understand why their parents had sent them here. But we could at least confide in each other. We talked and experienced things together. But things started changing around the time you joined.”

Yrith clenched a fist. A cloud of dust sank from it onto the ground. “So you think I broke you apart?”

Her Altmer companion gave a bitter laugh. “Yes. And no. I think you reminded us of who we were. You accentuated the difference between yourself and us. We were of noble origins, meant to rule over your kind, and you were the prototype of, as we say it, filthy broken commoner. Your aloofness worked in our favor. Or at least we thought so.”

She paused, a slender finger reaching for a pellucid thorn of ice. She touched it and a drop of water rolled down into the palm of her hand.

“I hated it,” she continued, “how uncivilized this whole conflict had become. They thought you filth and acted on it. I was the same, and I despised myself for thinking that way. And then… you changed.” She turned back to Yrith, golden eyes glistening with fascination. “Ever since the day you were forced to attend Conjuration for the first time, you’ve kept your head high. You stood up for your ideals like a true noble. And we… started doubting ourselves. That’s when I thought that perhaps you’re not so different after all.”

Yrith frowned, studying Leyna’s face. It was not the face of a close friend as she would imagine it, but there was no contempt. Then again, contempt was the only emotion she could feel certain of when it came to dealing with elves. When there was none, she could not penetrate their masks at all.

“So you only talk to me because you think I am one of you? Is that right?”

Leyna shook her head. “I talk to you because… I think I can identify with you. Because despite being the same as us, despite knowing the same pain, you can somehow see through the pretense. We all know there’s something wrong with this place, but you are the only one who admits it.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“Well,” the elven girl sighed as she drew a circle on the ash-covered window ledge, “none of us came to the College of our own free will. Not us, not you. Circumstances forced us. The only difference is that unlike you, we don’t know what circumstances. But we all feel the same unbearable loneliness.”

Yrith took a moment to gaze deeply into Leyna’s eyes. She was surprised when the proud elf averted them.

“If there’s anything you want to tell me…”

“There is. And I will. Just… not now.”

“Why did you follow me then?”

“I just… didn’t want to be alone.”

Yrith nodded. That part she could understand. After all, loneliness had been her only companion for a long time. Before she met Singird Larkwing.
“Say, Yrith… why did you come here? Doesn’t this place bring back painful memories?”

Good question. Why _had_ she come here?

“It does. Lots of them. But it also carries good ones. Things from my childhood. Maman’s smiles and stories I used to read.”

“What was it like when your mother smiled at you?”

Yrith raised a brow. “What kind of question is that?

“Well, I was just… I mean… I don’t think elven parents do that. Not in Alinor. We smile, but it’s… different.”

Yrith stared at her, pondering whether she was being ridiculed. Then again, she had never seen a happy Altmer. But Leyna knew enough to be able to convey her thoughts. Perhaps there was still hope for her. She took a breath. Was she being challenged here? Fine. Let them come.

“Different, huh? Say, have you ever wished for something really badly?”

“Like food or coin? My family always provided for me. So no, I don’t suffer any shortages.”

“No, I meant something that would make you feel good. Happy.”

“Like… a fashionable gown?”

“Well… like a person that would appreciate how beautiful you look in it.”

“Of course they would. They always do.”

Yrith gave her a crooked smile. “I… guess they do. Come with me.”

She beckoned for Leyna to follow her to the remote corner of the room. A small door led to a neighboring chamber, inconspicuously concealed behind a working bench and a broken laboratory apparatus. She blew the ashes off of the handle before entering a narrow corridor lined with semi-empty bookcases. The place looked like a whole new world, lit by sunlight from a small crevice between the house wall and the mountain side in which the library was hollowed.

“This is our family library,” she announced solemnly. “I was forbidden from entering back in the day. I did it anyway.” Yrith danced through the shelves with an impish smile and pulled out a few volumes. She did not have to look at the titles, knowing the place by heart. She remembered the fabric of every book she had ever held. These were her favorite stories, Chance’s Folly, the tale of Eslaf Erol and the Legend of Princess Sayda. “Do you like to read?”

Leyna took a book from Yrith’s hand and examined it. The title imprinted in the rough linen surface was weathered and covered in dust, but still readable. ‘Thief,’ it said. She raised a brow. “I do. Father always made sure to supply me with dictionaries, historical documents and arithmetic handbooks. But what are these?” She waved the book in her hand as though the answer would fall from its pages.

Yrith laughed. “Dictionaries and arithmetic handbooks? Your father really didn’t want you to… stray from your path, eh?”

“Don’t insult my…”

“I am not. Teach me to read your dictionaries and I will teach you to read the belles-lettres. Maybe
“If you say so.”

Yrith pressed the rest of the books in Leyna’s hands and made her way through the aisle, one finger brushing the spines of the books she passed, leaving a trail in the dust. She stopped at the end, eyes resting on a book laying on an otherwise empty shelf. A thin, well-thumbed volume that seemed as though it would shatter upon the first touch. Nevertheless, Yrith took it carefully in her hands, blowing the dust from it. This one’s title was scribbled in plain ink, smudged over the many years of its existence. ‘A Man of Two Faces’.

“This one I stole one too many times,” she said with a hint of pride in her voice. “It kept me company when my parents were mad at me or didn’t have time. The story made me infinitely happy. Do you know the tale of Princess Astarie who fell in love with a daedra?”

“That sounds like something the Dominion would have burned to ashes.”

“Well… I…”

Leyna extended her hand. Yrith hesitated. She wouldn’t burn it, would she?

“I wouldn’t,” she said as though she was answering her question. “Can I have it?”

Yrith handed her the book with uncertainty. As Leyna opened it, she read out loud:

“To our beautiful daughter with love. May all the dark places lead you to the light.” Well, your parents certainly seem to be quite forgiving, given they wrote this in a book you liked to steal.”

“They were… wait, what did you just say?”

“That your parents must have been…”

“No. The thing in the book. Show it to me!” Yrith yanked the book out of Leyna’s hand, ignoring the shocked look on her face, and stared at its first page. How was this possible? “‘May all the dark places lead you to the light.’ I don’t remember this to be there.”

“Well, it is certainly there now.”

Yrith flipped a few pages. This was definitely the same old book she loved to steal. The first part of the inscription was the one her mother had written when she finally decided to give the book to Yrith. It was her handwriting, and she recognized the strangely curly T at the beginning. She had asked her mother why she had written it this way. “Because it reminds me of your smile,” she had said, wearing a gentle smile herself. It could not have been another book. But…

“What is this?!” Her eyes widened at the page she had just opened. Countless ink blots covered the letters, making it seem sprinkled with cinders. She felt Leyna’s breath on her neck as the elven girl leaned to peek over her shoulder.

“Someone ought to change their quill here,” she commented.

“But this wasn’t there before! I swear this book is as old as Nirn itself, but one year ago it was clear as the summer skies.”

“Hmm. May I see it?”

Reluctantly, Yrith let go. Leyna frowned in concentration as she took the book, her face touching the
crumpled pages. Then, her fingers slid over their surface, studying their fabric. Moments passed. Yrith shuffled around and back again, waiting, impatience swelling in her chest. In the quiet that prevailed, she could hear Leyna’s every breath and every speck of dust that fell on the old planked floor.

At last, Leyna handed it back. Yrith grabbed it, cradling the book like her own child.

“The good thing about dictionaries is that they teach you many useful things,” Leyna said. “Like decrypting ciphers.”

“Ciphers?”

“Look closely. The stains are much newer than the writing. Their edges are still sharp and the ink is darker. And notice how they only cover the characters and nothing else. Each blot covers one, and only one character. Each covers it entirely and the gaps between them are fairly regular. There are no blots in the white spaces around. And then there’s the initial message. ‘May all the dark places lead you to the light.’ I think I know what ‘the dark places’ are referring to.”

“That’s… you mean it was done on purpose? But why would my parents leave a cipher?”

“I wouldn’t know. But it’s worth a try, no?”

“I guess it can’t hurt. How about we sit down in the kitchen? Or, what’s left of it anyway.”

Leyna nodded. The two of them made their way across the whole house, settling in the corner of the small, but well-equipped kitchen. The ladles hanging from the pegs on one of the walls were filled with dust and cobwebs, and the flowery patterns on the dishcloths spread over the cabinets were faded by the tooth of time. Faint light came through the only unharmed window in the house, dimmed by the glazed frost that lined its edges. Leyna and Yrith took two of the four chairs surrounding a dusty lacquered table, putting the book on top of it. From the depths of her robes, Leyna withdrew a quill, a paper and a tiny flask of ink.

“I always carry these with me,” she answered to Yrith’s raised brows. “My father is, among other things, a scribe. He always emphasized how important it is to keep your writing tools at your side.”

Yrith nodded. “Handy. Shall we start then?”

“Yes. Let’s see… first, we need to write down the characters the blots are hiding. The first one is this. I’m assuming the word is Pirate, so the letter is P. This one though…”

“Q. It’s a name, Quallia. And the next one is u from you.”

Leyna scribbled the characters down. They went through the text, marking down every blotted character, discussing and double checking, careful to maintain their order without missing any. As they worked their way through the whole story, a sequence of letters formed before them, occasionally interrupted by a comma.

PQUCMQ . OH . CRQ . BCMZH . HZN . CRQ . MCD . BCKQ . OH . CZMQ . URCC . RCRRQNQD . ZB . NOC . NOXM . HCXLC

While Leyna watched it with pride in her eyes, Yrith pulled her hair. “It’s just a bunch of nonsense!” she groaned.

“Patience. Simply hiding the words like that would be too easy, don’t you think? No, we just uncovered the cipher itself. Now we do what I learned as a child.”
“You’re still a child though.”

“Well… that’s not the point. Do you know how ciphers work?”

“No?”

“There’s always a key. You start by taking the shortest words and guessing what the characters in them represent. Let’s wager on this message being in our common tongue. The shortest words would be OH, CRQ, MCD, ZB and NOC, out of which only OH and CRQ appear more than once. So, which are the most common two- and three-character words you know that could appear in a sentence more than once?”

Yrith scratched her head. “Is… no, not that one,” she thought aloud. “Of… on… at… it… for… and…”

“Correct. Let’s not forget about the articles.”

“An and the,” Yrith nodded. “But it’s strange. Even if I limit myself to the words that are most likely to appear more than twice in one sentence, I end up with ‘an’, ‘of’ or ‘it’ for OH and ‘the’ or ‘and’ for CRQ. Then look at the word RCRRQNQD. I can’t imagine so many N’s or H’s in one place. Not even if CRQ meant ‘for’. And the word before that, URCC, makes no sense either. Are you sure the letters only correspond to one character?”

“I see your point, but if it was as you say, it would be an almost unbreakable cipher. That’s not how… wait!”

Yrith winced, watching as Leyna opened the book again, sifting through its pages.

“Let’s do it again,” she said. “This time we’ll distinguish between the capital and small letters.”

“Right!”

Letter by letter, a new cipher appeared on the paper. When Leyna finally put the quill down, the two of them stared at it, smiles slowly disappearing from their faces.

pQucMQ . oh . CRQ . bCMzhQ . hzNd . CRQ . mcd . bckQ . oh . CzmQ . uReC . RcrrQNQd . zb . NoC . noxM . hxLC

“Don’t you think,” Yrith uttered into the silence, “that all these words are way too short to take any guesses?”

Leyna nodded, letting out a sigh. “I wish I had one of father’s dictionaries here.”

“The Arcanaeum is quite well supplied.”

“If only the librarian wasn’t an orc,” Leyna shuddered. “It’s getting late. I think we should work on it sometime later.”

Yrith threw a glance at the window. The light outside was fading as the sun descended to the western horizon. Soon it would reach the Winterhold ridge and the humps of snow covering the land would darken in the stretching shadows of the mountains and the great statue of Azura. Yrith was silent, unwilling to remind her companion that they had just missed the Illusion class. Master Neloren will be furious. In the back of her mind, she was already devising what she would tell him.

They left the house. Yrith threw one last look at its run-down walls and windows gaping like wild
beasts with teeth of broken glass and sharpened ice.

“Can I keep the paper?” she said. “I’ll let you have the book.”

Leyna nodded. “I think we are missing a hint though. Perhaps it’s in the book somewhere.”

“Perhaps,” Yrith supposed.

“By the way, didn’t we just miss Illusion?”

“You noticed.”

“Who do you take me for?”

Yrith laughed. “So how does it feel to skip a class?”

Leyna took a while to answer, eyes gazing absently in the distance as she pondered the answer. “Unbelievable,” she said at last.

“Does it make you happy?”

“Is happiness defined by tight chest and frantic thoughts on ‘how in Auriel’s name am I going to justify my absence’?”

“Erm… I suppose not.”

“But I guess there’s also the feeling of doing something I’ve never done before. It is…”

“Exciting?”

“Perhaps.”

“Exhilarating?”

“If that’s the word for it.”

“Thrilling?”

“Maybe. But you keep saying the same thing!”

“So do you!”

The two of them laughed. Yrith glanced at Leyna’s face, noticing a strange, crooked smile that was both happy and sad. So were her eyes. The Altmeri girl definitely craved happiness. And definitely feared something. Questions arose in Yrith’s mind, but she was too afraid to ask. They fell silent, passing the houses with smoking chimneys.

On the remote side of the city of Winterhold, just by the base of the College bridge, Yrith could spot a few guards, the visors of their helmets up as they sipped from the tankards they were holding in the hands numb with cold. Only one of them wore no helmet, letting his wheat hair fall on his shoulders in wild locks stuck together by sweat. On the back of his monumental frame loomed a mighty battle axe attached by thick buckled straps. As the two of them approached, he turned to them with a gleam in his eyes, revealing the Stormcloak bear on his chest and wrists and the amulet of Talos around his neck. Yrith’s eyes brightened with surprise.

“Toddvar!” she exclaimed as she ran to greet the friend she had not seen a long time. “So good to see
“Look at you, the fine lil’ lass!” the man beamed as he crushed her in a bear hug. “How you’ve grown o’er the last year.” He let go, taking a long look at her as he stepped back. His face darkened, and it wasn’t just the shadow of the nearby tree extending over his person. “I heard what happened to your parents. Sorry for not coming to you sooner. Been busy down here.”

“But you’re here now. Are you going to stay for a while?”

“Afraid not. Been bouncing back and forth between Windhelm and Winterhold. There’s stuff to do. We’re preparing for war and the elves ain’t making it no easier. Speaking of which, who’s that?” Toddvar pointed a finger thick as the handle of his axe at Leyna.

“Oh, this is my new friend, Leyna Travi. Leyna, this is Toddvar.”

“Travi?” he repeated, rolling the name on his tongue with strange distaste. “Are you by any chance related to Selas Inarion Travi?”

“He’s my father,” Leyna said, pride fighting apprehension.

“Yrith.”

“Yes?”

“Are you hobnobbing with a Thalmor spy?”

“What?! She’s not a spy, Toddvar!”

“Indeed,” he breathed, his face stone-hard and voice cold as ice. Yrith stepped back, hands clenching into fists. She took a breath.

“I’ll… meet you at the College,” she said quietly as she turned to Leyna, nodding to the bridge. Her friend caught the hint.

“See you around then.” She scuttled away. Yrith’s eyes followed her silhouette to the first focal point. Then she turned back to Toddvar, brows knit in agitation.

“That was uncalled for,” she grumbled.

“No, Yrith. Be careful who you associate with. Ever heard of Selas Travi? He works for an authority that interrogates ‘continentals’, as they call them there. For them, it’s an equivalent for savage. For us, it means Nords and all the other honest people living in the mainland. Do you know how many folks he’s tortured? Can you imagine how many folks died ’cause of him?”

“But Leyna is not her father!”

“She is his blood. And elf blood is always rotten. Be on your guard, Yrith. The world is not safe these days.”

“Fine.” He did not have to tell her. Over the last month alone, she had faced an ice wraith, an avalanche and a body of more than unfriendly students. But Leyna? No. She did not believe it. She did not want to believe it.

“I’ll have to go. Stay safe, m’lass. Seven months back, the world lost two fine folks. We don’t wanna lose another one. And… be good to our little Singird, will ya?”
“Singird Larkwing? You know him?” Yrith snorted, trying to shake off the memories she had almost managed to discard. “Not a chance.”

Toddvar laughed, patting her on the head like a father would pat his favorite daughter. “He has… a complicated past. But he’s an ally you can trust.”

“All right then. I’ll… try.”

“I have to leave for a few weeks, but let’s keep in touch. The Stormcloaks have a courier in the city. If you catch him before he runs off to Windhelm, you can send me a note. Or leave it at Haran’s and she’ll give it to him once he stops by. Take care of yourself.”

“You too, Toddvar.”

Yrith waved at him as she entered the bridge, glancing over her shoulder at his receding frame. She left the narrow path behind her all too soon, facing the gates to the College where a scolding awaited her. Reluctantly, she entered to see Colette Marence pace across the courtyard. Just as she was about to slip into the Hall of Attainment, the Restoration master called to her, irk apparent in her voice.

“If it isn’t Yrith Ravencroft sneaking about! Hold it right there, you mischief!”

Yrith froze, turning to face the fuming teacher. She stopped inches before her, sizing her up like a criminal.

“To my room. Let’s go.”

Yrith bit on her lip, shuffling over to the Hall of Countenance and Master Marence’s chamber.

“Well well,” the teacher said when they stopped, not bothering to close the door. She took a flask from a drawer just opposite her bed and pressed it into Yrith’s hands. “Look at you, wandering around as you like. Master Larkwing gets worried sick about you, even changing your detention to avoid putting you in danger again. You don’t even stop by my room to get your healing potion,” she pointed at Yrith’s recently mended leg, “and now Master Neloren is asking for you because you did not attend Illusion. All the while you stray outside, disregarding all those who are concerned about you! Do you have any words to justify your actions?”

“No, Master Marence,” Yrith peeped, eyes pinned to the ground.

“Then perhaps you’d like to say something else?”

“I am sorry, Master Marence.”

“Now listen to me, young lady. I will not see you do this again, or you can count on me to give you a detention that will make Master Larkwing seem like a saint in comparison. Are we clear on that?”

“Yes, Master Marence.”

“Good. Now off you go. And drink that potion.”

Yrith scurried to the door, but then she stopped, glancing over her shoulder. She hesitated before turning back. “Erm… Master Marence?”

“Yes?”

“You said Master Larkwing changed my detention?”
“That he did. Has he not told you? I suppose he’ll do that soon. Mister Aldaryn has been assigned
the kitchen duty. He has been… trying to prepare our meals. You will have some other task. Now if
you’ll excuse me. There’s a meeting I cannot afford to miss.”

She stormed away, leaving the door open behind her. Yrith spotted several other teachers hurrying
outside. She wondered what the commotion was about but did not dare follow. No sooner than the
door snapped shut behind the last person did she leave Master Marence’s chamber. She drank the
potion on the way to her room, blinking in surprise at its sweet taste. These things were known for
their insufferably bitter flavor. It seemed Master Marence had adopted the habit of putting
snowberries in her potions. That was a good habit.

As she entered the Hall of Attainment, her eyes drifted upwards, to where the kitchen was. Cain as a
chef. She could hardly find a more entertaining image to think of. With a short stop to her room to
drop off the cipher, she made for the stairs. After all, it was not every day she could find something
she was better at.

A knock on the door tore Singird out of his own thoughts. He raised his head to check the hourglass
on his shelf. The crystalline sand emanated soft, almost invisible glow in the darkening room. It was
getting late. The hours he had spent reading in his room left his back stiff and sore.

“Come in,” he called as he rose to meet the guest. A split moment later, the door flew open, revealing
a panting Nirya. Her expression was even surlier than usual. Nirya had a reputation for letting
everyone around know exactly how ‘happy’ she was to see them. The feeling was generally mutual.

“Miss Ervine would like to let you know that all the Collegium is to report to the Arch-Mage’s
quarters at once,” she said without greeting. “She was stressing she does not like to be kept waiting.”

Without another word, the Altmeri woman turned on her heel and left. Singird rolled his eyes. Nirya
was exactly the kind of patron you would love to spend your time with.

He cleaned his desk and searched for a suitable place to hide the book he had received from Urag.
When he put it in the wardrobe amidst his carefully folded robes and shirts, his heart ached, but it
was, after all, the one place Singird Larkwing would never use to store a book. Or so people seemed
to think. He enchanted it with a simple dithering spell that would hide it from prying eyes. A well-
seen mage would not be fooled, but it would at least stall them. With a nod to himself, Singird left the
room.

It was the third time in his life he visited the Arch-Mage’s quarters, but this time, it was not Arch-
Mage Savos Aren who had made them his own. A crooked bare tree with lights floating about
dominated the spacious octagonal room, surrounded by plants of all kinds. Bookcases lined the
walls, accompanied by an enchanting device and an alchemy lab. That was all that had stayed.

Current Arch-Mage seemed to have a passion for flowers, having decorated almost every shelf and
desk with them. They were overgrown, taking the strangest of shapes, and Singird had a feeling it
wasn’t mother Nature who had gifted them with such forms and vibrancy. The bright dragon tongue
flowers took all colors of the rainbow instead of just the usual blue, similar in shape to an actual
dragon head sticking out its tongue. There were pitch black death bells, dangling like chimes in the
wind. When Singird approached them, the even gave the same clinking sound. Then there were
mushrooms, growing out of the stone walls as though they were full of unexpected life. Some of
them belched white smoke, rising to the ceiling in fluffy puffs. The air was damp and warmer than
the rest of the College. The place was breathing with life. It had certainly changed since he had last
been here.
In the center of the room, around the central tree and its garden, several tables formed another octagon. Chairs were lined along them, several occupied by members of the Collegium. Some were gazing stiffly at the tree, others exchanging quiet conversation. Mirabelle Ervine, the Master Wizard of the College, stood at the far end, watching the assembly with a hawk’s eye. Singird frowned. He knew that look. It meant something was very, very wrong.

He sat down beside Lady Faralda. Tolfdir, the old Alteration master, joined him from the other side. Despite his age, he kept his head up, eyes bright and sharp. Tolfdir was known for his vitality and passion for venturing out to discover old secrets, even if he rarely expressed it openly.

“Good evening,” he nodded as he seated himself. “Quite a gathering we have here. What do you suppose is going to happen?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” Singird shook his head. “What about you, Lady Faralda?”

“Who knows. The only thing I’m sure of is that Mirabelle never calls anyone without a reason.”

“True. I just hope it’s not another Eye of Magnus.”

“The Eye of Magnus? I only heard about it. Was it that terrible?” When the mysterious orb of magic, the Eye of Magnus was found in Saarthal and almost destroyed the College, Singird had freshly left the to help his parents with the family farm. It was then when the old Arch-Mage, Savos Aren, gave his life to save the Academia. Singird had only heard rumors about it, but it was the first and the last time he had ever admired Aren. The old Dunmer had a way of ridiculing everyone around. It took him years to acknowledge a person, and even then he would never fully respect them. As for Singird Larkwing, he enjoyed mocking him at every occasion. Singird shuddered at the memory.

“To have to watch Mirabelle struggle for her life after she almost followed Arch-Mage Aren to the grave? To watch the anomalies devour the citizens of Winterhold, and to reap Ancano’s harvest afterwards? To resuscitate the Dragonborn and his sister when they came back from Labyrinthian, almost torn to pieces? Yes, it was terrible. I may be the only one who approves of the Psijics’ choice though. The Eye of Magnus has no place in Winterhold.” Tolfdir rapped his fingers on the empty table before him, watching more members come and take their seats. “They could have at least brought us some water,” he added quietly.

“You certainly aren’t,” Faralda said. “As much as I love the arcane studies…”

She was interrupted by a clap, strangely suffocated in the heavy air. The door snapped shut under the spell of Mirabelle Ervine, watching the small sea of heads that had gathered around the table. She cleared her throat and waited for all the guests to quieten.

“It seems we are complete,” she nodded as she scanned her audience. Singird’s eyes met Urag gro-Shub’s. The orc was sitting on the opposite side, obviously in an even worse mood than before. Singird could imagine. He had witnessed several times how the overzealous librarian dealt with people who tried to drag him out of the Arcanaeum. For Mirabelle to be able to convince him, things must have really been serious.

“How are we complete?” Colette Marence asked, straightening in her seat to watch Mirabelle firmly in the eye. “The Arch-Mage is not here.”

“The Arch-Mage has a very important business to attend to. Which is why I will be hosting this meeting.”

The Master Wizard waited for comments to arise. When there were none, she continued.
“I have grave news for all of you, and a matter I want to discuss. We have been contacted by several Thalmor representatives.” There was a quiet murmur at the word Thalmor. Everyone in the room feared it. Even in the white-blue glow of the floating lights, Tolfdir paled visibly.

“Thalmor?” the word rose from the crowd like poison. “What do they…”

“Please, let me continue. The Aldmeri Dominion is demanding we hand them Leyna Travi immediately. Selas Inarion Travi, her father, is… was, the secretary in the Office of Provincial Studies in Alinor. He was very influential. And now he has deserted.”

“He deserted the Thalmor? In their own territory?! What a fool!” Arniel Gane, the local Dwemer researcher, slapped his own forehead.

“Fool?! Ha! The bravest soul on Nirn!” someone countered.

Mirabelle clapped her hands again. “Enough! We are not here to debate on the thin line between bravery and foolishness. We need to decide how we will handle this matter. If the Thalmor take Miss Travi, we will be sending her to her death at best, but more likely torture. If we keep her…”

Phinis Gestor rose from his seat, a disgruntled vein popping out on his temple. “Surely you can’t be serious! You keep her and you’ll be sending all of us to death! We can’t possibly defend ourselves against a Thalmor army!”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Drevis Neloren opposed. The Dunmer seemed to be the only one who was calm, leaning comfortably to the backrest of his chair.

“Well,” Lady Faralda said matter-of-factly, “it depends on how badly they want her. Indeed, Selas Travi was an influential man from a long dynasty of leaders, but I’m quite positive that the Thalmor won’t want to waste their resources on his little daughter who is hiding in a fortress on some godsforsaken cliff in the far north.”

“I dare disagree,” Singird finally joined the discussion. “They went as far as contacting us just to get their hands on her. The Thalmor never waste their energy on empty threats.”

“What does that even matter?!” Tolfdir jumped up on his feet, skeletal hands digging into the table. “What is the point of this whole discussion? We are civilized people here. We take care of our own!”

“Tolfdir, you of all people—”

“Yes, I of all people! I am no trauma-stricken old geezer who can’t stand a challenge, as many of you seem to think. I just want the best for us!”

“Best for us? I thought we weren’t dealing in politics, and for a damn good reason! Let’s just hand her over and be done with it!”

“I concur! We can’t antagonize the Aldmeri Dominion!”

“Are you people listening to yourselves? Since when are we so…”

“Enough!” Mirabelle thundered over the heads of the Collegium. Many members were on their feet, eyes shooting daggers at whoever dared to oppose them. Four people were still in their seats. Urag gro-Shub who had not uttered a single word during the entire meeting, Drevis Neloren, relaxed and listening to the others with unconcealed interest, Faralda whose unsettled frown spoke its own about what she thought of the whole situation, and Singird whose face mirrored Faralda’s. “Everybody please sit down. We are not here to argue. As much as I want to respect each of you and your
opinions, we need to find a common ground. I will now call your names one by one. I want you to share your opinion and your reasons. Colette. Keep or give?"

"Keep," Colette Marence said resolutely. "Miss Travi is one of our students, after all. By giving her away, we won’t be any better than those Dominion butchers."

Mirabelle nodded. "Nirya."

"Obviously give. Why would we risk our necks over a child of some runaway who doesn’t even belong here?"

Singird clenched his fists. Talk about despicable superficial hypocrisy. He struggled not to snort out loud to let the sleazy Altmer know exactly how he felt about her.

"Phinis."

There was a lull. Everyone held their breaths, waiting for the old Conjuration master’s answer.

"Give," he said at last. "While I would love to agree with Colette here, this is not just about Miss Travi, not even the College. By keeping her, we put in danger every single member and a student, as well as the whole City of Winterhold and everyone who will stand in the Dominion’s way as they approach."

Half expecting his old master’s words, Singird only let out an inaudible sigh. He loved his old master dearly, but some things he simply could not agree on. He wished for him to reconsider. He wanted to believe in him. But at least his reason seemed to make sense.

"Faralda."

Another moment of silence. Singird could almost feel her struggle. Lady Faralda had been born in Cloudrest and raised by members of the Thalmor. This certainly did not classify as one of her favorite topics.

"Keep," she uttered quietly. "Miss Travi is a talented student and a fine addition to the College. Even if there’s a battle, she could still contribute. I do not wish to see her go."

Singird stared at her. And here he was convinced that the Altmer were good at lying. Faralda’s lips trembled. She was more than bothered by the sudden turn of events.

"Master Larkwing."

"Singird is fine," he said thoughtfully. "Keep. I do like my family’s neutrality, but when it comes to the Dominion, I don’t want to let them have their way. The more we do that, the more power they have and the more death they sow."

"Tolfdir."

"Keep. I already said we take care of our own and I stand firm on this one. When you stood up to Ancano, Mirabelle, I thought you the bravest person I’ve ever met. I expect others to follow your example."


"Give. This is too much of a risk. Our research could be in danger. Our lives could be in danger. I
will not put my life on the line like that.”

“Drevis.”

Master Neloren too took his time to ponder the question and prepare the answer, but when he spoke, his voice was firm and his face determined. “Give. I don’t like it and I think we would have a solid chance to win if we decided to hold our ground against the Dominion. But the truth is, we are few and if any of us decided to leave, the tables could turn in favor of the Thalmor. I don’t think it’s worth the risk.”

“Sergius.”

Sergius Turrianus was the local master of enchanting, a man who liked to seclude himself almost as much as he liked to order people around when they dared approach him. He was the one and only member who was entirely opposed to the idea of accepting young students. When he spoke, Singird felt little surprise.

“We are involved in a political conflict here. It’s a situation we were never supposed to find ourselves in. The College was always neutral. Either choice is bad for business and our reputation. I am saying give, just so we can eliminate the problem once and for all. I don’t think the holds would thank us if we antagonized the elves.”

Faralda shot him a look. Singird felt her rage as she dug her nails into the table. Calling the Thalmor “elves” was not the best word choice he could think of.

“Well then, it is five to four in favor of give,” Mirabelle said, letting out a sigh of disconcert. She turned to Urag, the last member. “Urag?”

The librarian bared his teeth and scanned every face in the room. They were motionless, waiting, assessing their chances. He let them do so for a long while. It was a crude way of showing what exactly he thought of every member in the room. And it was very effective. Singird heard knuckles crack as the attendants clenched their fists. Yet again, he, Faralda and Drevis Neloren were the only ones who stayed calm.

“Humbug,” the orc spoke at last as he stood up. “People in the cities are in danger, our research could be lost, blah, blah, blah. How many of you actually think that? How many of you care for more than saving your own pathetic hide? I’ve said it from the beginning. Magic is not for everyone and accepting coin for teaching rich whelps who were cast out of their own families only served to impair us. Yet… it was agreed upon. And now that little outcast to whom we provided shelter, whom we nurtured and cultivated, doesn’t even have a semblance of a family. And we are still so eager to get her out of our way.

“We all joined the College, pledging our lives to this institution. We are also all free to leave at any time. But all of you are sitting here, squabbling like brats who don’t know any better. Are your beds warm enough? Does the local wine suit your delicate tastes? Is the view you get from your windows pleasing? You don’t want to give that up, do you? But responsibility… that you would abandon at any time. I hope you are proud of yourselves.”

He paused to take a breath. His glare alone would be enough to send a frost troll running with its tail between its legs, but his words rendered everyone absolutely speechless.

Singird tried to guess their thoughts. If the five people who had said “give” were now silently cursing the old orc, or whether they were rethinking their life choices.
Urag let himself sink back on his chair. “Keep,” he said. And then he fell silent.

Five to five, and that was it. All the members were stealing glances of each other, waiting for someone to utter a sound. Mirabelle Ervine waited too. Obviously, she did not want to make the final choice herself. A moment passed and she let out a sigh. And just as she was about to speak, the silence was broken.

“Mirabelle?” Phinis Gestor whispered, shifting uneasily in his seat.

“Yes?”

“May I change my vote?”

Singird smiled. Good old Master Gestor. Despite his general confusion and fears, he always made the right choice in the end.

“You may,” Mirabelle gave an approving smile. A few people chuckled. Singird let out the breath he had not even known he was holding.

“Urag, dear Urag,” Drevis said as he shook his head. “You can’t just throw around words like ‘responsibility’ like that. I mean… oh, blast it to Oblivion. I am changing my vote too.”

There were chuckles here and there, until they turned into the merry chimes of laughter. People shook their heads, incredulous of the worries they’d had just moments before. Only three of them, Nirya, Arnuel and Sergius, did not join the rest in their mirth. Their faces were sour, their frames stiff. No one paid them any heed. Mirabelle took a few moments to scan the room before she clapped her hands once more, demanding quiet.

“It seems most of us have come to an agreement,” she said. “We should now—”

“A fine agreement it is,” Sergius grumbled, rising from his seat. “So it was decided to keep Leyna Travi. But what do you do once the elves,” Faralda winced again, this time ready to jump up if not for Phinis Gestor who extended his hand to stop her, “march into Winterhold and attack us?”

“We will deal with the threat when it comes. For now, we need to decide what exactly we are going to tell the Thalmor.”

Singird raised a hand. “May I suggest something?”

“Yes, Master Larkwing?”

“Singird is fine,” he repeated. As the youngest in the Collegium, it felt strange to be the only one called by his title. He could almost swear Mirabelle did it just to mock him. Perhaps just to walk in the footsteps of Savos Aren whom she had loved dearly. “How about we stall for time? We don’t need to give the Thalmor a direct answer, do we?”

“I am surprised you of all people should come up with something like this, but it seems like a sound idea indeed.”

“No, it doesn’t! Won’t that just incite the elves?”

“Enough with the elves! I am an elf! And I am incited right now!”

“Lady Faralda…”

“Faralda is fine… Singird. Don’t stop me, I’ve had enough of his…”
“But he’s right, isn’t he?”
“I beg your pardon?!”

Singird took a breath. He had to tread carefully on this battleground where every word could mean antagonizing the entire Collegium. His parents had prided themselves to be impartial, unmoved by any events that did not concern them directly, yet they had somehow managed to stay on everyone’s good side. Until the day they were killed. What was that thing his father used to tell him?

The only person you can trust is yourself. That doesn’t mean you cannot make others trust you.

He disagreed. Trust must be mutual. But it must also be true.

“I mean… not literally. He is right that you are an elf. And they are elves. You grew up among them and know how they think. Am I correct? Can we not use it to our advantage?”

“You dare… I am different!”

“Of which I have no doubt, and it is exactly what gives us the advantage. You understand us. You also understand them. I know you have a way with words, La… Faralda. I am convinced you’d find the right ones to resolve this situation.”

“Master Larkwing, that is highly inappropriate…”

“No. He is correct. I have the knowledge and experience necessary to deal with the Thalmor. After all, I did convince them to let me leave Alinor with no blood spilled. But… the risk is great. The only way to make an orthodox Thalmor listen is to convince them they’d profit from it. What could we possibly offer them?”

Drevis Neloren snorted. “Power,” he said.

“No!” half of the Collegium yelled in unison.

“Absolutely not,” Tolfdir joined, voice firm and so was his face. “That would make the whole Eye of Magnus incident pointless. Savos Aren would have died in vain.”

“Knowledge?”

“Out of the question!” Urag growled. “The library will stay pristine.”

“We can offer them both. As long as it serves to our advantage in the end.”

“And do you know how?”

Through the veil of apprehension, a smile flickered on Faralda’s face. “Let me explain.”

When the meeting was finally over, everyone’s stomachs were growling with hunger. Singird felt tired, ready to retreat in his bed after the dinner. The sun had long vanished under the western horizon and the moons were hiding behind a thick blanket of clouds. The blue fountain in the courtyard seemed to be stifled by the surrounding darkness. Everyone was silent, with no strength left to discuss the recent events. But then, as they passed the focal point, the door to the Hall of Attainment flew open, revealing a panting Cain Aldaryn.

The Dunmer’s face was frantic, lined with horror. He was shaking, clenched fists pressed to his thighs, and when he spoke, his trembling voice was hoarse.
“M-midget… Yrith Ravencroft!” he cried. “Please, help! She’s… not gonna make it!”

Singird paled, jumping to his side before anyone else could react. “Where is she? What happened?!”

“Up there,” Cain pointed a shaky finger at the top of the Hall of Attainment. “Please…”

Singird did not wait for him to finish. Without a second thought, he darted inside.

Chapter End Notes

Sooo… the last part was a real challenge. Having eleven people in one room, all talking, each expressing different opinion… I hope you didn’t get lost and kept track of who said what. I tried my best to make it apparent without slowing the dialogue down with too many speech tags. So… yeah. Hopefully you enjoyed it.

I was thinking of splitting this chapter in two but then I decided not to. It has two scenes, yeah, but they share the theme of Leyna’s father and it slowly rises to a climax… or at least that was my intention. I hope I did a decent job.

Thanks to everyone who gave me comments, kudos or who bookmarked my story!

Thanks to Tildemancer for proofreading and some very valuable feedback!

See you next time!

Mirwen
The Hall of Attainment was lively this time of the day, full of quiet murmurs and loud laughs, passionate chattering, clapping of the boots on the stone floor and incessant echoes. Yrith did her best to blend in, ignoring the words that flew around her like streams in a river. She heard her name a few times, thinking to herself sardonically she had become quite popular. Out of the corner of her eye, she took notice of Qassir, waving at her and inviting her to keep him company. She quickly shook her head and made her way up to the kitchen.

It was empty, save for a Dunmer boy standing by a desk, one hand propped against it while the other was gripping a knife. His only company was the cold oven and a cask full of fish. The kitchen was almost as barren as the rest of the Hall of Attainment, reflecting the state of necessity the College found itself in. If it was up to Yrith, she would have named it the Forlorn Tower, for everything seemed grey and forgotten here, compared to the rest of the College which was cozy and bright with magic. She gazed at the lone figure before her and pondered how much he had changed. How much he reminded her of herself.

His back was bent as he observed his own work. Several unevenly cut pieces of salmon which would definitely burn at their edges while the cores would stay raw and tasteless. Yrith took a step toward him, but then she stopped, deciding to observe. He was not aware of her presence yet, struggling with the fish. But when he took the knife and sliced the next fish as though he was facing an enemy, stance firm like a warrior with his feet spread to maintain balance, an insuppressible laugh escaped her lips. He turned around and his face went from troubled to irked.

“What are you gawking at?” he snapped, waving the blade in the air. Yrith was relieved he was so far.

“Nothing,” she shrugged. “Just observing the situation.”

“So you have come to entertain yourself at my expense. Great, I’ve obviously met your expectations. By the gods, I do hope Larkwing will make you do something that involves a lot of Destruction magic.”

“Fine,” she said matter-of-factly, one foot slightly turned in a hint of departure, “if you don’t want me to help, I’ll just leave.”

The Dunmer snorted. “That’s the first time I’m hearing about help.”

“So?”

With the knife still in his hand and a smirk on his face, he crossed his arms over his chest, twirling it in his fingers. “Suit yourself,” he said theatrically.

Yrith felt the red dye her cheeks. How dare he! “You little… ungrateful…!”

“Yes? I thought you were leaving.”

“I am leaving!”
“Then go ahead. I’ll manage. Well, after all, you’ll be the one eating my cooking.”

“Ah, Oblivion take it! Give me that knife.”

“But I thought you were…”

“I’m not leaving.”

Cain laughed. Yrith had never heard him laugh like that. It was pure, full of mirth, and so uncharacteristic for a Dunmer. The voice filled the room and its space, darkening as the sun outside was slowly fading beyond the mountains, suddenly felt brighter. She watched him thoughtfully and had to respond with a smile just as sincere.

“I thought so,” he said as he handed her the knife, blade pointing at his person in utter caution for her safety. Yrith could not comprehend where the sudden affection came from, but she could not bring herself to doubt him. She gripped the handle, brows shooting upwards in a question. He caught the hint. “Ignorance is not your strong point,” he added with a shrug.

She pondered whether that was an insult or a compliment. Deciding not to think on it too much, she took the knife and a new fish to work with.

“So, about the salmon…”

She remembered it well, the way one cuts a fish along its spine and removes its fins, the way to make the slices thin so they become crisp and tender when they are fried. Back when her parents were alive, just after they had moved to Winterhold, the city still had a fishery of its own. She often came there to help, having few reasons to stay at home. She was always welcome there and often rewarded with fresh fish to take home. Upon her return, she would always get a pat on the head and a word of praise from her mother.

“This,” she said as the knife slid through the rosy meat, “is how you cut it. You want the meat to be tender and seasoning to blend in, so…”

“Well, troll’s dung. That thing we eat here is never tender, and I’ll be a blasted daedroth if it ever was seasoned.”

“That’s because it’s made by Nirya.”

Cain’s face twisted in the sour memory of the smug Altmer. Nirya, the local errand girl who was so convinced she was the greatest, or, rather, the only real contributor at the College. The elven outcast who liked to get delusional about Lady Faralda and her supposed jealousy toward Nirya, too absorbed in her own dreamworld to see that no one gave two septims about her.

“That… I can’t argue with.”

The two of them laughed. As Yrith sliced the fish, Cain sifted through various kitchen equipment in search of another knife, asking one question after another. Yrith was amused. The rich boy had never seen a kitchen with his own eyes, much less used it, and now he was curious like a little child on an exploration trip, wondering why there was a large spoon with holes in it or why the ladle he had just picked up had teeth.

“So you’ve never visited the kitchen in your manor?” Yrith asked, unable to imagine what his life could have been like without the chance to snatch things from the chefs. She had always believed every noble had to have a history of stealing treats from the kitchen. Then again, perhaps it was not so exciting when one could just ask and they would be delivered right away.
“Is that a jest? Of course I haven’t, that’s what we have footmen for.”

“Right.”

“Still, I’m wondering why all this is necessary when we have magic. Can’t we just magically slice all these? Or, rather, turn them into a feast with a single spell?”

Yrith shrugged. “Can you actually do that?” She laid an umpteenth slice into a stoneware bowl before her.

Without a word of warning, Cain pulled up his sleeves and fired a meteor of icy shards at a fish Yrith had just prepared for cutting. She jumped back, pointing an accusing finger at him.

“What in Oblivion are you…”

“Well, that didn’t exactly go as planned,” he mused as he inspected his work. All that was left of the fish was a mass of shapeless pink-flushed matter, hardly reminiscent of the creature it used to be.

“Obviously,” Yrith uttered dryly, wiping the remnants of the fish from her robe. At the back of her mind, she was grateful Master Larkwing could not see her like this. “Maybe we should return to the more… mundane methods.”

He let out a snort. “This is even more boring than having to go fetch them.”

“Quit complaining. You can heat up the oven with your magic.”

“Yes, mom.” A corner of Yrith’s mouth twitched, but she let the comment slide. After all, she was the uninvited guest here.

It had gotten dark when the two of them were finished. Occasionally, a student’s head peeked in from the staircase, inspecting whether it was time to eat. There were a few spiteful comments addressed at the two of them for being slackers, slowbones and other nasty words beginning with S-L, but they only laughed them off. Yrith caught herself smiling for no reason. Despite the rough beginnings, she was starting to enjoy the day. There were people she could call friends now. She could not feel the weariness the lack of sleep had brought her, only strange comfort she had not felt in a long time. Once or twice there was the feeling that nothing could go wrong now. The feeling of happiness she was trying to teach to Leyna… she was now living it.

She picked up a roasted salmon fillet. It was a good piece. Much more appealing than the ones from Nirya, made with care and precision. Ransacking the local supplies, Yrith had found a long lost jar of Nibenese sour pepper which she immediately decided to use. Now she watched the final product with pride.

“I want to see them say anything bad about it now,” she said as she nibbled on the fish. She felt a tingle in her belly, making nothing of it. She realized had not eaten the whole day.

Cain joined her, back against the wall and mouth stuffed to the brim. They enjoyed a moment of silence before the students started flooding the room, snatching portions to fill their hungry stomachs. Yrith watched as Ha’risha, accompanied by her usual group of lackeys, passed them on their way. The Khajiit girl picked up the fish, twitching her whiskers as she let it hang from her claws.

“After all the coin that was invested in this place, we still get to eat this,” she remarked, dropping the fish on the floor. “Made by two delinquents instead of a certified chef. Say, Aernil,” she turned to the crème Altmeri boy at her side, “would your parents approve of this?”
“Absolutely not,” came the expectedly smug reply. Cain clenched his free fist, his grip tightening around a fork as he stepped forward, but Yrith grabbed his shoulder. Before she could say anything to placate the irate Dunmer, another voice came across the kitchen, silencing all the others.

“Well well, that’s a pleasant change. Not only is our urchin a good mage, she’s also a good cook. Now, what was that about approvals or whatnot?”

Ha’risha stared at the approaching Redguard, tail and ears drooping down in unconcealed shame. If it was anyone but Qassir, Yrith would have laughed. Her eyes met with his and her stomach knotted. Had she not helped Cain with the meal, he would not have bothered coming to their aid, of that she was certain. The Dunmer boy beside her glared at him in apparent displeasure. Yrith tensed. Why did there have to be discord at every occasion she met her classmates?

“I hate my home. It’s filled with anger and strife. And I hate this place too because it’s just about the same.”

How much effort did it take for Cain to not give in to the anger he harbored deep inside? How much did he resent the world that had treated him with nothing but hostility? He could smile. He knew joy. But this world refused to give it to him. Her stomach churned and tumbled, perhaps with disgust. Brows knit in anger, she blocked Cain’s way with her own body, but the moment she stood face to face with both Ha’risha and Qassir, her vision blurred and her mind went blank. She could not utter a word. Rage gnawed at her from the inside but the words got lost somewhere on their way, before they could surface. Was she afraid?

“What now, commoner? Are you going to wave your hands like before? The same trick won’t fool us twice.” Ha’risha’s voice sounded distant. Yrith felt a stabbing pain in her chest and belly. Had she swallowed a fin? But she had made sure she pulled them out before putting the fish in the oven.

“Midget?” Someone touched her upper arm.

She inhaled and pain overtook her. It shot through her whole body and reached the tips of her fingers. She fell on her knees and heard a burst of laughter, shaking the whole kitchen and deafening her person in a sudden wave of clarity. She gasped.

“Now that’s more like it!” the Khajiit girl sneered and the rest of her group laughed.

“Shut up, you stupid cat, she’s choking!”

“And? It’s not my fault she left fins in the fish…”

“Silence!” Yrith could hardly concentrate on the words around her, but the angry voice of Qassir caught her by surprise. “She’s not just choking, this is…”

“Disgusting!”

“Midget! What is that thing?”

Yrith could feel something dripping from her mouth. It was heavy and viscous. Her blurry vision spotted nothing but dark stain on the floor that was slowly growing wider. It was as though she was being decomposed. Her body felt heavy and light at the same time as energy left her. Something was devouring her from the inside, feeding on her flesh and soul alike. She was being drained, and the nightmarish visions returned to her. One by one, images of tormented people she had seen and felt before flicked before her eyes, then slowly dissolved into nothingness. She was fading. Her very existence was evaporating. But that was impossible. In a brisk moment of realization, she knew what this was. The deadliest, most terrifying poison of them all. The one that would make death final and
ultimate. But it could not be. It simply couldn’t.

“Death…” was the only thing she managed to squeeze out through the tightening throat and chattering teeth. Deathbell, she wanted to say. Deathbell, Nimroot and Nightshade, the deadly trio that was her only hope now. But she could not finish, her own body was betraying her.

“Let me see her! I know some healing spells!” a girl’s voice demanded. It was clear and melodic, and it hurt her ears. Yrith had a feeling she had once known its owner, but the memory of her flickered and died. She could not remember. Not anymore. Everything was fading, the feelings, the memories, all that she knew. There was only pain, piercing, numbing, searing and freezing. She wanted to breathe but could not find her lungs. Only nothingness filled her body. She could not feel herself hit the ground. She could not feel the hands that lifted her gently and wiped the strange black fluid off her face, only to be stained by another burst.

“NO! Healing spells will only speed up the disintegration! I will…”

“Disintegration?! What in Oblivion…”

“No time to… godsdamn blazes! Stay with her, Dunmer, don’t let her pass out. I’ll bring an antidote.”

“There’s an antidote?!”

The sound of footsteps grew more and more distant. Voices mingled, cries of despair, disgusted snorts and gasps alike. Yrith was now watching the flicker of her own soul from afar. She wanted to grasp it, absorb it, but she could not reach it. It was drifting apart, further and further away with every breath she attempted and failed to draw. There was an existence inside her, alien, feeding on her life, taking the space that was meant for her. She wanted to cry out, but she could not. She should be afraid, yet even fear avoided her, drowned in the sea of nothingness along with everything else. She was fading. The world was fading. The voices were fading.

“Hold her…”

“No!”

“Wait…”

“… will get help…”

“… hurry…!”

“…’s dying!”

“There’s more…”

The words blurred into quiet murmurs, then almost inaudible hums. She could not feel anything anymore. She could not remember either. She did not know how she had come to exist and what her name was. Names, words… useless labels attached to various forms of energy. Energy that did not belong to her anymore. A higher existence took it, one that should have possessed it from the beginning of time. She would give it willingly. She had no right to have it. No right to exist.

There was silence, and then, even the silence began fading. There would be no more grief, no more pain, no—

Something tore through the nothing and broke the silence. A cry that came through as a quiet rustle
as though it was muffled by a thick mass of curtains. There were more, and they brought pain. Yrith struggled. Why should she come back? Why come back into that tempestuous world where even breathing is exhausting? Why fight and suffer when one could just give in?

“—croft!”

A familiar voice. One that promises safety. One that cares. She hesitated. It was still so far away, and the pain was already excruciating. Retreat, go back into nothingness where there is no pain. She wanted to cry out, but she had no voice nor breath to work with. She was empty. Though slowly but surely, the voice filled her. It gave energy, life. It brought back memories she had left behind, somewhere far away.

“Stay with me!”

The words shook her. She wanted to cover her ears, avoid the insuppressible aching, but it came again, and again, calling for her, seeking her attention and prodding her to come back. The tension returned. Pain shot through her, reminding her that she still had a body of her own. It flashed through her fingers, brimmed over her limbs, flooded her head and chest. She let out a deafening cry.

“Hold her mouth open, we have to get this in!”

She tried to open her eyes, but the light hurt them tremendously. Tears dripped from her face in waterfalls and mingled with the puddle of dark fluid that had soiled her entire body.

“Midget!”

“Is she responding?”

“I don’t know!”

“Stop shouting so loud!”

“Miss Ravencroft!”

“Yrith…”

She coughed as a new wave of pain seared her throat. Someone was holding her jaws, tightly securing them in an uncomfortably gaping position. It was hard to breathe through the mass of matter that was being forced into her. She tried to struggle, but she had no strength left. A muffled cry was the only reaction she could give. Someone beside her squealed with joy.

“She is responding!”

The matter was bitter and painful. She felt it sink down her throat and infuse her inner tissues. It was fending off the nothing that had threatened to absorb her, leaving around pain that was entirely physical, brutish and very, very real. She groaned and her eyes cracked open. The light from the candles hurt and blinded her. Tears made everything a smudged blot. She gasped for air, and suddenly, she could breathe. Every breath pricked her lungs like a stinger, but it also sent in new life. She kept inhaling, gaining a steady tempo as her vision sharpened.

She stared into the face of Singird Larkwing. She could barely discern his features against the light behind him, but the dread in his eyes that he tried to hide behind his typical stone-hard mask was apparent nonetheless.

“Miss Ravencroft? Are you with us?” She knew his voice was but a whisper, yet it still sounded so
loud and sharp to her ears. Her head hurt. Her whole body ached and trembled. She did not have the strength to reply. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted many other people gathered around in a circle, all watching her, but they were all just blurry figures in the murk. She closed her eyes and let the darkness take her.

“Caw, caw,” the crow lamented in the dark. It sang its cries and tore the silence. The unpleasant sound was strangely muffled, as though the poor bird was covered by a thick blanket, but the ominous voice still sent shivers down her spine. It spoke of dark times and foreshadowed eternal night. It wept like a banshee, yet its voice creaked like that of an old hag. “Caw, caw!” it went again.

Yrith opened her eyes and the darkness dispersed. It took her a moment to adjust to the bright light of the day. She blinked, trying to discern the number of floating shapes that wriggled before her. Unsuccessfully for a moment, she forced herself to focus. The shapes were laughing at her weakness, tormenting her eyes. She closed them and opened them again, patiently, systematically. With every breath, the blurred room became sharper, and finally she could see the window just by her bed, and the crow sitting on the ledge outside. She did her best to frown at it, and the black bird, as if sensing her irk, rose with a flap of its wings and disappeared in the distance.

With all the effort she could muster, she turned her head around, scanning the room. She was feeling weak, but also uneasy. The window opened to cloudy skies, which meant she was not in her own room. She only knew one teacher whose room was this high up. Just as she suspected, she found Singird Larkwing sitting at his desk, absorbed in a book. The room was so silent she could hear her own breath, and, as always, perfectly organized. She was not lying on Master Larkwing’s bed. Instead, it seemed another one had been moved to this room just for her. Was she dreaming?

She tried to pull the blanket that was draped over her closer. It was warm and comfortable, much warmer than her own down in the Hall of Attainment. Her aching body found the little comfort it could and it was not enough. She let out a soft moan, barely audible but loud enough to attract the attention of Singird Larkwing.

He turned around so abruptly Yrith could only see a smudged silhouette. “Miss Ravencroft! You’re awake.”

Had her body allowed it, she would have flushed like a ripe apple. The concern in his voice was so apparent, banging at her with urgency she had not known from him before. He hurried to her side, and in an instant, she felt his hand on her forehead. A wave of cold came over her, his hand feeling like ice. She shuddered visibly. He knit his brows in return.

“We need to do something about this fever,” he said.

She tried to raise her eyes at him, but her head felt too heavy. In a split moment, she was panting as though she had run a great distance.

“Stop. You are too weak yet.”

He did not have to remind her. She could not even clench her fists to let out her frustration. If she could at least bury her head deep under the pillow. But she was left at his mercy, feeling entirely vulnerable. She closed her eyes in exhaustion.

“How long…” she tried and her voice was but a whisper, much quieter than she had hoped for it to be.

“How long have you been here, you mean? Four days, and it looks like you will need much more
“Four…!” she would have sat up, but the moment she tried to flex the necessary muscles, remnants of the pain that had claimed her back in the kitchen paralyzed her. She hissed and felt moisture in her eyes.

“By the Divines, you’re stubborn as a mule! Stop waggling around like this, you need to rest!”

There were so many questions she wanted to ask. So many unknowns she needed to uncover, but she felt the bed sucking her in like quicksand. The blanket was so warm and heavy, and she felt her eyelids sink, drowning her in darkness once more. She heard Master Larkwing call her name before slumber took her.

She woke up into a moonlit night, with her lips and throat parched and stomach growling with agonizing hunger. Master Larkwing lay on his bed, deep in his dreams, but there was a decanter on his desk. If she could just reach it… but it was so far away. She drew in a few breaths. With a fairly swift movement, considering her condition, she swung herself up on her feet. For a moment, she stood by the bed, daring herself to take the first step. As she did, the world suddenly turned upside down.

Next thing she felt was the hard corner of the table hitting her head before it crashed onto the carpeted floor. She cried out with pain, spitting curses in her raspy whisper. She could barely hear the rustle that came from Master Larkwing’s bed before he appeared at her side.

“Why in Oblivion can’t you listen just for once?” he sighed as he slid an arm under her to pick her up. “What were you trying to do anyway?”

“Water…” she said, grunting as he lifted her. For someone of such a thin figure, he was surprisingly strong.

“I could have brought it to you.”

“You were… asleep.”

He lay her back on the bed, propping her against the wall with a pillow as a cushion, and gently wrapped her in the blanket.

“You could have woken me up,” he continued.

“I… didn’t want to… disturb you.” The barely audible mutter reflected how small she was feeling, fussed over by her own teacher, weak and in need. And then he only made it worse.

“What a silly argument,” he said as he patted her on the head. “It’s what I’m here for.”

Inadvertently, she glared at him. “Who are you and what have you done with Singird Larkwing?” was what she would have liked to say. She kept it to herself. So he was ridiculing her now. Surely it must be so amusing to watch her struggle like that.

He came quick with a mug full of water, holding it to her lips so she would not have to strain herself, guiding the water in her mouth with a stream of magicka. It was humiliating. Yrith averted her gaze so she would not have to look at the infuriatingly considerate teacher.

“Why am I here?” she asked. It was an obvious question, yet she felt a tingle of embarrassment as she posed it. This was perhaps the best place she could have ended up at, but she would never admit it to Singird Larkwing.
The teacher gave a long, weary sigh. He did not hurry with the answer, letting the silence linger. It was not a heavy silence. He seemed to ponder the right words, staring at his own magically imbued fingers.

“We needed to keep you at a guarded place and my room is the biggest in the College. When I’m out teaching or researching in the Arcanaeum, Lady Faralda and Miss Marence take turns watching over you.”

Yrith watched the water sparkle in the moonlight and the blue glow. So much effort just so she could live. So many people discarding their comfort or even risking their lives for her.

“Did you… were you the one who cured me back then?”

“No,” he shook his head and she could trace an almost unnoticeable hint of shame in his voice. “That would be Qassir Tahlrah.”

Forgetting her previous state of mind, Yrith stared at him. Qassir? Her own classmate? Impossible. It would mean that he was much more than he had made himself out to be. How in Oblivion had he managed to create the antidote? Unless…

“Could he… be a spellbrewer?” she mused, more to herself than the teacher at her side. He froze and the water splashed onto Yrith’s blanket. He immediately dried it up with a spell.

“I beg your pardon?”

“N-nothing!” How could she possibly tell Singird Larkwing about Spirit Blight? The fact that she had been warned about it by her parents who knew how to concoct it was disquieting enough, but to frame Qassir who had always come to her aid when she was in danger? Then again, that too was disquieting. He had come when the avalanche had almost buried her alive. He had come when she had been poisoned. And the fact she had been poisoned…

She had not thought so far. Why was this happening to her? Just who could hate her so much that they would try to kill her with Spirit Blight? Had she made such powerful enemies? Was the AWA trying to punish her for killing her parents? Or had she just been in the wrong place at the wrong time?

Master Larkwing was telling her something, expressing disapproval at her denial, something about protecting her, but she could only hear a soft echo of his voice, watching his mouth move and his brows knit. Her turbid thoughts put shutters on her ears. She realized something that had been lingering in her for a while, something she was too busy to see. She was afraid. Or, rather, terrified. Perhaps someone was aiming for her life. The stories she had read about valiant heroes who were on the brink of death all the time, those who fought for the whole world with no fear or remorse… she had thought she knew them so well, but suddenly, she could not identify. Whoever the culprit was, they had tried to corrupt her with a concoction that would shatter her soul. There would be no Aetherius for her, not even Oblivion. She would cease to exist entirely. The nothing that had tried to take her… it was too dreadful to think of.

Her back slid over the pillow as she curled up, hugging her knees. Despite her state, she felt energy gather in her, threatening to cast loose. It was difficult to breathe, to overcome the torrent of emotions that washed over her in waves. What if no one is there to save her next time? And if it really was the AWA, how could she ever escape?

She felt a grip on her shoulder. It made her wince and recoil before she realized it was just Singird Larkwing watching her with a frown that was not unkind. She raised her head to meet his gaze. It
was blurry and smudged. She was showing him this face again, this weak side of her that she hated so much. Why was it always him?

“Miss Ravencroft?” he asked with that unsettling urgency. “Are you feeling unwell?”

“I…”

She was afraid. Afraid of death, afraid of suffering, afraid of nonexistence… and afraid of telling her teacher that she was afraid. But she felt it surface, the suffocating need to shout it out to the whole world. She needed to release it, to set those feelings free. Disrupted by sobs, she took a breath.

“I’m… scared,” she whispered, and her own voice sounded strangely distant to her. But it brought her unexpected relief. Gaining the slightest bit of self-assurance, she clenched her fists. “I’m so scared!”

She was not ready to explain herself, but Master Larkwing did not ask for it. He froze, waiting for the longest three heartbeats in her life. Then he slowly nodded and did something Yrith would have never expected.

His arms closed around her in a tight embrace.

Singird was dumbfounded by his own actions. What had he just done? Was he really hugging Miss Ravencroft as though she was his own? How would he explain it when he finally let go? Concern did not justify it. He was her teacher, not a parent, or…

He maintained his grip. It was better than to look her in the face. In that crying, sad face that knew suffering like no other. He was taken aback by her honesty. Despite everything that had happened between them, she had decided to rely on him. Or perhaps she just needed to rely on someone and he was the only person nearby, but he felt slightly happy about it nonetheless. It was the kind of happiness he would have never expected to adopt.

He realized now that it was more than a teacher’s duty or his lust for power that led him to protect her. When he saw her that night, suffocating and drowning in the black matter that her own body had produced, his heart nearly stopped. Not because he saw something disgusting or unclean before his eyes, and not because of the possibility to lose her power. He was genuinely terrified he might lose her, this little girl he had been lying to, the girl whose sense of responsibility was far too great for her own good. The girl who, despite all that, was at times like the Skyrim gale that goes where it pleases.

It had taken him hours of talking and all his wits and resourcefulness to convince Lady Faralda to leave her in his care. He did not want her to leave his sight. Whenever she did, something happened. His room was enchanted with innumerable protective spells, a joint effort of Lady Faralda, Master Neloren and yours truly. While she was there, she would be safe.

He held her tightly. She was burning like embers, still shaking with fever mixed with her fear. She shifted in his arms, obviously unsure of his gesture, and he could not blame her. He was unsure himself. He had felt compelled to return her honesty, but this was something beyond his expectations. His body had simply moved on its own.

He had to let go. If he was to ever have a normal conversation with her, he had to let go.

And so he did.

His arms gripped her tight and it was hard to breathe. Yet it was also comforting, a little safe haven
she had found amidst all the struggles. He had betrayed her, or so she thought, but perhaps she was mistaken. Throughout their interactions, he had never expressed anything but care. And now, somehow, he knew exactly what she needed. Despite himself, he went out to give it to her.

She shifted uneasily. She wanted to accept his gift, but she was unsure if she was allowed to. She could smell his scent. It was a scent of cleanliness, like freshly starched linens, but it also had an undertone of exotic spices. Everything that was Singird Larkwing was contained in that scent. Hesitantly, she reached for him, but then, like a tide that’s reaching its low, he drew away.

She raised her head to meet his gaze. It was full of conflict that was more internal than directed at her, and she knew her own eyes mirrored it. There was silence, a mix of heavy atmosphere where none of them knew what to say with something more. A mystery they both wanted to explore. Yrith had forgotten about everything. Her mind felt blank. They looked at each other for a long while, silent and motionless, until she finally decided to break it with a single word.

“Why?” she said.

He did not hurry with his answer and she waited, patient, yet anxious. Then he hinted a smile.

“You seemed like you needed it. And you haven’t gotten the chance since…”

It was not like Singird Larkwing to not finish his sentences. It was more unlike him to be considerate enough to not articulate words that could put salt in her wounds. Who was he and what had he done with Singird Larkwing?

She nodded in thanks, unable to voice the answer. In the quiet of the room, she could hear snowflakes softly tapping on the window. The dark of the night was receding, giving way to the greyness of the upcoming morning. The glow of the hourglass dominating the shelves was fading. She had woken Master Larkwing up at such an ungodly hour.

“Time sure flies,” he stated absently as he rose to his feet. “I’ll get you a meal. You need to build up your strength. I think Lady Faralda should be here any moment.”

With that, he retreated to his cupboard in search of food. Yrith watched him for a while, but then her weary eyes closed by themselves and once again, she submerged into the darkness. By the time she woke up, her meal would be long cold and Master Larkwing would be gone for a lecture, leaving her in the care of Lady Faralda.

Days passed. No nightmares tormented Yrith in the nights. Her magic had been drained entirely by the Spirit Blight and she was only slowly regaining it. She did not have to feign anything this time. She was truly powerless, unable to cast the simplest of spells. The only difference was that Singird Larkwing was not angry with her and she felt much worse than before, knowing she had no way of protecting herself against anything.

Master Larkwing kept her in his room, only letting her out in his, Lady Faralda’s or Master Marence’s company. He returned to his usual grumpy disposition, but at times she could spot softness in his voice, like water under a thin layer of ice, bubbling with warmth from its depths. Yrith was not happy about the lack of privacy her self-proclaimed protector did not seem to care about, but he did supply her with books to spend time with. After a few days of Yrith’s constant pleading, he divided his own room with a curtain to let her have a semblance of her own space, but he still insisted on having her in his sight most of the time.

Yrith felt uneasy. Lady Faralda often left for “important business”, Colette Marence seemed agitated
because her healing techniques were useless against the after-effects of the Spirit Blight, and Master Larkwing emanated a strange vibe of anxiousness which added to her fear. Her new friends were out there, learning magic. Despite never being left to herself, she felt more alone than ever.

She could not insist on going outside. She was still afraid, still shaken from all that had transpired. There were times when she could not even concentrate on reading anymore. She would just lie on her bed, chin against her knees, and try to forget everything. Other days she would stare out of the window and envy the dragons out there who dominated the skies without anything threatening them. She wished to soar and be free. And she wished to have friends by her side.

“Master Larkwing?” she called to him one day, averting her eyes from the book she was supposedly reading. In fact, she had been staring blankly at it for a good while, pondering the words she should choose to address him. Master Larkwing was prone to moodiness and her words often caused him to snap. It took her some courage to speak up. He took his eyes off the fish he was examining for poison, giving her a thoughtful stare.

“What is it?” he asked simply. He put no feelings in his words, no indicator of his current frame of mind. She bit her lip.

“I was thinking… could I maybe… visit some of my classmates?”

“No.” He returned to the fish, imbuing it with detection magic.

“Or maybe we could invite them over…”

“No.” He did not even turn around the second time. His eyes scanned every inch, every single dot or irregularity they found. It floated in the air before him as though it was swimming in the ocean where it belonged.

“Not even for a short while? If I could just speak to Leyna or Cain for a minute…”

The fish landed on Master Larkwing’s desk with a plop. With a sigh, he put it on a plate. His eyes turned to Yrith, brows knit in strong disapproval. She winced and turned away.

“Miss Ravencroft,” he said as he joined her on her side of the room, “do you even realize what kind of danger you’re in?”

Yrith stared at him for a while. What kind of question was that? How could she not know? All that fear and frustration and loneliness she had been feeling suddenly swelled within her, trying to make their way to the surface. She gritted her teeth and stood up to meet his gaze. In the end, he still did not understand anything.

“You mean the danger of losing my entire existence which I have no means of protecting myself against? Of having my soul shattered? I… what’s going to change if you confine me here? What will it matter if I regain my magic?!” Rage. Burning, blazing rage. She felt it rise within her, take out the words she could only use when she was angry. The walking book act, as Cain liked to call it. Why was this happening to her? What had she done to deserve this? “No magic will save me from the Spirit Blight…”

“Miss Ravencroft…”

“… and no magic will protect me from the AWA!”

“Miss Ravencroft!”
“Nothing I do will ever…”

“Miss Ravencroft, slow down! Listen to me, for the Divines’ sake!”

She stared at him, rooted to the spot. He gripped her shoulders, dark eyes pinned to hers, face stone-hard as usual, but not unkind. He was not angry with her. She could only spot concern.

“Sit down,” he pointed at her bed when she finally caught her breath. “Let us talk.”

She sank down, feeling defeated. Why wasn’t he angry? Why didn’t he give her the reaction she was expecting? She would have snapped right back at him. She would have returned the favor tenfold and slammed the door behind herself, only to feel better. There would be no need to apologize because she’d have the right of it. She glared at a curl on the carpet pattern as though it was its fault that this happened.

“I know you are lonely,” he said as he joined her. “And I know you’re afraid and angry. You have every right to be. Someone’s aiming for your life and you don’t even know why. But please, be patient. We are trying to find out as much as we can about them. For the time being, we have to keep you safe. And that means keeping you away from potential suspects.”

She turned her glare up at him. “You don’t mean Cain and Leyna, do you?”

“I can’t be certain about Miss Travi, but Cain Aldaryn was with you every time something happened.”

“He didn’t do it!”

“As much as we want to believe that, we have to be careful. And you too, Miss Ravencroft. Do not let your trust turn into gullibility.”

Yrith clenched her fists. How could he! There was no way Cain could ever do this. After all, he could not even master expanding his own consciousness. There was no way.

“Cain isn’t a spellbrewer,” she hissed through gritted teeth.

“Indeed,” he mused, “but you’ve said that about Qassir Tahlrah. Care to explain?”

He really did not understand anything. She watched him closely, the face that was not just worried, but also curious and a bit of something else, something mysterious. She had already told him so much… but not nearly enough. She herself could not grasp the whole truth. She had asked so many questions when her parents were alive, of which only a small portion had been answered. She was frustrated and worried every time something happened to them. And now Singird Larkwing was in the same position. He was asking, yet he was not getting answers in return. She was being cruel to the person who had made her life at the College bearable. The first one to take her side, although he had no obligation to do so. She bit her lip.

“Can I ask a question first?” she peeped. She knew she was out of her line, and she had been ever since the first word of this discussion. But there were steps to be performed before she would trust him fully.

He raised a brow. “What is it?”

“Why do you help me so?”

Master Larkwing froze visibly. His face darkened with something very lonely and painful. Was it…
guilt? He let out a deep breath.

“One day, you had to ask this question, didn’t you?” he mumbled, and it sounded more like a thought to himself than an actual question. She did not understand it, and so she just waited. She could almost hear his thoughts clicking, like the cogs inside a dwemer irrigation mechanism. He had asked her to be patient, and just this once, she would be.

When he finally looked her in the eye, he seemed somewhat ragged and defeated. Yet still he managed to conjure up a soft smile.

“I suppose,” he said, “I owe you a lot. So much more than you can imagine.” He rose, withdrawing a teapot from his cupboard. “Make yourself comfortable, Miss Ravencroft. I’ll… tell you everything. It will be a long night.”

Chapter End Notes

Well… I was so anxious writing this chapter. This was one of the few that weren’t really outlined beforehand. I can’t plan emotion that well, it sort of has to write itself. I hope you liked it. :) 

There’s one thing I’d like to address. I made a mistake with the book names. In the previous chapter, I introduced a book called A Man of Two Faces (the one with the cipher). If any of you remember my chapter 5, I mentioned it there, but it was under a different name – Tale of the Pirate Princess. That was a mistake on my part. Tale of the Pirate Princess was actually the old name for the book which I then decided to rename because A Man of Two Faces added some symbolism to the story. So I apologize for the confusion. Chapter 5 has already been edited and it now shows the correct name. 

Thank you guys for all the kudos, comments and bookmarks I got from you!

Thanks to Tildemancer for the proofreading.

I would also like to include special thanks to RealityGlitch who has been a great inspiration for me for the past few weeks. She’s been constantly providing me with tons of comments with helpful feedback and we got to chat a lot about how we write our stories. She’s a great writer as well as wonderful reader and valuable friend. You should really go check out her profile. :) 

See you guys next time!

Mirwen
“So,” Singird said as he sipped from his cup. It was his favorite smuggled tea which he deemed fitting for an occasion like this, “I suppose it’s time to reveal what I’ve kept from you since the day I made you confess about your parents.” He was uneasy. He knew this moment would have to come sooner or later, yet he felt so unprepared. How would she handle it? How would she take the fact that he lusted for her power, and that there was a killer on the loose who had murdered her parents in cold blood and now was after her? He was worried she might hate him. And he was worried she might hurt.

She sat there, with those big, silver eyes pinned on his person, waiting patiently for him to start. He had to smile. Always so curious, this one. When it came to gaining information, she could be so focused. So intent on finding more about him, and about herself. He knew that this time, he would have to be open with her. She had shared her story with him. He would have to do the same.

“Let me start with a story of mine,” he said as he leaned against the backrest of his chair. “I come from a long line of mages. My parents grew up down in Falkreath, but they received their education in Winterhold. They were scholars of sorts, with their heads deep down in some sort of research, but they never shared it with anyone. They never took sides, and whenever someone came asking for help, they were ready to give it. They did not care for race or origins, allegiances or patron deities. The only thing they did not let anyone touch was their research. I was often left on our family farm with my uncle so I would not get in the way. It was infuriating, but they did feed me and provide good education for me, including the magical one. I can’t speak half badly of them.”

Singird felt his own brows furrow as he spoke. He had almost forgotten how it had felt for him to be left behind. In a sense, he was similar to young Miss Ravencroft who had conjured an atronach just to chase away the feeling of loneliness. She nodded in understanding. For a brief moment, he felt the urge to pull her closer, but he resisted. This was not the time. There were things he had to overcome on his own, and she had enough burdens on her shoulders.

“I was always curious what it was they were doing. I am not the type to sneak up on people.” Miss Ravencroft winced at that and he could almost touch the guilt that gnawed on her consciousness. He could picture her with ear pressed to the door, listening to her own parents. In a sense, it was adorable, although he could picture himself giving off detentions for that kind of misdemeanor. “But occasionally, I had a good chance to listen. Most of what my parents said sounded like gibberish to me and I could not make much sense of it, but they often spoke about my great-grandfather, Ulfar Larkwing. I daresay they were obsessed with him, yet somehow the information they could find on him was scarce and mostly just in the form of rumors.”

He paused to take another sip and watched the greyness outside the window. There was a crow on its ledge, as it lately liked to be. Ever since Yrith Ravencroft’s first night, it liked to sit there and caw endlessly. The girl often chased it away, disturbed in her sleep or in reading. Now it was silent, as though it was listening. Singird knew it would not hear a thing through the magical protections that were renewed twice a day. Nothing would come through without him noticing.

“What happened to him?” she asked, gripping her own cup as though it was the only warm thing in the room.

“He died in the Great Collapse. Or so it is said, but my parents thought otherwise. They were convinced that there was more to it than the Collegium claims, and so they investigated. You can imagine they weren’t very popular around here. I took after them,” he chuckled. “It continued for years. Around the time the magical murders started occurring in Skyrim, they were invited by Jarl
Siddgeir to join the Imperial army. To someone like my parents who prided themselves on their neutrality, such an invitation was an insult. At the same time, I was invited to serve as the Jarl’s court wizard. I was… too naïve to realize what that meant. I went along with it, seeing it as an opportunity to find my place as a mage. The invitation for my parents soon turned into obligation and I was not allowed to leave the court before their service was over.”

He fell silent again. The biggest failure of his life was always a sore subject for him. Perhaps no one but he and Jarl Siddgeir knew of it. And now, Miss Ravencroft. Not even his friend Toddvar knew, and perhaps if he did, their friendship would be over that instant.

Singird opened his mouth to continue, but then he noticed the look Miss Ravencroft was giving him. It was full of sympathy. He froze in shock. Had he made her feel sorry for him? The girl who had gone through so much more than him? He had no words to soothe her. This was his own mistake, and she was probably comparing it to her own. How could he say anything to calm her when he had not forgiven himself?

“When my parents received permission to return for a few days,” he said, determined to finish his story, “they went straight to Winterhold. They did not even stop by to see me, the only thing that held them back was that Winterhold was deep in the Stormcloak territory. They negotiated an exception for themselves. As long as they would carry no weapons and avoided populated areas, they were allowed to pass. They swore on their neutrality long before they were recruited, and strangely enough, they were mostly respected for it. Alas, nevertheless, they never returned. All I received was an obituary from Jarl Ulfric of Windhelm and a few documents regarding their death. The Jarl claimed they died an honorable death while helping some people escape a landslide. Their remains were supposed to be kept in the Temple of Talos, but I never got to see them. There were only ashes.”

“Do you think Ulfric’s men killed them then?” Miss Ravencroft was watching him so intently, the sheets underneath her creased in her clenched fists.

“Maybe they did, maybe they didn’t. I don’t think it’s relevant. Killed is the key word here. I am quite certain this whole thing was a setup and it was made to be absolutely unassailable. Except I dug out our family history and death at a young age seems to be the usual symptom of being a Larkwing. There were all kinds of disappearances. I searched for anything that could give me a clue on their death, but the only thing they left behind were their notes on Ulfar Larkwing. After some months of research and calculations that I covered up as ‘tending to our farm’, I managed to reconstruct this.”

He handed her a paper, the same one he had shown Master Gestor some time ago. She took it gingerly, first regarding it with cautious curiosity, but then her eyes widened. She recognized what it was immediately. He had trained her well.

“A summoning ritual circle!” she breathed in triumph. “But this one is… are these constellations? What do they mean?”

“Not just constellations. See this little symbol?” he pointed at the circle in the middle. “That is an anchor. This whole diagram symbolizes the exact time and place of my great-grandfather’s death.”

She stared at him, then at the paper, then back at him. He could almost feel the cogs in her head turning. When he let the silence linger, she shook her head.

“Are you… are you planning to… summon him?”

Despite her disbelief, she caught on quickly. “Exactly. That is what my parents were trying to do and that is what I will try to do as well.”
“So how do I…”

“This ritual,” he continued, sensing what she was about to ask, “is not just some ordinary conjuration spell. To reach Aetherius, you need incredible amount of magical energy. Amount that I could not possibly possess.”

“And that’s why you need… me?” If Singird did not know better, he would say she was excited. Happy that he wanted to use her. Grateful for what he thought was the worst kind of deceit. Her silver eyes sparkled with interest she could not hide. She was gazing at the paper, holding it like a holy relic, no doubt calculating in her head.

“Indeed,” he nodded slowly. He waited for a reaction, but she was so immersed in the paper she almost discarded his existence. “Miss Ravencroft?”

“What? Oh…”

“I know this experiment could be dangerous, so if you don’t want to…”

“I want to! I’ll help!” There was a strange emphasis on the last word. So that was it. She wanted to feel useful. Did she think she owed him something? Or perhaps she thought she owed the world something. Of course she did. He was feeling guilty over what had happened to his parents, and he was not even the one to kill them. Miss Ravencroft still thought she had killed hers. She was feeling responsible and useless, and anything that would give her purpose she would accept. The realization dawned upon Singird with horrible distaste at his own actions. How could he ever use this girl?

“Miss Ravencroft…”

“When do you think I’ll regain my power?”

“In a few weeks, perhaps. But…”

“Then I better prepare myself.”

“Miss Ravencroft… please, hold on. I said I’d tell you everything and that is what I intend to do. There is one more thing left.”

She looked at him, brows quirked up in question. She must have noticed his unease as the excitement retreated from her face. He took a breath. No more secrets, he promised himself. No more pretending.

“But… that’s impossible!” she said for the umpteenth time. Singird was at his wits’ end. He had never expected her to refuse to believe in her innocence. She was so convinced she had been the one to kill her parents, so intent on repeating she was at fault, over and over again. No matter what kind of evidence he brought up, she always managed to find a gap in his reasoning. True, he could not present any solid proof to her, but why did she refuse to be relieved? It was as though she would lose something important if she admitted the truth. He could not understand.

“After seven months of dreading what you believed to be the truth, when you could finally put all that blame behind you… it’s impossible?”

She did not reply. Her hands and feet played a strange game of tag on the bed. She was fidgety with unease which he could not comprehend. There were no tears, no relief, no anger and no gratitude. She was in complete denial. Singird got a strange feeling there was something she was not telling him, but how could he ask without even a hunch?
“Say, Miss Ravencroft. Why did your parents move to Winterhold?”

She stared at him, her eyes becoming distant for a split moment when she searched for a memory. Then she sighed. “Because the enemy is near,” she said colorlessly. There was an undertone of pain in her voice, internal struggle she could not quite cope with.

“What does that mean?”

She shrugged. “They never told me. This is all I got for an answer.”

“So they were chasing someone?”

“Maybe?”

“Have you considered that someone could have gotten ahead and killed them instead?”

She winced, but again, there was no response. She grabbed her cup and downed it in a single movement, pretending she had not heard the question. A corner of Singird’s mouth twitched. He was becoming very impatient with her.

“And have you considered that someone might be the one after you?” he pressed. She pursed her lips.

“Or it could be the AWA trying to get back at me for killing them,” she muttered, one fist obstinately clenched, fingers nearly tearing the sheets, while the other gripped the cup with such strength that Singird was worried it might crack.

“And how would the AWA learn about it?”

“They have their ways. That person can concoct the Spirit Blight… only the AWA can do that.”

“Speaking of which…”

She nodded. There was a lull. She finally put the cup on her end table, frowning at the crow still sitting there in silence, patient and motionless.

“Same applies to the antidote. It can only be spellbrewed, and I don’t think there’s anyone beside the AWA members who can do that.”

“Which would mean Qassir Tahlrah is either a spellbrewer, or knows someone from their ranks,” Singird concluded. He knit his brows. Qassir Tahlrah was shady enough to be anyone at all. Singird had considered the option that it was the mysterious Redguard aiming for Miss Ravencroft’s life. He had appeared out of nowhere and had been suspiciously close when the avalanche took her. But why would he save her then? Letting the Spirit Blight devour her without revealing anything would have been the easiest thing to do.

And then there was Cain Aldaryn who was with her every time something happened. But how could these children be capable of such horrendous feats?

“Say, Miss Ravencroft. Why do you think it could not have been Cain Aldaryn?”

She shot him a look that clearly said what she thought about his opinion. “Because someone from the AWA would never argue with me that expanding my consciousness is the wrong way to do it. It was their literature I got it from.”

“Sound argument, but only half-right. You underestimate people’s ability to pretend.”
“If Cain is fake, then I’m Saint Alessia,” she sputtered. Singird fought hard to suppress a glare. Under any other circumstances, such behavior would gain her a detention. He sighed.

“Very well. Can you tell me anything about the Spirit Blight then?”

“Not much.” Gazing upward, she looked up like a student trying to remember a definition from a textbook. “It’s the only poison that disintegrates a person’s soul. It becomes nothing more than lifeless energy and it’s unable to return to Aetherius. The Blight destroys memories, feelings, everything that makes a person an individual. My parents could make it and they also knew the antidote. Other than that…” She shook her head.

The only new piece of information for Singird was that her parents could make it. He shuddered, wondering why the Ravencrofts would need to make such a deadly concoction. And what did the recent events mean then? The person trying to kill Miss Ravencroft had clearly decided to play an emotional game with her, seeing how normal attempts to kill her would not work. They had almost succeeded at it. It had taken Singird a great deal of effort to convince her it was not the time to give up yet. He was certain the person who had done it must have known the whole family well. Out of the mages he knew, there was only Lady Faralda, but she could have done it so many times before. Other mages from the College could be lying about not knowing them to cover up the truth, but there was the tingling sensation at the back of his head, telling him there was something he was missing. An important fact he kept overlooking, but it was definitely there somewhere.

“What about the black fluid you disgorged?”

She shivered at the memory. He could feel the shadow of pain cross her face, but she shook it off. “I’ve… never heard of anything like that. It was… strange. I think… I think the Blight started taking effect much sooner than I realized and… this was the result. Though I read the effect was supposed to be quick and immediate. I guess not even the AWA literature is always correct.”

“Or you were made to believe so,” Singird mused aloud. “Say, Miss Ravencroft, is there anything else? Anything related to your parents or you that could help. Did you ever have any enemies? Other conflicts? Did your parents suggest anything?”

“Well…” She looked away, bright red flush dying her cheeks. A crooked smile flashed over her lips, a timid sign of her guilty conscience. He knew that face well, and if he should pick one expression that would represent Yrith Ravencroft in his eyes, it would be this one. “There is the cipher.”

“Cipher?”

“Yes. We… found it with Leyna a while ago in my parents’ old house.”

Singird’s eyes widened in disbelief. With Leyna Travi… that meant after the avalanche incident. After he had gone out to warn her about venturing outside. He felt color retreating from his face. She was already lucky to be alive, but this…

“You went to your parents’ house,” he repeated quietly. It was not a question, he did not need to confirm. But he was angry. The kind of cold angry that would freeze the blood in her veins. And it did. She looked at him, eyes wide with panic. “Just when did you do that and why in Oblivion could you not take my advice for once in your life?”

“I was angry,” she peeped. “It was right after the argument with Urag…”

The day of the Spirit Blight incident. Anything could have happened.

“Tell me everything,” he demanded. “Every single detail of what happened that day.”
“So this cipher you found… where is it?”

She groped about her robes, finally withdrawing a crumpled piece of paper. It was torn at some places and stained by the Spirit Blight, but the symbols on it were still discernible, if a bit smudged. Singird frowned in disapproval at the lines of text that covered it, some crossed or blackened out in a very disorganized manner. Below them was some sort of a code.

“We could not find a way to decrypt this,” she shrugged as she handed it to him. He took it, staring at the characters of the cipher, some capital, some not. It hurt his eyes and there was something peculiar about it. The same letter would have a different counterpart depending on whether it was capital or small, but was that really it?

“The words are too short,” he shook his head. “One can’t possibly hope to decipher this.”

Miss Ravencroft nodded. “That’s what we thought too.”

“In that case, there must be some kind of key. If this can’t be decoded using the standard method, then perhaps we’re looking at it the wrong way. If this message was meant for you, I suppose it’s something only you would be able to figure out. The method suggested by Miss Travi could be wrong entirely.”

“But I don’t know what…”

“We have time. Think about it. You said it was from a book? Could it be something that concerns the note in it? Or its story? A memory that connects you to it?”

She stared at the paper, shaking her head. “My parents always loved to overestimate me,” she sighed as she threw herself flat on her bed. Singird snorted.

“Your parents loved you,” he told her gently. “If this is a message from them, then they must have put it together just before they died. They had faith you’d be able to get to the root of this. No doubt they wanted to protect you.”

She shot him a glance, cheeks dyed with soft pink. She did not utter a single word, but he felt the gratitude that flicked from behind the curtain of grumpiness she had raised over her face. He smiled. At times, she was like a mirror image of his own person. The question was whether that should make him happy or worried.

“Is the mid… I mean, Yrith, all right?”

The lesson had ended, but three students, Cain Aldaryn, Leyna Travi and Qassir Tahlrah, remained, asking after their friend. That is, Cain Aldaryn and Leyna Travi remained while their Redguard classmate pretended to be idly standing nearby, very much interested in the plain paving of the Hall of the Elements. The rest of the class had left, grouped around the babbling Ha’risha who loudly announced how dull and useless Conjuration is in comparison to Illusion which can get a person very far. Unfortunately, Singird could not give detentions for stating one’s opinion, no matter how much he wished for it at times.

He looked at the querying Dunmer. Cain’s crimson eyes were pinned on him as though his life depended on the answer. Singird did hope Miss Ravencroft was right about her supposed friend. “She will be,” he said evasively. He could not risk revealing she had lost her magic, even if it was likely that the culprit already knew.
“When is she coming back?”

“When the time is right. Now go. You have an assignment to work on, and the exams are coming close.”

The boy muttered something under his breath, but gestured to his Altmeri friend to leave. The two of them gave Singird a slight bow before excusing themselves. Qassir Tahlrah followed them shortly, but just as he approached the closing door, a thought occurred to Singird.

“Mister Tahlrah,” he called to him. The Redguard glanced over his shoulder, brows quirking above the deep blue eyes. “A word, if you will?”

He chuckled, picking a slow, relaxed pace to close the distance between the two of them. “Did I mess up my last assignment?” he asked in a light, conversational tone. “I did think it was a bit off…”

Singird swallowed the caustic remark he was so close to spitting. This… boy, or whatever he was, always so easygoing, always fooling around as if he had nothing better to do. He wielded magic like a wooden stick, and there was not a disaster that could shake him. Now that he thought about it, Singird did not even know who his parents were. There was just this boy who came out of nowhere and laughed everything off. A Redguard on top of that, belonging to a race that was said to be the least magically gifted.

“No, I want to discuss Miss Ravencroft.”

“The urchin? What about her?”

“Perhaps we should take this somewhere else so we can…”

“There’s no need. I’m quite comfortable here. So what is it about the urchin?”

How audacious could one boy be? Qassir Tahlrah was annoying enough when he was showing off in class, but this was a whole new level of casual arrogance, as Singird would call it. He suppressed a glare, forcing his stirred thoughts to behave. “You saved her back then.”

The boy gave a theatrical shrug. “Whatever might you be talking about?”

Singird stared at him in disbelief. He was playing with him! Leading him on, and now Singird, the initiator, was feeling unsure. Was it safe to talk to him? Who was he, and why was this youngster so good at both magic and manipulation?

No, he would only say as much as was absolutely necessary.

“The Spirit Blight,” he said. “You managed to get an antidote for it.”

“Ah, that thing that almost got her? It actually has a name?”

Fists clenched, Singird fought the urge to punch him in the face, savagely, like an animal. With no magic, just to let out his frustration. Qassir Tahlrah could turn his every word against him. No matter what he said, he could not beat him in his own game. But all things considered, there had to be a limit. Whatever he was trying to pull, sooner or later, he would have to bump into a wall. Very well. If it was going to be like this, so be it.

“It does,” he uttered colorlessly. “And you managed to get an antidote. How did you get your hands on it?”
The Redguard circled the central fountain, by no means in hurry. Then he stopped and leaned comfortably against the cold wall, flickering blue light deepening the shadows in his tanned face. Somehow, Singird could imagine him with a pipe, unconcerned, smiling like a Khajiit offering the finest brewed skooma in Tamriel.

“Interesting. So this antidote is something that is hard to obtain, I take it?”

Another question instead of an answer. Singird’s fingers flexed and clenched into fists again. He took a breath. Relax, he told himself. This is exactly what he wants. He wants to drive you into a corner. He makes weapons out of your questions… then you should do the same.

“Which makes me question your methods and resources,” he stated, face hardening into his iron battle mask.

“Doubt is very popular these days,” the boy returned thoughtfully. “I helped a friend. Is there anything wrong with that?”

“It is the right thing to do, and that is exactly why I am asking. What if some others will need to… help a friend?”

“Then perhaps those others should first admit to having a friend.”

“You are digressing.”

“Am I truly? Or is it just you who interprets it that way?”

Singird was at his wits’ end. How in Oblivion was he supposed to react to that? Was Qassir Tahlrah simply avoiding answering his questions, or was he trying to tell him something? Then again, if he wanted to elude the conversation, he could just leave. Was it entertaining to toy with his teacher like this? Or was there a hidden purpose behind those riddles?

“Why would you say so?”

“Why indeed? A sound question, yet I must ask another one once more. Who do you blame for the current events?”

“No one,” Singird cut resolutely. What kind of question was that?

“Then who do you suspect?”

“How dare you…”

“Dare what? Ask a question? Then you’re afraid to answer it?”

The Redguard smiled. He was the epitome of wickedness, cruel, wide smile spread over his face. Chills ran down Singird’s spine upon looking into his eyes, but there was something behind that veil of twisted artifice that brought doubt in his own judgement.

“Afraid? No. But you asked a question that has no answer. It could be anyone, though if you’re suggesting otherwise, I cannot see it.”

“True,” he nodded, “it could be anyone. How convenient, isn’t it? There are so many who could take the blame. So tell me, Master Larkwing, what do you expect me to say?”

“Something that would make more sense than what you’re saying now.”
“What do you mean?”

“That you’re leading me on and I might just have enough of it.”

There was a lull. The boy’s face grew darker with shadows that had not been there before. His smile vanished, replaced by a deep frown. Eyes like two sapphires were underlined by darkness that not even the pale fountain light could penetrate.

“I am, aren’t I?” he breathed. “How truly convenient. Then perhaps, Master Larkwing, I have just demonstrated the tactics that person uses to lead us all on. I cannot give you the answer you are looking for. But you can find it yourself. Here.” He tapped his chest where his heart was.

Singird now openly glared at him. He had just been ridiculed by one of his own students, a boy in his teens that pretended to know all the truths of the world. “Why can’t you just answer a simple question?”

“About the antidote, you mean?” the Redguard laughed bitterly. “Very well, I shall give you an answer to the last one. Two answers, actually. Because first, that knowledge would be useless to you. You are either suggesting that I am aiming for the urchin’s life, or you think I have some extensive knowledge about her… enemy, so to speak. In both cases, you are mistaken. And second,” his voice dropped so he was barely audible in the humming of the fountain, “I am not entitled to tell you.”

“Wha…”

The boy rose and moved toward Singird. On his way, he picked up a piece of paper lying on the floor, likely dropped by some student on the way out. He unfolded it, quickly scanned the first line and folded it back. “This seems to belong to Leyna Travi,” he stated matter-of-factly as he placed it on the fountain wall, just beside Singird.

He stopped just a few inches from him, leaning closer. Singird could feel his breath on his neck, face twisting in distaste, but he froze as the Redguard spoke.

“I am taking a risk by telling you this,” he said in a low voice. “Consider it a personal favor. They are on the move. I shall be leaving Winterhold. But they will be back. They are drawn to this place. Beware the end of Last Seed.”

He pulled away, making for the entrance. “And Master Larkwing,” he called to him as the gate opened before him into the grim, snowy courtyard, “you know what else you have in here?” His hand reached for the chest once more.

Singird was about to tell him to stop with the foolish jokes, but instead, he just shook his head, half curious what the answer was going to be.

Qassir Tahlrah smiled again, this time in earnest, and the air around him suddenly became brighter. “Yrith Ravencroft,” he said. And with that, the gate closed behind him, leaving Singird speechless and confounded. And, for some unknown, mysterious reason, also hot in the cheeks.

It had taken Singird a few moments to shake off the daze that came afterwards. He had asked so many questions, yet instead, it felt as though he had been the one being questioned. Or, rather, tested. The boy had admitted to knowing something, yet just like Urag gro-Shub, he refused to tell him. Singird could only guess whether they shared the same reason. One thing, however, he was now certain of. There were many people and many places in Winterhold that held pieces of the puzzle, yet somehow, general distrust made it difficult to put them together. Distrust that was perhaps more than
simple wariness. It was fear of each other. Qassir Tahlrah was right. Someone had planted the seed of doubt among the people here. Someone who would grow stronger when others grew weaker, someone who took advantage of discord.

He sighed as he leaned to the fountain wall and closed his eyes. He let the blue, ticklish light stream of magicka wash over his face. It was cold and warm at the same time, helping him concentrate and ponder the Redguard’s words. He played the whole conversation over and over in his head, trying to make sense of it. He had not learnt who Qassir Tahlrah was, nor had he made any progress in finding the culprit. Yet he still had that tingling feeling that there was something he was missing, and it had nothing to do with the magic caressing his head.

At last, he rose. His hip grazed the paper that still lay on the fountain’s edge. He picked it up, opening it to scan its contents. It was a letter by the looks of it, written in the Altmeri language. Singird had once learned the script, and so he recognized the name Leyna at the beginning, but the rest remained hidden. Deciding he would return it to its right owner later, he folded it again, but just as he did, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed another name somewhere in the middle of the letter. Yrith Ravencroft.

After a lightning-fast contemplation, he changed his destination from his room to the Arcanaeum. The library was surprisingly lively this time of the day. Students and teachers alike paced from one book case to another, flipping pages in books and taking notes in preparation for exams that would take place in Frostfall. Students would then be sorted into expert classes where they would continue their education. Singird had no doubt the Destruction class would have the most applicants while Restoration would probably have the least. But he knew for sure whom he wanted in Conjuration, and he would not care if she was the only one to join.

He scanned the room. Fortunately, most people were gathered in the magic section of the library. The language studies department was completely deserted which worked in Singird’s favor. Avoiding the orc who loomed above the library like a hawk, watching for the first careless soul to make a sound louder than a quiet hum, he slid into the lifeless corner and pulled out a few dictionaries. Fortunately, the letter was concise, written in simple modern language, apparently in hurry, made to be easy to understand. The translation Singird made was rough, but there was no time to give way to his perfectionism. As he approached the end, he grew anxious, and when he finally finished his work, he felt color retreating from his face. This could not be right. By the Nine above, this could not be right.

Leyna,

Things have changed. Chaos now reigns the Dominion. People are turning on each other, stabbing their allies in the back. Alinor is not safe anymore, not even for our kind. I have been forced to take refuge elsewhere. Do not worry for me, I am safe. But you are not. I apologize. I sent you away, hoping you would be safe in the far north, but time has proven me wrong. Watch out for the Justiciars. Here is hoping the College staff will have enough dignity to protect you, but if the worst comes to the worst, escape. But do not leave alone.

There is a girl in Winterhold, going by the name Yrith Ravencroft. Become her friend. Gain her trust. Even if you are to turn the whole College against you, she alone must become your ally. It is essential that you bring her with you wherever you go.

If by any chance the two of you manage to stay safe in Winterhold, you will take her to the promised place when the time comes. You will know when that is.

You must not fail, Leyna. Many a fate depend on this arrangement.
Stay alert, daughter of the Travi.

Auri-El guide you.

Your father,

Selas Inarion Travi

This must have been a cruel joke. Leyna Travi, Miss Ravencroft’s first friend at the College. The very person he had defended before the Collegium, the person they had decided to risk their lives for. He had stood up for her, and so had Lady Faralda and Urag gro-Shub. Had she befriended young Yrith only so she could betray her afterwards? Was she planning to sell her out, to harm her? What would he do about it? Confront her directly? No, that could result in a disaster. But what of Miss Ravencroft? The poor Miss Ravencroft who still might have no friends at all?

He clenched his fists, crumpling the letter he was gripping in his hands. Several people winced as they passed him, letting him know that the expression he wore could not be classified as friendly. He was not feeling friendly. If Leyna Travi was behind all this…

He took a breath and cursed himself for the thought that had almost seized his mind. Slowly, calculating his every movement to maintain control, he returned the dictionaries into place. Their backs were in a perfect line, their titles were in the right order, even the colors matched as they should. With gritted teeth, concealing his expression, he left the Arcanaeum. As he reached the College roof, he drew in the fresh air. The breeze was cold and refreshing, and the view was as astonishing as ever. The icebergs contrasted the dark sea that carried them on its currents. The mountains were tall and mighty, and the statue of Azura ruled them from above. Yet, somewhere beyond it, a column of dark smoke rose to the skies, revealing a camp that belonged to either the Imperials, or the Stormcloaks. The war was close.

The College of Winterhold was fighting a war of its own. A war that made people doubt each other. Singird could not put his trust in anyone. That was, anyone but Miss Ravencroft. But then again, she was the main reason for his doubt. It was because of her that he often got heated. It was because of her that he was scared and doubtful. And… it was because of her that he was hopeful. Before he knew it, she had filled his whole life. He had known her for a month or so, yet he felt as though he had known her for ages.

In fact, he did not mind being upset over her. He was more than willing to fight this war for her, to protect her and support her until she would be able to stand for herself. What he did mind were her tears. When she was broken and hurt… that was when he ached. He felt this stabbing pain in the chest, like a white-hot knife piercing him over and over again.

He stopped just before the entrance to the Hall of Countenance with his hand on the handle, staring into a knab in the wooden door. Suddenly, he realized that Qassir Tahlrah was right. Singird had forgotten all about his original motives. His actions were driven by her, and the insuppressible need to protect her. And the pain he felt when he realized how hurt she would be upon hearing about Leyna Travi’s treachery… deep inside he decided that he could never tell her. He could not bear to break her. After all, Yrith Ravencroft was really in his heart.

He pulled the handle and entered the tower. His room was just a few paces away. She was somewhere inside, waiting for him, with her head buried in a book. Upon opening that door, she would not be the same anymore. He would see her in a different light. Now this was a situation.
“Wake up, my child,” the voice said. It breathed spite and venom, it was malice itself. And yet she felt something else in it. A touch of emotion that perhaps no one had ever noticed. Loneliness, void. Silent plea that had never been answered. It was a voice that resented her for what she was, yet it was longing to become just that. It yearned for warmth it had never known, and it could only give coldness in return. “Wake up, so that you see. Awaken, so that you feel me devour you. You belonged to me long before you were even born. Open your eyes.”

Yrith turned with unease, clutching the blanket that was wrapped too tightly around her. Her magic was swirling inside her, rising like a high tide. It was flooding her with fire and ice, piercing her skin, suffocating her. Day by day, it grew stronger, more overwhelming. With each passing moment, it filled her with new feelings and perceptions. She saw images flick before her eyes, leaving her with a feeling of utter helplessness. Everything she saw, she could only observe and ingest. She could not erase the bitterness from her tongue. And in the end, all the images dissolved into darkness that clouded her mind.

“Wake up.”

“No…” she moaned quietly. “Leave me…”

“Miss Ravencroft. Wake up!”

Something was shaking her, clutching firmly her shoulders. No, someone was. She would not let herself succumb. She fought against the grip, but she could not move. Magic, she needed magic. She was so full of it… She let it flow, fill the palms of her hands. It was cool and soothing. Now she only needed to…

“Miss Ravencroft!”

Her eyes flicked open. She gasped, staring into the face of Singird Larkwing. He was leaning over her, hands still on her shoulders, but he retreated with a sigh as soon as the glow of her magic faded. They stared at each other for a while. She felt his cold hand on her forehead. Then he withdrew a handkerchief out of nowhere and wiped the sweat from her, gently like a caring mother. She closed her eyes, absorbing the tranquility of the moment.

It had been like this the last few days. He was there when she felt scared or uneasy, he was there to wake her up from her nightmares. In the times of loneliness, he would exchange stories from their childhoods with her, and in the times of despair, he would embrace her, uncertainly at first, but as time passed, his grip grew firmer and tighter, and she found herself wrapping her own arms around him, seeking his warmth and claiming it for her own.

She lay there, thinking of all those times, until he removed his hand.

“You were dreaming again,” he said, an obvious fact, but his words brought comfort.

“I’m sorry if I woke you,” she muttered as she raised herself on her elbows, just for the sake of politeness. She doubted her own words. The room was bright with sunlight and his desk carried a humble breakfast. A wooden plate with a slice of bread and two small pieces of goat cheese, and a jug of tea, no doubt smuggled though one of the Khajiit routes.
“You did not. How are you feeling?” Hearing his tone, she looked into his eyes. He did not say it out of care or obligation. Those eyes were bright with expectation. There was purpose in his question.

She shrugged. “Could be worse.”

“You are handling your dreams better than before.”

“They’re not that bad… yet. But I keep hearing a voice in my head. As if someone was constantly watching me. Do you think I’m… hallucinating?”

“I don’t know, but we cannot discard the possibility that someone really is watching you. Let us rid you of your dreams, Miss Ravencroft.”

“How?”

“Your magic is returning. You might as well keep your end of the bargain.” Yrith stared at him. He crossed the room, waving to her casually to get up. From the inner part of the window ledge, he took a bowl with fresh, cold water and placed it on her end table before disappearing behind the curtain that divided his room.

“My end of the bargain?” she sputtered, jumping from her bed at once. “You did not even keep yours!”

She heard a sigh beyond the curtain, accompanied by sudden footsteps. “Let me just make this clear, Miss Ravencroft. I did not…”

He fell silent. Just as she was taking her night robe off, he returned to face her. She froze, covering quickly the bared parts of her body, and he was just as quick to let the curtain fall back in place. Yrith’s heart was racing. It was just Singird Larkwing. Her own teacher. But she suddenly could not find a way to steady the frantic pounding and stop the hotness from flooding her cheeks.

Fast as she could, she washed herself, heedless of the cold that bit into her skin, and took shelter in the safety of her robes. She peeked into his half of the room, treading lightly to the other side. Master Larkwing was sitting by his desk, eyes on a still closed book. He did not raise them when she approached, only shoved the meal over to her side of the desk and beckoned for her to take a seat. She did, biting into the cheese.

“Don’t forget the bread,” he reminded her.

‘Yes, dad,’ she thought to herself. They spent a few moments in silence. Then he broke it, clearing his throat.

“So, as I was saying, I did not say anything to gr… Urag gro-Shub. In fact, he said you’d told him yourself when I confronted him.”

Yrith let the cheese sink back onto the plate, swallowing hard the bite she had taken. She replayed every moment she had spent with Urag since the death of her parents. This just didn’t fit. She had never mentioned anything concerning their death. He had addressed the topic several times, but every time she would just shake her head or reply with an evasive “I don’t know.” There was just no way…

“Urag? Did Urag really say that? But I didn’t… why would he lie to you about it?”

“I have yet to understand that. Do not let your mind be clouded with doubt, Miss Ravencroft. That old brute is ruthless and likes to speak in riddles, but I can assure you he’d give his life for you.”
Yrith nodded, pushing the plate away. She rested her head against the table, letting in the soothing coolness. “A lot of people let their minds be clouded with doubt lately,” she said pensively.

“Way too many of them,” he agreed. “Eat your breakfast. We will be going out.”

“For a stroll?”

“For training. Now eat.” He opened his book, engulfing himself in its pages. She wanted to ask him for details, but she knew it would be pointless.

She ate her meal, if she could call it that, in silence, watching his face. He was so calm, so serene. Over the time she had spent in his room, she had adopted a habit of watching him, often at the expense of her own reading. He liked to immerse himself in texts on magical science, or any textbooks or history books at all. When he put his books aside, he took a place by the window, gazing far into the distance, watching the thin horizon line where the Sea of Ghosts met the sky. Much like her, his mind was almost never present. He was always deep in thought, often taking long to react when she had something to say. At times, she pondered what it was that occupied his mind so. Occasionally he would give her a look full of concern, staring at her for a long while before retreating back to his own world. For some reason, it always made her smile.

When she finished her breakfast, Master Larkwing motioned her to follow him, leading her to the Hall of the Elements.

“Are we going to practice Conjuration?” she asked on the way, listening to the echo of their quick-paced footsteps.

“No. Conjuration alone won’t save your life when you stand face to face with real danger. We will hone your reflexes.”

Yrith paled. She was prepared to shine before Master Larkwing, but now her confidence crumbled like a house of cards. She was not fast, she could not rely on her instinct. Whatever Master Larkwing was expecting of her, she was sure to fail him. And most of all, she hoped they would not be practicing Destruction.

The huge brass gate of the Hall of the Elements opened before them upon the touch of Master Larkwing’s magic. He led her in, to the fountain where he halted, scanning the place as though he was searching for something. Yrith shifted her weight nervously.

“What are we going to do?” she asked.

“First off, wait for Master Tolfdir. He should be here any mo…”

The door to the Arch-Mage’s quarters, the only one in the College that Yrith had never used before, opened with a loud, long-drawn creak. From beyond it emerged the man in question with a look of a madman in his face, beads of sweat coming down from his temples in glistening streaks. His overcoat was askew, stained with dirt down on the side that touched the ground. Master Larkwing welcomed him with a raised brow and Yrith could almost feel the disapproval that tried to force its way to his lips.

“Master Tolfdir,” he greeted coolly. “Did anything…”

“No, everything is perfectly fine, thank you,” Master Tolfdir hurried with his answer, huffing as he adjusted his garbs. “Please, just… don’t ask.”

“Very well.”
Yrith wondered what kind of thing might have happened at the Arch-Mage’s quarters. She had never seen the infamous head of the College herself. At times, she even doubted her existence, but once in a while, she heard a word or two about her. Curiously enough, no one ever spoke of the Arch-Mage in superlatives, despite the fact she had been elected for the position by the Collegium. She half hoped Master Larkwing would insist on knowing, but true to his word, he did not bring the subject out.

“Shall we begin then?”

Master Tolfdir was busy beating his overcoat. He raised his head at the question, staring absently at the two of them for a good while before finally giving a slow nod. “Yes, yes, I suppose we should,” he said as he straightened his back. “Miss Ravencroft. It has been a long time.”

She hinted a curtsy. “Good morning, Master Tolfdir.” She felt her cheeks redden. The last time they had seen each other, she demonstrated to him the poorest use of magic on Nirn. She was surprised he had agreed to waste his time on her.

“So, we are here to train you today. Do you feel prepared?”

She shook her head and felt a lump settle in her throat.

“That is good. Relax those shoulders of yours a little. We are not putting you to torture here. It is good you don’t come ready. Life is often going to find you unprepared.”

That did not make Yrith feel any better. On the contrary, she felt all the color retreat from her face.

“Are we going to train Alteration then?” she peeped.

“Indeed. Master Larkwing has asked me to help with your first lesson. The practice of Alteration magic will help you gain control over your powers. You will learn how much power exactly you need for specific tasks and how to manipulate your magicka. And, of course, you will also hone your instincts on the way. Alteration is what I would call easy to use and hard to master. But we will be working on your mastery right from the start.”

“But… I don’t even know the basics.”

“You know them in theory, right?”

“I’ve… read a few books, but…”

“Then you have all you need. You are only going to practice one spell today, and that will be telekinesis. And before you say anything,” he raised his hand to shush her as she opened her mouth, meaning to point out that telekinesis was an adept spell and she could hardly do the novice ones, “yes, you can perform it. There is no special trick to telekinesis. The only reason it is considered an advanced spell is that it requires a lot of magicka. I take it you have plenty of it, correct?”

She nodded.

“Good. Then Master Larkwing, if you may.”

Pulling up his sleeves, Master Larkwing let out a stream of magicka, directing it to the place where the glowing pillar from the fountain met the ceiling. Upon the clash, a dark sphere appeared in the light, seemingly absorbing all of it. Yrith stared at it as it descended, stopping two feet above the fountain’s surface. She raised a brow at it, posing a silent question.

“We can thank Master Neloren for that,” Master Tolfdir said in response. Yrith wondered how many
more hidden objects lay scattered around the College. Knowing Drevis Neloren, there could be thousands of them. “Well then. Would you be so kind, Miss Ravencroft, to pull that ball out of the fountain?”

Yrith waited for further instructions, but there were none. Her gaze shifted to Master Larkwing, but he returned it without a word. Master Tolfdir was looking at her with expectation.

“Pull it out… with telekinesis?”

“Exactly. Just a stream of magicka to latch onto it and take it out. Go on.”

Yrith stared at the sphere, flexing her fingers. Just how in Oblivion was she supposed to use a spell she had only read about? Then again, she had done it before, when she summoned her atronach for the first time. And she had killed her parents with it…

She took a deep breath. There were two skilled magisters with her this time. She would learn it properly. And so she called forth her magic, felt it tingle on her fingertips before she released it. It lunged forward, claiming the dark sphere ahead, but the moment it touched the fountain light underneath it, Yrith felt a shockwave hit her and send her staggering backwards. A force so strong it overwhelmed her, a presence so grand it made her feel like the smallest speck of dust in the vast greatness of Mundus. It spoke to her, absorbed her…

She gasped and broke the connection, shivers running down her spine.

“Miss Ravencroft? Is everything all right?” Master Larkwing wore that concerned look of his, the same one she woke up to from her nightmares and the one he had shown her after the Spirit Blight incident. But perhaps this was just her own power acting up. Perhaps she just needed to get used to it and understand it, and there was no need for him to worry.

She shook her head, feigning a smile that was all too weak and unconvincing for her liking. His frown did not go away.

“If there’s anything troubling you…”

“I’m fine. I just… I guess I really can’t control my magic too well,” she smiled sheepishly. She turned around quickly, summoning her magic again to avoid further questioning. Whatever it was, she’d be prepared this time.

The impact hit her again, but she simply let it wash over her, ignoring it as she tried to grab the ball. Her magic slid around it, encompassed it, but no matter how much of it Yrith used, the ball would not budge. She pushed and pulled and tried to shove it out of its place, but it stayed there as though it was chained to the fountain. Master Larkwing strode over and put a hand on her arm.

“Try to use less power and work on your technique instead.”

So he said, but how? She had read all about it, how her magic should be an extension of her arms, how she should be able to manipulate things with it. But even so, the ball was just an orb of magical energy, impossible to grab. She sighed and closed her eyes, trying to recall the words from the books. And the moment she did, the world changed around her.

The stream of magic she was holding up spread evenly throughout the space. She could touch anything and everything around her, feel its fabric, its substance, even its origins. She could see, even if the colors were inverted and strangely distorted, yet her vision came in sharper than ever. It was similar to what she saw in her dreams, dark, yet so clear. She could feel the objects around her, become a part of them and let them become a part of her. She could feel the College, an organism
which felt and saw just like she did.

That was what she had felt before, a being that stood guard above her and everyone inside, an entity that was perhaps older than Nirn itself. She could connect with it and explore the whole grounds with her mind. She could locate every person and every snowflake. The moon orbs held by the statue of Arch-Mage Shalidor sent a slight tingle her way, a focal point in itself that connected the College with Masser and Secunda.

She pulled away, too overwhelmed to continue, and focused on the Hall of the Elements instead. She felt the fountain, the sphere, and the two people standing at her sides. The elder was calm and wise, regarding her with an eye that had seen its share of the world. The younger was full of energy he did not want to expose. Passion he kept to himself, feelings that seemed cramped within that small body of his. His heartbeat was fast and his eyes fixed on her person. The feeling of sudden proximity made her own heart race. She retreated and reached for the ball.

Pulling it out of the fountain was so incredibly easy. She felt more than control. She felt harmony, as though there was no difference between moving the fingers on her hands or manipulating objects that were twenty feet away. She smiled as she felt the dark orb getting closer. Keeping it at the same height, she navigated it toward herself, stopping it a foot away. The sound of Master Tolfdir’s voice next to her made her wince and open her eyes at once.

“Splendid!” he praised. “That was an exemplary display of the use of telekinesis. I must say I am impressed. Wouldn’t you agree, Master Larkwing?”

Yrith could only devote a small portion of her attention to the two teachers. The sounds and the sudden burst of images before her eyes made it difficult to concentrate on the sphere. Her magic worked differently with her eyes open and with so many impulses assaulting her senses. She had to reduce it to a tiny stream which was so much harder to handle. The ball bobbed up and down in the air, trying to slip out of her grasp. Only now she realized that what she had used to draw the ball out of the fountain was not the telekinesis spell at all. And judging by the disgruntled sound that came from the side of Master Larkwing, he knew it too.

“I would like to know,” he said, his tone low and reserved, “why it is that Miss Ravencroft is suddenly struggling to keep the ball in the air?”

“Oh, I am sure this exercise must have been exhausting. Shall we take a break?”

Yrith wildly shook her head. A break would mean a chance for Singird Larkwing to ask about what she had done. She was not prepared to answer his questions. Not when she did not understand it so well herself. She bit her lip in shame, feeling the sting of guilt for cheating Master Tolfdir. She needed to make it right and she needed to do it now.

“Very well, if you insist, we shall continue. In the next exercise, Master Larkwing and I will push against each other. While one will try to take the ball to the ground, the other will drive it upward. Your task will be to maintain its height at a steady point.”

Yrith froze. She could barely maintain her hold on the ball as it stood, yet now she was to face the combined forces of her two masters. She felt defeated before she even started. How could she ever hope to control her magic?

“Ready?”

With a deep, shaky breath, she nodded. She resisted the urge to clench her fists, concentrating on the stream of magic coming out of her hands. The two teachers at her sides exchanged a silent sign and
let out their magicka. The ball quivered, and suddenly it was so much harder to control it. It became heavier, then lighter, then heavier again, almost touching the ground. She needed to find a way to keep it steady. Perhaps if there was just one person pushing at it, she could balance it from the other side, but this was almost impossible. The only way she could think of was to cut the pressure out. Prevent them from accessing the ball. But she was certain that was not what Master Tolfdir meant.

She spent a while trying, gritting her teeth, but time did not seem to help. She felt as though she hadn’t the slightest control over the ball and it was entirely in the hands of her two teachers. She sent in more magicka, but it only shook the ball to no effect. She let it encompass it, but that only helped the two masters who used her own power to manipulate the ball. She let out a helpless sigh.

“How?” she asked, fighting the desperation from sneaking its way to her voice. “How am I supposed to do this?”

“Try to…”

“Figure this out for yourself,” Master Larkwing said in a voice cold as ice. “No one is going to help you when you face an enemy.”

“But I am not facing an enemy!”

“Then treat it as if you were.”

“Master Larkwing, aren’t you a little too harsh with her?”

“No. She has all the knowledge she needs. She only needs to use it.”

Master Larkwing’s words stirred anger within her. How in Oblivion was she supposed to train her reflexes and control when she could not even master the basics? She tried to recall everything she had read on Alteration and the telekinesis spell, but no book she had ever touched mentioned similar exercise. She assumed it was something that could only be learned by practice. But she was so bad at it.

Then again, Master Larkwing had told her to treat them as enemies. And an enemy had to be defeated at all costs.

She decided to close her eyes again. She felt their magic… and took it away. The more they would send, the more control she would gain, and the ball was steady in her power once more. She opened her eyes ajar, trying to maintain it. It was difficult, yet not as much as the first time. The two teachers ceased their attempts.

“Well then, that was an interesting take on it, but you did gain control in the end,” Master Tolfdir commented. “Although, as much as I am ashamed to say so, I feel compelled to ask how.”

“It does not matter. Miss Ravencroft failed. What she did had nothing to do with telekinesis. That was not control what she displayed. She overpowered us.”

Yrith could not raise her eyes to meet Master Larkwing’s. The anger in his voice sent shivers down her spine. He was right and it was vexing. She felt so powerless, so useless compared to those who only had a portion of the power she had, yet wielded it with such mastery. She was small and weak, a child who understood nothing of the world, and she was supposed to face a person capable of spellbrewing. Yet again, the thought made her tremble in fear. Why did it have to be this way? What had she ever done to deserve this?

“It would count as a success though,” Master Tolfdir opposed, only to fall silent again under the
heavy look of Singird Larkwing.

“In this particular situation? Yes. In a hundred of others? No, it would not. We will try this again, Miss Ravencroft, and you will do it properly. Shall we move to the third exercise, Master Tolfdir?”

The elder mage shook his head in resignation as he raised his hands to cast a spell. A labyrinth appeared before them, its walls glowing with magicka. The tunnels turned and wound their way to the center of the maze that was the focal point. Yrith stared at it, following the path to the fountain and trying to memorize as much of it as she could. No doubt she would be asked to navigate the ball through it. She needed to be prepared.

“Studying the maze will not help you,” Master Larkwing said as if it caused him utter pleasure to shatter her hopes. “You will now be forced to react quickly to changes while keeping the ball under control. You will need to constantly find new routes. We will be shifting the walls as you proceed.”

Yrith scolded herself inwardly for being that naïve. As if Master Larkwing ever made anything easy for her. She looked at the walls, trying to imagine how she would twist them if she wanted to make the passages difficult but not impossible. Then again, if she was Master Larkwing or Master Tolfdir, she would probably choose to react to the ball’s movement. This would be the biggest challenge yet, and she had failed the previous two. She contained a sigh, waiting for the signal to start.

It came all too soon for her liking. Shakily, she led the sphere to the maze, calculating the path ahead. It already took a large portion of her mental capacity, and she was terrified of the moment she’d be forced to change route. The two masters waited, letting her well into the labyrinth so she would not have the option to back away easily. Then, it was Master Tolfdir who struck first, much more mercilessly than she had anticipated. He cut off not one, but two of the passages ahead, forcing her to go back. She realized a moment too late that by doing that, he had opened a different path she could have taken. A careless mistake. In a fight, this would have cost her life. She gritted her teeth.

Master Larkwing proved to be just as ruthless. The two of them faced Yrith like a worthy opponent, constantly trying to drive her into a corner, tricking her as she worked her way through the maze. After a while of drifting and turning, the ball was locked inside with no way out. She let out a breath, cutting the magical connection. The maze shifted back into its initial state and Master Tolfdir guided the ball out.

“Perhaps we should end here for today,” he said, but Master Larkwing shook his head.

“We will take a break. I can accompany Miss Ravencroft to the courtyard if she needs fresh air.”

“I’m fine,” she muttered. Of course she needed fresh air. Alone, without anyone lecturing her on how she should man up. She retreated to a niche between the tall pilasters that circled the Hall of the Elements, hugging her knees as she sat on the window sill. It was not even noon, and yet she felt tired like never before. She rested her back against the cold wall, refusing the piece of a sweet roll Master Tolfdir offered her, miraculously conjuring it from the depths of his robes. She kept her eyes closed and let just a tiny bit of magic out to feel her surroundings. It was somewhat soothing, giving her a feeling of security when she knew about everything around. Inadvertently, she reached out to Singird Larkwing, feeling his heart. She did not find any anger there, only concern. She opened an eye to look at his face. He was discussing something with Master Tolfdir, his gaze constantly drifting toward her and back, and he wore the same ice-cold expression she had seen on him moments before. She let her magic retreat. At times, he was so hard to read. Yet when she thought about it, this unapproachable nature of his was somewhat appealing.

The exercise continued after a short while. Yet again, Yrith led the ball through the maze, struggling with the control, wincing every time the passages shifted. Time dragged, but she stubbornly shook
her head every time Master Tolfdir offered to end for the day. Occasionally, she took a peek at Master Larkwing’s face, searching for a trace of softness, but she never found any. In and out, the sphere kept advancing and backing again, reacting to the changes. After a while, it became an almost automatic process, but Yrith still could not find her way. She was driven to a dead end for the umpteenth time.

Impatiently, she closed her eyes and reached out with her magic. Then she opened them ajar to feign concentration. She could feel the masters’ hearts, the movement of their fingers as they controlled their magic, the strands of magicka extended toward the maze. She could anticipate what they would do before they even sent the impulse. That was it. She would succeed this time. The ball obeyed her perfectly and the road ahead turned according to her expectations. She could see the paths and all the alternatives. It was so easy to navigate the sphere to the center and connect it with the fountain again. At last, she succeeded. But the only thing she gained was a piercing look from Master Larkwing that stabbed her in the heart.

“I would suggest you do it properly next time, Miss Ravencroft.”

She could only reply with silence. Shame mingled with the feeling of injustice. She had been, after all, encouraged to imagine she was in a real fight. And it was natural to do anything in a real fight. She pursed her lips, stifling the words of defense.

“I suppose we should give Miss Ravencroft some time,” Master Tolfdir said, raising his hand to placate his agitated colleague. Yrith stared at him. So even he now realized what she had done. And even he disapproved.

“Perhaps.”

“I will excuse myself for now. Miss Ravencroft, I suppose we will be meeting each other soon. Think on your use of magic. And practice. There are many ways to hone your instincts and they don’t have to be magical.” With a short nod to Master Larkwing, Master Tolfdir left the room. Yrith pinned her eyes to the floor, unwilling to look in her mentor’s face.

They spent the way back to Master Larkwing’s room in silence. Yrith listened to their breaths, to the sounds of the magical fountains, the weeping wind and crunching of the snow under their feet. She thought of what to say to him, but nothing came to her mind. Upon entering the Hall of Countenance, they passed a disenchanted Mirabelle Ervine, giving a piece of her mind to J’zargo, the only other Khajiit in the College beside Ha’risha.

“It is moonsugar again. How many times has it been now?!” The Master Wizard stood with hands on her hips, eyes flaring like a thousand of heated suns. Her slight Breton posture was much more threatening than that of Urag gro-Shub on his bad days.

The Khajiit stood proud, furry ears shooting upward while he gazed at her with no sign of remorse.

“J’zargo has been telling you it is not for skooma. J’zargo does not drink skooma. But moonsugar slows down the effect of potions. J’zargo needs it for his experiments.”

“I am not interested in your excuses. There shall be no moonsugar on the College grounds. Are we clear on that?”

Yrith could not hear the Khajiit’s answer. His voice faded as the door snapped shut behind her. There she was again, in her prison and haven in one. Crossing the room, she threw herself on her bed. The curtain hid her momentarily from Master Larkwing’s sight before his magic reached it.

“This will stay open,” he said curtly. Without another word, he sank to his chair, staring out of the
window in silence as he so often liked to do. Yrith observed his silhouette. It was just like in the morning, his frame motionless and his mind so distant, yet now there was tension that had not been there before. She closed her eyes and once more, she let her magic touch him, observing him from the inside. His heart was unsteady, like the ocean waves in a storm and the ice floes that flip-flopped on top of them. Then its pace suddenly quickened at she retreated, but not fast enough to go unnoticed.

“What are you doing?” he asked. There was no anger or agitation in his voice, but it made her hot in the cheeks nevertheless. She opened her eyes to see him gazing at her, his face demanding answers.

“I…”

With a soft sigh, he motioned to the empty chair by his desk. “Come sit with me, Miss Ravencroft.”

She shuffled to his side of the room, feet dragging like a prisoner going for his execution. Master Larkwing stood up and opened a barrel standing by his cupboard. It was filled with ice wraith teeth preserving a few pieces of fish. He took one out and placed it on a plate just by his seat. She stared at him in anticipation. He took his time, imbuing the fish with detection magic as he always did. The blue glow from his fingers made the features of his face sharp, emphasized by the dancing shadows.

“How are you feeling?” he asked. Yrith frowned. Surely small talk was not the reason he had asked for her presence.

“A little tired,” she said. Lies. She was tremendously exhausted, but also anxious. By the look in his eyes, he already knew.

“Say, is it more exhausting to try your hardest to achieve what has been asked of you, or to cope with the emotional strain that comes with finding a way to elude it?”

Her hands clenched into fists before she could even process the words. She jumped on her feet to look him in the eye, bright red in the face, eyes fire and lightning. “You… what do you know? You have no idea! I was happy, you know! I have this power and it is my only worth! There’s nothing else I…”

“Sit down.”

“I can’t use magic like all of you do! I’m useless, I know! Is it fun to spit in my face and laugh at my expense?!?”

“Miss Ravencroft, sit down! Now!”

She sank into her seat, shaking, tears welling up in her eyes for the umpteenth time in his presence. She wished to run away, but there was nowhere to hide. She wanted to punch him in the face, but she would never dare. He stood there, calm as ever, pulling at the strands of his magic like a bard would on the strings of his lute.

“Do you know why I tried to teach you the way I did?”

She shook her head.

“Then take a guess.”

“To torment me,” she muttered. Despite himself, Master Larkwing struggled to keep a straight face.

“I am not amused.” He was clearly amused. Yrith wondered if he did it on purpose to stop her tears
from falling. Either way it worked and she felt a hint of smile tug at her lips.

“To teach me some basics…”

“True, but why do you think I did it?”

Why indeed? She gazed into his face and felt shame burn her cheeks again. As if she had not known that Singrid Larkwing always had a reason for everything. He had always stood by her side like a silent guardian, without a word of complaint, and she could only return the favor by cheating and acting like a spoiled brat. She bit her lip.

“To… protect me… somehow?”

“Correct. And do you know how the basics can protect you?”

“I… no. I don’t know. They’re… limiting.”

“Indeed, they are limiting. Which is exactly why you need to master them. They guide you to use your wits and be resourceful. They force you to fit within the constraints of your limited options and discover paths you wouldn’t have otherwise considered. They teach you to think outside the box. That is why every beginner must start with them, and that is why a lot of skilled magicians failed in what they did. They also provide foundation for the common principles of magic, and these principles are what most magic users follow when they use their powers. And even if they don’t strictly follow them, they are somewhere beneath everything they do. To understand them is to understand half of your enemy.”

Yrith pinned her eyes to the floor. She had no words to counter that. She felt defeated by the logic in Master Larkwing’s reasoning. The momentary silence felt heavy on her shoulders, but fortunately, it did not last long.

“I am not against you finding new ways of handling your magic,” he said in a tone much gentler than moments before, “but you do need to grasp the common knowledge and practices. Knowing these will also help you know your own weaknesses. It will ultimately make you stronger.”

“But…” The room was darkening as the day slowly retreated. Perhaps he would not see the struggle in her face in the dim light, but she could not bring herself to raise it. “I don’t know how. I’m not capable of…”

Master Larkwing let the magic fade. He rose and joined her, putting a hand on her back. She shuddered as he spoke, so close to her she felt his breath on her face. “You are fully capable of casting magic properly. You only need to try.”

“But…”

“Do you think others don’t struggle on their first try? You made progress today. Considering you had never tried this before, the step you took was a tremendous one. It was your telekinesis that made the ball move through the maze, that much is a fact. Do not feel ashamed of not succeeding. You should only feel ashamed of giving up when you have not tried your best.”

The tears started falling again, not in streaks, but in rivers, leaving salt on her lips and soaking her robes. In the end, it was he who encouraged her again. She wanted to jump on her feet and embrace him like he had done so many times before, but fear of growing too close stopped her from acting.

She looked up through the blurry film on her eyes, drawing a breath to speak, but a fierce knock on the door took the words away. The two of them turned after the sound. Yrith quickly wiped the tears
from her face, struggling to put up a neutral face.

“Come in,” Master Larkwing said, stepping before Yrith to hide her. Again, she felt a wave of immense gratitude.

The head of Lady Faralda peeked in. Yrith could not see her face, but she could clearly recognize her voice. There was more than disconcert in it.

“Apologies for interrupting, Singird, but we are being called out. Everyone is to assemble in the courtyard, students, teachers and staff alike. From what I understood, it was another murder and it was close.”

Immediately, Master Larkwing tensed. He took a moment to ponder his reply, drawing a long breath to gather his determination. “That is grave news. But shouldn’t I stay here with Miss Ravencroft?”

“No. Take her with you.”

“If the murderer is the same person who is after her, wouldn’t that be exactly what they want?”

“Hardly. I would like to see them try against the whole Collegium.”

“Very well. We’ll be there in a moment.”

Lady Faralda gave a quick curtsy before excusing herself. The room fell silent, lit by the crimson gold of the setting sun as it found a gap between the clouds. Yrith stood up, still shaken. Master Larkwing handed her a handkerchief to wipe the rest of her tears as though he had one prepared for every occasion. She accepted it with a nod of thanks.

“Miss Ravencroft, whatever happens, stay by my side. Grab me if need be, just don’t let yourself be dragged away.” His tone was urgent, making her heart shrink with worry.

“Do you think something will happen?”

“Chances are one on one. I do hope it is just me, but it’s always better to come prepared. Shall we go?”

She nodded and the two of them left the room. When they reached the courtyard, it was already filled with people. As soon as they emerged from the Hall of Countenance, she could feel Ha’risha’s glare at her. At the same time, she spotted Cain and Leyna waving at her. She waved back timidly, nodding toward Master Larkwing upon Cain’s invitation to join them. The Dunmer stooped his shoulders, earning a pat from Leyna.

Around the statue of Arch-Mage Shalidor stood almost the entire Collegium. Lady Faralda discussed something quietly with Master Tolfdir. Drevis Neloren stood like a silent sentinel, eyes roving over the whole courtyard as though he was expecting a sudden explosion. Sergius Turrianus and Amiel Gane were frozen like two statues, minds somewhere deep in their own worlds. Phinis Gestor was rubbing his temples. Next to him stood Mirabelle Ervine, her eyes shifting between the College entrance and the gate to the Hall of the Elements. She looked agitated, enraged even, lips pressed into a thin line.

The advanced class students marched toward the crowd from the Hall of Attainment, led by the ever-frowning Nirya. She then joined the teachers, pretending to listen to their conversation in her self-important act while being completely ignored.

Yrith followed Master Larkwing to the bundle of teachers. He stopped a few steps away from Lady
"I just hope this won’t influence my negotiations," she heard her whisper to Master Tolfdir. Then she turned around to greet Master Larkwing. “You are here. Make yourself comfortable.”

He raised his brows. “Whatever might you mean?”

“She means the Arch-Mage is not here yet,” Master Ervine remarked, crossing her arms over her chest. “It seems she is not quite bothered with the current situation.”

“Somehow I do not find that surprising,” Master Larkwing said, voice ice-cold. Yrith wondered what kind of history he had with the Arch-Mage. She was eager to see the legend in person and caught herself glancing at the Hall of the Elements even more often than Mirabelle Ervine.

The sun had sunk well beyond the horizon when the huge brass gate finally opened with an ear-splitting creak. The blue light of the fountain revealed the figure of an Argonian woman. Her head was proudly raised while the hood of her robes hung from her back. She was thin, skeletal almost, with nothing but two proud horns in place of her ears, reminiscent of an emerald skinned dragon. From her left horn hung a set of brightly colored feathers which reached to her neck, coiled with a number of golden chains. Her eyes of green and gold glided over the gathered crowd, wild and hungry, as though they belonged to a beast which was constantly forced to choose between hunting and becoming prey to another. At a closer look, many scars lined her face and neck and wrinkled her skin. Her expression, however, was a gentle one, likely the calmest face present.

The small crowd of teachers split in two groups and formed an aisle for her. She stepped forward, into the light until her features were bluish pale. She nodded to the students and beckoned to them in greeting. Master Tolfdir hurried to her side and whispered something in her ear, but she returned it with a simple shrug and a dreamy smile. He shook his head and knit his brows as he retreated. The Arch-Mage turned to face the mass of bodies before her and everyone fell silent.

“So many people gathered here on this occasion,” she spoke. Her voice was just as dreamy as her smile, too soft for an Argonian. Not even an Altmer would be ashamed of singing in such beautiful alto. Yrith watched her wrinkled body and savage face, mind trying to connect it to the voice that came out of that mouth without success. “So many bright minds, both young and old. I suppose this is where I deliver my grand speech.”

Mirabelle Ervine cleared her throat. “This is not a parade, Arch-Mage. We are dealing with…”

“Yes, yes, of course. It is very unfortunate. Very unfortunate indeed.”

“Arch-Mage…”

“Corpses, torn flesh, deformed eyeballs and…”

“Arch-Mage!”

The Arch-Mage shrugged theatrically, giving an angelic smile, if that was even possible for an Argonian. “People get so dull these times, don’t you think?” she said matter-of-factly. “People die every day. The routine gets boring, but you can find beauty in decay. Nevertheless, dear Miss Mirabelle, you are the Master Wizard. I hereby name you my spokesperson. Please, be so kind to explain to these souls what happened. I have important matters to attend to.”

“You always do.” Mirabelle Ervine spoke in a quiet voice, yet every word carried through the courtyard, clear and razor-sharp. “Very well. I will deliver the speech, but please, be so kind to stay and make a decision… for the sake of these souls. I believe a moment or two will not affect the state
of those… important matters you speak of.”

“Clever words. I suppose I could stay and listen then. The floor is all yours.”

Master Ervine took the Arch-Mage’s place, clearing her throat. “There have been two murders in the city of Winterhold,” she said, plain, with no flowery language and no sidetracked comments to adorn her speech. “One was the Winterhold guard captain. The other one was an elven courier.”

Quiet murmurs spread through the crowd along the few gasps and sighs. Yrith could hear both thrill and concern, students and teachers alike whispering to each other excitedly. Mirabelle Ervine raised a hand to silence them.

“The two of them were stripped of their belongings,” she continued. “The culprit is unknown. They were found just under the College bridge, broken from the fall, but there were clear signs of magical injuries on their bodies. This is a dark day for all of us. We have lost the last bit of faith that rested here in Winterhold. I ask of you to tread carefully and not leave the College. The outer world is not safe anymore. Now Arch-Mage, if you will.”

She stepped out of the light circle around the fountain, beckoning for the Arch-Mage to take her place, but the Argonian did not seem to follow. Instead, she nodded, putting a hand on Mirabelle’s shoulder.

“Very well said,” she sang. “You would make a much better Arch-Mage than I am. Now if you would excuse me…”

“Arch-Mage! All of us are waiting for a decision. And perhaps some instructions on what to do are in order.”

“Decision? Is that not what you are here for, Master Wizard?”

Mirabelle Ervine took a deep breath, and another one after that. Yrith could almost feel all the curses she had ready on her lips, but pride and dignity did not allow her to let them be heard. “No, Arch-Mage,” she whispered. “I only see to their completion.”

“Then I grant you the permission to…”

“Arch-Mage!” That was Tolfdir, unable to hold his own anymore. Yrith had never seen the old Master so agitated. Master Ervine raised a hand to silence him, eyes still on the Argonian.

“Arch-Mage. We need the decisive word.”

“Very well. Then I suppose from now on, no one will leave the College without an officially signed permission until the issue is resolved. And… someone should probably resolve it.” Every word was said with a smile, in a light conversational tone. The Arch-Mage played with the feathers on her horn, staring somewhere into the distance. The murmurs rose to a storm upon her speech. Even Master Larkwing at Yrith’s side growled with poorly concealed impatience. “I suppose that is all.”

“Is it really? How are we supposed to conduct the investigation?”

“Well then,” the Argonian said without changing her tone, ignoring the question entirely, “I believe this College should have enough competent mages to deal with a petty matter like this. Now if you’ll excuse me.” With that, she waved to the teachers, turned toward the entrance to the Hall of the Elements and disappeared behind the massive studded door.

Shocked silence reigned after her departure. Teachers exchanged incredulous looks, students stared
with their mouths open. No one noticed the snow which started falling from the skies, fluttering around and landing on their clothes and hair. They just stood there, a sea of statues frozen in time. Yrith looked from person to person, waiting for the silence to break. Then, the lone voice of Phinis Gestor spoke, sounding thunderous in the quiet.

“What in Oblivion was that?”

The question hung in the air for a moment. Then several heads nodded and the courtyard filled with quiet mutters of agreement. Mirabelle Ervine sighed and wiped her forehead.

“Everyone is to return to the Hall of Attainment,” she said wearily. “You will receive further instructions as soon as we make the final decision. No one,” she looked over the gathered people, “absolutely no one is allowed to leave the College without our approval.” She raised her hands, releasing a vermillion bolt out of it. It spread over the main gate as it reached it, sealing it shut. “This seal will not break upon the strongest of impacts if you do not carry the Sign of Accord with you. Please, report any strange sightings or suspicious acts to me or Master Tolfdir. Dismissed.”

The students, now chattering amongst themselves as if someone set the time back in motion, slowly dispersed in all directions. Master Larkwing exchanged a few words with Lady Faralda and Mirabelle Ervine before prodding Yrith toward the Hall of Countenance. She followed obediently, eyes on the last few of the students, searching for her friends to tell them goodbye. Cain was nowhere to be seen, but she found Leyna dragging her feet through the snow. She raised her hand to wave at her, but lowered it instantly. The Altmeri girl’s face glistened with tears. Yrith froze at the sight, wishing for a chance to talk to her.

“Miss Ravencroft, don’t fall behind.”

She sighed, feeling her heart sink. She could not be there when her very first friend was suffering. She could not give her a shoulder to cry on. And Cain was still nowhere to be seen.

For a split moment, her eyes met with Leyna’s. Yrith opened her mouth to call to her, but her friend only shook her head. She gave a sad smile that seemed like an apology. Then she turned around, white-gold mane waving around her like a veil, and retreated to the depths of the Hall of Attainment. Yrith stared at the closing door, head full of questions and face long with worry. Master Larkwing was calling to her, but she could not hear his words anymore.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is dedicated to all those who suffer extremely low self-confidence. Think of Singird, guys. You can do it!
Of Darkness and Light

Chapter Notes

A little warning for sensitive souls – this chapter might be unsettling for some of you. I do not go into much detail when describing physical atrocities, but they are still there. You have been warned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“No, you cannot see them. How many times do I have to tell you before your tiny magician minds finally accept the truth?!” The scrawny ginger Nord with freckles all over his face stood with his arms crossed over his chest before the barracks entrance in a would-be threatening posture. Singird alone would have sent him flying had he decided to punch him with his fists, and that was something to say. But even he was not so foolish to doubt the rightfulness of the new guard captain.

“Can’t you see it is for your sake as well? Please, by all means do list us in your protocols and send it to Jarl Ulfric for all I care. You can record our every action here. We are on the same side. If we don’t find out who is behind this, the murders are going to continue.” Drevis Neloren, standing by Singird’s side, chose the voice of reason. Nevertheless, the man did not move an inch.

“Coating your words with honey will not help you. Who do you take us for? Do you think we don’t know what a cover-up looks like?”

“Listen…”

Singird put a hand on the Dunmer’s shoulder. He fell silent, raising his brows in question.

“I assume you have heard of General Toddvar?” Singird said, looking the man straight in the hazelnut eyes. The captain stared at him, obviously assessing his stance.

“Who hasn’t? What of him?”

“He is a very good friend of mine. I hear he sleeps with a picture of the Stormcloak bear in a field of stars under his pillow.”

The man now openly gaped at him. Despite his composed face, Singird felt a lump settle in his throat. This was a risky move which could either gain him absolute trust or an immediate death sentence. Back in the day when his parents had served the Imperial army, a legate came to visit him in Falkreath, carrying a message from his parents. He had shared a story about Stormcloak secret signs and what it meant when someone mentioned a picture under a general’s pillow. If the passphrase was correct, the person would immediately earn the trust of the Stormcloaks. If it was wrong, they would be considered a traitor or an intruder and sent for execution. That day, Singird had learned the signs of all Stormcloak generals including Galmar Stone-Fist and Toddvar Ansgarsson. And now he was using the secret to speak of a person who had never shared it with him.

The ginger man sized him up, brows knitting in doubt. There was a moment of silence. Singird felt the chill of the evening wind as it shook his frame. Drevis Neloren kept watching him, question still in his face.
“Come in,” the man said in a neutral tone. The Dunmer’s expression brightened but Singird knew the real test was yet to come. They were led through a series of corridors and small rooms. Singird drew in the scent of the dark, stained wood the walls were made in. It brought back memories of his hometown, the green, sunlit forests of Falkreath, the smell of moss and pines and the sound of woodpeckers carefully picking up bark beetles. The Larkwing family farm was made the same way the Winterhold barracks were, with bright windows and dark cozy corners inviting to spend the long nights in the light of a single candle.

There were a few men around, most of them minding their own business. A sturdy man with a mop of curly chestnut hair was cautiously wiping his blade, turning it into a mirror. Two guards engaged in a quiet conversation raised their heads to see the guests. They stared briefly at Singird, and slightly longer at his Dunmer companion, but then they simply shrugged and continued their discourse.

The captain led them into a small chamber whose equipment counted a single bed and a small table carrying a chandelier and a jug of water. The bed was occupied by a Nord man who looked more like a bear than an actual person, brown-grey hair sticking out from every inch of his person. He lay there with his huge hand over the massive belly, huffing quietly to himself. As soon as the three of them entered, a pair of dark eyes glistened from beneath the thick fur and he rose on his elbows.

“Well well, look what the cat dragged in,” he growled, sounding like a bear even as he spoke.

“Hafnir. These two want to see the corpses. They claim to be friends of General Toddvar.” The slight ginger man hopped to the bear’s side and whispered something in his ear. The bear man gave Singird a long, inquisitive look. Singird returned it, mustering all his willpower not to back away from the room.

“Well well,” the bear man said again. “If it ain’t young Larkwing coming for a visit.”

Singird’s brows quirked up in question. “Excuse me, have we met before?”

“Who? We? Nah, I don’t think so. But I know a friend of Toddvar’s when I see one. Well, you look like you could use a bit o’ dirt under those nails of yours.”

Singird threw a quick glance at his nails. Light, glossy, round… perfectly clean. There was nothing wrong with them. He looked at the man to see him grin at him, but he was not amused.

“Feel free to look around, young lad!” the man continued. “As long as you don’t touch anything that’s not yours.”

Singird let out a breath as he bowed. “Understood. We are in your debt.”

“Hopefully we will be in yours soon! Now if you’ll excuse me.” The bear man lay back on the bed, turning his back to the guests and face to the wall. Singird quickly backed out of the room before the brute could change his mind.

The captain led them down to the cellar. They found themselves in a small room with walls of round stones and fine grout. A few torches were attached to them, casting flickering light over two bundles on the floor, covered by dark cloth. The cold of the room sent shivers down Singird’s spine, and by the looks of it, Drevis Neloren, wrapping his arms around himself, did not feel any better.

“Here you are,” the ginger man said. “You are free to touch the bodies. You are not allowed to take them away, damage them or desecrate them in any way. I will be excusing myself. Leave whenever you want.” Turning on his heel, he made for the stairs. Singird and Drevis Neloren were left alone, staring at the two heaps before them.
“Shall we?” Singird asked gingerly, hoping his companion would take the first step. Master Neloren let out a deep sigh, for once letting the gravity of the situation show on his face.

“Together then?”

“And no magic.”

“No magic.”

They nodded at each other, both taking one end of the dark cloth. As one man they pulled it away, revealing two bodies with incessant scars crisscrossing their skin. Each corpse was laid with its hands over the chest, a wreath of snowberries and mountain flowers atop of it.

“If I didn’t know better, I would almost believe they are alive,” Master Neloren said with a hint of acknowledgement. “I have to give it to your people, you sure are skilled in preservation.”

“Questionable if that is actually a good thing,” Singird muttered as he bent down to study the bodies closer. “The draugr can terrify the best of us, and they are not known for their kindness.” The bodies made his stomach knot in repulsion. All the way to this place he had been preparing in his mind for what he would see, yet no amount of time and contemplation could prepare him for this sight. He averted his eyes to take a breath.

“The draugr are a reflection of who they were in life. So are our ancestor ghosts. There is a lot of misconception concerning our dead, but for some, the act of staying on the boundary of worlds is not nearly as selfless as one might think.”

Singird forced himself to smile as he turned back to the corpses. “People are still people, regardless of the race.”

“Wise words. Have you found anything?”

He clenched his fists, studying the bodies with eyes half-closed. “Quite a lot, but still very little. These wounds,” Singird pointed at a strangely curved and jagged scar, “could not have been caused by any weapon, nor standard magic. The flesh was literally torn out, severed from the body, and it was no claw that did this.”

“Strange. I have never seen anything like this. It is as though someone is purposely leading the guards to think it was done by magic.”

“That might as well be the case. Either way, we should look for traces. Do you think there will be enough after a whole day?”

“Under normal circumstances, there would be enough left even years after their death. You can read a person’s history from their bones. But I have a suspicion about the craftiness of our enemy. I hope I am mistaken.”

“Let us find out then.”

Master Neloren nodded and the two of them raised their hands, engulfing them with magicka. They let out a strand each, caressing lightly the surface of the bodies, inch by inch, cautiously studying their fabric. Singird’s brows knit in concentration. He proceeded slowly, restraining his movements to almost unnoticeable gestures, absorbing, feeling the rough, ripped skin as though he was touching it with his hands. He felt his stomach tumble and pressed his lips tightly together to stop the wave that was rising inside him. When he reached an especially wide wound, gaping open in its full hideousness, he winced. A spark of bright white magicka shot from his fingers. Master Neloren
gasped, breaking his own connection.

“Pull away!” he shouted, but Singird was slow. His breath betrayed him, eyes growing wide at the myriad of colors that burst before him. He could not sever the link, the magic drew him in, pulled him closer to that bright light.

“Damnation!” Drevis Neloren spat, directing his magic at Singird. It hit him hard and sent him flying to the wall. The impact struck him breathless. Through the thousands of tiny stars dancing before his eyes he could see an orb of light encompassing the bodies. Bolts of magic from the inside made cracks in it, but every time they did, the barrier was strengthened by another wave of magicka. Singird forced himself to stand, trembling on his feet. Master Neloren was barely able to stand his ground. Gritting his teeth, Singird sent in his own magic. The barrier shone brighter, dying the walls snow-white.

Bolts kept assaulting the shield, but they grew weaker with every strike until they were reduced to tiny sparks. The two of them pulled back, letting the barrier absorb the last bits before it dissolved. The room grew dark.

“Still in one piece?” Drevis Neloren asked, hurrying to Singird’s side. Singird let himself slide along the wall, letting his heart steady itself.

“I think so,” he breathed.

“I apologize if I was a bit ruthless…”

“You saved my life.” Singird closed his eyes. The investigation had not even begun and he was already feeling dead tired. “Magical trap, very clever. That person must have anticipated the College’s involvement.”

“It is more than that. Had we not stopped the explosion, it would have destroyed the whole barracks and everyone inside.”

“You believe it was calculated?”

“It is only an assumption, but I do indeed. So far, everything they’ve done was planned with absolute precision. And if they want to destroy the College, having us accused of blowing up the entire Winterhold guard would certainly work in their favor.”

Singird frowned. “I still think there is something we are missing. The College’s downfall can’t be their only motivation.”

“We can only assume.”

Sudden footsteps made Singird lift himself up with the help of Drevis Neloren. He huffed as he leaned to the wall, still feeling weak and shaken. The newcomer pounded down the stairs, his every step resonating throughout the small room.

“I heard some noises. Is everything all right, Larkwing lad?” It was Hafnir, the bear man, treading down to find the source of the commotion.

Singird made a quick assessment. Here was a man who may or may not have been involved in the murders. If he was, then he already knew everything that had transpired just moments ago. If he wasn’t…

“There was a trap in the bodies,” he said truthfully. “If an unskilled mage had touched them, this
The man halted, dark eyes watching Singird from under the thick unnaturally long brows. Singird registered the shocked look on Drevis Neloren’s face. He sent a nod of reassurance his way.

“You are saying we are being dragged in your internal struggles,” the man said slowly. Of course he would interpret it this way. And he was not wrong.

“That is one way to say it, but we are on your side. That person was ruthless enough to sacrifice an entire unit.”

The man scratched his wild beard, thinking in silence. For a moment, crackling of the torch fires was the only sound filling the room. Then he sighed and rubbed his hairy temples.

“Leave this place, Larkwing lad. This will be the last time we have collaborated.”

Singird froze. He had miscalculated. Waves of hot and cold flooded him. Any resistance could prove fatal, but he could not afford to lose this chance. He glanced at the Dunmer at his side. Drevis Neloren shook his head in disbelief.

“We really need to stay here,” he said in a peculiarly strained voice. Singird stared at him, ready to scold him for his manners, but then he noticed the strand of magicka coming from his mouth. “Let us continue our investigation.”

“But…”

“You want to let us proceed and forget this entire matter.”

The bear man shivered visibly. Then he stooped his shoulders in resignation and let out a raspy whisper. “I… indeed. That sounds… reasonable. Do continue, please.”

He retreated back to where he came from, leaving the two of them alone. Singird let out a shaky breath, wiping beads of cold sweat from his forehead.

“That was…”

“You young ones,” Drevis Neloren was shaking his head. “What in Oblivion were you thinking?”

“I… I apologize. I made a mistake.”

“That you did, a cardinal one. That could have been the end of us.”

Despite himself, Singird flushed, feeling like a child that had gone out to play instead of doing his chores. “You saved me… again. That was very impressive.”

“Unfortunately, it wasn’t. That man’s mind was weakened. He was already being controlled.”

Singird’s heart skipped a beat. “I… beg your pardon?”

“You heard me. We are well deep in the enemy territory and whoever we stand against, that person’s influence stretches far. Let’s get this over with.”

Singird nodded, feeling the weight of the moment on his shoulders. Face clouded with uncertainty, he knelt down to inspect the corpses, the sight of them adding to his already stifling queasiness. Master Neloren joined him, brows knitting as he enveloped one of the bodies in the glow of his magic. There were no more explosions. Not a single spark left the bodies, but the deepening frown
on Master Neloren’s face told Singird there was still something wrong.

“I can’t believe this,” he said, letting his hands sink to his sides.

“What is wrong?”

“Do you remember what happened when I went to inspect the avalanche site?”

“Nothing I know of…”

“Exactly. Nothing happened. It should have. Magic leaves traces, residue that can last from years to millennia. But back there, I considered the possibility that the culprit simply erased them. Or that my magic was too weak to identify them. But these are fresh corpses. They should be overflowing with leftover magic. Especially the elf,” he waved his hand to the corpse of a thin, pointy-eared man. “But there is none at all. As if their souls…”

“The Spirit Blight,” Singird said as realization dawned upon him.

“These two were not poisoned though.”

“No, but the method is the same. That person is strangely partial to tearing their victims’ souls apart.”

“That they are,” Master Neloren said with a sigh. He rose to his feet, watching the bodies with resignation. “But why would they do that?”

“Maybe to achieve just that. Erase traces. If the dead can’t talk, they reveal nothing.”

“Why would they try to do that to Miss Ravencroft though? It’s not like we would have found any traces if she’d died.”

Singird clenched his fists. The idea of finding Miss Ravencroft’s corpse, deprived of the last bits of her soul, incited anger within him. He could not let it happen. “Maybe to prevent her from taking the whole College with her?”

“I doubt it,” Master Neloren shook his head. “First off, they did not seem to mind when it came to this place. And secondly… well, even if you tear someone’s soul apart, the energy has to go somewhere.”

“But it’s not here.”

“No.”

“Then…”

“To gain power!” both of them exclaimed at once. Singird’s hand shot up to cover his mouth. Drevis Neloren raised his head to glance cautiously at the stairs. Then he sighed, letting out all the tension and weight of the freshly gained knowledge.

“Let’s go,” he said. “There is nothing left to do here.”

Singird nodded. They slid the dark cloth carefully over the bodies. Singird muttered a short prayer to Arkay before leaving, knowing fully well that no Aetherius awaited the poor tattered souls. They left in silence, hurried past the mostly sleeping guards, avoiding unnecessary attention. Even when they reached the entrance gate to the College under the starry sky, they only exchanged a few words before raising their Sign of Accord and nodding each other goodbye.
Ten days had passed since the investigation. Just like the rest of the Collegium, Singird was now confined to the College grounds. There would be no more visits to the Frozen Heath, no more strolls through the silent snowy night and no more talking to the Winterhold citizens. But unlike the other teachers, Singird did not mind. Most of his time he dedicated to Miss Ravencroft and her training. And over those few days, she had exceeded his expectations.

The progress she had made was more than impressive. To most, it would be unthinkable. Her reactions still needed improvement, but her magic was something Singird would have never thought possible. She wielded it with absolute ease, making the world succumb to her at will. She could create impenetrable wards, manipulate things from the inside and summon creatures that would last her forever no matter how many more she conjured. She could cast balls of fire and start a small blizzard. She had changed. The look she wore when casting her spells was one of pure determination. She trained whenever she could, even in his room. She slept with textbooks, a feat Singird scolded her for on many occasions. She did not complain anymore. But she did not talk much either, and it scared Singird beyond anything.

He watched her as she listened to Master Neloren’s explanation of the invisibility spell. She observed him intently, devouring each and every word he said. At times, she interrupted him gingerly with a question, all the while keeping her eyes on him, with her fists clenched and pressed to her thighs.

When the training began, it only took her several tries to become fully invisible. Master Neloren stuttered on his reaction, proceeding to the next phase of the training.

“I must say I am impressed,” a voice issued just next to Singird and he winced. Faralda had materialized by his side out of nowhere, watching her foster daughter with unconcealed interest.

“You were right about her.”

She wore a smile that said nothing of her thoughts. Singird sighed, letting out a bitter chuckle.

“Thank you for the recognition,” he said.

“You don’t look very pleased with her progress. Wasn’t it you who so fiercely protested against her studying here, claiming that she was a useless good-for-nothing?”

He stared at the slight Breton girl, now trying to master detection spells. Faralda was so right. He was not pleased. He deeply regretted ever complaining about Miss Ravencroft. She was everything but a useless good-for-nothing, and now he wished she would be.

“True. How can I be pleased with this? She is becoming a weapon. A human weapon.” He felt how his nails dug into the palm of his hand, but the pain it brought him was nothing compared to what he felt inside.

“You should not take it that way. It is for her own good.”

“Is it though? Is this necessary? She never wanted to… can you not see it? The look in her eyes? I know that look. It belongs to someone who lives in denial of their own desires for the sake of… something else.”

There was silence, defined by the humming of the fountain and Miss Ravencroft’s magic. Faralda gazed at her face, keeping words to herself. She had certain pride in her eyes, but there was a slight hint of doubt that had not been there before. They stood there for a while, just watching, and the silence grew heavier with every passing moment. Miss Ravencroft chanced upon an obstacle. Master Neloren kept invading her with mind-controlling spells and she had a difficult time fending him off. He used her own soul power against her. She was gritting her teeth and Singird could feel the growing anger in her, but she did not snap or complain. Every time she seemed about to burst out,
she took a breath and flexed her fingers to calm herself down. She was fighting two battles at once.

“That incident with Leyna Travi,” Faralda said suddenly without taking her eyes off Miss Ravencroft, “is not going to be easy to deal with.”

Singird stared at her in question. Did she know? Did she have any idea that it was connected to Miss Ravencroft’s case?

“Of course not,” he said, feigning ignorance. Faralda laughed.

“You did not ask,” she pointed out. So he was being led on. Again.

“I was expecting you to go on,” he shrugged.

“Truly.” It was not a question. A simple statement, perhaps an acknowledgement. She hinted a smile that he knew she showed just out of politeness. “You said that courier must have had his soul ripped off.”

“That I did.”

“I have been thinking. Did you see Leyna Travi’s reaction that day when the Arch-Mage announced his death?”

“I admit I was not quite paying attention to her.” Of course he hadn’t. His eyes had been solely on Yrith Ravencroft. An assembly of so many people, all listening to the queer Arch-Mage… it would have been so easy to stir chaos. Anything could have happened.

“She was… dismayed. Genuinely broken. Most of us Altmer do not even know what that word means.”

“Which made you assume that she had been expecting someone.”

“Someone sent by her father, perhaps, yes. You said the two corpses had their soul shattered and here is Yrith who became a victim of a murder attempt by the Spirit Blight. Curious how things add up, isn’t it?”

If Singird could pick a word to describe the situation, it would likely not be curious. He would call it frightful. Suspicious. Disquieting. But not curious. He did not like it. Whoever the enemy was, they were someone influential and most likely involved with the Thalmor. The name itself was enough to send a person to their knees. He had never had a personal experience with them, but a single look at the faces of those who had assured him he did not wish to. Then again, Faralda did not know what he did. She had no idea what Leyna Travi was planning. How close the enemy was. By the gods above, what a good actress she must have been.

“Say, Faralda,” he said, watching Miss Ravencroft succumb to yet another onslaught, “how do the elves express feelings? I must admit I suspected them of not having any at all.”

Faralda laughed. “Your question offends me, dear Singird,” she said with a bitter smile, “but it is indeed a valid one. You are so young… but imagine living for hundreds of years. For a fifty-year old human, it is painful to watch the seasons pass, to observe as everything around them withers and dies. They grow white hair, they become weary, and eventually, they decide to set out on the journey Aetherius. But imagine being an elf, whose great-great-grandfather had seen the wonders of the Merethic Era. When your king Ysgramor reached the shores of Skyrim, he was an old, seasoned warrior. At that time, we had been around for hundreds of years, yet we were still so young. How would that… discrepancy reflect in one’s mind?
“We do not age like you do. Our body does not easily give in to our state of mind. And therefore, it is not the body that adapts, but the mind that follows the pattern that is so alien to you. We feel deeply the sorrows of this world. We see our own history. Perhaps that is the reason why many of us Altmer, the higher race that derives directly from the Aldmer, the elder ones, think themselves to be superior. I do not identify with that line of thought, yet I understand it. We see our own history so clearly. We see the seasons pass and many armies fall. I was around when the Nerevarine vanquished Dagoth Ur. I saw the gates of Oblivion open, and I lived to see them close. I observed as the Empire of Tamriel shattered into pieces when the last Septim had fallen in the dust. I watched my own people plunder the lands under the guise of cleansing them of sin and heresy. And I have witnessed the dragons return.

“Over those hundreds of years, you realize how powerless you are. There is nothing you can do. Mer, men, beastfolk, all the living things… they will pass whether you want it or not. And you either follow them, or you are alone. The pain is so overwhelming, and with every loss, it becomes deeper, paralyzing. In the end, you can either succumb to it, or learn to shut those feelings away. But it does not mean you feel nothing at all.”

Singird stared at her, suddenly feeling deep respect for the master of Destruction. Just how old was she, despite wearing the form of a woman in full bloom, not even a mother yet? She had so much to say, so many thoughts, yet kept it all to herself. There must have been so many feelings hidden behind that mask. So many memories, people she had met and lost, emotions she had abandoned out of the fear of being crushed by them. She was watching her foster daughter, her face still nigh indifferent, yet he could see something in her amber eyes he had not seen there before. A flicker of life that had seen its share.

“I do not envy Yrith,” she added thoughtfully.

“What do you mean, she feels us all? She can control things with her magic, but she cannot read minds, can she?”

Faralda raised her hand to cover the smile that played on her lips. “You amuse me, Singird. Is it your ignorance, or wishful thinking, that made you pose that question? Of course she cannot read minds, but that does not mean she doesn’t feel what we do. Do you remember those dreams she had? Drevis made it clear that they are caused by her own magic, mingling with the magical currents that traverse the world. There are no boundaries for her. Magic is still magic, and a soul is nothing more than
concentrated magicka. It is as though we are a part of her. I am quite certain she can feel everything we do if she so desires.”

Singird could not find any words to counter that reasoning. Deep in his mind, he had known it for a long time. It was neither ignorance nor wishful thinking that led him to his conclusion. It was simple denial. If she could feel him, then she knew how his heart raced every time he looked at her. She knew how he ached when she cried, and how great his fear was when she was in danger. And she knew how reluctant he was to let go when he embraced her. It was not fair. He knew nothing of her feelings. She was keeping them to herself, rarely talking outside the facts. He wished to know. There were so many things he wanted to know about her.

Master Neloren had announced a break. Miss Ravencroft nodded without a word, sinking to the wall of the focal point. She was obviously more exhausted than usual, and her face revealed she had faced more than just Master Neloren’s mind attacks. Faralda beckoned to her, inviting her to join her and have a drink to refresh herself, but the girl just shook her head, staring at the floor and keeping to herself. Singird’s eyes drifted to Drevis Neloren, but the Dunmer too seemed preoccupied with his own thoughts.

“My words seem to strike a chord in you,” Faralda remarked. “It is unsettling to have yourself exposed like that, is it not? And you’re not even an elf.” She gave Miss Ravencroft a look. For the first time, Singird could see genuine concern in her eyes, mixed with pride and… affection, perhaps? “She is very much like her mother in both looks and her stubbornness. Look after her, Singird. You are right. There is something in her eyes that speaks of hidden secrets and determination whose source I cannot figure out. In the end, we may have to fight her before anything else.”

“Let’s hope that moment never comes,” he breathed.

“Do you truly believe that?” He met her eyes. Faralda’s query was more of a statement than a question. Leaving it lingering in the air, she excused herself, leaving Singird to his thoughts. He let out a deep sigh, waiting for the training to resume.

The day dragged on. Miss Ravencroft grew more tired with every attempt, yet she refused to retreat and take a rest with obstinacy of her own. When the light from the outside dimmed, leaving the duty of lighting the room to the blue fountain, Master Neloren broke the magical connection between them for the last time.

“Let’s call it a day,” he said. “The night is already falling.”

“No! One more time, please. I can still go on.” She was leaning against the wall, obviously struggling not to pant.

“I can see your thoughts, Miss Ravencroft. You are tired and on the verge of collapsing. You will not help anyone by overstretching yourself. Go take a rest. We will continue next time.”

She opened her mouth to protest but closed it again. Singird could see the struggle in her eyes as she tried to come up with a convenient argument, but she could not find a way to beat her own tactics that Master Neloren was using against her. She stooped her shoulders, taking her place at Singird’s side with the face of a child who had just lost her favorite toy.

“I will be excusing myself then, Master Larkwing.” Drevis Neloren hinted a curtsy. Singird nodded and watched him disappear beneath the entrance door. He turned to the girl beside him. She looked up at him and he noticed the dark circles that formed under her eyes, emphasized by the flickering pale light. The confinement was certainly not good for her, even if Singird tried to take her out for
strolls regularly.

“How about we take the upper route for some fresh air?” he suggested her, but her gaze immediately dropped to the floor. He waited, but when no answer came from her, he tapped her on the shoulder. “Miss Ravencroft?”

She winced as she raised her eyes again, trying to avoid looking in his face. It seemed as though she was about to cry. “Yes?” she asked absently.

“The roof. Shall we go through there for a change?”

She looked up at the ceiling and bit her lip. “You mean through the Arcanaeum…”

He had almost forgotten. She still had not reconciled with the old orc. She had not brought up the topic either, even if at times she seemed to ponder it. He gave her a soft smile.

“Haven’t you just learned the invisibility spell?”

She stared at him, forgetting her worries for a brief moment. “You mean…”

“You are so eager to improve, yet you don’t consider the possibilities. Shall we test your new skill?”

“I would consider them if I had a reason to believe you’d let me,” she protested, pursing her lips. He wondered since when these brazen responses of hers had caused him to laugh instead of thinking of suitable detention. Of course she would not expect him to encourage her in her mischiefs. But it would not harm anyone, or so he kept repeating to himself, and she needed a moment of leisure.

“Let’s go,” he prodded. She raised her brows in surprise, but he went ahead without another word, entering the stairway to the Arcanaeum.

As expected, Miss Ravencroft had no trouble with the invisibility spell. Hidden beneath their enchantment, the two of them passed through the corridor, sneaking past a small group of students gathered there to discuss the thesis they were preparing for their expert class admission exam. Some were planning to make it a joint effort. Singird frowned. He made a mental note to himself, thinking that he may just let his tongue slip before Faralda. He had to admit sneaking around unnoticed brought some unexpected benefits.

Aside from that, it also brought thrill. He had never done anything like that before and now he could see why Miss Ravencroft enjoyed it. It was like floating around, unaffected by anything in the world, observing and seeing things from an entirely new perspective. He felt almost reluctant to leave the Arcanaeum, watching as people shuffled through the infinity of tomes and scrolls, observing the ones who tried to sneak a book out of the library and silently giving points to Urag gro-Shub whose keen eyes did not miss a single one of them.

“You there!” the orc bellowed, pointing in their direction. He felt the slight figure of Miss Ravencroft next to him tense. Urag gro-Shub stopped inches from her, yanking a book out of the hands of Dorien Lafayette, a young Breton boy who was known to excel in the Alteration school. The boy cowered, averting his eyes. “That dictionary is one of a kind. You dare take one step outside of this library with it and the daedra whose language it contains will haunt you to Oblivion!”

“But I need it for Conjuration…” the boy defended, but the orc stayed firm, crossing arms over his chest.

“Ah, truly. After so many moons of studying here? Do not let Larkwing find out you neglect your studies.” With that, the librarian’s eyes wandered directly to the place where Singird and Miss
Ravencroft were. Second wave of panic took over Miss Ravencroft. Singird gritted his teeth and grabbed her sleeve, dragging her away before they could be discovered entirely. They reached the roof just in time for the spell to wear out.

He let out an exhausted breath. “Well, that was… unexpected,” he said. Miss Ravencroft materialized just by his side, scanning her own body and trying its tangibility. “Perhaps next time we ought to pick the safe route after all.”

She inhaled deeply the fresh evening air, walking toward the edge of the roof to take a look at the landscape. The Sea of Ghosts at the foot of the College cliff was dyed deep purple, reflecting the image of the starry sky above. The air was clear like pure crystal. Far on the east, they could vaguely recognize the outline of the island of Solstheim, bathing in the ashes cast by the thick plume of the Red Mountain.

“Thank you, Master Larkwing,” she said suddenly. She gazed at him over her shoulder, eyes shining in the moonlight, her face adorned with a smile that spoke of thrill and adventure. “I enjoyed it.”

Singird froze. He looked her over, scanned every inch of her face, every wrinkle, the curls on her lips and the spark in her eyes… he burned that image into his mind. That was a happy Yrith Ravencroft, right before his eyes. She was weary, and somewhere behind that smile was a pile of worries that could not be erased, but at this very moment, she was happy, and he was the one to give her that happiness. He thanked the gods for the night that concealed the flush that burned his cheeks. But then again, she could quite possibly feel it with her magic.

“Miss Ravencroft.” He joined her by the wall, watching the floes that bobbed lightly on the sea, rippling the starry reflection and creating ribbons of quivering light.

“Yes?”

“I… I’ve been wondering… about your magic. The way you use it is unprecedented. What can it do? What do you feel when you control it?”

She hesitated, fingers rapping on the stone wall she was leaning against. He heard how her breath quickened. “Well, I can… see with it… touch things, manipulate them… feel the magic in them.”

“So, basically, you feel everything around you.”

“Basically.”

“You said that in your dreams, you feel people’s pain, happiness, fear, joy… can you feel these things when using actively your magic?”

She turned away, eyes penetrating the Arch-Mage’s tower. “No, I don’t think so,” she whispered.

“Well then,” Singird said as he circled her, blocking her view. His eyes met hers and she was forgetting her breath. “Could you say it again while looking me in the eye?”

She took a step back, nearly tripping and falling over the wall. He grabbed her firmly, steering her away from the edge of the roof.

“So?”

Unwillingly, she looked up at him, face twisted in apprehension. “What do you want me to say?”

“Have I ever asked for anything but the truth?” he chuckled gently. She bit her lip and took a breath.
“So you want to hear that I feel with my magic. You want to hear that I can listen to people’s
heartbeats, that I feel when someone is in pain, and that I also feel when someone is in… when
you’re in… why do you do this to me?!” she was almost crying those words, shifting and waggling
to free herself from his grip. “Why are you so unfair? You go and give me hope. You give me home,
and comfort, you hug me and you… what do you want to hear? I can feel, yes! But sometimes I
think I only feel what I want to feel. I…”

Singird stared at her. His hand shot up, to her face, touching it lightly. It was burning. He could not
see her flush in the pale light of Masser and Secunda, but he could feel the hotness in her cheeks
and the tremble that shook her body. He could feel her quick, shallow breath. And he could hear her
words. She averted her eyes, falling silent, but he had heard enough. If only he could believe it… she
had said it, it must have been true. Yet he had to replay those words in his head thousand times.

*Sometimes I think I only feel what I want to feel…*

“And what do you want to feel?” he asked her quietly.

She did not respond. She clenched her fists, looking everywhere but his way. Singird felt his chest
tighten.

He needed to analyze, to confirm… but his thoughts gave way to unexpected desire. A hunger that
was not easy to satiate. His mind went blank. His heart picked up a pace. He felt hot, despite the
wind rising from the north, despite the cold night and the colorful veil of aurora that flickered above
their heads. Miss Ravencroft’s eyes were roving in a frantic motion. He pulled her closer. This could
be his best move. Or his worst. But there was no way back. Not now.

He froze for a moment, eyes sliding over her slight figure. She was his student... was what he would
have thought a few weeks before. But not anymore. She had become so much more than that.

He took a shaky breath. Damn everything to Oblivion. He could spend eternity pondering his
options. But he was a mere human with no eternity at his disposal. He wrapped his arms around her,
not minding the gasp she gave as her eyes turned to him, seemingly on their own. Whatever her
words meant, now it was too late to ask. He seized her chin, pulling her up. Her eyes widened, but
not in fear or discomfort. It was expectation which he was more than eager to fulfill. And so he did.

The feelings mingled. His lips locked around hers. He claimed her, feeling the touch of her skin,
and her raven hair tingling his arms. He felt her warmth, and her breath, and the heartbeat that matched
his own. He felt her slender arm wrapping around him, closing the nonexistent distance if it was even
possible. She did not resist, playing his game instead, dancing in the rhythm he had set up for her,
answering with the same fervor as he expressed. He closed his eyes, but opened them anon just to
see if she was still there, if he was not dreaming. She was. So tangible and real, yet he could feel her
own emotions as though they were his own. As if…

He gasped. A wave rose in him like the tide. She glowed almost unnoticeably, the blue of her magic
surrounding her frame. It reached him and absorbed him, filling him with a feeling so strong it almost
sent him to his knees. She was letting him know. Everything she had been afraid to tell him, she was
giving him now. Her fears and insecurities, but also her love and passion. The wrath she harbored for
the one who dared hurt her and her dear ones, as well as the care for those she considered her friends
and family. Her grief and suffering, and the comfort and happiness she had found here. Her magic
was incredible. He could almost visualize it. Images were passing before his eyes, both grim and
colorful. He felt her hot tears on his face. He finally pulled away, leaving her breathless and weak in
her knees.

She looked at him through the tears, half smiling, half crying. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.
He pressed her against his chest, letting her tears soak his robes. “Don’t be,” he said. “We both did what we needed to.”

“Is it wrong to say my dreams came true?” She pulled away, fixing her silver eyes on him. Her face was so serene. There was no concern in it. Only the calm of the moment.

“Is it wrong to say I longed for those words?” he returned with a smile.

She turned away, gazing into the distance. The world looked so small from the top of the College, as though it was theirs and theirs alone. On this night, Singird allowed himself to think so.

“I was scared…” she breathed. “Scared that I mistook your feelings for something else. You’re… you’re my teacher.”

“And you are my student,” he said as he joined her, wrapping his arm about her, “and I was just as scared that I might hurt you if I ever let you know how I feel.”

“So you drove me into a corner,” she uttered dryly, but he could feel the smile in her words.

“That really wasn’t my intention.”

She drew a breath to say something, but no words escaped her lips. She let the air out again, choosing to stay silent. The night was bright and peaceful, and her body felt warm against his. He looked up at the stars above and they seemed so much closer than before. Singird smiled at them, allowing himself a few more moments of bliss before steering Miss Ravencroft back to his room.

He felt in a daze. It was a dark night, yet everything around seemed so bright in the light of a handful of candles that he lit with a single motion of his hand. She was there by his side, and for the first time, she did not scurry away to her side of the room. She wore a distant smile, likely having her head full of thoughts, and so did he. They spent a while just looking at each other with no words breaking the tranquility of the moment. Then she chuckled nervously.

“I should…”

“Stay for a while. I will make us a meal.”

She shook her head. “I’m not hungry.”

Of course she wasn’t. He too felt his stomach tighten and the only thing he craved at the moment was her person. “Then tea?”

She nodded, seating herself by his desk. Singird fumbled about his cupboard in search for his favorite smuggled tea, but just as he found it, a knock came down on the door. He sighed, cursing in his mind whoever had decided to disturb him at such an inconvenient time.

“Come in,” he said, making his chagrin apparent in his voice.

The door flew open and Singird had to send his magic to stop it from hitting the wall. He frowned at the panting figure of Drevis Naloren who, despite his already ashen skin, seemed unusually pale. He looked at him with urgency and Singird froze inside.

“Master Naloren… did you forget something?”

“No…” he rasped, leaning against the doorframe to catch his breath, “I didn’t… we’re in trouble, Master Larkwing. We’re in serious trouble.”
“What happened?”

“Remember Hafnir? That bear man from the barracks?”

“Yes. What of him?” Singird felt a familiar tingle at the nape of his neck. He knew the answer before Drevis Neloren articulated it.

“They found his corpse. Right there, in his bed.”

The spell of the moment was now completely broken. Singird felt his heart sink as he realized what he had just been told. Another murder. But this time, he bore his share of responsibility.

Chapter End Notes

Making up for the lost time, I decided to put this chapter up a little early. Hope you enjoyed it!

As always, many thanks to Tildemancer for proofreading my chapter. Also, special thanks to RealityGlitch and iNiGmA for their continuous feedback, awesome evening talks and a bunch of wonderful comments. If you want some quality fanfiction from the Transformers or Harry Potter universe, check out their profiles, guys! They’re wonderful authors!

Mirwen out!
Even up there, so far from the shore, on top of the Green House, the cry of the seagulls was loud and strong. The sea stretched wide and far, sparkling crimson in the setting sun, and just before the golden line of the horizon, the tall walls of the Whitefort city loomed above the gentle blanket of mist. Warm evening breeze invited to a walk through the Daggerfall streets, to infinite adventures and explorations. There was salt in the air, bringing the scents of Hammerfell desert spices and Elsweyr forests. First stars flickered in the sky, still dim and feeble in the lilac hue. A beautiful lazy day was to be followed by a wondrous night. Or so she thought.

“Hey Ravy!” someone called. She rolled over to the side of the roof, looking down through the ruffled vines of ivy. A boy stood on the street, not even four feet tall, a mop of chestnut hair curling wildly about his round, somewhat girly face. He waved at her, lips curled up in a smile but eyes bearing a shade of loneliness. “No vineyard tonight, m’fraid. Ye’re being called.”

“Called? Where to?”

“Where, where, yer home, where else? Yer old man’s face looked like one of them castle hounds with bloody eyes and pucker sniffers, so you better scoot up fast.”

Yrith swung herself to her feet, quickly making her way down, finding the protruding bricks and gaps in the mortar with absolute precision. She landed two feet from the boy in the squatting position, a move the local gangs liked to call the Assassin’s Leap.

“Dad’s home?” she asked with concern. “I’m gonna have it tonight. See you, Albi. Thanks for fetching me.”

“No probs, Ravy! Same place tomorrow?”

“You bet!”

The two of them scurried away, each heading their own way. Yrith crossed the cobblestone bridge, eyes avoiding the dirt of the duckweed-covered river below. The house of her parents was just past the barracks on the right side of the street, with its wood-hatched gable, so typical for the Daggerfall architecture. She slowed down when she reached it, treading carefully around the window. She slipped inside in absolute silence and a chill ran down her spine as the shadow of the entrance corridor wrapped her in its coldness. The door to her father’s study was closed. Just as she was about to enter, she froze, hearing her own name.

“You should leave Yrith here,” someone said. “It’s not safe for her.” Yrith frowned. She knew the voice. They called him Erethis The Lean. He was an elven officer from the AWA, a frequent visitor to their house. To Yrith, he was a typical high elf snob who never as much as greeted her. Why he should mention her name all of a sudden, she had not the faintest idea.

“And if I leave her here, who’s going to take care of her? Who’s going to provide for her and give her home to come back to?” The agitated voice of her father made Yrith shudder. He was not angry with her. He had not found out that she liked to spend the evenings atop of the Green House. The ire in his voice was much deeper than that. What was happening? Where were they going?

“Damasy, please. Have you forgotten…”
“No, I have not. But for the sake of the Old Gods, Yrith is my daughter. You said the Association has been compromised. I will not leave her here with no one to watch over her.”

“You are taking her deep in the enemy territory. The last time this happened, more than half of Winterhold went down in the sea. All that glory… all those people… gone in one splash. That… thing is no mere spellbrewer. He’s a…”

“Don’t you dare pretend to care, Erethis. You never even looked her way before.”

“Things were different then. I did not need to.”

“She’s coming along.”

“She has friends here. This is her home.”

“She will find new ones.”

“And Winterhold’s a cold, barren place. There’s nothing there.”

“Erethis, leave this place. There is nothing for you here.”

“You want to get your daughter killed?! Damasy Ravencroft, don’t you have a heart?”

“I have more of it than you do. And Yrith is not a child anymore. She will shine.”

“Of that I have no doubt. But she is different and you know it. Let us handle her.”

There was a rustle, a thud and a gasp. Somewhere outside, a pair of roused doves took off with wild flapping of the wings. “Handle her?” Yrith’s father snarled. “I should put you down for that statement alone. She will handle herself. Don’t treat my daughter like some sort of abomination. She will live her life and make her own choices. And no one, not even you and your pathetic gang, is going to change it. Are we clear?”

“That… gang is still paying good coin to keep you going,” Erethis coughed out. “You’re a fool, Ravencroft. She will never be accepted. She will wish she was born to Oblivion instead.”

“Wishful thinking.” By the sudden gasps and coughing fit, Yrith assumed her father must have let go of his unwelcome guest. “Get out. I don’t ever want to see you in my house again.”

“It won’t be long till it’s not yours anymore.” Erethis let out a snort. “And you will remember this moment. Mark my words. You will regret your choice.”

“Get out.”

That night, Yrith was taken away, shielded from prying eyes by the darkness of the moonless skies. She knew that the next day, Albi would be waiting for her in the usual place. It would be the first time in her life when she would break a promise to a friend.

She glanced over her shoulder. The city of Daggerfall was dotted with golden lights coming from the street lanterns and tall castle windows, cloaking the streets in soft glow whose warmth she had known her whole life. The familiar scents of the marketplace and cobbled pavements were so far away. Yet the road ahead was so long.

She looked at the bent backs of her parents, burdened by heavy rucksacks, walking relentlessly forward. A lone tear slid over her cheek and hit the rocky ground under her feet.
Yrith opened her eyes to the gloom of the night. It had been a while since she had last had a dream from her past. She had almost forgotten about the events of that fateful night when her parents suddenly dragged her away from home without giving her any answers. So much had happened since then. She had lost so much, but she had gained also.

“You were dreaming again,” a voice issued beside her. She winced, turning in her bed to face Singird Larkwing, or, rather, his nigh motionless silhouette. She kept her blanket wrapped tight around her, trying to save as much warmth as possible. She was still in her day novice robe, not having changed since the last night, but it could not chase away the cold that had crept under her skin. The candles had long died out and the eastern horizon, barely visible over the window sill, was a shade lighter blue than the rest of the sky. The dwarven paperweight cast its pale turquoise glow unto the desk on the other side of the room.

“It wasn’t the usual,” she said weakly. She was tired. Excessively so, having only slept for the short while since Master Neloren’s arrival.

“A regular nightmare then?” There was apparent relief in Master Larkwing’s voice.

“I dreamt of the night we left Daggerfall.”

He nodded, moving from the chair he had been sitting on to the side of her bed. He took her hand. A bold gesture, yet she responded automatically, closing her fingers around his. The memories of the previous evening seemed so distant, but every action and reaction they shared gave her a feeling of rightness.

“Do you miss it?” he asked. There was no restraint in his voice, nor did he push her. She felt at ease in his presence, like never before. Despite herself, she gave a light smile.

“I haven’t thought about it,” she replied truthfully.

“Or more like you haven’t had the time to think about it?”

She chuckled. He was a keen observer. “It is strange,” she said. “I feel like I am starting to forget all about that place. Even the things that happened there. There was this elf… Erethis. He tried to talk my father into leaving me behind.”

Master Larkwing frowned. “Why would anyone do that?”

“I don’t know… but father told him to stop treating me like some sort of abomination. I… at that time, I couldn’t understand what he meant. But maybe he knew about my power. And my parents knew… while I had no idea.”

“That is… disquieting.”

Yrith shifted in her bed, clutching her pillow with one hand and Master Larkwing’s fingers with the other. “So in the end, even if they were killed by someone else, it is still my fault.”

“Why? Because even then they were after you? Don’t you think it was your parents’ choice to come in their pursuit? You could not have known. They told you nothing at all.”

“True, but…”

“But?”
Yrith fell silent. The mere thought of someone wishing for her death still paralyzed her. She sat up and her eyes wandered out to the rising sun just to avoid his. She was not a fighter and no amount of training could ever prepare her for the encounter. She could not even face her own classmates properly. And every time she did, she just wished to disappear.

“M-master Larkwing,” she said at last, but was silenced immediately with his finger on her lips.

“I am no master of yours,” he shook his head. “Not anymore. You know what to call me, don’t you? Yrith…” He added her name in a whisper. She felt hot blood in her cheeks and instinct forced her to look him in the eyes. They smiled at her mysteriously, invited her. She bit her lip, not feeling in the slightest prepared.

“S-Singird?” she tried, cautiously as though she was stepping on a bobbing floe. He nodded approvingly.

“That wasn’t so difficult, was it?”

She let her lips curl up in tacit reply.

“So? What was it you wanted to tell me?”

She took a breath. “Do you think… I mean… when can I return to the classes?”

He froze. If there had been a hint of mirth in his face, Yrith’s question had wiped it all away. He sighed.

“Selfish and shortsighted as it may seem, I hoped this day would never come,” he uttered quietly. “But I suppose you have a good reason to ask?”

“It’s just… I feel that if I stay here, I will never be able to face the world. Much less… whoever it is that tried to poison me.”

She gasped as he suddenly locked his arms around her, pressing her against his person as if trying to squeeze all air out of her. She could feel him tremble, but he drew breath after breath, mustering the courage to talk. It felt strange, being the one who was somewhat in control of her feelings while he felt helpless and scared. She closed her eyes and let him take over.

“I don’t want to let you,” he said. “I dread the moment you get hurt, and thinking of losing you is just… paralyzing.” He buried his hand in her hair, letting her feel every bit of his worries. For a while, the two of them sat there in silence, letting the dawn dissolve into morning. Then he broke off and looked into her face. Yrith felt a sting of guilt. His eyes had never been darker.

“But you drive a hard bargain,” he said at last. “Your words are as painful as they are true, and I can’t cut off your wings when you decide to soar.” He laughed helplessly. “You have become so strong. But promise me, Yrith… promise me you won’t do anything reckless. Stay in sight, don’t get into fights you cannot win. Don’t draw unnecessary attention to yourself. And…”

“I can’t possibly do all of that,” she said with a light chuckle. Then her smile faded. “But I will try. I too have something I don’t want to lose.”

“You are so eloquent now.” His look was gentle and caring and it put her at ease.

“You have made me so,” she said, filling the words with gratitude. He nodded in understanding.

They stayed like that for a long while, watching the day pass. A dragon glided over the sky far to the
south and its cry tore through the air, reaching them even through the closed window. Then it disappeared in the mountains and the land was serene once more.

That morning, Yrith had left her bed with not a wink of sleep. Singird was sulking and would not talk to her, leaving her to examine the dark circles under her eyes and eat by herself. He would not look her way when she readied herself and he would not see her off when Master Tolfdir came to fetch her for her first class in forever. She left in a bitter mood, and the sight of her classmates’ glares when they arrived in the Hall of the Elements did not help her humor either. To Master Tolfdir’s surprise and the amusement of the whole class, she took a deep breath and slapped her cheeks. She straightened her back as the echo slowly faded, eyeing the class with new determination.

Something was missing. She scanned the small crowd, shattered into a number of groups. Cain and Leyna stood in the rear, the former with anticipation in his eyes, the latter studying the floor in silence. Her friends were there. But something was still missing.

“Today,” Master Tolfdir said when the laughs and hums from the crowd died out, “Miss Ravencroft will be rejoining us. As you know, she has been a victim to a murder attempt. However, I trust this incident will not cloud your judgement. I ask that you treat each other with proper respect – and that goes both ways.”

He nodded to her and she left his side to join the class. Cain was waiting for her, arms crossed over his chest, wearing the smug look she remembered from the old days, but she knew he was not true.

“Well well, way to go with dramatic departures,” he said. “What took you so long?”

Yrith blinked, pondering the answer for a split moment. Then she shrugged. “Hibernation?”

He broke into a grin. “Well, your timing is a bit off, but maybe the winter comes early in Daggerfall.”

She laughed, and even the gloomy Leyna at his side hinted a smile.

“Welcome back,” she sang in her beautiful alto, though her eyes seemed to drift elsewhere. Yrith studied her closely. Her elven friend looked beyond tired, and Yrith suspected the smooth, fair skin under her eyes was the result of a very convincing chameleon spell concealing the dark circles that had originally been there.

“It’s good to be back,” Yrith said, and she meant it. Looking at the tall blue-lit windows of the Hall of the Elements with the eyes of a mere student was somewhat comforting, as if a great burden had been taken off her shoulders. She scanned the rest of her class. Some people were not so secretly pointing at her. There were whispers and murmurs, but Yrith had been expecting as much. But something was still missing.

As Master Tolfdir began a lecture on protective skin charms such as oakflesh, Yrith examined the room. The fountain was as she remembered, the walls still weathered by the tooth of time. The windows were tall and the distant howling of the wind outside was barely audible through their magical structure. Her classmates were there…

She froze.

“Where is Qassir?” she asked her friends in whisper.

“Didn’t you hear?” Cain replied as he scribbled something in a seemingly hastily bound notebook. “He disappeared shortly after you were poisoned. No one knows where. But ever since then, the
“Shush,” Leyna scolded him, knitting her brows. “I know he’s a strange one, but surely he would not kill a person, no? And why would he save Yrith when he had the chance?”

“Well, I still need to figure that one out…”

Yrith frowned. “Cut it out, will you?” she hissed. “You don’t want to become like that prejudiced lot…” she waved to the rest of the class and froze. It was dead quiet and everyone was looking at her. And clear as the Hammerfell sky, they must have heard her.

“Erm…”

“Well, Miss Ravencroft,” Master Tolfdir spoke into the silence, “I was just saying that you could demonstrate to us the correct usage of oakflesh.” The class laughed. Yrith felt a hot flush in her cheeks. Cain patted her on the shoulder. Leyna’s face mirrored slight amusement, perhaps even satisfaction.

“Right,” Yrith mumbled as she pulled up her sleeves. She took a breath. A tiny amount of magicka would do. Nothing to attract attention, or at least not more than she already had. She called for it, letting it spread over her body and harden like a second, more resilient skin, creating a natural armor. There were murmurs among the people, some appreciative, but most derisive. She tried her best to ignore them.

“Very well. Mister Feiran, could you tell us what Miss Ravencroft just did?”

Nelarin Feyran, the tattooed Bosmer, took his glassy eyes off Ha’rishha whom he had been eyeing with admiration and straightened his back. “Oakflesh,” he said in a mannered voice, “is a novice-level Alteration spell which gives its caster protection similar to armor. It is created by spreading one’s magicka evenly over the surface of their body and hardening it enough to absorb physical damage but not enough to prevent the caster from moving freely. The structure of oakflesh is an emulation of leather armor, even if the magicka itself is reminiscent of oak bark in appearance.”

A Novice’s Guide to Alteration, chapter 3: Protective Charms. That was what Nelarin had quoted.

“Thank you,” Master Tolfdir said, “but that is not an answer to my question. Anyone else?”

“She cast stoneflesh instead of oakflesh,” Dorien Lafayette said after a moment of silence.

“Correct. As you know, stoneflesh is a stronger version of oakflesh and it creates a harder shell with a different texture. Miss Ravencroft expressed strength and capability. However, you should always cast spells adequate to the situation. Should you face an enemy, or even just negotiate with a stranger, revealing your strengths too soon may work against you. When healing or lighting a torch, using a spell too strong could cause harm. To be a mage means not only to use magic, but also to use it wisely. Control is important, remember that. Now, Miss Ha’rishha, would you demonstrate oakflesh for us?”

Yrith sighed, ignoring the bronze Khajiit who stood to attention and raised her paws to cast the spell. Being told this in front of the whole class certainly felt different than when Singird scolded her during their sessions. Although, as she suddenly realized, from him it hurt in a whole different way.

Cain patted her again. “Don’t worry about what he says. That was still quite impressive.”

“No, it wasn’t. Stoneflesh isn’t even an impressive spell to begin with. He’s right. I can’t even
control what I do.”

“You just need practice, that’s all.”

“I don’t need practice. It’s just…”

That there was too much untamed magic in her. That she was different, a special case which needed special handling. A freak who could not function like everyone else did. An abomination.

“… forget it,” she shook her head.

“Well… fine. I just wanted to help, you know.”

“I know,” Yrith said quietly.

They spent the rest of the lesson in silence. Master Tolfdir instructed everyone except Yrith to practice stoneflesh. She alone had to try oakflesh, “for the sake of control.” Once again, she was the one practicing the basics while everyone else had moved on to the more advanced part. She gritted her teeth. It was all a part of the training, she told herself. She must not become discouraged.

The lesson had finally ended and Yrith felt drained of her willpower. While others struggled to even find enough magicka to perform their spells, she fought to suppress her own in order to gain control. She sighed.

“Master Aldaryn offers you a private lesson,” Cain said, hinting a wink as he stuffed his notes into his knapsack.

Yrith smiled. “Thank you. I’m not sure it would help though. I mean Si… Master Larkwing and some others tried to do the same.”

“True, but they know so much that maybe they have long forgotten what it feels like to be a beginner.”

Yrith raised her brows, more questioning her own judgement than his words. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps she too, by immersing herself in advanced literature rather than novice guides and by taking the words of her experienced mentors too literally, prevented herself from grasping the basics.

“Fair point,” she said with new determination. “Let’s do that.”

“That was quick. Do you have time tomorrow after Illusion?”

She sized her Dunmer friend up. He was so eager to help, and it brought a smile to her lips. Singird would not let her. He would reason with her and suspect Cain of trying to lure her out. He would be against her leaving his or other teachers’ sight. She bit her lip.

“I do,” she nodded. She would make it work. Somehow.

“That’s a deal. I need to run to the library. Damn Faralda is making us work our arses off, and Larkwing’s even worse,” he snorted. “What expert class are you taking, by the way?”

Yrith had never considered she could even qualify for expert classes. Now the question found her unprepared. Restoration came to her mind first, the school which she respected and valued. But that choice would enrage Singird. He would surely expect her to sign up for Conjuration. She laughed inwardly as she imagined his face, creased with wrinkles and sulking just as he had been this morning.
“That’s a secret,” she said with a smile.

Cain snorted. “You’re not making it easy for me, you know that? Anyway, are you coming along?”

She shook her head. “Not yet. There’s something I need to take care of.”

“Well, then you know where to find me. However strange it sounds. And by the way,” he added as he stepped closer and pulled her into a brief, friendly hug, “it is really good to have you back.”

Yrith blushed inadvertently. “Who are you and what have you done with Cain?”

He left with a laugh, waving at her before he disappeared behind the door to the Arcanaeum.

“Then I’ll be off,” Yrith said to Leyna. The Altmeri girl, who had been silent until now, suddenly put a hand on Yrith’s arm.

“Wait,” she said with urgency in her tone. She looked around. They had been left alone. The crackling of the fountain drowned her quiet voice. She pressed her lips together, unable to voice whatever was on her mind.

Yrith raised her brows and waited.

“Do you have just a moment? Somewhere out of sight…”

Yrith looked around, as though a secret door should appear out of thin air at any moment. Out of sight, she said, but the only place she could think of was the Midden. It was forbidden for the students to enter it. Ice wraiths lurked around every corner and there were rumors of dead risen from their corpse piles and a troll waiting for unsuspecting victims. A year prior, four advanced class students had disappeared from the College after some strange discovery in the Midden that none of the Collegium members wished to talk about. And somehow, Yrith did not feel brave enough to venture inside.

She grabbed Leyna’s hand and hurried toward the entrance gate. Someone would be here to pick her up soon and this was her only chance to gain herself a moment of freedom. The two of them crossed the courtyard, not minding the occasional snowflake that fluttered to the ground, grey against the milky white skies. They fought their way through the small crowd of students gathering near the entrance to the Hall of Attainment and slipped inside the blue-lit corridor. Yrith pulled her friend in her own room, locking it with her magic. Then she let out a breath, scanning the place.

It felt so strange, coming here after such a long time spent in Singird’s chambers. The coziness Yrith had once felt here was gone with the wind of time, the only remainder being a vague memory. There were still several piles of paper on her table, crumpled with moisture and grey under a thin layer of frosty dust. The last speck of sand in the hourglass standing on the shelf by her bed had long descended. The room was grey and still. Yrith gave a worried look to her bed, or rather, the unseen contents underneath it. Somewhere in those dark corners would be the book she had come here to fetch. But not when she had company. She raised her hands to cast a few protective charms she had learned from Master Neloren.

“Would this suffice?” she said with a sheepish smile, turning back to Leyna. Her friend looked around and slowly nodded.

“Yrith, I…” Leyna inhaled, searching for the right words. Then she shook her head and sank onto Yrith’s bed, resting her face in her hands. “Where do I even begin,” she uttered with resignation.

Yrith frowned, remembering Leyna’s crying face just a few days before. “That murder in
Winterhold,” she said as she joined her, “it has something to do with it, doesn’t it?”

“I am scared,” Leyna whispered. “My father… he said I would be safe here. Back when he sent me here, he repeated this to me so many times. But now he is…” The hands under her face clenched into fists. She glanced to Yrith, then to the floor. “I… need to calm down.” She talked more to herself than to Yrith.

There was no tea or water Yrith could give her shaken friend. The room offered no comfort whatsoever, and she was afraid to light a candle. Someone on the outside could notice. Yrith groped about her pocket and found a small leaf package. Opening it, she stared at the pastry in the palm of her hand. A rockie from Singird, a memory of her homeland.

With a soft smile, she passed it to Leyna. What an irony, that Singird had offered the same sort of comfort to her in this very room when she was to speak about her nightmares. Leyna took it with a silent nod of appreciation.

“What are you trying to say?” Yrith asked, unsure what to make of her friend’s words.

“Do you know what my father does for living?” she asked as she nibbled on the rockie, more to occupy herself than out of interest.

Yrith shook her head.

“He is the secretary in the Office of Provincial Studies in Alinor. I assume you know that Alinor is the capital of the Summerset Isle and currently also the name of the whole country?”

A nod in response.

“Well, Alinor is now ruled by the Thalmor. And they’re…” Leyna’s lips trembled at the memory of her homeland. She took a breath. “They’re as ruthless as the rumors say. If you ever go against the Thalmor, chances are that you soon mysteriously disappear from the surface of Nirn, along with your friends and all the members of your family. And my father… the honorable Secretary of Provincial Studies, did exactly that.”

Yrith put a hand on Leyna’s arm, the only gesture of solace she could think of. She doubted this elven girl could be comforted with an embrace such as the ones Singird had offered her. She had no words for her, and so she just waited. Leyna took a while, staring on the floor, before she decided to continue.

“He was searching for something. I am certain of it. My father would never run away out of fear. He is a proud elf. He spent so much time in the local library, studying, researching, draining knowledge like water. The only occasions he even looked at me were when he taught me the art of linguistics and then the moment before my departure. And if he left, it means that he has run out of material or the Thalmor did not like his research. Or both.”

Leyna stood up and paced across the room, staring through the window into the snowy courtyard. The fluttering robes of Arch-Mage Shalidor, frozen in stone for eternity, caught the blue fountain light from one side and the snowflakes from the other. She propped herself against the window sill, staring pensively at the sight.

“This place is so quiet,” she said in low voice. “So peaceful… as long as one doesn’t look under the surface.”

“What are you trying to say?” Yrith asked, unsure what to make of her friend’s words.

“That day before we parted ways, he kept saying I’d be safe here. He said it far too many times for me to believe it. And he touched me on my cheek and…”
Leyna gripped the window frame, inhaling deeply to calm herself.

“I don’t trust this place. I think he was trying to convince himself, rather than me. But we are not safe here. You… you’re the living – fortunately still living – proof of that. But I don’t think this all is just a coincidence. I was sent here for a reason.”

Yrith joined her friend by the window. Cold air passed through the gaps between it and the wall, giving her shivers. “Is there a single person who has it easy here?” she asked thoughtfully.

“No. I don’t believe so. This place is cursed. We are cursed. And it is no coincidence.” Leyna turned her golden eyes to Yrith. “The people in our class… they are all from families dealing in shady areas.

“There is my father with his research, and I know from a few of our family visits that the Thalmor have spent vast resources trying to figure out what he was looking for. Then there is Cain. The Aldaryns have roots within the houses of Indoril and Telvanni. A very strange combination, but they left the traditional teachings a long time ago to follow some strange, dark deity that overshadows the daedra when it comes to committed atrocities. Cain is their youngest son. He has three much older brothers and a sister, and, as you might have guessed, no future. Paying for his studies here is easier than taking care of him. Ha’risha is the daughter of a former Khajiit chief. She left her own family, renounced her kin’s customs and was adopted by a Bosmer mage serving the Dominion. Aernil and Nelarin’s families always had close ties with the Camorans and the Mythic Dawn, but never joined for unknown reasons. To be more precise, they have ties everywhere and can dig out any information you dream of. But the things they ask for in return – I don’t even want to know. Tanya is an only child and a daughter of a strange Altmer-Imperial union. I think her parents are spies of sorts and have killed more people than I ever even saw in my life. Dorien’s family looks like the typical High Rock merchant clan – except the things they trade are all artifacts of unbelievable value like varla stones, functional dwemer dynamos or keys to places you didn’t even know existed, and their clients remain ever silent and ever unknown. Saelar’s father is the type of man who will stop at nothing to get to the top, and he is very good at it. None of his victims even felt by his own hand, but they sure did by his doing. And Ildreth and Jearis… their families have always stood on the opposing sides when it comes to political views, but they never fought and never schemed against each other. The Dominion has their eyes on them. They expect conspiracy, but the Rissis and Finorans are very good at covering their tracks.”

Yrith stared at Leyna with eyes wide open, trying to process the sudden flood of information. “How do you know all this?”

Leyna shrugged. “I listen. When my father took me to visits, no one paid attention to a girl that had not even reached her twenties. Take some canvas, a thread and a needle, and no one will even notice you are there.” She let out a bitter laugh. “But on these visits, I have never heard the name Tahlrah, not to mention Ravencroft.”

Of course she had not. Yrith’s parents had been no nobles, and they had always profiled themselves as no one important.

“Yrith, you are different. Impartial. And I need you to help me.” Leyna’s eyes were suddenly pleading, and Yrith was convinced that it was only her upbringing that stopped her friend from grabbing her shoulders.

“Help you? But… how?”

“Those two people who died… one of them was a messenger. An elven courier. I was expecting a
message from my father, an invitation… but he was only a decoy. Yesterday, I finally received a
note. It was brought by one of those Nord couriers, the ones roaming Skyrim. And it was encrypted.
My father… he is close. I need to see him, he might need help… but I can’t go alone.”

“Leyna… you know that we would be risking our lives by leaving the College…”

“Would we? Or are we risking our lives staying inside? Does it even matter? I will not coat my
words in honey. I think someone wants you dead because you are a threat. You break our lines and
make us see reason. I have told you before. You are different, and for that reason alone, you
challenge us to think upon our views of the world. You don’t even have to do anything and you
could still turn the tides. You are someone to be feared. The safety we are given here… I do not
believe in it. They have managed to get to you before and I don’t see why they shouldn’t be able to
do it again. Come with me, Yrith. You can turn back at any time. But I need you with me.”

The intensity of Leyna’s plea made Yrith step back. She shakily bit her lip, staring at her friend’s
silhouette against the window and the white skies behind it. “I… I don’t understand what you’re
talking about.”

She felt so small, and there certainly could not be any way that she, a simple girl whose only
aspiration in magic was to conjure a friend to keep her company, could be a threat to anyone.
Leyna’s father was a politician, that must have been the reason she talked like that. She had seen so
much, and feared so much. And her father was out there while she was here… feeling utterly
helpless.

“You will understand… once we’ll meet him. He will give you answers. Many of them.”

Yrith’s eyes drifted to the bed and the hidden treasure beneath it. Of course, regardless of threats and
perils, she would have done anything to see her parents again.

She let out a breath and gave a slow nod. “I’ll… I’ll see what I can do.”

Leyna hinted a smile, tattered by worry. “Tomorrow when your lesson with Cain is over, meet me
here.”

She slipped through the door and disappeared in the Hall of Attainment. Yrith watched it for a while,
feeling her stomach knot. So many dangerous promises she had given out today. And here she was,
hiding from the teachers’ sight.

At last, she turned to the bed and groped underneath it. The book had to be there. She pressed herself
to the cold floor, squinting in the dark, but there was nothing to be seen. She kept searching with
both her hands and her eyes, touching every inch of the stone under the bed, inhaling the dust and
the frozen moisture. Yet, there was nothing. Panic overcame her. This could not be true.

“Looking for this?” a voice said behind her.

Yrith hit her head when she suddenly tried to sit up. With a painful gasp, she quickly pulled herself
out to see the uninvited guest, rubbing her head where it hit the bed. Her eyes widened at the sight of
the Arch-Mage, sitting comfortably on Yrith’s desk, back propped against the wall behind her. In her
lap lay the exact book Yrith had been looking for. The Arch-Mage’s green and gold eyes observed
her attentively, but nothing could be read from her lizard face. Yrith’s eyes roved to the door. It was
closed and protected, just as she had left it. The Arch-Mage must have been here all along. Yrith
paled at the realization.

“Young and curious,” the Arch-Mage said gently. “I still remember how it felt.”
“A-Arch-Mage…” was the only thing Yrith managed to articulate.

“Miss Ravencroft, is it? I must say you have a very… unusual taste in literature.”

“That’s…”

“Do take a seat, please. The floor must be very cold and uncomfortable.”

Incredulous, Yrith forced herself up and took a seat at the edge of her bed. She waited, but the Arch-Mage did not seem to be in a hurry to explain herself. With something that was likely a smile, she let magic envelop her fingers. Next to her on the desk appeared a silver tray with snowberry tarts. That was not a chameleon spell that had hidden them from Yrith’s sight, but true invisibility. She stared at the Arch-Mage. Despite her appearance, the Argonian lady must have been a very powerful mage.

“Help yourself,” she invited. “And pardon me for borrowing your room. During your absence, it has become a nice sanctuary to hide from prying eyes and incessant requests.”

“When Leyna was here, did you…”

“Hear the whole conversation? A very serious one, wasn’t it? And now you are expecting me to go and stop you.”

Yrith could only respond with silence, staring at the floor.

“Say, did you finish this book?”

The sudden change of subject made Yrith raise her head again. The Arch-Mage was tapping the page, looking at Yrith with intense curiosity.

“Almost, but…”

“It is not finished.” She extended her hand to pass the book to Yrith, adding a tart on top of it. Yrith gave her a disapproving look, but accepted it anyway. Taking a bite of the tart, she sifted through the pages. The sweet taste of snowberries filled her mouth and brought back a distant memory. She shushed it, staring at the book. The Arch-Mage was right. The last pages were empty. Only at the bottom of the very last one, in an almost unreadable script, there was one sentence.

My master has come for me at last.

Yrith cursed her habit of never looking at the final pages of the books she read. But this could not be true. If the book did not have the answer she was looking for, then why would Urag be so angry with her?

“But…”

“Do you know the master that Septimus Signus is talking about?”

Yrith shook her head.

“Neither do I. Intriguing, where some roads lead us, isn’t it? Just when it seems you are about to reach your goal, you run into a dead end. And sometimes, a revelation comes when you least expect it.” She filled her mouth with a tart, staring thoughtfully at the window. “I think you should visit your friends in the library. Study for your expert exams a bit. Talk to Mister Lafayette and ask him about his trouble with Conjuration. Perhaps you could even help him and gain a new ally. An ordinary moment of study time would do you good, don’t you think?”
“What…”

“Off you go, Miss Ravencroft. I need some time for myself. I will hold onto this.” The book slid out of Yrith’s hands, fueled by the Arch-Mage’s magic, until it landed back in her lap. She smiled angelically at Yrith as she beckoned toward the door which opened seemingly by itself.

Without a word, Yrith dropped a quick curtsy and excused herself. The Arch-Mage gave her shivers. She would have to tell Leyna to meet elsewhere to avoid her lizard sight. But something in the Arch-Mage’s voice told Yrith she should at least consider her advice. Perhaps she was right. Perhaps a while of ordinary studying was just what she needed. And perhaps it was finally time to face Urag. After a brief contemplation, she made for the Arcanaeum.

The library welcomed her with murmurs and quiet rustling of pages. She inhaled the heavy dust-filled air and searched for the orc. When she found the stepladder on which he was standing, searching for something in the highest shelves, their eyes met. She froze, forgetting her breath for a while. Then she forced herself to step into the corridor and follow the aisle to his stand.

“Been a long time,” he grumbled as he stepped down to greet her.

“It has,” she nodded shyly.

They stared at each other for a moment. Then he suddenly pulled her closer and buried her in his muscular, green arms.

“And thank Malacath you are still in one piece, you reckless piece of mother-orc’s tusk!”

“U-Urag…”

“Do you have any idea how worried I was? It has been so long!”

“I… I’m sorry…”

“Well, you should be. But wait till I get my hands on the bastard that’s trying to have your neck. They will be sorry.”

Yrith smiled into Urag’s stitched robe. “It is good to see you again,” she said.

“Likewise,” he grumbled. “Well, I suppose you came in search for books? Don’t overdo it with your magic here. I hear you have been causing quite some uproar within the higher circles.” He grinned at her mischievously as he let go. Yrith laughed.

“I will try,” she said with a wink.

She left him deep in thought. He had not addressed the book. She was certain he remembered it, but her own safety always came first. How unfair she had been to snap at him that day. How terrible she must have made him feel. She felt a sting of guilt stab her in the chest.

“Urag!” she called to him, rushing back.

“Hmm?”

“I… I’m sorry for…”

He ruffled her hair. “That’s in the past.” Then he turned back to his books.

When Yrith left him for the second time, she did not even realize how big the smile she wore was.
She entered the study hall feeling a lot lighter than moments before, and the first thing to welcome her were the raised brows of her classmates. She just shrugged them off, finding Dorien Lafayette among them. Nodding to Cain as she passed him, she approached her Breton classmate who was gripping the same dictionary he had been fighting over with Urag a few days before, during her little adventure with Singird. Now that she stood before him, she had no idea what to say to a boy whom she had never spoken to before. He was one of those who often gave her cold looks, but never spoke to her aloud. Yrith had no idea what he thought of her.

“H-hello,” she tried hesitantly. There was a burst of laughter.

“Ravencroft is trying to talk to Lafayette now?” someone sneered. “Oooh, how dangerous!” Yrith did her best to ignore them. She bit her lip, but no words came to her. The boy stared at her in expectation. Then he sighed.

“Look, dolt, if you’re only here to chat, don’t waste your time. Unlike you, we actually need to spend our time studying.”

Dolt… she was not liked. Not at all.

She pointed at the dictionary. “Is that for Conjuration?”

Another sigh. “Don’t know why you care, but yes, that’s for Conjuration. And no, I am not sharing it with you.”

“There’s a better book if you want to learn the daedric script in practice. There are graphs of ritual circles…and you can create patterns from them. It is called *Techniques of Summoning in Graphemes and Shapes*.”

A bit of concentration to confirm where the book was and then, with a wave of her hand, she fetched it with her magic. She handed it to the boy before her and he accepted it with question in his eyes. He gave the book a doubtful look as he scanned its pages, but that quickly turned into surprise.

“I don’t know why you’re doing this, and I hope you are not expecting anything in return. But this sure looks useful. Suppose I’ll leave the dictionary for those who want to feel fooled by how these characters aren’t at all the characters they actually look like in our common script.”

“I suppose they do…” Yrith laughed nervously. She gave a look to the dictionary, still open in his lap. He had a point. The characters were indeed quite similar to the common script, except they represented different sounds. How inconvenient. Although…

She gasped as realization sank in. “Wait, what… say that again?”

“That I’m not giving anything in return…”

“No. The characters…”

“That they look like ours but they aren’t what they seem to be? What of it?”

Yrith stared at him. There it was, the answer she had been looking for. Everybody saw that, except for her. If she had studied like a normal student, struggled with the dictionaries, complained about the foreign scripts… she would have found out so much sooner. She laughed. More raised brows followed, but she just shook her head. How had the Arch-Mage said it?

*And sometimes, a revelation comes when you least expect it.*
“You, sir,” she said to Dorien, “are a genius!” With that, she scurried away, taking the steps to the College roof by two as she hurried to Singird’s room. The wind up there whipped her cheeks and fought against her, and it almost felt like eternity before she finally stormed into the room, catching her breath.

Singird jumped up, face twisted in anger. “Yrith! Where in Oblivion have you been?! I hear you disappeared just after Alteration. The whole College has been looking for you since then!”

“With the Arch-Mage,” Yrith replied without thinking. “And then at the library.”

“The Arch-Ma…”

Yrith waved him off impatiently. “Singird! I found the key to the cipher!”

Singird stared at her, taken aback. For a brief moment, anger fought thrill in his face. Then it changed completely and his eyes widened.

“You did?”

“It’s so simple… it never even occurred to me. The hints are all in the book. The great elven princess Astarie, and her daedric lover, ‘a small fry’… the capital letters are in the elven script and the rest is daedric.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. What would you achieve by that?”

Yrith gave him an impish smile. “Just wait and see.”

The two of them worked through the text together. First a daedric letter, an elven one, two daedric ones… the further they progressed, the deeper the frown on Singird’s face.

“This is atrocity,” he commented on the uneven line of text that appeared before them. Yrith smiled as she patted his shoulder. Surely this must have been a visual torture for a person like Singird. Yet she found this side of him immensely adorable.

When the text was completed, Yrith looked at it, feeling a mixture of fear and accomplishment. Singird kept frowning.

“And now?”

“And now we look,” Yrith said, taking the piece of paper with the finished message and extending her hand to look at it from distance. Singird let out an incredulous breath.

“How, for the love of the Nine, did you figure this out?”

“I had help,” Yrith said quietly. Clear as the day, the message stood there, right in front of their eyes.

**Beware of the Strife. Find the Mad Sage of Time. What happened is not your fault.**

A cipher in a cipher, Yrith thought to herself. But the last sentence even she understood. They had known. They had known they would die, and they had been prepared for it all along. And Singird was right. She had not killed her parents. Up until now, she had refused to believe it. She had denied herself the peace of mind she rightfully deserved out of fear of someone proving him wrong. But they had known. They had even known she would blame herself. How could they have perished so easily then?
She sank into her chair, letting the paper fall on the desk. A tear slid down her cheek and dropped with a quiet splash on the back of her hand. Singird’s hand wrapped around her shoulders before he pulled her to his chest, holding her close and tight, deep in the warmth of his embrace.

Chapter End Notes

Regarding the huge delay, I will just say one thing. Working people don’t have it easy… :'( 
Come, Little Children

Chapter Notes

I changed the Midden and made a few secret tunnels that are not so secret in my interpretation. But it should still be as close to the lore as possible.

If you can, please review and let me know if you like it so far. Or just to say hi. I welcome every comment I get – they are one of the sources of my motivation. And I love to hear from you! You guys are important to me – I’d just like you to know that.

And without further ado, let’s move right into the drama!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“So? What is it that you and Leyna are so secretive about?”

The wind was warm with the passing summer. Cain was leaning to the wall surrounding the College roof, letting it caress his fiery hair. The day had gone past peaceful, even if Singird had spent half of it sulking, not talking to Yrith for the sole reason she preferred to spend her time with her friends. She was getting used to seeing this side of him, happy that he cared, charmed by his weak side, but also saddened by the lack of trust he put in her. But then again, she too was betraying it at this very moment, and the plan they had devised with Leyna that morning was not going to put her in better light. But there was a complication. A complication that stood right before her.

“Why don’t you ask Leyna if you’re so curious?”

Cain had not heard the whole conversation. But he had caught enough to make him pose countless questions instead of providing the training session they were supposed to be having.

“Hah! Have you ever asked Leyna anything personal? She could chop your head off with the look she’d give you.”

“Then perhaps she does not want to share. I am not obliged.”

Cain sighed. “I know we were never close to begin with... but you’ve drifted so far away. Keeping secrets, commanding magic I could only dream of... did you even see your face when the two of you talked?”

Yrith could imagine. After all, it was not every day when someone invited her to the Midden. She was still not convinced it was the best idea, but it was the only idea she and Leyna could come up with. The only way to leave the College unnoticed. And she had promised. One should never break a promise, that was what her parents had taught her. She believed in their teachings.

“It is none of your concern,” she muttered. “I thought we came here to practice.”

“We did. It’s just...” Cain shook his head in a gesture of utter helplessness. “You know, it’s just been two days and I can’t get you out of my head. Even when you talk to us, it seems like you’re looking right through us. As if we were not there at all. What is happening to you, Yrith? Is it your magic that seems to be so far beyond imaginable? Or is Larkwing giving you a hard time?”
“So it wasn’t about Leyna, was it? Then what, Cain? What is it that you want to hear?”

“No… it wasn’t about Leyna. Has anyone told you how many times I came to Faralda or Larkwing, pleading to see you just to make sure you were all right? And the answer I got every time… She’s not ready yet. Ready for what? What have you gotten yourself into? And what does Leyna have to do with it?”

Yrith stared at him in disbelief, ready to snap. But then she just sighed and shook her head. “I commend your imagination,” she said. “But you are wrong. She only asked for help with certain matter of hers.”

“And you agreed?”

“That I did. Why do I get the feeling you don’t trust Leyna?”

Cain stood there, rubbing his temples, and she could almost feel the cogs in his head turn as he tried to come up with some solid reasoning. “I trust her,” he said with sadness creeping into his voice. “I just don’t trust her judgement. And I… I’ve seen enough of you getting hurt.”

Yrith smiled gently into the sunset. “Thank you, Cain. But I’ll be fine.”

“You know, Yrith…” he took a step toward her and pulled her into a hug before she could back away, “if you ever need someone to rely on… remember that I am always here.”

Her cheeks flared with a flush when he let go, disappearing in the Hall of Attainment. She stared at the door for a long while, thinking how she should have asked him about the lesson. Perhaps he had not intended to teach her from the start.

She shook her head to chase away the ache in her chest. There was a more pressing matter at hand, and it waited for her down in the courtyard. She cast a quick invisibility spell and slipped through the door to the Hall of Attainment, following Cain’s footsteps.

Down on the ground floor, she sneaked into the dark corner behind the stairs. The things she had smuggled from Singird’s room lay there intact under the chameleon spell. A pair of breeches, a warm coat and a rucksack filled with dried fruits, smoked fish, a waterskin and two tiny vials of potion against exhaustion. In the best case, she would not even need these things.

She hesitated before donning them. Singird would kill her when he found out, and she did not doubt he would find out. But Leyna was waiting for her, relying on a friend. It had been so long since anyone had relied on Yrith. She could not disappoint her.

With one final swift movement, she flung the rucksack over her back and left the building.

Leyna was waiting for her by the trapdoor to the Midden, carefully hidden behind a bush just by the Hall of the Elements. Yrith did not dare take off the invisibility spell before she was inches from her, and her elven friend jerked in surprise upon seeing her.

“You startled me,” she said with a hint of a smile.

Yrith looked her over. Leyna’s usual novice robe was replaced by soft leather trousers and an overcoat which seemed to be made of a thick layer of dark cobwebs, a fine piece of elven craftsmanship. Her long, golden hair was plaited into a braid, the lower part hidden under the coat. She had changed from a mage to a wayfarer, taking the same precautions as Yrith.

“Shall we then?”
Leyna nodded. The two of them pulled the trapdoor, wincing at the loud creak it gave. Yrith went first, securing Leyna from below. Then the door snapped shut and they were left to themselves.

Immediately, Yrith felt the cold grip her entire body. The Midden was colder than the surface, walls covered in frost, but underneath them, she could faintly recognize the smell of mold. The floor was littered with debris of all kinds and, to Yrith’s horror, with bones. She looked at Leyna with worry in her face.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” she asked, her voice drowned in the heavy air.

“This is my father’s life we’re talking about. I will find him no matter what. It’s just a few bones. I’ve seen worse.” She kicked what Yrith suspected to be a collarbone. It hit the wall with a dark clank. Yrith felt shivers run down her spine but said nothing.

They went down, into the depths. The thick stone walls made Yrith feel uneasy. The stale air was hard to breathe and the dark tunnels seemed to be endless. The cobblestones were slippery, sometimes hidden underneath several layers of ice, and the cloudlets of steam rising from their mouths were thick with the contrasting warmth. A strange echo seemed to follow them, causing Yrith to turn around from time to time, scanning the walls as if something was to emerge from them. Just several steps into the tunnels Yrith froze, looking at the crossroad ahead.

“Now what?” she asked as she turned to Leyna. Her friend shrugged and crossed it without a second thought.

“They say that when you don’t know the way, you should follow your nose.”

“Leyna…”

“Just follow me. I’ve seen the map of this place. We’ll be out in no time.”

“I sure hope so…”

Descending the stairs ahead, the two of them could spot a soft glow. It grew stronger with every step, flickering and ominous in the dark, quiet maze. Yrith stared forward, trying to recognize its source. She felt vulnerable. If something came at them from behind, there would be nowhere to go. But Leyna kept a steady pace, marching forward without ever looking back.

The tunnel led them into a circular room with a round platform filling its center. Countless candles were burning on its edges and a large symbol of Oblivion was carved in its middle. Before it lay something reminiscent of a small furnace dominated by a ghastly-looking carved skull. A box of seemingly Dwemer origins was attached to its front. Yrith stifled a gasp when she felt a sudden wave arise in her, like the high tide washing over the reefs. She stared at the image before her, closing her eyes and reaching out to the platform. She was welcomed by a force so strong it made her stagger.

“Yrith?”

“This place is brimming with ancient magic,” she said quietly. “Where are we?”

Leyna looked around curiously. There was no mold in this chamber, no ice and no cold. “This must be the fabled Atronach Forge. I heard it lets you summon just about anything that can be found within the boundaries of Mundus if you use the right ingredients. Though its true purpose is probably long forgotten.”

“I had no idea,” Yrith uttered as she knelt down, touching the dwemer box. Contrary to what she had expected, it was cold on touch, almost freezing her fingers in place. She wondered if Singird knew of
this place. *It can summon just about anything from all over Mundus...* so what about souls of the deceased?

She made a mental note to look for Atronach Forge in the library. Perhaps there was something that Singird could have missed.

“Let’s go,” she motioned to Leyna. “There’s no time to lose.”

Leyna nodded and the two of them followed the tunnel further. Coldness wrapped about them once more. Yrith pulled her cloak closer, stooping down every now and then to avoid the sharp icicles hanging from the ceiling. They were led into a series of tunnels with walls of pure ice. Yrith felt the cold bite into her flesh and freeze her very bones. She heard her own teeth chatter, and judging by the echo next to her, Leyna was not any better.

The tunnel, at times so narrow the two of them had to proceed one by one, suddenly forked into two passages. Yrith frowned.

“Let’s just go this way,” Leyna waved to the left, rushing in, no doubt to chase away the cold. Yrith put a hand on her forearm and shook her head.

“No. We can’t take any more guesses. Maybe we’re following the wrong way from the beginning.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

Many times over, Singird had reminded Yrith not to reveal too much of her power to anyone. Given that nearly the entire collegium knew of it, Yrith saw no point in it, but she respected his wish nonetheless. Now, for the first time, she was about to break her word.

“I will lead,” she said, spreading her magic far and wide, touching every corner of the Midden. Even the magical touch sent more shivers down her spine. She hovered over the frosty walls, inspected the stones and crevices. There were countless dead ends, pits they could fall into, slippery paths where one could easily break a limb, piles of broken ice that blocked the way… and creatures. Upon the first touch, Yrith yanked her magic away, paralyzed by the sole nature of the beings she found. She had felt this before, in her dreams. Always for a split moment before the soul tore from its vessel and found its way to Aetherius. Death. But these were different. Tainted, bound to Nirn by twisted magic. She pulled away entirely, covering her mouth as she felt her insides turn and tumble.

“But how will you… Yrith? Are you all right? Did anything happen?” For an Altmer, Leyna managed to produce an unexpectedly caring expression. Yrith nodded, taking deep breaths to steady her heart.

“Just fine. But there are… undead.” The word felt strange on her tongue. As a child, she had believed the undead to be a fairy tale to scare little children like her. She had considered the term funny, unreal. Now she had felt the whole weight of a soul unable to transcend to the outer spheres and it made her feel sick.

“Undead…? How do you know?”

“I saw them… felt them… with my magic.”

“I thought you’d changed when you returned to the classes, but this…” Leyna’s gaze turned to the icy floor, mind caught in some inner struggle. A moment passed before she turned back to Yrith with a soft sigh. “I have never heard of such a spell. But I believe you. Does it make you feel unwell?”

“A little. Anyway… I think we can avoid the undead. Unless they hear us… the passageway we
should take passes it by a distance. But there are other… things lurking around. Let me see…” Yrith closed her eyes, fully concentrating on her magic and their surroundings. She had never spread it so wide with the intention of feeling every single thing it touched. It was exhausting. She resisted the urge to lean against the wall, too afraid she would freeze into it.

“An ice wraith down in the lower tunnels. That should not be much of a threat… but there is a bridge in the lowest parts with a troll on the other side. We could make a run for it, the exit is not far from there, but it would mean jumping down from the bridge and taking a leap to a ledge that’s quite a distance below. And there would be no way…” Her voice faded at the sudden discovery.

“Yrith?”

It had not occurred to Yrith before to scan the area behind them. Now she wished she had done so before. There was someone trailing them, a living, breathing person. Had a teacher found out about their little trip? Yrith concentrated on them, touched their presence and felt their emotions. Fear, apprehension, an urge to protect. Singird? No. It was…

“What is it?”

She wildly shook her head. “Nothing,” she lied. “Just my imagination. So, the troll should be our only concern.”

She could not bring herself to give Cain away. Leyna would not get another chance like this. And he was here on his own volition. She clenched her fists, praying that things would not go awry. Not one friend to watch out for, but two… she could not bear if something were to happen to them.

“I think the leap down is our best option,” Leyna mused. “How far would it be?”

“About ten feet, but there’s a gap that leads straight to the bottom of the pit. It is risky, especially if we want to be fast.”

“But you are good at conjuration, are you not?”

“What are you implying?”

“That we can keep the troll occupied.”

Yrith shuddered at the prospect of two or more monsters having a battle to death while the two of them were trying to take a leap that could very well end their lives. A part of her wished that Singird would find out, drag her away and lock her in the safety of his room. That someone would make a stop to this foolish plan. But strangely enough, there was another part that found thrill in the current situation. She could be of use… or even more, she could be a hero. She had the means to do so. For the first time in forever, someone relied on her, trusted her with their life. The sudden responsibility, the need to make decisions that would matter, was liberating. She could not believe her own thoughts.

She glanced in her mind behind several corners. Cain was close by. He must have heard them talk about the troll. But he did nothing. She wondered if he was simply going along with their plan. Why he had not tried to stop them. Perhaps he was ready to save the day lest something happen. She frowned. The troll could mean danger to him too.

“Let’s go,” she said through gritted teeth, stepping out with a thin strand of magicka leading her way. Leyna followed her with a nod.

The two of them walked in silence, rubbing their arms every now and then. Yrith could feel a film of
frost settling on her lips and nose. A few moments later, she found herself almost unable to talk. She stretched her arms and fingers, refusing to give in to the cold.

Their footsteps were drowned in the crackling of the ice. Yrith cast candlelight as the last ray of light from the vents faded, blocked by the thick mass of frozen water all around them. It had become even harder to breathe. Yrith wondered if jumping down the bridge would not be impossible with so little air in their lungs. As they went on, her concerns grew heavier on her. She wished to stop and relay them to Leyna but found herself unable to do either. Stopping would mean allowing the cold to claim even more of her than it already had. Talking would be wasting the much precious air, and the effort she would have to invest in moving her lips would surely drain her of strength.

She kept moving her arms, clenching and unclenching her fists, refusing adamantly to give in to the whims of Skyrim’s eternal winter. Behind her, Leyna was fighting the same battle, just as unyielding in her struggles.

As they approached the undead parts, Yrith cast a quick spell to muffle their footsteps. They moved slowly, careful to not slip on the ice, although Yrith was now more afraid that a single moment of hesitation would result in them being frozen to the ground. The ice was sticky as resin, working against them on every step they took. Yrith quickly checked if Cain was still following them. He kept a steady pace, easily matching their own. She would have let out a breath of relief had it not been so difficult.

Fortunately, they passed the undead without an incident. Yrith kept looking around, still afraid that there might be something she had overlooked, but the only thing coming to meet them was the ever-present silence. The ice walls were replaced with stone once more, covered in fissures as the winter had taken its toll on it. Yrith stared at the image in apprehension. These tunnels were not safe for passage. Instinctively, she picked up her pace, not willing to risk more than necessary. Leyna followed her without a question. Somewhere in the rear, Cain did the same.

After what felt like several hours of walking, though Yrith was certain it could not have been more than half an hour, they stopped.

“The ice wraith is just a few paces away,” Yrith forced her lips to motion, whispering as quietly as she could. “I think two atronachs should do the trick, so I will send them ahead. Keep your ward at the ready.”

Leyna nodded, stepping back and forth to keep herself warm. Her soft leather boots would not be enough to protect her from the cold.

With a quiet hum of magic, Yrith summoned two blazing creatures and willed them forward. They floated weightlessly through the air, aflame as if the cold of the place did nothing to them. A few moments later, she heard the familiar crackle of the ice wraith’s skeletal body. The creature twirled through the air like a feather carried by the breeze, light and playful to the eye. But Yrith knew from books that ice wraiths were everything but playful. They attacked on sight, mercilessly and with no exceptions. And so did this one.

It plunged forward, biting into the first atronach. The elemental hissed, returning the favor with a ball of fire. The second atronach joined the battle with its own missile. It hit the wall behind the ice wraith and left a circle of moisture on it. The surrounding ice sent a threatening crackle. Yrith clenched her fists, ward spell ready in her hands. They had little chance of escaping if the walls came down upon them, but Yrith would not give up without a fight.

The ice wraith backed away momentarily only to attack again, icy jaws clattering against each other. Yrith saw that its efforts were futile. Back when she had been sent on detention with Cain, she had
defeated the wraith with a single atronach. She doubted that any more than two would be necessary. For a split moment, it seemed as if the ice wraith would break through to her and Leyna, both girls instinctively taking a few steps back, but then the atronachs made short work of it. The only thing left was a pile of ice on the ground.

“T-that was… surprisingly easy…” Leyna uttered through the chattering teeth. Yrith nodded. It had been too easy, and she did not like it.

“Let’s keep close to the atronachs for the time being,” she said. “They will keep us warm.”

No ice could quench the fires of Oblivion. The two girls reveled in the sudden feeling of warmth, staying as close to the creatures as their self-preservation allowed them to. Yrith could feel the blood returning to her lips and fingertips, bringing about a sudden rush of pulsing pain. She gritted her teeth, concentrating on the road ahead.

Not too long after, they heard a low growl, far closer than Yrith had anticipated. They froze. There was not much time left until Yrith’s atronachs would return to their home plane. She assessed her options. If the troll was approaching, the only option would be to face it head on. Trolls were territorial creatures and normally did not attack anyone unless that person was too close for their liking. But life in isolation deep under the surface could have a different effect on the poor animal. Perhaps the two of them were a welcome dinner for the starving creature.

She raised her hands to summon new atronachs. But before she could call to her magic, Oblivion broke loose.

The ice shattered and fell in million pieces from the walls as the troll stomped into the tunnel. The two girls screamed in unison. Both atronachs disappeared with a loud crack. They were on their own, trapped in a narrow tunnel with nowhere to escape except the way they came. Yrith grabbed Leyna’s hand and ran. The animal followed. They could hear its breath and the thuds of its paws as it leaped toward them like a giant sabre cat. And they ran.

There came an intersection. Yrith went for one way, Leyna instinctively took the other. They split, Leyna quickly disappearing from Yrith’s sight. Yrith’s mind raced. There was no time to stop, no time to consult or devise a plan. She slowed down only to see the troll approaching her. Its snow-white fur almost glistened in the light of the still present candlelight spell, heaving on its ape-like figure. Three eyes stared at her like large beads of dark hematite, two real and one simple light detector with no ability to discern shapes and colors. Yrith took one terrified step backwards, staring at its huge jaws and cube-like teeth that were meant to crush. She could not bring herself to run anymore. No matter how hard she tried, her feet were glued to the ground in complete paralysis. She stared at those eyes, all the facts she had read about them flashing through her mind despite knowing that now was not the time for lessons on troll physiology.

Or was it?

An idea came upon her. She threw a quick glance at the light spark following her, then at the troll. She smiled, savagely, like an animal, and let the magic flow. An orb of light appeared just before the troll and attached to its front. The creature roared in pain and anger, staggering backwards. Yrith took a breath, her whole body still trembling. She had gained herself time. She needed to run. Find Leyna… they had to reach the surface. She forced her legs to move. Magic… she needed magic. She let it flow, spread… two more flame atronachs appeared before her. It felt like a dream. As though she was only watching while some other person, an entity that had been hidden inside her, did the fighting. She let the atronachs fight and ran. The troll roared and snarled, enraged by the blinding light. Upon the first fireball, it cowered and wailed.
Yrith gritted her teeth. The sound made her mind freeze in terror. She had caused the animal incredible pain. But she could not afford to die here. There was too much for her to do.

She ran as fast as she could, spreading her magic to find the way. Leyna was close by, in a parallel tunnel, but there would be no connecting point until…

Yrith’s heart almost stopped. Leyna was running straight to the dwelling of the undead. Yrith sped up, almost slipping on the ice. She had to think of something before she reached the skeletons. Something, anything… but fear had left her mind entirely blank. Out of despair, she searched, scanned the place over and over with her magic… and then she noticed the troll suddenly moving toward her, leaving the atronachs far behind. She touched its primitive mind and found rage beyond anything she had ever felt. Cold gripped her, an entirely different kind from the one keeping the ice in place. The troll was behind her. Ahead was a group of soulless skeletons. And she was running out of breath, the weak and untrained novice she was. She looked around desperately as if the key to the escape route was to be found nearby. She found nothing. And so she ran. And ran further. When her legs began to betray her, she ran even faster. Closer to the skeletons, closer to the end, but she did something. She would not give up. Not now.

At last, she reached the crossing and took a turn to the left. And she ran again until she almost crashed into something. She screamed and raised both hands, lightning crackling between her fingertips. That something screamed back.

“Leyna!” Yrith panted. Her legs were shaking and giving way under her, holding up by the sheer power of her will.

“Yrith… what… the troll?”

Yrith shook her head. “Still behind me.”

“This way then!” Leyna pulled Yrith by her sleeve, taking the route she had come from. Yrith fought to catch her breath, letting herself be dragged through the long arcade of ice. She stared blankly at the ground, watching as the cobblestones and ice rubble moved underneath them in slow motion. Too late she heard the clatter before them. Leyna came to a sudden halt, gasping as she locked Yrith’s hand in an iron grip. Yrith raised her head.

There were two of them, skeletal figures, jaws frozen for eternity in an eerie smile. One smaller, one taller. Their eyes were shining with otherworldly magic and thin fingers clutched the most primitive weapons Yrith could imagine. A hatchet and a rake. Yrith backed off instinctively. Leyna stood there, frozen like a statue.

“Calm down,” she said and Yrith knew she was talking to herself. “They’re just skeletons. Pitiful, feeble creatures… what do we know about skeletons?”

“F-fire…” Yrith whispered behind her.

“R-right… fire!” A fiery orb flared in the palm of Leyna’s hand. She aimed, fired… and missed. The two figures sidestepped nonetheless. A passage opened before them. A chance.

Yrith took the lead, now being the one dragging Leyna along. There was no time for words, but her friend understood. They ran again. The skeletons darted toward them. Then a roar shook the tunnel. A shower of tiny ice shards sank onto Yrith’s shoulder. Inadvertently, she turned around. The troll, beaten and wretched, its fur coat charred and torn, made its last effort to catch its prey. It fell right into the trap of undeath. The skeletons gave up the chase, turning face to face with their new enemy. Yrith and Leyna shared the same idea. They ran again.
The ice was slippery. Yrith caught herself holding tight onto Leyna who returned the grip with the same vigor. Having support... in spite of the desperate situation, Yrith smiled to herself. She had never felt this before, and it was a good feeling. She felt her strength coming back to her. They would make it out. She was certain of it.

At last, they reached the bridge. The air was warmer here, gusts of wind from the surface flowing here through several vents. The ice floor was covered in a thin layer of snow, with large clawed footprints all over. The troll was somewhere far behind.

“I don’t think we have to…” Leyna started, waving all breathless toward the ledge that spun along the wall on the left.

“... take the leap anymore,” Yrith finished, suddenly laughing. They both did, filling the ancient frosty walls with a sound they had never heard before.

Yrith felt incredible, as though all that had transpired just moments before had been a dream. It felt unreal, an illusion that had passed before her eyes. Her life had been in danger. There had been an enraged troll, a pair of soulless skeletons and a slippery path. Now she felt ready for anything. To go out and explore the world. To face whoever dared threaten her head on. Then all her thoughts dimmed, turning into one memory. Cain. He was still there, in the tunnels, and Yrith had completely forgotten about him.

She searched one more time. It did not take long to find him. He was not far, approaching them from the tunnel where she had fought the troll. She touched him lightly, feeling his thoughts. They were a tangled mess, shaken with fear, more for the lives of his friends, rather than his own. But he was safe and in one piece. The troll was still battling the undead, growing weaker and more hurt by the moment. Yrith let out a sigh of both pain and relief.

“The way out is just around the corner,” she beckoned to Leyna. “Let’s go before something else decides to show us how unwelcome we are here.”

“You’re right. Let’s go.”

Crossing the bridge, they trod through a small maze of winding paths until an icy passageway opened before them, leading to a porch with a view of the Sea of Ghosts. Countless ice floes bobbed lightly on its surface, glinting in the moonlight. Yrith stood there, closing her eyes momentarily to feel the warm breeze on her cheeks. She drew in a breath, absorbing the freshness and the faint smell of salt. They were out. Out of the Midden, out of the College. They had left everything behind. Only Cain was still on their trail.

“Now we need to find my father.” Leyna’s face was dark with worry. “There should be an encampment not far from Saarthal. We just need to make it through the Winterhold pass.”

“That’s still quite a distance from here. We won’t arrive before morning.”

“But we will arrive. I will not disappoint him.” Face filled with determination as someone who has little to lose, she took the first step forward. Treacherous path awaited them, the ice before them descending in cascades to the shore. One wrong step and they could be falling head first onto the ice gravel below. Yrith quickly fumbled through her rucksack, withdrawing two vials. She offered one to Leyna who accepted with a nod of thanks. The potion stung in their throats, burning its way down, but almost immediately, Yrith could feel her exhaustion fade away.

With utmost care, she slid down the first cascade, keeping her whole body close to the ground. Her legs were trembling, now adding to the fears from the Midden. But as she landed smoothly on the
second level, she felt her confidence grow, her next steps more daring and secure. She waved to Leyna, smiling in encouragement. Her friend followed, joining her in an elegant leap. One by one, they conquered the tall steps, holding onto each other in moments of necessity. Despite herself, Yrith felt satisfaction when she finally set foot on the solid ground, staring back at the crackling mass of frost.

“I guess that was the worst part,” she half laughed, half sighed.

“So now we go back to Winterhold. I think it would be best to avoid the guards. Especially since they are on the Stormcloak side. I don’t want my father to get any unwanted attention.”

Yrith nodded. “I happen to know a few hidden paths.”

“Lead on then.”

Through the city of Winterhold they went. Yrith relived her memories, the times when she had played alone in the streets, finding secret passages and pretending she was still with her friends back in Daggerfall. Where there were houses, rocks, trees and bushes, there were also secret paths. She never failed to find them, setting out on adventures of her own. Brushes of snowberries and mountain flowers worked in her favor. She loved sheds and barns behind which no one ever looked. Some even stood on poles, providing yet more ways to keep out of others’ sight. To surprise people by leaving one way and returning from the other was a feat she excelled at. She felt the memory warm in her chest, bringing her peace in an uncertain situation.

She led Leyna into the familiar dark corners of the city. Close to the mountains, sheltered by low bushy pines, scattered rocks and piles of firewood, they strode quietly past the humble thatch-roofed abodes, backs bent down like two old ladies far beyond the zenith. At times, they saw a guard from a distance, but their gazes slid over the shady places without so much as stopping to blink.

They moved through the stillness of the night, drawing in the smoke from the chimneys. It carried the taste of homemade stew and the memories of long-lost comfort by the family hearth. And then it was gone as they entered the Winterhold pass, a deep gorge cutting through the mountain ridge that separated the eastern shore from the Winterhold basin.

The pass was shaded, hidden from the moonlight, and entirely silent. The surrounding trees were motionless, branches leaning down limp like withered flowers. Shivers ran down Yrith’s spine as she picked up her pace. Leyna gave her a questioning look.

“Yrith?” she mouthed.

Yrith shook her head. “I… I don’t like it here. Can you feel it?”

“Feel what?”

“Exactly… feel what? There is nothing here. No life, not even the wind passes through this place. It gives me the chills.”

It was more than that. Yrith could not find a trace of magic in the pass, the life force of all. The only sources of magic were the two of them and, to Yrith’s relief, Cain, still following them with boundless determination.

“I think that’s just you, still shaken from the Midden,” Leyna said, her elven voice unable to express the comfort Yrith craved. “It will pass when we’re back in the open.”

Yrith sighed, keeping all the words to herself. They spoke no more, eyes fixed on the path ahead.
Soon, she kept reminding herself. Soon they would find Leyna’s father and then…

Then what?

Leyna had never mentioned her plan to her. She would have one, right? She, an elf, smart, one of the few children that were born throughout the generations of the Altmer… she surely would have one. Yrith thought of Singird. She had to return to him. By now, he would be searching for her, mad with worry. The sooner she went back, the better. Feeling her stomach knot, she sped up even more, almost feeling Leyna’s silent protests.

The eastern horizon was lit in pale glow when they finally left the pass. A vast land opened before them, with cliffs rising in terraces from the lowlands surrounding the northern coastline. Ruins of ancient structures were scattered here and there, dominated by the golden domes of the dwemer city of Alftand far in the distance. It was a sight to behold, both terrifying and beautiful. This part of Skyrim was almost devoid of life, with barely any trees or bushes to feed the stray animals.

“There,” Leyna pointed to a chasm nestled in the shade of several cliffs, “down in that ravine. That’s where we are going.” The place was shrouded in a thick cloud of white fog. Even from afar, Yrith could sense the magic in it. It made her skin tingle and her hairs stand on end. That was no ordinary magic. She recalled a memory from her days in Daggerfall, a vague feeling she had had when her parents imbued the walls of their house with a layer of protective enchantments. Spellbrewing. The fog had been real once, but it had been altered. She gave Leyna an uncertain look, unable to hide her concern. This was more than a coincidence. She knew she ought not to be here. But she had promised. But then, what if this was all a trap? But Leyna wouldn’t… or would she?

“Let’s go,” Leyna urged, now pulling at Yrith’s sleeve. “We’re so close…”

“Leyna,” Yrith said slowly, refusing to move.

“Yes?”

“What are you going to do once you find your father?”

“Why now, Yrith? We’re almost there…”

“I need to know. For… peace of mind.”

Leyna sighed, eyes roving endlessly here and there. “I will most likely stay with him. He called for me, after all.”

“But you know I will return to the College, right?”

“I… suspected as much. Despite how it treated you, you seem to have a strange affinity to that place. But please… talk to my father before you leave. I think he would be interested in getting to know you.”

“That is a peculiar choice of words,” Yrith muttered under her breath.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Nothing. I guess we should be going.”

They went on. Yrith felt butterflies in her stomach as they neared the ravine. The fog was impenetrable, she could not make out a single shape. She tried to explore the place with her magic, to no avail. Everything was obscured, as if torn away from existence. She wondered if the two of them
would even be able to pass through. But to her surprise, as they took the first step toward it, the fog opened before them, creating a path. The tingling was now so strong Yrith felt as though she was to turn inside out. She took a deep breath, glancing over to Leyna, but her friend seemed unaffected.

The view began to clear after a short distance’s walk, first revealing vague silhouettes of wooden structures. Platforms on poles, scaffoldings, bridges and watchtowers, a whole settlement stretching across the small valley. Yrith wondered where all this wood had come from. Then the air cleared entirely, and she saw people. Two men in dark robes with gilded hems, the Thalmor attire. They gazed at the two newcomers, faces dark with suspicion.

“Who dares disturb at such an ungodly hour?” one growled, not trying to hide the animosity in his voice. Leyna stepped closer, back straight and head high. In an instance, the man’s face changed from hostile to surprised, humble politeness lining his features. “Young Lady Leyna… at last. We have been expecting you. But who have you brought with you?”

“This is Yrith Ravencroft… my father should know.”

Yrith’s heart skipped a beat. She turned to Leyna, feeling the time stop and weigh on her. “Your father should know? That’s the first time I hear about this.”

“You’ll see, Yrith… please.”

“That’s…” the two guards exchanged bewildered looks. “Let me get Master Selas. I apologize for keeping you, I won’t be long.”

He disappeared in the labyrinth of structures. The other guard, a man with falcon eyes who did not appear to have seen more than thirty winters, bowed slightly to Leyna. He did not take his eyes off them for a single moment, regarding them with wariness despite the courteous look he wore on the outside.

“Explain yourself, Leyna. Why are we here?”

“Yrith, I know you must be uncertain, and I understand. But my father is a decent man and…”

“Oh I am uncertain. You sure that’s the right word for it?!”

“Yrith…”

“You know…” The guard stared at Yrith, a sign of warning clear in his face. She sighed. “Uncertain… right. I’ve just been lied to by… a friend,” she shook her head, helplessness forcing tears into her eyes. But no… she could not cry. Not now. She had to stay on her guard. She had let herself be deceived, led far from the safety of the College. But if her life was to be threatened, she would not give up without a fight. She clenched her fists, containing the words that strived to surface. She was angry. Angry at Leyna for betraying her trust. Angry at herself for being so utterly foolish. Angry at the whole world for being so unfair. How could she ever face Singird? Would she even get the chance?

From behind the tallest watchtower emerged the guard who had welcomed Leyna, accompanied by another dark-robed man, exceptionally tall even for a high elf. Slim face, beautiful and elegant, spoke of ages’ worth of wisdom. Memories of both pain and joy mirrored in those golden eyes, the same as Leyna’s. As he walked toward them, pace calm and measured, his long silver hair waved around him in gentle swings. Yrith stared at him, calmness spreading through her as she realized she was not afraid of this man. Rather, she felt the need to bow before him as she would before a king.

He stopped a few paces before them, frown deepening in his face as his eyes slid from Leyna to
“What is the meaning of this?” he asked, voice a mere whisper, yet clear in the quiet morning. Leyna raised her head to face him and Yrith noticed a tremble in her knees.

“Father… I brought her. Just like you asked me in your letter.”

Silence. His eyes, hard like two diamonds, sized his daughter up from head to toe. He was assessing, and the more time he took, the more frightened Leyna became. Yrith felt shivers run down her spine, imagining this was common practice in the Travi household.

“There was no such letter,” he breathed at last. Leyna’s eyes reflected sheer dread.

“But…”

He stepped closer to her, putting one hand on her shoulder. “The letter I truly sent you… it must have been swapped. I should not have contacted you. I should not have been greedy… I… I have never expected my own allies to betray me. My closest friends. They made an oath…”

“Father…” Leyna gave a quiet sob, shoulders stooped down in defeat and humility, “I’m… I’m sorry…”

“Raise your head, Leyna. You are a high elf. You have just been deceived. You know what to do.”

“I…”

“I hold no grudge against you. You of all people should know. Now raise your head and wipe those tears away. There is no place for tears in the eyes of a Travi.” Without waiting for her to oblige, he turned to Yrith who tensed, suddenly forgetting to breathe. As he approached her, he gripped her chin, raising her face to look her in the eye.

“Yrith Ravencroft… I would not have expected to see you here. A spitting image of your mother… how beautiful she was.”

Yrith felt blood rush into her cheeks, filling her with a desperate need to step back. But she couldn’t. His sharp eyes pinned her to the ground.

“I am Selas Inarion Travi,” he continued. “Under any other circumstances, I would be thrilled to meet you. But your arrival is untimely, and I fear it brings about dark times.”

Yrith stared at him, words heavy in her throat. “My mother… you… knew her?”

“Aye… sweet Adine. She is one of a kind. Bright, gentle… with the ability to teach an old elf how to love. I never found the chance to tell her how much I appreciate her. Perhaps one day…”

“She’s… dead. Half a year ago she…”

The face of Selas Travi grew even darker than it had been moments before. “That is grave news. Is Damasy as well…?”

Yrith nodded.

“I can’t express…”

“Master.” It was the falcon-eyed guard, eyes on alert. “Pardon the intrusion, but we have another visitor.”
Selas Travi did not even lift his hands to send out his magic. Yrith felt it nonetheless, strong and swift, penetrating every inch of the ravine. As if following some hidden sign, he made his way to a wall hiding the entrance. From beyond it, he pulled out the startled Cain, the look in his eyes so hard it could split a mountain in two.

“Well well, look what the gods have brought upon us. An Aldaryn heretic.”

“I’m not a heretic!” Cain spat as he tried to shake his captor off his collar. “Don’t compare me to… that lot.”

“Truly? Then why are you here?”

“I…”

“Master, shall I put him down?”

“No… he means no harm… for he came to protect. The Ravencroft family has a fascinating ability to teach others to see in color.” He let go, leaving Cain to grumble in defiance. The Dunmer boy glanced at Yrith with a sheepish smile before quickly turning away. “Tilion.”

“Yes, Master?” The first guard stood to attention.

“Prepare a horse for Yrith. The fastest stallion we have.”

“Right away, sir.” The man turned on his heel and was gone in an instant.

“Yrith…” he put both hands on her shoulders, a gesture of trust and protectiveness, but it made Yrith shiver nonetheless, “you must leave immediately. You are not safe here, and nor are we as long as we have you. I may be too late already… but before you leave, tell me. Did your parents ever inform you what their mission was?”

“I…” Had they? She had no recollection of it, save for the bits and pieces she had overheard when they’d had a visitor, and the cipher they had left behind. The cipher. She did not even know what it meant. “I… don’t think so…”

With a sigh, he let his arms sink back to his sides. “I thought as much. The enemy fears you, Yrith. You’re not prepared yet. I can feel your magic swirling inside you, wild and uncontrolled. But when you are, you must find him.”

“But who is this enemy?”

Selas Travi gave a bitter laugh. “That’s the intricate part. We do not know.”

“What? But then… what makes them an enemy?”

“What indeed? The pain that he spreads. The discord he sows. The chaos he creates. It has been like that for millennia. Thousands of years we have spent trying to get on his trail. And he is close. But we know one thing. To defeat him, you need a—”

The sentence was cut from his lips with a swishing sound and a gurgle. Yrith stared in horror as the man who had been talking to her moments before sank to the ground, his chest pierced by three arrows, blue and black feathers adorning them on their ends.

“Father!” Leyna shrieked, and the sound froze the blood in Yrith’s veins. “NO! FATHER!”

“Master!”
“Godsdammit!” Cain cried, grabbing Yrith’s hands as he jumped to her side. “Out! We have to move out! Come on!”

Yrith could not move. She could not breathe. She felt her whole body tremble, knees weak with the sudden dread. She could not even cry. The scene before her eyes was so surreal… this was not happening. It could not be happening. Leyna was kneeling on the ground, mindless of the frost and dirt, turning her father to face her. Her eyes were full of tears, yet still begging, refusing to give up the last speck of hope, no matter how futile it was.

“Yrith…” he rattled, with hardly any sound escaping his lips, “you must find it… his name…”

“Father!” Leyna cried. “Please, no!” At last, Yrith finally sank to her knees beside her.

“Midget, no, come on! We have to leave!”

Cain’s words were like water, flowing, in, then out, washing over her and leaving her cold, but still frozen to the ground. Selas Travi reached out, trembling fingers touching Yrith’s.

“Find the name… lost… in time…” he breathed.

The last spark of life faded from his eyes. He was gone. Yrith felt his magic, the tremendous burden he had carried in his life, leave the vessel that had been its refuge. Her heart ached. She raised her head, seeking the source of the arrows. There were yells around them, people running and unsheathing their weapons. Magic crackled and sparked in the air. There were more arrows. People were falling and dying. Yrith watched the scene, paralyzed with fear. There was nowhere to run. Cain flinched her to the side as another arrow made its way to where she sat.

“Yrith! Please!”

She looked at him absently as though he was but a ghost.

A cry tore through the air, commanding and fierce. “Stop! Cease the fire! You’ll kill Yrith!”

Yrith turned her gaze after the voice. Someone was running toward her. A sturdy man… her vision was blurred, but she could see the blue he was clad in. She blinked and the image sharpened momentarily. Toddvar… the Stormcloaks were here. She had suddenly found herself in the middle of a battle. Next to her, Leyna was shaking with sobs, wrapping her arms around her father’s body. Cain was tugging at Yrith’s hands, despair in his crimson eyes. The falcon-eyed guard lay nearby, blood soaking the snow underneath him. No… this could not be real.

“Yrith!” Toddvar’s voice bellowed somewhere above her. “What in Oblivion are yeh doin’ here?!”

“I…” she had no words for him. There were none she could offer. The only thing on her mind were the dreadful images passing before her eyes at that very moment.

“Get up! Yeh need to leave now!” She felt herself being pulled on her feet. “C’mon. Get a grip, lass! Yeh need to move! Horse!” he yelled as he turned to his comrades. “Bring me a horse, the first you can find!”

“Yessir!”

“General Toddvar!” Another man approached, breathless, gripping an axe with ornate handle and shining blade. “Imperial! They found us!”

“Oblivion take it! Yrith, move! Stick to yer fellas here and get out, for the love of Talos! Go!” He
pushed her toward the entrance, then turned around, drawing his great axe like a wooden stick. The first man in red came on horseback, long sword down to cut anything that stood in his way. Toddvar was faster. He jumped backward as he swung his axe at full length, chopping the body of his opponent seemingly without effort.

Yrith’s senses came back to her, hitting her like lightning. She felt her insides turn at the sight of the falling body and let out a stifled cry. Cain was gripping her arm with both hands, unyielding in his efforts. She glanced at him and understood.

“Leyna!” she shouted, pouncing on her friend. She was holding her father’s head in her lap, heedless of the battle around. “Leyna, we need to…”

“It’s no use, Yrith, she’s…”

“I’m not leaving without her!”

“Dammit, you can both die here in vain, or you can at least save yourself!”

“Then I die!”

Cain staggered back at the power of her voice, staring at her in shock. Two Stormcloak soldiers with spears held high ran past them, shouting and growling like wild animals. “Yrith, please! I beg you!”

“Leyna! Get up!”

“No! Give him back! Give him back!”

The red-collared riders were closing in. Toddvar still fought his battle, taking a wide stance and slaying everything that came in his way and wore red. But there were more. More riders…

“Children!” someone gave a vicious laugh. “The Stormcloaks have children!”

“No! Yrith, run! RUN!”

“Come, little children, the hour is nigh for demons of night to wander, come, little children, when sleepless you lie, watchful of shadows yonder.”

Someone was singing, laughing at the ancient tune sung to children since time immemorial. Yrith felt her blood freeze in her veins. She grabbed Leyna, mindless of her protests, taking the friend with her, away, away from the battle, away from the carnage. Chaos everywhere. The weapons were rattling and clinking. Horses were neighing, the ground was shaking under their hooves. Cain was holding tight onto Yrith’s wrist. She held onto Leyna’s, dragging the staggering girl one step after another, with strength she didn’t know she had. A battling pair before them, they took a turn to the left. A falling horse with arrows in its neck, another turn. Duck before the volley of arrows coming their way. Cain with his quick instincts pulled her to the ground. The way out was close. So close…

“Come, little children…” the voice was dark, full of malice and twisted lust. A rider stood before them, his face a wicked sneer. An arrow flew past, he dodged it with a quick yank of his head. Cain pulled Yrith back. He was too late.

The man laughed as he plunged the handle of his spear into Yrith’s chest. She staggered and fell on her back, unable to even cry with pain. Her vision blurred, the sounds turned into a cacophony of rattling and stomping, sharp and deafening. Someone was shouting beside her. It hurt. Everything
hurt. She felt another blow, this time in her stomach. She could not breathe. There was blood on her tongue and on her lips, she felt it come down in streaks over her cheeks and drip into her hair. She stood no chance. She could not raise her hands to cast a single spell. Her fingers felt numb and broken under the weight of her body.

Singird… if she could see him once more. Tell him how sorry she was…

A strong hand wrapped around her waist and hauled her away, then up, swinging her mercilessly over something warm. In one last attempt, she tried to tame her senses to obedience. Then she felt a blow in her head and the world drowned in darkness.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was unbelievably difficult to write. Good 30, or maybe 40 hours went into it. I’m starting to think I really am a masochist… oof! I would welcome some feedback. I know some people hate when authors ask for feedback, but believe me, when there’s not enough of it, this is the only thing we can do. Please, be good to me. I won’t bite. I promise. :)

Mirwen
“Caw, caw,” the crow cried. Then, with one mighty flap of its wings, it pushed off the ledge and flew off into the night.

Singird watched it with aching heart. He had searched everywhere. Her room was empty, albeit visited recently, judging by the considerable lack of dust on the desk. The roof welcomed him in all its stillness that he usually preferred. Now it only brought despair. The Hall of the Elements was ablaze with magical experiments of the advanced class students, yet none of them had seen her that day. The Arcanaeum was as lively as it could get before the exams. All her classmates had gathered there in preparation for them. All but Cain Aldaryn and Leyna Travi.

He threw a fist at his wall, hissing in pain as it landed on the hard, coarse stone. She had disappeared before. She loved to pull pranks and enjoyed her freedom, even if it made him worry. He was angry each time, but she had always returned. Not last night. He felt deep down that something was amiss. That she was in trouble. He had to find her.

A knock came down on the door, thunderous in the stifling silence. Singird turned to it, pondering for a moment before answering.

“Come in,” he said. His own voice was betraying him. He did not want to talk to anyone, yet at the same time, he felt the insuppressible urge to shout at people and ask questions that no one was able to answer.

Drevis Neloren entered the room, and his serene face stirred anger within Singird.

“Word has it that you have been looking for me,” the Dunmer stated matter-of-factly, picking up the moon-shaped paperweight on the table without invitation. He studied it, sliding a finger over its surface. Singird clenched his fists.

“Why did you not wait?” he half whispered, half snapped. “Why did you have to let her out of your sight?”

Master Neloren tossed the paperweight into his other hand, watching in apparent amusement as Singird’s eyes narrowed. “Dear Master Larkwing, what do you think would happen if I hadn’t?”

“That,” Singird hissed, snatching the Dunmer’s self-declared toy from his hands, “is not the answer to my question.”

The amusement faded from the face of Drevis Neloren. With a sigh, he looked Singird in the eye. “Because your question is irrelevant. One important factor, Master Larkwing. She left of her own volition. With your precision-loving nature, I am quite sure you’ve scoured this place inch by inch. So tell me, have you found any signs that would indicate she was dragged away or engaged in a fight?”

“No, but…”

“Then accept this. If she had not left now, she would leave later. Now I believe there’s something else you should be doing instead of brooding over what’s done. And since I am in a generous mood, then I would like to invite you to a little outing to the Midden and beyond. Faralda has already received permission from Mirabelle and is awaiting us downstairs.”

“The Midden?”
Master Neloren let out another sigh, putting a hand on Singird’s shoulder. “Say, Master Larkwing. Do you know what kind of illusion is the most dangerous?”

Singird knit his brows in exasperation. “What are you talking about?”

“Do you?”

“Even if I knew, now’s not the time…”

“The most dangerous of illusions is the one you make yourself believe in. She left through the Midden. The main gate’s seal is untouched.”

Singird closed his eyes, letting the wave of despair take over him before it would flow away, leaving behind bitter resignation. He knew. He had known all along that she had taken this path, but Drevis Neloren spoke the truth. Singird was too afraid to concede it. So many dangers lurked in those tunnels. Dangers he had only heard of.

“Midden… She could have…”

“She’s alive,” Master Neloren said and there was not the slightest trace of doubt in his voice. “If she wasn’t, we would have noticed, I assure you.”

Believing in Drevis Neloren was all Singird could do. He gave a slow nod before quickly fumbling through all of his chests and closets to find clothing warm enough to protect him from the cold of the icy tunnels. The Midden. He had never visited the place but heard legends about it, one more terrifying than the other. Now it was time to find out if they were true.

The Midden was cold and quiet. The ice crackled in an eerie symphony whose echo was drowned in the heavy air, deafening and making the blood freeze in their veins. She had been here. Faint, but still visible, Singird could trace the footprints in the thin layer of frost covering the floor. Master Neloren and Faralda exchanged silent nods, the latter letting an orb of magic envelop her fingers.

“At least we know they were here. Keep your wards and spells at the ready. Just in case.”

They followed the path. The footprints faded as the ice receded, melted by the warmth of the Atronach Forge, but they quickly found the trail again. It led them deeper and deeper to the tunnels, to a humble pile that was sure to be the remains of an ice wraith. Singird let out a quiet sigh. An ice wraith would not pose a challenge to Yrith, that she had already proven a long time ago.

Not too long after came a crossing where the trail multiplied and became knotty chaos. The three of them stopped, all frowning at the disturbing image before them.

“That was a frost troll,” Drevis Neloren stated what Singird had been afraid to say aloud. “By the looks of it, they first went into that tunnel and then got chased back.”

“What about those melted parts?” Faralda pointed to a line of ice that had seemingly melted and frozen back to form a river with smooth, solid surface. It zigzagged through the passageway, interrupting the footprints.

“Flame atronach,” Singird said. “Two of them, actually. Miss Ravencroft made use of her expertise.” He did not know whether to be relieved that she had fought back or concerned that it would not be enough. Bending down, he studied the tracks, constantly shifting his weight from one foot to another to protect himself from the cold. The footprints were everywhere, running in two different directions.
“Now what?”

Master Neloren shrugged. “These passages ultimately lead to the same point. It does not matter, let’s just pick one path and decide what to do at the next crossing.” Singird and Faralda nodded their assent.

The crossroad the passage had led them to revealed a similar bundle of footprints as the one before. Singird could easily guess that this was where the fight had broken out. But over the huge troll traces led three pairs of human and mer footprints. They had left victorious. Singird allowed himself a soft smile.

Not far from there, beyond a bridge and a few turns, was the end of the tunnels. It became more difficult to follow the trail throughout the cascades of ice that followed. Eventually, the road they entered wound up to Winterhold. Pushing his way through the incessant bushes, crouching under overhanging rocks and tucking himself into the small spaces between huts and sheds, Singird had to commend Yrith’s resourcefulness. She knew every secret path there was to know, every corner that would hide her from unsuspecting eyes. He felt like the child he had never been, reveling in mischief and more so in getting away with it. His parents had been good to him, but too unforgiving to ever tolerate the smallest hint of disobedience. He caught himself contemplating on how much comfort this life of freedom would give him even now when he was grown and could not crawl up to his father’s lap.

Soon, the three of them left Winterhold behind, entering the pass beyond. The trail was still clear, leading straight through it. They would soon be facing the northern coast with its jagged isles of rocks and scattered ruins. Singird knit his brows, thinking of the bandits and draugr that liked to take refuge in their shelter. But his worries were soon replaced by a feeling far more dreadful. As soon as the rocks on their sides receded, a view of a battlefield opened before them. Scattered all over lay corpses, a few of them in dark robes with golden hems, but mostly warriors in blue or red. Their bodies were twisted in unnatural positions, opened, some still gripping their weapons and painted shields depicting the Stormcloak bear or the Imperial dragon. The snow was red with blood and the air, despite the cold, heavy with the stench of death. Singird paled, forgetting his breath.

“Gods no,” he whispered, suddenly picking up his pace. If she was not dead, he would kill her himself just so she would never run away again. She had to be alive. She just had to. He would not forgive her if she had perished. But there was no sign of an explosion. Did that mean she had exhausted her magic? No… that would not have been so easy. And she surely had not died. She couldn’t have…

“Wait!” Drevis Neloren darted toward him, barely able to keep up with the angry, shaken Nord. “Singird Larkwing, stop right there! Do you realize the situation?”

“What situation?!?” Singird snarled, not bothering to turn or change his pace. The Dunmer hurried to grab his arm.

“This is a battlefield, dammit! You don’t know who might still be lurking around. You’re going to…”

Singird yanked his arm out of his grip.

“I don’t. And I don’t care. If she is here, I will find her. I will find her!”

“Her, is it? Not them. Her. You humans. You get blinded by the so-called love, obsessed with the one you so ardently look up to. Halt, Singird Larkwing. Don’t let your life go to waste.”
Singird turned around, feeling the wave of anger surge within him, brimming over the edges of his sea of patience. He clutched the Dunmer’s shoulders, eyes ablaze with fury. “You’re right,” he said, his voice a mere whisper. “This is a battlefield. It is a place where people die. She is somewhere in its midst, maybe in pain, maybe long dead. But you… you let her go and you still don’t realize what it means. You would never understand.”

“Truly? Am I the one who doesn’t understand? Or do you simply…”

He trailed off as Faralda landed a hand on his shoulder. “Let him go, Master Neloren,” she breathed. Her amber eyes were devoid of their usual fire, her face wrinkled and suddenly so old.

“But…”

She shook her head. “Let him go.”

“Fine. Go throw away your life. It’s none of my business anyway.”

“Over those hundreds of years, you realize how powerless you are. There is nothing you can do. Mer, men, beastfolk, all the living things… they will pass whether you want it or not. And you either follow them, or you are alone.”

Singird let his hands sink from Master Neloren’s shoulders. He remembered Faralda’s words well. But he could not stop. Not now. She understood. After all, she cared for her as much as he did.

“I’m sorry,” he said, turning back toward the battlefield. His chest felt tight and torn at the same time. He needed to hurry.

Down the slope gently descending from the mountains lay a ravine, hidden from the sight of passersby. As Singird proceeded toward it, the snow looked more and more like a sea of blood and dirt. He covered his nose and searched, his stomach knotting with every carcass his gaze slid over. They were all grown men, young or just in the age to have families to provide for. People who could have nurtured the land and made it bloom. There were no children among them. And Singird was more and more torn between hope and despair. He wanted to run, run wherever his feet would take him, but he needed to look. He had to find her.

The stench grew stronger in the chasm. Wooden structures, watchtowers and palisades had been torn down and set on fire, their remains still smoldering and filling the air with dark smoke that stung his eyes. In the distance, he could distinguish several silhouettes of people, standing at the end of the trail of bodies. There were more dark-robed elves here. Singird had no doubt that this had been the hideout of Selas Travi. But still, there were no signs of Yrith. Not even her friends.

He wished he could spread his magic as she did, examine the people ahead without fear of being stabbed the moment he approached them. But he only had his own limited pool of magic at his disposal. Cautiously, he looked around, hands raised to summon an atronach to his aid, but then he heard voices coming from the dark haze before him. One voice he recognized, the rough baritone of his favorite Stormcloak general. He sighed in relief but summoned a storm atronach nonetheless. After a quick contemplation, he added a dremora and equipped himself with an ethereal sword that he held all too timidly for his own liking.

He had received a semblance of military training from Jarl Siddgeir’s housecarl. Helvard was a hard, uncompromising man with bitter disposition and Singird did not think back on the days in his company with pleasure. Still, it had made him stronger, more resilient against people who wished to hurt him.
Clutching the ghostly weapon, he stepped forward. “Toddvar!” he called, still cautious to not step too close to possible peril.

The giant man stepped out of the smokescreen, his great axe slung over his shoulder. He was followed by two other men, clad in the Stormcloak blue, faces of all three darkened with grief. This time, Toddvar did not welcome Singird with his usual mirth.

“Singird,” he said quietly, sizing his friend up. “I know why yeh’re here.”

Singird shuddered at the tone of his voice. It brought nothing but despair. Momentarily he thought of smothering his next words in Toddvar’s throat before he could speak them. He was afraid to hear them. But he had to know.

“What happened? Is… are they…?”

“Yrith and her two friends have been dragged away by the damned Imperials. I dread what might befall them. Singe, I couldn’t help. I swear I tried, but they were everywhere, and I had to fight! I have no idea what they might do to them, but it… it might be worse than death.”

Singird let out a breath he did not know he’d been holding. So she was alive… but he could not know for how long.

“Why?” he asked, his voice struggling between hope and fear. “Why would the Imperials take them?”

“For fun, I s’ppose. This is war, Singird. It draws the worst out of people.”

Singird clenched his fists, letting the magical sword disappear. The thought of some filthy warrior smelling of sweat booze, laying his hands on Yrith, made him feel nauseous. He chased the thought away by sheer willpower. No, it would be too much of a coincidence if she had been simply dragged away for the amusement of some romance-deprived private. There had to be more to it.

“Selas Travi,” he said, straining his mind to concentrate on all he knew and not fall into the state of utter misery. “Do you know who he is?”

Toddvar’s eyes narrowed. The Nord warrior hesitated before answering, watching Singird with unsettling suspicion. “I might.”

“Where is he?”

“Why do yeh ask for the Thalmor scum?”

Singird paused, pondering his next words. “And as much as his fate does not concern me, I’m afraid Miss Ravencroft followed his daughter here to look for him.”

With a sigh, Toddvar placed a hand on his shoulder. “Listen, Singird. Yeh’re stepping on thin ice here. Yeh’ll find ‘im here among the corpses, but I’m only telling yeh ‘cause yeh’re a friend. The rest is classified information and I can’t oblige. Yeh must understand.”

Singird gave Toddvar a hard look. “There are lives of our students on the line, Toddvar. Please, I need to know everything there is to know.”

“I feel yeh, but…” Toddvar’s gaze suddenly turned somewhere beyond Singird, his eyes narrowing with displeasure. “Are those your fellas from the College?”
Singird glanced over his shoulder to see Faralda and Drevis Neloren approach. They were cautious, treading lightly with hands up and crackling with magic.

“Colleagues, to be precise,” the Dunmer corrected, dropping a curtsy that would freeze a person from the inside. “I am Drevis Neloren of Blacklight, the Illusion master, and by my side is Lady Faralda of Cloudrest, the esteemed Destruction master and foster mother to Miss Yrith Ravencroft, one of our missing students. And you would be the fabled General Toddvar of the Stormcloaks, I presume. Enchanted to meet you, although the circumstances are rather somber.” Faralda joined the curtsy with her own, slightly less deep than the tradition dictated. Singird had a sudden urge to disappear, feeling Toddvar’s gaze bore into him in both question and ire.

There was momentary silence. The air felt heavy, and when Toddvar spoke, his voice was low and reserved. “Pleased to make yer acquaintance,” he uttered with no sincerity. “Heard rumors of Yrith’s new… elven family but didn’t have time to introduce m’self properly. But, as yeh can see, the situation’s rather dire and I’ll have to postpone our chat.”

“Of course, we understand,” Master Neloren nodded, “and that’s why we only have a few questions. If my ears served me well, you said that our students were dragged away by the Imperials?”

Toddvar opened his mouth to snap, but then he closed it again as his eyes dimmed, the flare of is anger fading into nothingness. His companions scrabbled for their weapons, but he raised a hand to stop them. “Indeed,” he said quietly. “They were.”

Singird suppressed a stare in Master Neloren’s way. Casting illusions on the Stormcloak general could cost him his life, even if his only allegiance was to the College, but Singird could not bring himself to stop him. If it was to find Yrith, he was willing to take desperate measures. In his mind, he laughed at himself. A few months before, he would have thought such situation ridiculous.

“And they came here to see Selas Travi.”

“Maybe. I couldn’t get a glimpse of that, but we found ‘em in his company when he was killed.”

Master Neloren’s eyes became brimstone, softly glowing in red as his magic grew stronger. “And who killed him?”

At that, Toddvar let out a sudden laugh. “My men, of course. We ain’t letting the Thalmor filth roam our lands freely.”

“But you knew it would be Selas Travi that you would find here.”

“I did. My men didn’t. We don’t share these things with foot soldiers.”

The Dunmer’s eyes narrowed, assessing, weighing. Then he gave a slow nod. “Very well. May we see his corpse?”

There was a pause. For a moment, Singird thought that Toddvar would break free of the spell, but then he shrugged, giving a strange, dreamy smile that sent shivers down his spine. “He’s right there, by that fence. The first black cloak yeh stumble upon. After all, I only need his head.”

Master Neloren could not hide his twitching mouth as he bowed again, joining his hands in a feigned sign of gratitude. “We are in your debt.”

“Of course.”

The three of them excused themselves, following the path of Toddvar’s finger. Singird tried his best
to avoid the suspicious looks from his comrades, wondering if Master Neloren had enchanted them too. The dark elf said nothing as he bent down to the corpse of a once unusually tall Altmer man. The trail of blood and grime, distinct in the surrounding snow, suggested that it had been dragged here. He had been pierced by several arrows, their shanks now broken and twisted in the wounds.

“He died a mercifully quick death,” Faralda remarked as she inspected the body.

“He sure did.” Master Neloren’s face darkened as he proceeded with his examination, touching the man lightly with his magic.

Singird studied the dead man’s face, still twisted in the final moment of his agony. It was almost pleading, making him wonder what his last words could have been. It was not a face of a murderer. Up to this moment, Singird had been convinced that the runaway Thalmor wanted to hurt Yrith. But looking at that face, contemplating the sudden twist of fate, he wasn’t so certain anymore. He wished he could have spoken to the man. But he was too late.

His musings were interrupted by the words of Drevis Neloren. “Let’s go.”

Singird stared at him in question and so did Faralda, but the Dunmer did not elaborate. The three of them left in silence, following his resolute lead. Singird nodded to Toddvar on the way, but the Stormcloak general was too busy with ordering a small group of men that had gathered around him to clear the place. Soon, they had left him far behind. Only when they reached the end of the Winterhold pass did Drevis Neloren turn back to them, features lined with concern.

“We are getting into some serious trouble here. A Thalmor refugee getting in the midst of political entanglements is nothing out of the ordinary. But when he gets killed by three arrows and still, I cannot trace a bit of his magic on his corpse, that’s when it starts to scare me.”

Faralda raised a brow. “What are you trying to imply?”

“It is very convenient to have someone like Selas Travi succumb to a salve of arrows in a battle and then take out all his soul power. You achieve three things. One,” he bent down a finger, “you will go unnoticed. Two,” another finger down, “you will get power. And three,” a third finger joined them, “you erase all traces. A shattered soul cannot speak. It will reveal nothing.”

“Shattered soul? Please, tell me you are not serious.”

“Our enemy seems to be in the habit of doing just that,” Singird said with a sigh.

“Our enemy… I can’t say I like the sound of that word. So we don’t know anything at all?”

Drevis Neloren began walking again, staring up at the cloudy sky in thought. “We have learned a few things,” he said. “Fortunately for us, that person takes risks that can easily turn against them. The question is, can we be quick enough to stop them before they actually achieve anything? But anyway,” he ran a hand through his hair, “I digress. We know this person is the same as the one behind the murders we are getting accused of. They are beyond skilled in illusion. They can take away one’s magic entirely and likely command similar magic as Miss Ravencroft. They are politically engaged and related to the case of Selas Travi. And, strange as it sounds, they likely have spies among the Stormcloaks. I don’t believe those arrows landed by coincidence.”

“One of those men we met?”

“I doubt it, they hardly had any usable magic in them. Although using a magicless person for one’s twisted purposes could be a good camouflage. Still,” he gave a cheerless laugh, “I must commend Ulfric for his choice of generals. That man’s will is strong as iron and unyielding like the Red
Mountain. Magic or not, he posed a challenge.”

“But you made him tell us the truth, didn’t you?” The tone of Singird’s voice was alien even to himself. Calm, almost appreciative. He was not angry at Master Neloren’s audacity to bewitch his friend, a Stormcloak leader. He did not even feel reproachful. Instead, he felt gratitude for extorting the so-called classified information. Despite himself, he felt a semblance of smile spread across his face. Faralda gave him a questioning look.

“That he did,” Master Neloren nodded.

They fell into silence, listening to their footsteps. They passed the first Winterhold houses, gesturing a greeting to Haran, the barmaid, as she swept the fresh snow from the stairs to the Frozen Hearth. Here was where it had all begun. Where he had started to doubt Yrith’s incompetence that she had so adamantly feigned until the moment he almost broke her. She had shown him her tears then, perhaps first in those six months since the death of the Ravencrofts. Perhaps that was the first time when he had wished to enfold her in his arms. He had not known then that this desire would turn into yearning so insatiable it would wipe his mind clear of all thoughts. And now it ached, tightening around his chest and making it painful to breathe.

He clenched his fists as they entered the Winterhold bridge. The strait was quiet, the horkers sleeping in repose on the shore in a tangle of flippers and tusks. If Singird didn’t know better, he would not have believed there was a war raging outside of this peaceful land.

As Faralda raised her Sign of Accord, the magic of the seal guarding the entrance to the College glowed in bright amber light, same as her eyes. “I will talk to Mirabelle. We should call a meeting and send out a party,” she said as she stepped into the courtyard.

“A party? If they were taken away by the Imperials, then no party can save them.”

Singird raised his hand to silence them both. “No. I think it’s time for Master Gestor to return to his rightful position.”

“Singird? What could you possibly achieve alone?”

Master Neloren shook his head. “And here I thought we’ve had enough of madness for one day. I truly want to believe in your power, Master Larkwing, but facing off an entire Imperial unit, maybe a whole army? Even if you sneak into their camp in the middle of the night...”

“No. By now, they could have taken them to any camp in Skyrim. I think I will go pay a visit to General Tullius in Solitude.”

The eyes widening in disbelief and gaping mouths of his elven companions brought a smile to Singird’s lips. Perhaps the elves were not so oblivious after all.

Waving them goodbye, he headed to the room of Phinis Gestor. The path ahead was long, and time was of the essence. He knocked on the door, expecting to see another illusionary hearth.
Pain was what woke her. Yrith did not know how long she had been unconscious. She did not know where she was. She did not even know whether she was alive. The only thing she knew at the moment was the pain and the incessant throbbing in her head. The ground was cold and hard under her, coarse on the bare skin of her arms and legs. She took a breath and it stabbed her chest. The pain was too real, she had to be alive. She had felt it before. Only now it was hers, and it filled her with fear greater than any she had ever felt before.

Digging her fingers into the soil, she inhaled again. It was all she could do. She was too weak to lift herself, too weak to even fully open her eyes, and so she only breathed, drawing in her surroundings. They hit her nostrils and filled her with images. The heavy taste of sweat and metal she remembered from her days in Daggerfall when she sneaked into the smithy on the western side of the city. Horses and hay, grasses carried by air that was far warmer than the Winterhold breeze. Ale and smoke from the fires, and smells far less pleasant. It was all unknown and threatening. Where was she?

With the next breath, the first sounds reached her ears and made the throbbing in her head even more painful. She let out a soft hiss, trying to force her hands to work, to at least turn and see more than just a piece of dry earth. They refused to oblige. She tried to move a foot, but something cold and heavy was wrapped around it, keeping it in place.

“I think the Breton’s wakin’ up,” someone said. The voice hurt, obscured by its own sharpness. It was unpleasant, hoarse, yet high-pitched and screechy. Yrith groaned quietly, realizing how parched her lips and throat were. How long had she not drunk or eaten? She had no strength to stay awake, yet she was too exhausted to fall back to sleep. There was nothing she could do, and that helplessness terrified her more than the broken state of her body.

“You think?” another voice said, deep and rough. There was a slapping sound. “You really shouldn’t do that, you might hurt yourself. She was almost dead when they brought her, but sure, she’s wakin’ up! Sheogorath’s balls.”

“Well, but she got that magic, y’know…”

Magic… yes, Yrith had magic. She needed to use it. To free herself. To heal her body. She closed her eyes, concentrating, searching for the power of her soul. It was swirling, like a caged animal assaulting its bars, fighting for a chance to rip its captor apart. But the cage was unyielding, and the beast was too weak and hurt to break it. With all the willpower she could muster, Yrith moved her fingers. The magic sprung from her chest, spread across her body, shot through her arms…

“Trollheaded fool. Like she could… blast!”

There was a loud crack. Out of the corner of her eye, Yrith could see the sparks enveloping her wrists, sending thousands of white-hot needles through her skin and filling her with yet more pain. This time, she cried out aloud, unable to contain the primitive sound. The magic was sealed within her, blocked by some sort of barrier in her wrists and ankles. She tried once more, and the pain paralyzed her. She sent her magic out to explore, but it would not pass through. She could not use it to feel or see anymore, it would stay and weigh on her body and soul. The fear within her grew and made her tremble. She took a breath, but it would not bring her the relief she craved.

“I told you, didn’t I? That magic… Erinor said she’d heal quicklier thanks to it.”

“More quickly, you moron. Well, well.” There were footsteps, slow and heavy, causing a small
earthquake inside Yrith with each stomp. She gritted her teeth, trying to shut the pain out, but it was rooted deep inside. As the man approached, he bent to her, his knees cracking and sending yet another wave of painful sound her way.

“Oy. Give that to me,” she heard him say, his voice slightly muffled. He must have been facing the other man.

“What? You can’t be serious…”

“I said give it to me.”

“But Erinor said we’re not supposed to kill her…”

“I know what Erinor said, now give it to me and stop staring at me like a squeezed slaughterfish.”

Yrith heard quiet rustling, leather on leather, then a thud. There was a grunt as the man near her picked up something heavy. And then she felt something jab into her and her vision blurred and blackened. The man lifted her with a haft of a large axe, mercilessly turning her over. She slid off the handle and screamed with pain, digging her nails into the dirt underneath her. The thing holding her foot gave a clanking sound. Chain. The man laughed, the sound vicious and full of scorn.

“Well well, the princess has awoken. Oh, but is she crying? Look at the poor thing, Ary. What shall we do about it?”

Through her tears, she was staring at a red canvas ceiling. The area around her was confined by the same red walls, drowning everything inside in red tint. She could spot a pole holding the whole structure together. So she was in a tent.

“Hmm,” the first man with the screechy voice hummed as he drew closer, sliding a finger over Yrith’s face. She looked at him, trembling in fear, but still wishing to look in the face of her enemy. He would have been handsome if it had not been for the unkempt mop of umber hair, the overgrown beard and a scar that stretched over his tanned cheek and down his neck, gaping like twisted jaws of a sabre cat. He would have been attractive if had not been for the grin he wore as he looked at her, eyes hungry and glinting with malice. Yrith wanted to pull away, but there was nowhere to go. She lay on the ground, helpless as he held her chin, forcing her to face him. “What a pretty face. Ah, but so sad. I think she could use some quality time, eh?”

The other man, still out of Yrith’s sight, prodded her again with the haft, skillfully picking the sorest spot in her side. She moaned, tears rolling down her face and falling in the dirt.

“Give it a break, Ary. This one would not last a moment of your antics. Besides…”

“Besides,” a third voice joined them, this one so cold Yrith felt as though she was being buried in the Midden’s ice, “I believe you have been given instruction.”

“Master Erinor…”

“Arius and Silvio. You Colovians know no restraint. Do I smell booze on you again?”

“I didn’t…”

“Silence.”

“Yes, sir.”
The screechy man pulled away and vanished from Yrith’s sight. The haft left her skin as the man known as Silvio dropped the axe to the ground. There was wild and hasty shuffling followed by a curse as someone tripped. Steel boots stomped on the ground. But the newcomer was quiet and collected, and by both his step and his voice, Yrith assumed he was an elf, likely an Altmer. He was entirely different from Lady Faralda, Leyna or Selas Travi. His step was firm but unrushed. Unlike the two men, he smelled clean, but not like Singird. His was the rich scent of redwort baths and jazbay grapes, underlined by the heavy fragrance of ermine fur. Yrith knew before she could see his face what kind of eyes would stare down upon her. She wanted to turn away, but at the same time, she could not. She stared back as he appeared, his features twisted in a cold sneer. She imagined this man walking away from a battlefield with blood dripping from his blade, graceful and basking in his own victory. Yet still, he would not truly smile, for losing had never been a possibility. She shuddered when she saw those eyes. Beautiful almond-shaped and deadly dark.  

“You consider this pretty? I suppose simple minds enjoy simple things.” He sat down beside her comfortably, enjoying the view of the helpless girl before him. “Ah, the fabled Yrith Ravencroft. You awoke even sooner than I expected. I hope you are pleased with our hospitality.”

Yrith stared at him in shock. This man knew her, just like Selas Travi had. He called her fabled. And he mocked her for her pitiful state. The hopelessness she had felt just moments before vanished, replaced with sudden anger. Anger at Leyna for lying to her. Anger at herself for getting lured out and betraying Singird’s trust. Anger at this man for the vicious sneer in his face.

“Who are you?!” she hissed, her voice a hoarse whisper that hurt her parched throat.

“Ah, that you would like to know, wouldn’t you? But even if you did, what good would it be to you?”

“Why have you taken me here?”

“Your questions, dear Yrith, bear no importance. But I can promise you,” he closed the distance between them, face inches from hers so she could smell the sweet, heavy perfume on him, “you will be relieved soon.”

Cold gripped her and her stomach knotted. She felt sick and paralyzed, and everything was surreal. This could not be happening to her. How had she managed to get herself captured, with her body broken and her magic blocked? She could not feel anything. She did not know where her friends were. She was at the mercy of a crazed elf who seemed to revel in the dominance he had over her. Everything was red. She must have been in an Imperial tent, but who was he?

She took a breath and gathered her magic again, sending it forward in a rush. But it would not break through. It stopped at her wrists, sending yet again a painful spark that scorched her skin. She cried out, eyes filling with tears once more. The man’s face widened in a cruel grin.

“Very convenient,” he said as he lifted her hand, twisting it and flooding her body with more pain. Yrith could spot a thin silvery bracelet on her wrist, almost invisible but glowing in pale blue. It crackled lightly, reacting to every strand of magic that touched it. “Unfortunately, your magic will not help you. Nothing will help you, Yrith Ravencroft.” He let the hand fall on the ground. More pain. His face blurred and darkened before Yrith’s eyes. She let the tears flow, wishing for all this to end.

“Make sure she does not try any tricks. She will stay where she is, untouched, until the clash. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Master Erinor,” the two Imperials said in unison. There was more shuffling and clanking of
“What about the other two?”

“Ah, these?” Yrith heard those slow, poised steps, then a moment of silence. “Let’s see…”

A thud and a cry that froze the blood in Yrith’s veins.

“Such refined features, eyes of pure gold and white-gold hair like the finest silk, even in these conditions… a result of careful cultivation throughout generations. Unfortunately, the dynasty is going to perish with this one. Selas Travi is dead. She is useless.”

“You…” Leyna snarled. Yrith shuddered. Never before had she felt so much hatred in her voice, so much anger and hurt. It made her ache inside. She knew her pain. Leyna had just witnessed her own father die. A man she had loved and respected so much. “You’ll pay for this. I may die here, but you will pay! You will die a heretic’s death and never see Aetherius. I swear it on my father’s honor!”

“Ah, it barks… but bite it cannot. Save your breath, traitor’s child. You are in no position to make such promises.”

“My father was no traitor!”

“Certainly not to you, was he? Now what do we have here?”

“You…” One more thud. Leyna stammered and shrieked, and so did the freshly woken Cain. Yrith clenched her fists, unable to stop the tears from falling. This was all her fault. Her foolishness had led them all here, and now Cain was paying for it.

“Damn it… it hurts… dammit!”

“Oh, it does, doesn’t it?” Erinor drawled, the words sounding strangely sweet on his tongue. Yrith heard a hiss.

“Who in Oblivion… dammit… Yrith! You s’wit! What have you done to her?!”

“Ah, and this would be young Aldaryn. Also useless. A banished fourth son with no future. His family would think we’re doing them a service by killing him… wouldn’t they, young Cain?”

“Y-you…”

“Are we to get rid of these two, Master Erinor?” The high-pitched voice of Arius was slick with twisted pleasure.

“Stop…” Yrith whispered through the sobs, “please. D-do… do whatever you want with me… just… leave them alone… let them go…”

“No!” Cain cried. “Yrith, you can’t…” he suddenly fell silent. Yrith felt another wave of cold take over. Her throat felt so tight she could not catch her breath. Why? Why did it have to be this way? By now, Singird must be going mad with worry. More than ever she wanted to feel his embrace. Perhaps she never would.

“Ah, so she is pleading. Silvio?”

“Yes, sir?”
“Hold young Yrith up for me. So that she has a clear view of her… friends.”

The man with the deep, rough voice slid his hands under Yrith and lifted her mercilessly. She did not cry out this time, gritting her teeth, fighting a battle with herself. How could she give these men the pleasure? They reveled in seeing pain. She had to be strong. Even if she was to die, she had to be strong till the last moment.

Erinor came back into her sight, standing between her trembling friends with that sneer of his. Cain and Leyna were each chained to a different pole, each wearing the same two pairs of glowing bracelets as she did. They were half lying half sitting, filthy and ragged, but unhurt. A sigh of relief escaped her lips, gaining her a painful nudge from Silvio. She took a breath, stifling the moan.

Cain was glaring at his captor, cuffed hands clenched into fists, knuckles turning white under his ebony skin. Leyna’s eyes were pinned to the ground, but when Yrith set her gaze upon her, she raised them to meet her. Yrith shuddered. The look Leyna gave her was not painful. It was not pleading or broken. It was full of hatred. Countless icy needles pierced her whole person. What had she done to be loathed so?

Next to Leyna, Erinor slowly unsheathed his dagger in a single practiced movement. Yrith’s eyes widened in fear.

“Well then,” the elven man said, placing the blade on Leyna’s cheek. She froze, forgetting her breath. Then she closed her eyes, two solitary tears sliding down over her face. Yrith’s vision blurred again. Fear paralyzed her and made her lose breath. What was she supposed to do now? Would she be forced to watch Leyna die in front of her? She wanted to cry and beg, but she couldn’t. It would change nothing. It would only serve for this man’s vile entertainment.

He changed his grip, sliding the dagger lightly over Leyna’s skin. A thin red line appeared.

“Well?” she hissed. “What are you waiting for?!”

“That you would like, wouldn’t you?” Erinor said, his voice the sweetest whisper. He pulled away and twirled the dagger in his fingers. It sailed to Cain’s neck. Yrith’s insides turned in her. Her eyes burned. There were no more tears she could shed. Her strength left her entirely. She hung limply in the hands of her keeper, wishing the end would come soon. If she could just be the first to go…

But then, Cain would have to watch her part. The loyal Cain who had only sought to protect her. The Cain who had stood by her side, expecting nothing in return.

She forced herself to raise her head again, eyes hard as the finest steel whose color they bore. And as they landed on Cain’s face, the Dunmer’s lips quirked in a sudden smile. He looked up at Erinor, defiance in his eyes contrasting the state of his body.

“Thank you muchly,” he snorted, “for making me feel right at home.”

“Silence.” The dagger left his neck, replaced by a flash of magic that made Cain cough and gasp for air. “Just in case you get any strange ideas, little Yrith… remember that there are things far worse than death that could befall your… friends.”

“You… coward,” Yrith hissed through gritted teeth, not believing her own words. “Too afraid to face me. Too scared to…”

The dagger shot out in two swift movements, leaving a perfect cross over Leyna’s cheek. The elven girl screamed, curling up as much as her chains allowed. Yrith froze in horror.
“That was one. Anything else you would like to tell me, little hatchling?”

She shook her head obediently, feeling her will break under the weight of his look.

“Ah, so you can listen when you want to. Release her, Silvio. The two of you will not touch the young Ravencroft in my absence.”

Yrith felt the hands that had held her retreat, letting her fall in the dirt.

“And the other two?”

“You are allowed to… discipline our guest lest she try something unseemly. Try not to overdo it. We do not want any casualties.”

“No casualties… right,” Arius guffawed. “’Spose that’s good enough.”

Erinor gave a nonchalant shrug as he looked at Yrith once more, cold smile still playing on his lips. “One more thing. Do not feed our guest. At all.”

“But master… you told us to keep her alive…”

“Oh I will keep her alive. Just… barely.” With that, he walked out, his richly woven robe flapping about him. As the last inch of his soft leather boots disappeared behind the red canvas, Yrith fought to suppress the acute burning in her eyes.

She did not know how much time had passed since she had fainted. She felt even weaker than before, and her restrained magic had a suffocating effect. She felt as though she was shrinking, more and more with every passing moment, until she would explode. But she had no strength to command her magic anymore, not even to send it against the bracelets on her wrists. She faintly noticed someone coming to her side and imbuing her with a tiny droplet of their own magic, sending it trickling down her stomach and through her body. So that was her food now. She did not even try to open her eyes. She did not care anymore. She would wait till the bitter end.

Voices reached her through the barrier of her pain. She knew them and they were not friendly. One screechy, one deep and hoarse. They hurt. She tried to deflect them, but they kept coming, drowning her head in painful tremor.

“I gotta tell you, Erinor’s a fool if he thinks Toddvar will back away cuz of her.” That was the screechy man. Arius, that was his name. She tried to slide her hands to her temples, ease herself of some of that ache. They would not move. Her body had never felt so heavy before.

“You better hope he doesn’t hear you,” Silvio’s hoarse voice joined. “Anyway, he said something about breaking his morale, didn’t he? Hah, morale! Some people are so simple.”

“That’s just plain st…”

“Shhhh! You’re really asking for trouble saying things like that!”

“Well, but have you seen General Toddvar? That General Toddvar? He’s like a mountain, and when he goes to battle, that axe never misses. And I mean never. He never falters, never backs away and those people that follow him… they’re like crazed. I’d say it’ll take more than a death of one girl to break the guy.”

“Hey…” Silvio’s voice dropped into a whisper, barely audible to anyone outside, but roaring like a
thunder to Yrith. “Truth be told, I agree. I don’t think the elf is half as smart as he thinks he is, and Toddvar is like a damned Dwemer centurion. But it’s not like keeping the girl will kill us, right? I mean… she doesn’t even eat.”

“Right… but he could at least let us have some fun with her.”

“Well, you can have fun with the elf.”

“Bah! I’d rather die than touch that thing with my bare hands!”

Silvio let out a yapping laugh. “Well, apparently this little thing has some scary wild magic that’s going to eat us alive if we dig into it.”

“Oooooh, look at my hair standing!”

The two of them laughed at that, buckles on their armors clanking as they shook. Yrith fought not to moan, not to express the pain every outburst of theirs brought her. The poor joke lasted for a while of their entertainment before it finally became quiet. She took a careful breath, absorbing the moment of tranquility. Perhaps she could fall asleep again. Forget this all was happening and keep in the dark forever. But…

A sudden thought woke her to full attention. Those men spoke of Toddvar, but he could not have been the real reason she was kept here. For that, Erinor had been too smitten with her. He had kept repeating her name too often for her liking, savoring her pain, enjoying every moment that he could look at her tormented face. He had spoken of her magic and bound her with bracelets strong enough to suppress her power. But if what Master Neloren and Selas Travi had told her was true…

“The enemy fears you, Yrith. You’re not prepared yet. I can feel your magic swirling inside you, wild and uncontrolled. But when you are, you must find him.”

Was Erinor that enemy? No… they were cautious and evasive. Subtle. But this man loved to flaunt. He was nothing but a tool, she was certain of it. A powerless little pawn that strived for recognition. If she had met her enemy, she wouldn’t have known, or she’d have long perished. But she was still here, waiting…

Suddenly, she found the thought ridiculous. She was the daughter of Damasy and Adine Ravencroft who had trusted her in their mission. She had surpassed her classmates and gained the respect of the Collegium. And she had left Singird alone…

She could not die here. She could not just wait until death came to claim her. Something was about to happen, but perhaps that could also be her chance. And in the end, she was not so powerless. For some reason, Erinor had not deprived her of her magic. He had only blocked it, with a few simple circlets that, ultimately, were still made of magicka. Perhaps it worked like a door that could only be opened from the outside, while on the inside, it only had a doorknob. But then, some thieves could open such a door in a snap. She would only have to become one that can get through a magical bracelet.

Slowly, quietly, she drew in a breath. She felt so weak… but she was still alive. People were waiting for her, depending on her.

She opened an eye and saw two pairs of steel shoes. She would be constantly watched, and any sign of movement could put Cain and Leyna in danger. Suppressing a sigh, she closed her eyes again, pondering her options. As long as she would play nearly dead, they would be safe. A sneak thief works in silence, with absolute precision, touching, trying with care, until the lock gives an almost
inaudible click. A sneak thief is resourceful and finds ways and means others would never think of.

Inwardly, she smiled to herself. If Erinor could feed her his magic, then so could she.

The night was dark and moonless. Not many could boast about having visited the Midden and making it out alive. Singird had done so twice in one day. Only three people knew that he had left. Faralda, Drevis Neloren and Phinis Gestor, the three whom he had chosen to trust. Of course it would not take more than two days for the rest of the College to notice, but by that time, he would be long gone. He had only packed little to sustain him, relying on whatever his journey would serve him. The College barely had enough to get by as it was.

As he descended the cascades of ice, the sea welcomed him with soft splashes. The night was so serene as he roamed through it, picking the exact same route as previously, following Yrith’s and his own footsteps. There was not a single snowflake falling down from the skies, and the wind was just enough to lightly swing the twigs of the scarce Winterhold trees.

Keeping to the shadows, he approached the city and watched a group of guards walking cautiously toward him. They held their torches high, backs pressed together as if in defense formation. Rumor of the battle just around the corner must have reached them. Singird suppressed a bitter laugh. He could not imagine anyone trying to invade this dreary place.

Casting a quick invisibility spell, he crouched behind the trunk of likely the oldest tree in the city, hidden from the light of the guards’ torches. He let them pass, holding his breath.

“… and apparently the Imperials got hold of some secret weapon against our General Toddvar,” one of them whispered as he scanned the shadows inches from Singird.

“Hah, right, they’re bluffing. Secret weapon, but everyone knows about it.”

“That’s what I told them…”

The voices faded away as the guards went to examine some remote corners of the city. Singird slipped past the tree and through the bushes, following the path to the Winterhold pass. He kept to the shadows, maintaining a pace not too slow and not too quick. Winterhold had no stables and hiring a horse to gain a lead was out of the question. Perhaps in Dawnstar fortune would smile on him and he would find a reliable steed, but that was at least two days away.

He sighed… two days during which anything could happen. Two days when Yrith would be held captive, likely hurt and poorly treated. And that was only the beginning. What kind of face would she be wearing when he finally found her? If he could make it in time to find her alive…

Clenching his fists, he picked up his pace, eyes turned to the horizon. Somewhere in the distance, beyond the gold-hued mountains, was the great city of Solitude, and inside it was the man who could make a stop to this.

Singird halted as he approached the battlefield, scanning the land before him. There were two paths that would let him avoid it. The southern route led through a mountainous region, past the freshly excavated Saarthal and round the ancient Dwemer city of Alftand that was known to teem with bandits on the surface and the Falmer in its depths. He had no wish to fight either. The northern path followed the shoreline, keeping within the firing range of several Nordic tombs where the undead liked to dwell. Not a pleasant prospect either, but at least he would be facing his own ancestors with no qualms about sending them back to their slumber. With a sigh, he stepped to the north.

The road was quiet, leading him down the shore and along the coast. The Sea of Ghosts was dark
and murky, and occasionally he heard the grumble of horkers. Sabrecats enjoyed roving around the shore in search of prey, hunting for fish that strayed too far from the safety of their depths. Singird’s hand groped about his chest until it found a moon-shaped Dwemer amulet, a memento that had been passed from father to son in the Larkwing family, ordinarily disguised as a plain paperweight. It had saved his life more than once and he counted on it to do it again.

When the sunrise drew near, he decided to camp in an alcove formed by a great rock several hundred paces away from the sea. It would provide enough of a shelter for a short rest, even though he could imagine a cleaner and softer place to lay his weary body. He spread out his bedroll, too thin for his liking, and buried himself inside, chewing on his last supply of dried fruits.

The morning was grey and quiet, but more than an hour passed before his eyelids finally sank to relieve him of his exhaustion. Still, images of the war and Yrith, laying down hurt with her silver eyes full of tears, haunted him even in his sleep. As wind carried the splashes from the sea afar, he dreamt of squelching blood. When the first seagull’s cry tore through the air, he heard cries of agony. Then magic crackled and threatened to swallow everything alive, drown him in blinding light...

His eyes cracked open at once. The moon amulet was glowing bright turquoise and magic was indeed crackling in the air, deflected by the faint barrier held up around him. It dispersed with the last bolt of lightning that would have struck him down had he not jumped out at once. In a single swift movement, he shook off his bedroll and called forth two atronachs, one a mass of stones and lightning, the other a graceful flaring creature. They both fired at once, one missing and the other crashing into a bright shield of translucent magicka.

Singird skipped and jumped, dodging one missile after another. The road along the coast was blocked, lit by fire and lightning. Behind him was a solid rock. The only remaining option was to his right, along the mountain of stone and ice. It would almost certainly be a trap. He still tried.

He ran and ran again, hands flashing with magic as he cast spell after spell. Ironflesh, a ward, another atronach as the fire creature fell in a blast of fire, a lightning strike to hit an enemy and replenish his magicka, a banishing spell to send a freshly conjured enemy atronach back to Oblivion...

He counted at least five people assaulting him. He would not stand a chance. And so he ran, cursing his luck as he thought of the humble supplies he had left in his resting place. He would never see them again. Now it was just him and his pocket, luckily filled with enough coin to get him by once he arrived in Dawnstar.

He slid past a rock to vanish from his pursuers’ sight, ready to disappear entirely, but the invisibility spell faded from his hand as soon as another opponent emerged before him, a triumphant smirk defining her face.

“You have nowhere to go, little mage. Give it up!” she laughed as she raised her hand. Singird roared just to give himself courage, cloaking himself in fire as he summoned a blade and a ward, charging right at the woman. Her eyes widened in surprise. She could only let out a few weak shots before he reached her. The fight was short. She carried no weapon on her person and only relied on her spells. He could sense panic from her, panic that had been born from her own haughtiness. He gave a primitive, beastlike smile as he plunged his ghostly sword in her chest and sent her gurgling to the ground. He did not bother pulling it out and ran on. That was little mage for her.

Up, up the hill, up the steep slope that fought against him. Another rock stood in his way. He sent a quick ice storm blast for distraction, slipping behind the would-be obstacle. Muffle, then invisibility, and he was lost to their eyes entirely. Holding his breath, he hurried up, reaching a plateau with a beacon and a modest cabin attached to it from the side. There were two open sheds, each holding a pile of hay. Singird forced himself to stop and think. If he was pursuing someone, the first place to
look would be inside the buildings or in the hay. He frowned and restored the spells on him, squeezing himself into the gap between the two sheds. He was just in time to see the enemies appear in his sight. The leading man, a Breton with eyes hungry like wolf’s and muscles hard and lined like thick ropes wound tight around his limbs, kicked the nearest chunk of snow.

“Damned son a crippled clannfear,” he hissed.

“Shall we split then?” a Dunmer woman next to him proposed in a smooth voice, nodding to the two paths spanning from the beacon. One led south into the mountains. The other circled the beacon and continued down, back to the shore. Singird felt a slight tug of satisfaction, seeing that the woman, along with a man that was, judging from the same mop of wavy chestnut hair and the same slightly crooked stance, likely her brother, bore countless minuscule wounds from the ice storm.

“No, he may be a Nord, but he’s a mage above all and spent most of his life buried in texts. He has no stamina to run that far in one go. He is hiding here somewhere. Tanris, you will follow me inside. You three will search every corner of this place. Don’t forget who your enemy is. He may be very crafty, don’t let your guard down for a moment.”

The five of them exchanged nods before the leader disappeared in the depths of the beacon in the company of the Dunmer woman. The rest began to search. Singird tensed as two of them advanced to his hideout, but just as he expected, each took one pile of hay, ignoring the seemingly empty gap where he stood. He stifled a sigh of relief. This would be a good moment to make himself scarce before the spells on him would wear out.

Protected by the muffle spell, he sneaked out in absolute silence, making his way straight between the two people who were far too preoccupied with their own search to notice the slightly quivering air at the place where he walked. Slowly he backed away, making his way to the slope while constantly watching his surroundings. Just a few more steps and he would be safe.

“Over here!” someone cried. It was the third one, standing just a few paces away from him. A moment later, Singird jumped aside to dodge a firebolt. Lucky these scoundrels were foolish enough to talk before they fired, he thought to himself sardonically as he deflected the next missile with another ward. The invisibility spell flicked away immediately. Singird noticed snow on his sleeves, likely fallen from the cliff under which he had been standing. So that was what had given him away.

He darted out again, dodging, summoning creatures to his aid, deflecting. So many shots missed him by inches, making him panic and search frantically for an escape route. The only possible way was the slope down, but the descent itself was dangerously steep, not to mention the potential avalanche that could come down from the cliff. If he could somehow switch places…

He smiled to himself. Of course he could switch places with them. Why had he not thought about this before?

Skipping around to avoid the incessant shots and hide behind his atronachs, he scanned the cliff and did a quick math. A step to the left, then down, then two left, one right to avoid a missile, two left… the closest man suddenly ceased his fire. Singird gave a beastlike grin. He was running out of magicka. One last step…

And he had them exactly where he wanted them. He raised both hands, summoning the biggest fire blast he could produce. It shot up, to the south-west. The two men in the rear began laughing.

“Where are you aiming, Master Conjurer? Sending the gods’ wrath upon us?”

“Exactly,” Singird mouthed as he fired another ball of fire. The cliff shook, the snow began melting.
Now all three of his opponents looked up, turning away from Singird, and he could only imagine the 
dread in their eyes. They bolted out at once, but too late. Third shot sent the ice and snow down, 
burying them deep inside. Singird could hear their cries until they were stifled, perhaps for good.

He did not waste any time. Turning away, he muffled his step to prevent leaving footprints and slid 
down the slope as fast as he could. Dawnstar was still almost a day away, a day he would have to 
spend with no food and no way to take a rest.

When he finally reached a hollow he considered safe enough to make a stop, with enough routes for 
potential escape, he leaned to a tree and let out a long, exhausted breath.

“So this is what it has come to,” he said to himself as he slid down along the trunk to squat. The 
blood of four people was on his hands for just the first day of his journey. In his mind he was trying 
to convince himself that he had only acted in his defense, but the weight was still tremendous to bear. 
It was different from the responsibility he had felt when his parents had passed. These people had 
died before his very eyes, by his own doing. He raised his hands and stared into their palms. He had 
ever imagined how deadly they could become. And Yrith… how terrible must she have felt when 
she found her parents’ corpses just moments after her own atronach had entered their home? He had 
ever known. Not even now he could imagine her pain. He only wished to lock her in his arms 
again, to never let go.

He forced himself to get up. She was waiting, and there were still people after him. Perhaps they 
would think twice now that their group of six was reduced to two. Or perhaps there would be more 
coming. He frowned as he realized that meeting them was no coincidence. They were not after his 
belongings, nor were they random marauders trying to get rid of an unwelcome guest. Those people 
knew exactly who he was, even where he was headed. They were all mages. They had called him 
Master Conjurer, and they had followed him obstinately even after the death of one of their own. 
Someone was trying to stop him from proceeding. But how could they have known? Was the trust 
he put in his three fellow teachers misplaced?

He left the hollow with dark thoughts. As he ascended the slope ahead, a new view opened before 
him, a massive stone tower dominating a run-down fortress. That was the Nightcaller Temple, former 
home to the priests of Vaermina, the Mistress of Nightmares. Singird would have to circle it, not 
wishing for a night full of dreadful dreams. It loomed over the vast land beyond it, watched the city 
of Dawnstar below with its docks and the sea that stretched to the north. Far away in the distance 
were the Mortal swamps, and through the mist that hung over them showed the city of Solitude with 
its great bridge carrying the mighty Blue Palace. It was still many days away, for the swamps could 
not be crossed easily, but the sight made Singird feel just a tad lighter. Carefully picking his path, he 
stepped forward, eyes fixed on the murky horizon.

It was almost midnight when Singird finally arrived in Dawnstar. The rest of his journey had been 
surprisingly uneventful, but he welcomed the change with open arms. Weary from his battle, 
traveling and hunger, he aimed straight for the inn. The innkeeper kept giving him strange looks 
filled with curiosity, but Singird was too tired to engage in a conversation. He fell asleep before he 
could finish his meal.

Voices woke him the next morning, sending a painfully loud echo through the main hall and to all 
the rooms.

“And I’m telling you to get your lousy arse up! We’re leaving now!”

“Oh, c’mon, capt’n! Just one more…”
“Don’t worry, there’ll be plenty of booze for you up in Solitude. Now move those lazy bones!”

“Up in the Winkin’ Skeever, eh. D’you even know what they serve there? Ain’t nothing but the Black-Briar swill! I ain’t drinkin’ that!”

“Yeah, we ain’t drinkin’ that!”

“Very well. Then I’ll cut your pay in tenth and maybe then you won’t be drinking at all. The shipment will arrive before sundown or you’ll be the ones paying the fine. Your choice.”

Singird jumped on his feet at once, cleaning himself with a quick spell. It was not perfect, and his braid must have been tangled by now, but there was not time to lose. He smoothed down his robes as he left the room, scanning it over his shoulder for anything he might have forgotten. But he had not brought anything with him save for the cloak that hung over his hand and the sack of coins buried deep in the folds of his robe.

The rather small space within the main hall was filled with sturdy sailors, muscles on one arm twice the width of Singird’s thigh. Almost every one of them held a tankard, ale dripping over their unkept beards. The smell of the place hit Singird’s nostrils with the power of the dragon breath. Sweat mixed with spirits and whatever the men had been eating, with a hint of dirt and soot. Singird suppressed the need to cover his mouth and made his way directly to the man standing on top of one of the tables, shouting at the lot with unmatched vigor.

“Get up, vermin! Move it!”

“Fine, whatever!” Grumpy murmurs hummed through the crowd as the people started rising, some more agile, others staggering and grabbing the shoulders of their equally sluggish comrades. Coins clanked on the counter as a ginger-haired innkeeper scooped them into a pouch.

Singird elbowed his way through the mass of stinking people, avoiding as much contact as possible. The captain, a mountain of muscle and tendons coated in bronze skin and hair dark and ruffled like freshly plowed soil, shouted for a good moment before most of his men crawled out of the inn, into the grey of the morning. At last, he jumped down from the table and dropped a curtsy to the innkeeper.

“Later, Thoring. Take care of your girl!”

“You take care of your boys,” the innkeeper laughed.

“Hah! Those lads would survive the end of the world!”

“But we all did, remember?”

“More than once, dear Thoring. I ought to take the Dragonborn for a drink sometime. See ya!”

The captain turned to the door.

“Wait!” Singird hurried to his side. “You’re the captain, correct?”

“What do you want, boy? You don’t look like someone interested in our dealings.”

Singird swallowed his pride at the unseemly address. “I heard you’re headed to Solitude?”

“Yes, we are, and no, we are no messenger service nor public transport. So whatever you want, take it somewhere else.”
“I respect that,” Singird said with a bow, “but any other way would take days. I will pay you handsomely if you take me aboard. And I am...” he cleared his throat, “quite effective when it comes to cleaning.” Offering himself in place of a cleaning lady. Singird could not believe his own words.

“Quite effective when it comes to cleaning,” the captain repeated. Then he roared with laughter. “Can you hear it, Thoring?” He sized Singird up, dark bushy brows furrowing in distaste. “Fancy yourself a mage, eh? Up from the damned Winterhold, perhaps? We don’t take your kind. Get lost.”

“How much is it to change your mind?” Singird pressed on, stepping in the captain’s way. He felt pathetic, staring at the pile of muscle before him. At least he matched him in height.

“Well, maybe you should use your cleaning talents for getting rid of that dirt in your ears, lad. I said no.”

“Wait a minute,” the innkeeper suddenly cut in as he hurried past the counter and to Singird. He grabbed his shoulders and stared into his eyes, face suddenly brightening with realization. “I thought I’d seen you somewhere, but I guess that was not you. You’re old Larkwing’s boy, aren’t you?” Singird froze, hoping this would mean a friendly encounter. Now it was too late to back away.

“Larkwing?” the captain raised his brows. “Ranmar Larkwing?”

“That was my father,” Singird nodded, scanning both men with suspicious eye. They were no mages. They had trouble recognizing him. And he would be long dead if someone here had wished so. He forced himself to breathe steadily. Surely there was nothing to fear.

“Well then,” the captain shook his head, fire in his eyes fading in painful memory, “I suppose that changes a lot. I owe you an apology. Your father was a good man. Better than most.”

“You knew him?”

“Not too well myself, but he was one of the few not to treat us like filth when we delivered the Imperial cargo. My men loved him. But ever since he passed away, things have been turning for the worse. And the men are tired with the war going on. Your parents… they were protectors. Everywhere they went, people had respect for them. Bandits ceased their ravages, Stormcloaks and Imperials alike stopped their assaults. They kept the units in shape. Your father was an uncompromising man. He would make sure that anyone he deemed unreliable or incompetent was immediately expelled. People feared him, but the worthy looked up to him. And his men... they never mistreated a single soul.”

“I... didn’t know my father was a commander.”

“Oh, he wasn’t. Not officially, at least. But the generals listened to him. Even Legate Rikke held him in high regard. But why are we still standing here? Let’s get a move on, the crew is waiting.”

“Wait,” the innkeeper said. “Young Singird.”

“Yes?”

“You seem doubtful of your father. But believe me, that man had nothing but love for you. He spoke of you highly. Said you have the power to see the truth, even if it was buried ten feet under the ground. Take these words with you. They will show you the way in troubled times.”

Singird clenched his fists. How many times had he woken up in the middle of the night, reliving the moment he had bowed to the Jarl of Faklreath? How many times had the memory of the messenger announcing their death come to haunt him?
“Then I failed him,” he said bitterly as he turned away. He walked out of the inn without another word, followed by the captain.

“You really are his son, aren’t you?” the captain laughed. “He was just as hard on himself. Hard on everyone, that’s for sure, but himself he could drain entirely.”

The road led them past a line of thatch-roofed abodes, not unlike those in Winterhold, but there was much more life in Dawnstar. From afar, Singird could hear laughter and the constant pounding of a smith’s hammer. Children were running around playing tag. An elderly woman was offering the passersby alchemical remedies.

“Care for a drop of fearless elixir?” she said to the passing Singird, gifting him with a warm smile. He shook his head.

“Say… did my father ever complain about joining the Legion?”

“Complain? Dear lad, if I said he complained it would be like calling a giant a goblin. He was furious!” The captain threw up his arms, not minding the alarmed people in their way. A small girl slipped behind her mother, peeking at them in suspicion. Amidst the sea of grey and brown tunics, Singird in his gold-lined robe and a captain dressed all in red were certain to attract attention. “He talked about home a lot. And about ‘stuff waiting to be done’. That this whole war is pointless. He even tried to prevent several battles. I guess you never heard.”

They descended to the lowest circle. Several men were waving at them from a large white ship with red flags carrying the Imperial dragon insignia. The others were preparing the sails, making a quick work of the ropes and hooks that held them.

“I have not.”

“‘There’s something rotten in the Empire,’ he kept saying. Not once did he believe that the Legion stood for reason, but so did he doubt the Stormcloaks. It is like a plague that keeps spreading, and in the end, whoever wins will gain nothing in the face of our greatest threat.”

“And by greatest threat he meant…”

“He never said. Always sounded so mysterious, but we all assumed he was referring to the Thalmor.”

“I wonder if he did,” Singird muttered, stepping on the plank connecting the ship to the pier on which they were standing. It was wet and slippery, and he was glad he was not carrying anything, struggling to maintain his balance. The sailors up on the deck encouraged him with cheerful laughs, helping themselves to whatever liquor they could find aboard.

“What did you just say?” the captain shouted over the voices, taking firm, practiced steps on the plank.

“Nothing,” Singird shook his head. “Could I perhaps get a drink as well? I’ll pay…”

“Absolutely not!” Then the captain stopped and turned around. “Unless you accept an invitation to our humble feast.”

Singird gave him a smile. “It would be my honor.”
on the ground that suddenly did not seem quite as solid as it usually did, Singird could not even
ever the view of the grand bridge formed naturally by a single piece of rock. Up there, a few
dhundred feet above their heads, stood the proud city of Solitude in all its glory. The snow had
receded to a sudden outburst of greenery and the sea glittered with the setting sun. Incessant gongs
and bells resounded through the vast docks, sailors shouting over each other in between the cries of
the seagulls. Never before had Singird visited the capital of Skyrim, and now he was regretting he
would not get to spend more time here, to visit the Temple of the Divines and taste the famous
Firebrand Wine.

“So this is where we part, young Singird. It has been an honor. Try not to be too hard on yourself.
For your own sake.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Captain Winterbreath.” Singird bowed and pressed a few coins in the
man’s hand.

“Ah, you never learn, do you? That part of you that doesn’t want to owe people… you won’t get far
with it. And you know that Winterbreath is not my name, right?”

“It goes well with Captain,” Singird shrugged.

“I’ll have to have a good talk with those lads of mine, teaching our guests strange things. You take
care now.” The captain gave Singird one last pat on the shoulder before he excused himself. Singird
watched him disappear in his cabin before he made for the city.

It was long dark when he finally reached the main gate. The guards flashed him looks full of
suspicion, hands caressing the hilts of their blades. “Only burglars and vampires lurk around after
dark. So which are you?”

“A late traveler,” Singird said truthfully. “I arrived in the docks at sunset.”

“A brave soul, traveling in these times. Or a foolish one. You may pass, but remember that no crime
will be tolerated within the walls of this city.”

“I will keep that in mind,” Singird nodded. The gate opened before him, presenting a view of the
main street. To his left, an ornate sign featuring a skeever with its tail wrapped around a plate
informed him that the building before him was The Winking Skeever, the local inn. To his right was
raised a platform with an execution block. As far as Singird knew, the last time this place had been
used had been almost two years ago, during the execution of Roggvir who had opened the gate to
Ulfric Stormcloak and thus sent the High King Torygg to his death. This incident was what had set
Skyrim in such chaos. He averted his eyes with a sigh, making his way to the inn.

The Winking Skeever was lively with sailors, soldiers, merchants, and also beggars who did not
hesitate to stretch out their hands in a pleading gesture whenever someone took out their coin pouch
to pay. Rarely they managed to capture the attention of the more prosperous folk who mostly treated
them with cold looks and sometimes even kicks in their rears. The people of Solitude were much
more colorful than those in Winterhold and Dawnstar. Dames dressed in velvet gowns and sirs in
tunics bearing rich embroideries, gold and rubies adorning their necks and hands, hair up in complex
angles of braids held together by gleaming tiaras, all holding goblets with wine that was five classes
above anything Singird had ever savored. That was Solitude. Amidst them stood a female bard
dressed far too scarcely for Singird’s taste, fingers dancing over the lute she held as she sang the
Song of the Dragonborn. A good many people joined the singing, dancing wildly to the rather calm
tune.

After a good while of simple observation, Singird made his way to the counter.
“Welcome to the Winking Skeever, young man!” beamed the bartender, a middle-aged Colovian who seemed to be in a mood just as jolly as all his guests. “What can I do you for?”

“I’d like a room for the night, a bath and a dinner.”

The man tilted his head to his side, giving a look of feigned sympathy. “Well, too bad, my friend, but we’re out of rooms.”

Singird let out a sigh. “I suppose I’ll have to find another place to stay then. Maybe I can get the local stables some extra business.”

“Haha, I was joking, don’t be such a grump! Second floor, first on the left. The bath will be ready in half an hour. That would be twenty septims, please. Thirty if you want to include a massage. Lysia over there is serving tonight.” The man winked at him, nodding to a delicate ginger girl with a wide smile and large round eyes whose bright green gown was even more revealing than the bard’s. Singird fought not to roll his eyes.

“Thank you for the offer, but I will have to pass tonight.” He dropped a small stack of coins on the counter. The man took out a key and spun it on his finger before handing it over to Singird.

“As you wish.”

That night, Singird had not slept a wink. The inn was rowdy and he was haunted by thoughts of his parents, his father whose trust he had betrayed, mingling with fear for Yrith. He had a vision of her lying in a dark place, trembling in the cold, skin dark with stains of blood beneath her torn robe. A thud came down and she screamed, calling his name. Singird sat up, catching his breath. Drowsily, he stumbled out of his room, to the landing providing view of the lower floors. Spilled liquor, one man cracking his fists, another lying face to a pillar. A circle of people around them, waiting for what was to come. Singird rubbed his head.

Locking his door, he threw a blanket over the whole of his person, pressing it to his ears. But the thuds continued, bringing images he was too afraid to look at, but even more afraid to chase away. Exhausted, he left his bed before sunrise for a sip of fresh air.

The city was quiet, with only the guards in red roaming the streets to maintain order. He wandered from one tall building to another, absorbing the quiet while admiring their sturdy stone walls, roofs that had been designed for the moss that now covered them and ancient gables tastefully divided in two by ornate wooden beams. In the distance, he could see the Blue Palace, its lustrous azure domes contrasting the greyness of the morning sky.

He passed the morning in silent meditation, waiting for the streets to slowly fill. He watched as merchants carried their goods to the market, filling it with various scents of fruits, pastries and meats, leathers and linens, even soil and seedlings. He did not need to find his way to the Imperial headquarters as he saw several men in red uniforms, the Imperial dragon embroidered on their chests, march up the steep path zigzagging to the top of a terrace. Casually as he could, he followed them through a massive stone archway to a vast plaza enclosed with walls and buildings from every side. The men dispersed to their positions, relieving others after their night shift.

Just to his left loomed a small fortress dominated by a round tower with its tip pointing to the skies. That was Castle Dour, currently home to the Skyrim’s branch of the Imperial Legion. Singird’s eyes found its door under the crimson Imperial banner. Two guards were standing at its sides, hands over their chest in a would-be threatening posture. Singird assessed his options. The city was peaceful. The morning welcomed it with its usual murmurs and people running back and forth, minding their
own business. There were no signs of war, no signs of anything bothersome. And the guards looked bored.

He sighed as he slowly approached them, betting in his mind against the odds of having his pride shattered by the two men seeking purpose in guarding a door that likely went untouched for days. He opened his mouth to address them, but before he could utter a word, the guard on the left let out a snort, gazing somewhere past Singird.

“Tirrus, weren’t you supposed to have a night shift?”

Singird glanced over his shoulder to see two other uniformed men, panting as they ran to where he stood. One of them carried a helmet under his arm, long dark wavy hair heavy with sweat. As he came to a halt a few steps from Singird, he wiped his brow clean, taking a few breaths to calm his heaving chest. The second guard followed him, not bothering to take down his own helmet.

“I was,” the dark-haired man uttered with a shaky nod, “but I have news for General Tullius.”

“You know the General doesn’t wish to be…”

“Oh, he’ll wish to see this,” the man waved his hand. He glanced back to the archway as if expecting someone to chase after him. “There’s been… an attack on one of our supply ships. They took down the whole crew. Not a single man left alive, security included. The docks are upside down.”

The two guards by the door suddenly snapped to attention. “Divines preserve us. Which ship was it?”

“The Wintebreath. Didn’t know the Stormcloaks used mages to do their dirty work.” He spat on the ground in a gesture of distaste.

Singird felt all color leave his face. The Winterbreath… and a magical killer. This was his doing. Not only had he killed people on his way to Solitude, now people were dying for just talking to him. Whoever was after him, they were desperate to find him. Desperate enough to involve the Legion. Or perhaps this served in their favor. Perhaps this was their power play, a game to show him how far they could go. And if this was related to Yrith…

He clenched his fists, forcing his knees to stand firm. He could not let the moment pass. Not now.

He took a breath.

“Please,” he said, painfully aware of how unnaturally raspy his voice sounded, “take me with you to General Tullius. I know of this incident. I was on that ship last night.”

All four guards raised their brows, suggesting silently to take the joke elsewhere. Singird fought not to look away. This would be a long day.
“Indeed, and I was bedding Jarl Elisif last night. So please, give regards to my wife for me.”

Singird stared at the gatekeeper before him. Droopy eyes watched him from under the Imperial helmet, contemptuous smirk playing on his lips. Boredom was written all over his face as he leaned lazily to the wall behind him. The recent news did not seem to tear him out of his state of lethargy. Singird sighed. Of course it would not be that easy, even if consequences played in his favor. But he was not just any local jester to be driven off that easily.

“I have things to share with the General.”

“Well, whaddya know,” the other guard snorted, picking his nose as if it was a part of the local bon ton. “Another youngling craving attention.”

Patience, Singird told himself as he forced his eyes to stay on the guards, suppressing a twitch in his mouth at the sight. They are enjoying the distraction. “Please, at least hear me out.”

“Sure, what is it? Have you lost your mommy?”

“I can…”

“Stop. All of you.” Everyone turned to the man previously addressed as Tirrus as he raised his hand. The guards snapped to attention instinctively. Singird knew instantly that this man held a higher position within the Legion. He carried himself with pride and authority, like a lion watching his coalition. “If this young man claims to know something about the Winterbreath incident, we have to give him a hearing. The situation is dire. We lost at least two dozen of men. I will go speak to the General. You, sir, please be so kind as to wait here. I will get back to you shortly.”

Singird felt a wave of gratitude toward the man. He hinted a curtsy, watching him vanish in the depths of the castle. The three remaining guards exchanged sour looks, muttering something under their breaths. Singird felt hot in the cheeks just by hearing the words they spouted. He turned away, scanning the perimeter.

There was nothing to truly admire about Castle Dour. The sturdy stone walls had been built with protection in mind, lacking in beauty and color. The central plaza held no trees or plants, no doubt to eliminate the possibility of fire spreading from the fire ring in its middle. Training dummies were lined along the wall opposite to the main castle entrance, their skin of linen torn, revealing tufts of hay. The area around them swarmed with trainees assaulting them as if they were facing their mortal enemies, the only source of entertainment for the local guards. One swing of the sword after another, day by day, they would stand here, watching the same play and wondering when the war would come to them. Singird scowled to himself. He did not envy these men. But neither did he wish to be the harbinger of death just for the sake of distraction, as he now was.

“Come with me, sir. The General will see you now.”

Singird turned back to see Tirrus’s head pop out of the door. The gatekeepers watched him intently, and he could almost taste their jealousy as he followed his guide inside. Cold gripped him as he entered the main corridor, dark, the only light coming in through the doors of the adjacent rooms. It led them to a room with a long table in its middle, covered almost entirely by a map. Tiny flags were jabbed into it at different places, some red and some blue. Over the map stood a man in red-gold armor, propped against the table on his steel-hard muscular arms. When Tirrus and Singird entered
the room, he raised his head. Hazel eyes watched Singird from a scarred face, hard as iron and rough as the Skyrim winter. They slowly slid from his boots to his silver robe, freezing momentarily at the moon-shaped amulet around his neck. Then they found Singird’s eyes, focusing on them keenly. Singird fought not to avert his gaze.

“I have brought him, General. This is…”

“Larkwing,” the General breathed before Singird could utter a word, standing to full height. “The junior. I should have known.”

Tirrus stared at Singird, taking a step back as though he was expecting Singird to bite him. “He is?”

“The pleasure is mine, General,” Singird said, bowing to show proper etiquette. Tullius gave a mirthless smile. Shadows danced on his face in the light of a candle, making his scars seem like gaping jaws. Singird had the feeling that if he tried punching that face, his fist would break into a thousand shards. Never in his life had he felt so small.

“Well well. You look like your father, you act your father… and I reckon you even have the same bloody sense of honor.”

“Like every Nord out there, sir.”

“Indeed.” Tullius circled the table. Singird could notice a slight, almost imperceptible limp in his step, likely remnants of an old injury. The man stopped inches from him, studying him closely. He smelled of steel and fire, of the war that he waged. Singird stood with his feet frozen to the ground, too afraid to step back. “I did not like that man. Of all people, he was the one to always remind me of my limits.”

The words were spoken with strange affection, ice-cold on the surface, yet with a hint of warmth on the inside. Singird would have liked to know more, to spend the whole day listening to stories about the parents of whom he did not know nearly enough. But he had a purpose, and this was a test of his own will.

“I am not my father, General,” he said quietly. “And I come with news. And… a plea.”

“If it is the same thing your late father asked for, then the answer is still no. Tirrus.”

“Yes, sir?” The man straightened at the sound of his voice.

“We are leaving for the ship.”

Singird stared at him in unconcealed astonishment. Was this a test? Or was he being rejected before he could even state his purpose?

“General…”

“You don’t mind waiting for me here while I look into this… predicament, do you, young Larkwing?”

General Tullius did not even wait for a word from Singird. He limped into the corridor, waving at Tirrus to follow him. The latter gave Singird a quick bow before excusing himself. Singird heard a low chatter until the door shut behind them with a loud thud. For a while, he kept staring in their direction, waiting for the General to change his mind. But only silence followed, interrupted by nothing but the quiet crackling of the candles raised in the chandeliers around the room. Singird sighed.
Following the General’s footsteps, he made for the door. As he reached for the handle, a guard appeared from one of the neighboring rooms, lowering his head in respect.

“Sir,” he said, hiding his intent behind a mask of sheer politeness, “if you would not mind waiting for the General within the castle. He would see you upon his return.”

So he was being tested. And closely watched by someone who was no mere guard, judging by his choice of words. Very well. Why not play into the General’s hand when it was convenient?

He gave a nod. “I was, in fact, looking for you,” he said with an enigmatic smile. “Or, any person of interest. Could I ask for a cup of tea?”

“Certainly. I will have it brought to you right away. The reception room is to the right of the antechamber at the end of this corridor. Make yourself at home.”

“Thank you. I intend to do that.” It was exactly what Singird did not intend to do.

The tea did not make Singird happy. It was bitter and muddy, not unlike the one served by Phinis Gestor. Singird wondered if it had been made so to make him feel discomfort, or just because tea preparation did not fall into the scope of a soldier’s training. He waited in silence, looking out of the window as the sun rose higher to the azure skies. Time passed and somewhere out there, Yrith was waiting for him. He moved in his chair, hands clenching into fists in his lap, then loosening, then clenching again. The General had his priorities, he was aware. But it did not make him feel better. He could hear the voice in his head far too well in the silence, prodding, whispering, showing images he did not wish to see. He could not turn away from that face that cried tears of blood. It was carved into his mind, haunting him ever since he had seen the battlefield. What if he would not make it? What if he only found her corpse? Would he ever be able to forgive himself?

He felt his chest tighten. His hand rose to support it when he heard footsteps, soon followed by the General’s face in the doorway.

“I am honored to see our guest stay,” he said, but there was not a hint of respect in his voice. A woman followed him into the room, a sturdy warrior like none Singird had ever seen. She was not muscular or big in size, she was simply so hard on the look he immediately wished he would never have to fight her. Her eyes and the straight, firm posture with which she carried her heavy scaled armor spoke of great strength. Her hands were big and ready to grab the sword she was carrying at her side. Her copper hair flew freely about her head, but Singird could guess by its thinness how much of her life it had spent confined under a helmet. Tullius moved aside to make passage for her.

“This is Legate Rikke,” he said as he gestured toward her. “She was a good friend to your father. Today, she will be keeping us company.”

The Legate nodded, elegant in her step despite her armor. When she spoke, her voice was razor-sharp and hard like a diamond.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Master Larkwing. General Tullius says you come with news on The Winterbreath.”

Singird rose to meet her eyes. She spoke straight to the point, true to her warrior nature. Yet she was the only one here to call him a Master. He took a moment to size her up, but she remained the solid rock she was.

“I do,” he said cautiously.
“Then let us hear it.” Tullius nestled himself comfortably in one of the chairs. “The ship was plundered of all cargo. We lost more than just men.” He motioned to Legate Rikke to join him by the table, but she only shook her head, leaning her back against the wall, watchful like an eagle.

Singird frowned. Surely whoever attacked that ship had not come there for cargo. The General watched him intently, examining every muscle in Singird’s face. Singird stared back.

“But I suppose whoever did it, they wouldn’t have massacred the whole crew had they only come for the cargo, would they?” He sank to his chair, eyes still locked in the battle of wills with the General. Tullius let out a snort.

“That is what you ought to tell us. Tirrus said you claim to have been on that ship last night. What were you doing on a supply ship anyway?”

The voice of General Tullius was not kind. Despite the allegiance of Singird’s parents, he did not express the least bit of trust. In his mind, Singird went over every strategy he could use against him. Convincing him to save Yrith might not be as simple as he had thought. He looked into those hazel eyes, trying to read them, but they were dark as the deepest well, concealing every thought, every motive. The General put his hands behind his head, a gesture that clearly showed who was home here. Singird took a sip from his cup to gain himself time to think, suppressing a scowl at its muddy flavor.

“I needed quick transport to Solitude. I sought to avoid the swamps of Morthal and the Captain was willing to give me a lift. But I was followed. On the way to Dawnstar, I fought five mages, three of which I managed to take down.” Singird fell silent. It still sounded ridiculous. He, killing people. He did not feel guilt. But the burden of murder weighed on him nonetheless.

“Three out of five? All alone?”

“Not exactly. A cliff was involved. And likely Lady Luck as well.”

“He even fights like his father,” Legate Rikke remarked with a hint of smile on her lips. Just for a moment, the mask of stone melted into affection before her face hardened once more.

“That he does,” Tullius supposed, his voice quiet and thoughtful. “But that brings me to the question of his purpose. Your dealings are of no concern to me, Sir Larkwing, but if The Winterbreath’s crew was annihilated by the same person who follows you, then you have quite a powerful enemy. An enemy who is not afraid of wiping out an entire ship of Imperial cargo. This unsettles me.”

“And rightly so. I come to plead for the lives of three children the College of Winterhold has lost in the recent battle near Saarthal. Word has it that your men took them away.”

Tullius and Rikke exchanged silent looks. For just a split moment, Singird could swear he saw a shadow of worry in both of their faces, along with something else he could not name, but it passed as soon as it came. Tullius leaned over the table, lacing the fingers of both his hands together. He rested his chin on them, his gaze sharp and piercing. The test was over. Now it was an interrogation. Despite himself, Singird felt sweat surface on his forehead.

“Truly,” the General uttered quietly. “And just why would they do such a thing?”

The air felt heavy in Singird’s lungs, and the midday sun burned his skin through the window. How much could he reveal? Could he be sure that his words would not send Yrith straight to Oblivion? But even if he lied here, his deceit would be exposed eventually. How much did he know already? He would have at least known what had transpired in that battle, would he not?
“Perhaps,” he said, “because one of those children is the daughter of Selas Travi. But Selas Travi died in that battle. Unless there is some additional value to his daughter, I cannot assume their motives.”

The lull was longer this time, and now Singird was certain he saw surprise in the face of Legate Rikke. General Tullius sat still as a statue, but there was a glint of inner struggle in his eyes. Singird smiled to himself. At least there was something the elves had taught him. Humans could never surpass them in terms of hiding their emotions.

“His daughter, huh. How did they even happen to be there?”

“It seems Leyna Travi left the College in search of her father and took the other two along.”

Tullius gave a slow nod. “Say, Sir Larkwing. Your institution, the College of Winterhold… if memory serves me right, it has no political ties, correct?”

“Correct.”

The General fell back into his seat, but his raptor gaze did not change. “Let me just briefly sum up your situation. Some two years ago, the first magical murder occurred. It led to a chain of murders across all of Skyrim, all done by magic, all in the same manner. The jarls who, until then, supported this institution of knowledge greatly, ceased their donations and left it in a desperate situation. From there, the only option would be to ensure a stable income. And who else could provide that but the nobility? But the nobility, Sir Larkwing, is always partial and always has a motive. Even when it comes to sending their children to a gods’ forsaken school. Now, wouldn’t it be very convenient if some of them were kidnapped by the Imperial army? Here’s a target to point your finger at. Handy that. Just like a series of mysterious murders that were so clearly done by magic that even the most uneducated peasant would notice. One would say that a true mage would want to hide the method, would they not?”

“What are you implying, sir?”

“Now if I were to be like the rest of the local folk, I would accuse you of killing off an entire ship crew and raising a false charge against the Legion. Someone out there would benefit from this for sure. But that someone is a threat to the Legion as well. I will help you find your students, Sir Larkwing, but I need to hear everything. Including that tiny little bit that you keep avoiding at all costs.”

“You mean to tell me that it was not your men who took them?”

Tullius gave him a look that would freeze a fire atronach. “That is irrelevant.” To his side, Legate Rikke shifted her weight.

“General…”

“No, Rikke. I know what you want to say, and the answer is no.”

“But General, he deserves to know the truth.”

Singird raised his head to meet Rikke’s gaze. She could not hide the gentleness that crept into her hard face. What was this truth she was speaking about?

“Rikke, from now on you are only here for recording. You will not interfere with the discussion.”

“Duly noted, sir, but this could actually serve to our advantage.” The Legate stood proud, not afraid
to look the General straight in the eye from the height of her head. He scrutinized her from below, leaning into the backrest of his chair and letting out something between a sigh and a snort.

“No, it will not. It is your bloody Nord honor speaking from you, Legate. I ask you to get rid of it.”

“But Ranmar Larkwing…”

“Not another word, Legate.”

Singird followed the line between the two of them with his eyes, sensing but a tiny spark of conflict. There was trust between them, warm like the sunlight caressing the cold drops of morning dew. He was more than certain that General Tullius had a good reason for taking the Legate with him. Perhaps there was no conflict whatsoever. Perhaps he was still being tested after all. But he could not pass on this chance.

“Might I inquire what it is that I should know?” he said, his voice brimming with invitation. Tullius rubbed his chin, taking his time to reply.

“You may, and I will not answer. Not before you put in your share.”

“By which you mean…”?

Tullius let out a weary breath. “This discussion doesn’t lead anywhere. I can sense that you don’t trust me, Sir Larkwing. But you will have to if you plan to rely on my aid. There is more about this whole incident. Something that you are not telling me. Where were we? Yes, the students. So one of them is the daughter of Selas Travi. But as you said, Selas Travi is dead and that renders her useless. It would be more than simple to kill three children in a battle. But they were taken away instead. Alive, I presume. So… who are the other two?”

Over the course of the conversation, the General’s face had barely changed. Singird now understood how he had claimed his position. He was perceptive, shrewd, merciless. The perfect combination that would get him anywhere he wanted. And he knew exactly what sort of tone to adopt when he spoke to a Larkwing. Singird felt cornered. Surely he could trust the General. So why was it suddenly so immensely difficult to give Yrith away?

“A Dunmer boy from Morrowind named Cain Aldaryn and a girl from Winterhold who is not of noble birth.”

“Aldaryn. I’ve heard that name before.”

“The Aldaryns had a say in the Elder Council before it was compromised at the beginning of the fourth era,” Legate Rikke said. She smiled lightly at Tullius’s knit brows, challenging him with her disobedience. “But I only know that from the chronicles. There are no records of their current activities. At least not in our archive.”

“I see. Then it does not help much. I am afraid, Sir Larkwing, that the information you have provided is not sufficient.”

“How is it not sufficient?” Singird asked quietly, fighting the urge to clench his fists. “I have told you what I know. If you can’t save our students, then tell me so and I shall leave.”

“I may have a way, and true, what you say may just be enough to send out scouts and find your lost students. However, think of this as a bargain. This costs me resources that I am not willing to sacrifice unless the Legion gains from it. Do not let your father’s heritage appease you, Sir Larkwing. I hold his memory in high regard, but in this world, we all need to tread our own path. You stand
before me as yourself, not as your father. I owe you nothing. So either we find common ground, or we each go our way. The choice is yours.”

Singird stood up, lowering his head but refraining from bowing entirely. Who was this man to talk to him like that? How could he ever rely on him? How could he let Yrith rely on him? Would he not lift a finger for anyone if it was not in the favor of the Legion?

“And here I thought the Legion served the people of the Empire,” he said, venom dripping from his voice.

Tullius sighed and opened his mouth to speak. But before he could utter a word, a knock came on the door, and all three, the General, the Legate, and the Master, turned their gazes after the sound.

“Come in,” Tullius said.

The door revealed a helmetless freckled man, Nord by the looks of it. He entered the room and bowed to the General, oblivious to Singird and Rikke. “Falk Firebeard wants to see you, sir.”

“Tell him I’ll be right there.” Tullius rose to his feet, turning to Singird. “My time is scarce, Sir Larkwing. Come see me again tomorrow morning. Think upon my words. I believe there are things we have yet to discuss. Legate, please see young Sir Larkwing to the door.”

With that, the General took off, leaving the two of them to their thoughts. Rikke watched his shadow disappear in the anteChamber, struggle painting wrinkles on her face.

“Do not think badly of General Tullius,” she said. “He stands before a difficult choice, and these times do not permit to trust easily.”

“Then he should have said so.”

Rikke chuckled quietly. “But he did, did he not? You are fortunate, Master Larkwing. Most don’t get to hear what the General really thinks.” She trod to the anteChamber, motioning for Singird to follow. “In fact, most don’t get to talk to him at all.”

They left the room. Singird did not regret not finishing his tea. He had left it there as a sign of his host’s inhospitality. Legate Rikke led him straight to the entrance, bowing slightly as she placed her hand on the door handle.

“I suppose we will see each other again. Now to go record everything as it must be.” She sighed, glancing over her shoulder. Then her voice dropped to an almost inaudible whisper. “I am not good with papers like your father was. The archive is such a dreary place. The whole third floor is. I think the soldiers hate it too. No wonder the night shifts ditch it for a drink in the Skeever. All except Tirrus, but he’s been busy in the docks lately.” She gave a cryptic smile, opening the door for him. “Good day, Master Larkwing.”

And she was gone.

Singird gazed into the dark of the corridor as the door shut behind her, mindless of the two guards that stared at him from his sides, not bothering to contain their yawns and snorts. He had never imagined Rikke being that garrulous. Perhaps it was her affection to Singird’s parents. Or perhaps, Singird thought as he walked away, it was something entirely different.

He stopped a few paces from the archway connecting the plaza with the main street, turning back to the castle. His eyes slid over its sturdy walls, up to the third level of windows. To his delight, the fortification wall reached straight up to it. Even from here he could spot several stairways leading up
He smiled inwardly. He would make sure to thank the Legate properly when he had the chance.

The Winking Skeever was surprisingly quiet during the day. Singird used the chance to make up for lost sleep from the night that had kept him awake. As he lay in his rented bed, smelling of furs and feathers, the whispers from downstairs made his eyes heavy like a quiet lullaby. The breeze sang gently through the open window, shrouding him in darkness. For a moment, there was absolute silence. Then, he emerged from it, his soul ripped off from his chest. The wind carried him through the clouds, far above, until it ceased to blow. Singird was falling, down into the depths, cold air freezing his soul, until he was caught again, rising and sinking with every flap of the giant wings.

His carrier was a giant gold eagle, gliding on the currents of the wind with absolute ease. It carried him far across the mountain ridges, presenting to him the vast land of snow and tundra grasses. But far in the distance, dark plumes were rising to the skies. Singird heard cries, both brave and terrified, and as they approached, men fell under him like a house of cards, staining the land in red. Heavy stench scorched his nostrils, and the air grew dark. Further along, a city fell to dust under the blazing flames of Oblivion. Men and women and children, all cried, all wept for their lost hope.

Singird was dropped to walk on his own, to feel the fire burn his cheeks. The world was crumbling around him, but still, people rose and fought, only to fall again, lost in an endless circle of despair. Their wounds contorted and decayed, but even then, they would not find their peace, as though an invisible force lifted them on their feet, freeing them of their sanity. He trod slowly through the dying land, finding a solitary mound. A statue had been raised there, its head laying in its feet. And just before it knelt a woman, deep in prayer.

There was laughter, first quiet, then it gained on strength. A demon emerged from the flames, and as Singird looked at him, he froze in horror. The demon had no face. Only darkness gaped at him, deep and empty. The beast loomed above the woman, crooked talons rising to sink into her. She turned a desperate gaze to Singird and he felt his heart stop. Silver eyes stared at him, pleading, glistening with silent tears.

He ran to her, breathless, mindless of the heat and the gusts of wind that whipped his arms and singed his face. As the demon plunged itself into attack, he pushed her away, taking her place. The woman cried, reaching out her hands. Singird gasped as the claws tore his soul apart, bit by bit, and the blue of his magic mingled with the red of his blood. Pain, pain was everywhere. He could not cry out, his breath had been stolen. Everything blurred and faded. Everything but her cries. Then he looked above at the beast that was leaning over him, tasting his flesh, and the sight made him forget the pain. The demon wore his own face.

Singird sat up with a gasp, eyes snapping open at once. Breathing heavily, he took a while to just sit there, let the tension flow away on the rays of moonlight passing through the open window. Thuds and cries carried from the outer corridors of the inn, speaking of guests in high spirits, perhaps the liquid ones too. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, exhaustion weighing on him almost as much as before he had laid himself to sleep. Gathering all his willpower, he forced himself on his feet, draping a woolen cloak over his shoulders.

Tossing a few coins to the bartender for his second night, he passed through the inn as casually as he could, entering the cold night. Two drunk soldiers almost collided with him, voices rising in a very off-key version of The Age of Aggression which would surely make any bard from the local college pale with distaste. Singird picked up his pace, not eager to listen to whatever they yelled after him. As he neared the archway to the training grounds, he scanned his surroundings. Not a soul around,
or so it seemed. He confirmed with a few inconspicuous detection spells before making himself properly muffled and invisible. In the pale light of the moons, he was nearly undetectable without magic.

On his way up to the fortification wall, he avoided a guard, lazily waving a torch to pretend caution. There was another one just before the entrance to the third floor, but fortunately, he was pacing back and forth over the wall, eyes fixed mostly on the possible entrances. Naturally, no one expected an invisible intruder. Singird pressed himself to the door and waited, following the guard’s trail with his eyes until he was far enough to not hear the door open. And just when the guard gazed down into the distance, he slipped quietly inside the castle, finding himself in an unlit corridor. He cursed under his breath. Night eye was a spell he had never mastered.

He checked with detect life again to find the closest person a floor lower. Legate Rikke was right. The guards truly did not enjoy staying here. As his frame materialized out of the thin air, he pulled his moon-shaped necklace from under his robes, watching its typical turquoise glow. It helped little with the surrounding darkness, but at least Singird now knew where he was placing his steps. He checked one room after another, treading lightly on the planked floor, confirming from time to time that he had no company. On his way, he discovered a deserted dormitory, a dining room, a small armory and something he would call an indoor garden with various plants and fungi lining the walls if his eyes did not deceive him. At last, at the very end of the corridor, he finally opened a vast room that welcomed him with the heavy scent of dust and paper. After one last check, he dared light it with magic, staring at lines of shelves, bookcases, and a few desks at the center of the room, all buried under piles of books, scrolls, and various documents. Everything was covered in dust, from the floor and lacquered red wood to the last inch of paper.

Singird knit his brows. What blasphemy to treat books this way.

Containing the urge to sweep the dust away, he followed the only pair of footprints in it to a remote half-empty shelf filled with various volumes tied in a very disorderly manner. Singird frowned at the pages, creased and overlapping at their ends, before he took one that stuck out from the line. *Markarth Incident Report*, the title said, scribbled likely in haste. The document summarized Ulfric Stormcloak’s raid on Markarth, how he had overthrown the rule of the Reachmen and killed every single of their supporters. Singird held a hand to his mouth as his eyes scanned over the list of atrocities that had taken place there, the torment of women and children alike. It had been proven that at least half of those rumors and testimonies were false, but that did not justify the other half. Ulfric was certainly not the people’s jarl. He was ruthless and stopped at nothing to have his own way.

With a sigh, he put the report away. This would not help him.

He took another volume. *East Empire Company: Clearance, 4E 203 Sun’s Dawn*. Of course the East Empire Company prospered the further the war dragged on, even if they tried to claim otherwise. The Legion needed supplies and there were always citizens to extort from. He returned the book to its place with a snort, not bothering to open it.

One after one he went through the volumes and scrolls, finding various reports from battles, secret or not so secret letters, dossiers, lists, memoirs, and some old battle plans and strategies. But there was no mention of any battle near Winterhold, nor could he find a file on Selas Travi. After a while of fruitless searching, Singird shifted his weight nervously, taking a glance at the door. Quietly as he could, he cast a detection spell, but he was still the only person on the entire floor. He took a breath and returned to the texts, invisibility spell at the ready lest someone try to enter the room.

He frowned. The reports he was now browsing were more than a year old. He had doubts he would find anything useful there, but he refused to give up. There had to be a reason why Legate Rikke had
pointed him here. Unless she wanted to drive him into a corner. He shook his head, refusing to consider it an option. His hand fumbled almost automatically for the next book. Opening it, he stared at the title, expecting another accounting book or some ancient battle report. But as his eyes found the name under it, he froze.

Case F Suspects
Reporter: Ranmar Larkwing
4E 202, 16th Second Seed

The document contained a list of names and a letter. As Singird opened it, he recognized his father’s thin neatly aligned script, not unlike his own.

Dear General,

Upon the request of Legate Rikke, I am sending you the list of the Case F suspects. These names have been gathered after a thorough investigation. The list is likely incomplete but even I am not foolish enough to accuse people based on groundless assumptions. You can find my notes on each of them at the end of this document with references to the recent events. I have placed citations from several reports in the text. All of them can be found in section F in the old archive.

Despite all this, I ask that you treat these people fairly. They have been deceived and completely unaware of their own circumstances. On my next visit to Solitude, I would like to schedule a meeting with you regarding the source of this deceit. I dare not speak of this openly as the knowledge could fall into the wrong hands. I strongly advise you to consider the suggestion I gave you on our last meeting. Please, do not overlook this matter. I believe we share the same interest.

Yours,
R. Larkwing

Singird stared at the document, unmoving, lost in thought. So his father had found something. If the feeling that his death was no coincidence had been a mere hunch before, now he was certain. His father had made a discovery for which he had been willing to break his neutrality. Just what could it have been?

He sifted through the attached reports on various people, most describing their actions and strategies in battles and political dealings. At the bottom of the very last one, he could see a scribbled note.

Castle Dour: Section F, Intelligence Division, Part III.

He looked over the room, eyes sliding over the old, dusty furniture. In the other half of the room, several bookcases were marked by letters and numbers engraved in silver plates attached to them here and there. At least something in this place had the proper order. Section F was uncomfortably low, and he had to squat down to reach it. It took him several blind picks before he found the first document of the Intelligence Division, Part III. It was a thick dossier titled The False Imperial Army. He opened it at the first page.

4E 202, 30th Sun’s Dawn: Reports from our scouts and generals repeatedly mention smaller battles and skirmishes that take place in various parts of Tamriel. Lately, there have been many occurrences of these in the province of Skyrim and its borderlands. Specifically in Skyrim, the clashes seem to involve the Stormcloaks and the Imperial Legion, rarely any other party. However, the Generals unanimously deny that they or any of their men have ever taken part in the battles. Many of them seem orchestrated to put the Legion in a bad light and stir hatred within the locals whose families, crops and cattle get decimated.

The term False Imperial Army has become very popular amongst the legionnaires for those who
fight falsely in the name of the Legion. However, as these people wear genuine Imperial armor, walk under the Imperial Dragon standard and even know some of the Legion’s strategies, it is strongly believed that they are in fact part of the Legion, traitors who act in favor of the Stormcloaks. The Legion also suspects that they may be a part of a cult as many of them walk into battle knowing that they are not going to return.

These units must be suppressed. They pose a threat to the Imperial campaign and support distrust amongst the people of Skyrim. The White-Gold Tower has sent the Legion to end the terror that has been started by Ulfric Stormcloak. Any obstacle to that must be eliminated at once.

The following pages contain a list of the documented incidents, their reporters and known names of their victims. Any future records will be added to the collection upon their delivery.

Singird felt his hands tremble as he stared at the text before him. Fake battles? False army? Whoever was behind this must have had some unbelievable resources at their disposal. Not to mention their authority. But if that was the case, then who could have taken Yrith? Did General Tullius have any chance of finding her at all? Perhaps the General had not known about the battle or Selas Travi before Singird’s arrival. That would explain the surprise in the face of Legate Rikke. Singird commended the two of them inwardly for the excellent act.

He suppressed the need to sink down on the closest chair and bury his head in his hands. He had to search on, find anything that would lead him to her. What had the captain of The Winterbreath said about his father? That he had stopped some battles from happening?

*I strongly advise you to consider the suggestion I gave you on our last meeting…*

That was what he had written in his letter. Now he could see the meaning behind the words of General Tullius.

“If it is the same thing your late father asked for, then the answer is still no.”

Of course. The only logical suggestion in this situation would be for the Legion to officially withdraw from the war. And naturally, General Tullius would not have a word of it. The false army was harming the Legion while a withdrawal would mean clearing the entire field. Who would gain from it? The Stormcloaks? But they hardly had the resources to lead their own campaign, much less form an entire new army, even if from the ranks of the Legion itself. It would require months, or even years of planning, absolute precision and the undying trust of many a Legionnaire. Ulfric could hardly afford it. Unless...

Singird frowned. Unless he had an ally that would grant him the power to do so. What a powerful ally it must have been. And Singird could only think of one that fit into the picture.

But then Toddvar must have known. If the False Imperial Army had anything to do with the Stormcloaks, then why would he allow them to abduct Yrith? Good old Toddvar, a friend of his for years, friend to his parents and friend to…

Singird froze, hands still clutching the book. The light of his magic died out, leaving him in darkness disrupted only by the faint moonlight coming into the archive through the draped window. “Damn it,” he breathed to himself, for once not bothered by his choice of words. “The ignorant fool I have been!”

He recalled Yrith’s words from the morning after the avalanche.

*“Even I can recognize the sound of a walking mountain clad in steel when I hear its footsteps.”*
But Toddvar? He was not a mage. Or was he? But then how could Drevis Neloren had controlled his mind so easily? Unless he only thought he did, which would be entirely possible for someone who had managed to set Yrith’s atronach against her parents.

Singird thrust the book frantically back to its place on the shelf, lighting another spark to help him find his way to the section on the Stormcloaks. One after another he picked up lists of names, searching until he found him.


Below was a rather superficial biography along with a list of tactics and weapons Toddvar liked to use. Singird scanned the text, searching for more. Attitude, diplomatic skills, no, no, that was not what he was looking for. How could he even have made it to the Legion, not to mention the Stormcloaks, when his origin was unknown? If there was just one hint, one single clue that would point him in the right direction…

The door slammed open. Singird winced, frozen as he stood face to face with an armored man gripping a torch. The man gave him a triumphant smirk, spending a moment to size Singird up before he entered and sidestepped to make way for the person behind him. Face lit with the flickering flame of a candle he was holding, General Tullius stepped inside. He gave Singird a long, pensive look, finally letting out a sigh.

“So the guards were right. We really had a visitor. To welcome the same guest twice already, to what do we owe the honor?”

His voice was smooth and calm, as though he was only engaging in a weather talk. Singird lay down the book he had been holding, raising his hands in a gesture of resignation. “I missed the place,” he said just for the effect.

“I am pleased our castle brings you such comfort,” Tullius replied in the same manner of affectedness. Then he turned to the man at his side. “Is Rikke here yet?”

Just as the man finished his sentence, footsteps from the outside announced the arrival of the said Legate. She walked into the room with her head down, eyes devoid of any question or sign of resistance. She stopped just before the General, her voice quiet as she spoke.

“You wanted to see me, General.”

“That I did. Gallin, leave us alone.”

“The man bowed, backing away from the room almost reverently. Then he shut the door behind himself. Tullius waited before the sound of his footsteps faded away in the distance. Then his eyes found Legate Rikke and his face was one of a father scolding his favorite child after a great disappointment.

“What is the meaning of this, Rikke?”

The Legate raised her head to look him in the eye. Her reply was low and even, the kind that spoke of clear conscience and just intentions. “General… he has the right to know. His parents…”

“For the hundredth time, Rikke, he is not his parents. Obviously, they were decent enough to not
even talk to their own son about the Legion matters. And now you’re breaking their pact of loyalty! This could be classified as treason. And you know the price for it.”

The Legate’s look hardened as she straightened to full height. She was smaller than Tullius, staring up at him with glistening eyes, face steel-hard with determination. For a moment, she did not say anything. The two of them stood there, looking at each other, and Singird could only guess their clashing thoughts. Then she spoke in the same unyielding tone as before.

“If I never took any risks, General, I would not be standing here before you. I did what I think is right. I am more than prepared to bear with the consequences. After all, we are in a war. I have been killing my own people for several years now, just to do the right thing.”

“Rikke, you…” the General rubbed his temples, clearly at a loss for words. “Why are you doing this to me? After all this time…”

“We are still serving the people, General,” she added softly.

Singird looked at Rikke with more than appreciation. As she stood there, firm in her conviction, strong, yet delicate and true to herself, he saw a different face. Before him stood Yrith, with her silver eyes gazing up at the General, unyielding even if it took all of her courage. The Yrith who would always fight for the right thing at the risk of losing everything. The Yrith who more than once had chosen the way of her heart before reason, standing strong, yet so vulnerable. A beautiful person with a beautiful heart. He felt his chest tighten. She was waiting for him somewhere out there. She would endure, fight till the very end, never give up no matter how much it hurt. But unlike Rikke, she was fragile… and she could not kill to survive.

In his head, Singird went over the last day, replaying every bit of conversation, every thought he had, rereading the lines that had turned his whole world upside down. Things that had been unclear, things that had confused him or even irked him, they now made perfect sense to him. He stepped forward, clearing his throat to gain the attention of the General and the Legate.

“General Tullius… please, hear me out.”

Tullius sighed, running a hand through his thinned grey hair. “I am listening, but know I am doing you a great favor.”

“And I am grateful,” Singird bowed slightly. “I was reluctant when I first saw you. Just like you, I was not sure where to put my trust. But Legate Rikke helped me understand. Reading some of the local records, I know now where my father stood. And I know where I will stand. I think we could help each other. I will tell you everything I know.”

For just a brief moment, Singird could swear he saw a smile flash over the General’s lips.

“Then let us hear it.”

The tea was warm, a gentle plume of steam rising from it. Singird could notice an apparent increase in quality. This was a Tamriel classic, mountain flowers with dragon’s tongue, and its typical lightly sweet taste sent warmth into his whole body. He sat across General Tullius and Legate Rikke in a small circular room with windows from all sides. The view of the whole Solitude with its elegant spires and timbered gables was breathtaking even in the pale moonlight. Singird could imagine himself spending long hours just gazing into the distance, past the great buildings, to the glistening sea.

But now his attention was on General Tullius who shifted in his seat, resting his chin on his laced
fingers.

“Ravencroft,” he mused. “I’ve heard that name before.”

“You have?”

“Not too long ago, actually. A Redguard boy came to visit us about two weeks ago. And he…”

“Redguard? Was his name Qassir Tahlrah by any chance?” Singird felt his hands clench in his lap. The memory of his last encounter with the audacious boy was still vivid in his memory. He burned with rage just remembering that smooth, confident voice.

“Why yes, it was indeed. So you are acquainted?”

“I am.” He could not stop the sting of ice from creeping into his voice. It seemed to amuse Legate Rikke who chuckled softly as she bent down to fiddle with something down by her feet. Both Singird and General Tullius regarded her with raised brows. When she finally emerged from under the table, she was holding a small scroll, extending her hand to pass it to Singird.

“Then I think you should take this.”

The hand of General Tullius shot up to stop her. “What is this and why do I have no knowledge of it?”

“The boy gave this to me before his departure,” she gave a light shrug. “He told me to give it to the right person. ‘You will know when they appear,’ he said. Now I believe he meant Master Larkwing here. As for what it is… I have no idea. I tried to break the seal,” she gave an apologetic smile, “but no matter what I did, it would not open. Not even the paper would tear apart. Maybe it can only be opened with magic.”

“You people and your magic,” Tullius shook his head. “Very well. Go ahead, Sir Larkwing.”

Singird’s mouth twitched. “You only said that so you could have a peek.”

“Am I that readable?”

“Quite so.”

“You’re the same damn bastard as Ranmar Larkwing was. Go on and open that thing.”

“I hope you did not pull it out of your boot, Legate,” Singird said as he reached for the scroll.

Rikke gave a nonchalant shrug. “I stored it in my dagger scabbard. But if I knew I would be handing it to a Larkwing, I would surely have hidden it close to my sweaty feet.”

Singird took the scroll with a wry smile, inspecting the seal as he let the flickering candlelight fall on it. It looked like a simple wax seal, easy to break, but then Singird noticed its details and froze. The image on it depicted a flask standing on a maple leaf, bearing three letters: AWA.

“What a coincidence,” he muttered to himself sardonically, ignoring the curious looks of his hosts. Just to make sure, he pressed a finger on the seal. Not even the smallest crack appeared on it. He sighed, assaulting it with a thread of magicka. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, a thin line of text appeared on the outer side of the paper, and Singird recognized the lavish handwriting of his Redguard student.

*I reveal myself when the light of the moon that walks the righteous path touches me.*
He frowned. “What kind of riddle is this?”

“What have you found?”

He handed the scroll back to the Legate. She looked at it with knitted brows, stroking her chin deep in thought. “I guess it wouldn’t help to try opening it by the window,” she mused. Tullius leaned to her to glance over her shoulder, letting out a snort.

“I wouldn’t be surprised.”

Doubtful, Singird took the scroll to the window and let the moonlight fall upon the seal just to appease them. Again, he tried to break it with both his fingers and magic, but to no avail. It stayed hard as stone, ridiculing him in the way of its creator. He let out a breath, imagining the face of Qassir Tahlrah. What method would the Redguard use to hide what was only meant for a certain person?

“He told me to give it to the right person.”

And if the person was him…

He gave a smile. The answer was surprisingly easy. The AWA surely must have tracked the location of all sorts of magical artifacts. And one of them happened to be his family heirloom.

He took his moon-shaped amulet, sliding a tip of it over the seal as though he wanted to cut it. The fake wax sizzled and dispersed into fine dust, sinking down onto Singird’s robe in a gentle shower. He frowned, almost certain that the Redguard had done this on purpose. As he unrolled the scroll, his eyes found an eagle with wings raised high to the skies, the symbol of the Aldmeri Dominion, the one that adorned every gilded helmet of the elven craftsmanship. The paper creased under the clutch of his hands as he scanned it.

Thalmor Dossier: Toddvar Ansgarsson

Status: Asset, Active, Acting upon the Appointment of the Great Regent
Description: Supreme Commander of the Thalmor Forces, General of the Stormcloak Rebellion, Imperial Legion veteran

Toddvar made the first contact with the Aldmeri Dominion ten years prior to the First War against the Empire, in 4E 161. Ever since then, he has been a valuable asset in planting the seed of distrust amongst the non-elven races of Tamriel. Despite him being a Nord, he showed unprecedented devotion to the elven deities and authorities and exceptional skill in the arcane arts, but also surprisingly vast knowledge of our own tradition. His continuous reports play a major part in developing our strategies. One of his most commemorated feats was bringing Ulfric Stormcloak to us and establishing a long-lasting connection to the Stormcloak Rebellion of Skyrim. Atop of that, he remains influential among the Imperial ranks, granting us nigh absolute control over the Tamrielic lands.

Operational Notes: Direct contact should be avoided, if possible, to ensure the confidentiality of his actions. Toddvar is to maintain balance between the forces of Tamriel at all costs. To all those standing outside, he is an enemy of the Dominion and should be treated as such as long as his influence and our dominance is not harmed. However, as his true motive remains to be unknown, should he display any sign of disloyalty, he is to be disposed of with immediate effect.

Singird felt the time stop as his eyes reached the end of the document. Every expression he had ever seen on Toddvar’s face, every joke that came out of his mouth, perhaps even his partiality for mead, all of them were a lie, a guise to deceive the eyes of everyone around him. But why would he do it?
Why would he target his parents and the Ravencrofts?

If he contacted the Dominion in year 161, then he had been serving them for over forty winters. Singird stared at the paper, rereading the text over and over again in disbelief. Even if he looked like a seasoned warrior, there was no way he was that old. Who was he? Who in Oblivion was he?

He felt rage rising in him, filling him with hatred that he had never felt before. He had trusted him. Yrith had trusted him. How many times must she have turned to him with a smile on her lips, unaware of all the atrocities he had done? He wanted more than to just save her. He wanted justice. He wanted to kill. To rip his soul apart like Toddvar himself had done so many times before, so that he would never rise again.

“Sir Larkwing?”

He raised his head to look at the questioning face of General Tullius. Legate Rikke held a hand over his shoulder, likely after a long while of demanding attention from Singird.

“General,” Singird said, trying to suppress the rasp in his voice, “I think you should see this.”

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