"I am Dragonborn, and I will defend your people whether they like it or not."

Dunmer are everything Nords are not. So, when one becomes Dragonborn, he will ignite a storm across Skyrim, the Empire, and beyond.

Expands on Skyrim. Fleshed out characters, content from earlier games and apocrypha, alternate choices and intelligent consequences for actions.

WARNING: Contains mature content, limited to but not including sexual themes, violence, and in-depth examinations of lore.

Comments welcome. Please note grammar or spelling errors, and I shall correct them.
Chapter Summary

The beginnings of a legend. Leaving Helgen, and the first steps in a new land.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Doom…doom-DOOM… doom-DOOM…doom-DOOM…doom-DOOM…

Part 1

Outlander

"The music of the Divines is the material of creation, from which is spun the Aurbis of all that we can comprehend. The Dwemer managed to manipulate a shard of their own tuning into the music, and with it created the unknowable craft they called Tonal Architecture. The Ansei of the Ra Gada sung swords into being that could shatter the earth itself. And, perhaps most famously, the Nords harnessed the Thu'um, and shouted their own voices into the music, reshaping reality with naught but their tongues. The music of the Divines is their message to the world."

-Kurmuk of the Imga, Enlightened Baron of Broken Falls, Introduction to Warp and Weave of the Wheel

"Anyone who tries to tell you how the Aurbis works is inevitably insane, lying, or a fool. Sometimes all three."

-Dealean Endermond, High Wizard Emeritus of the Northpoint College, Ramblings

Chapter 1 – Northbound

"My Thane, a question if I may."

"After all you have done, it is for a question that you want permission? Ask."

"Did you truly hate Skyrim so much when you first arrived?"

"Ha! You know, I did. But consider my position. Caught in a trap by the Empire, accused of being a Stormcloak of all things, and then only spared the block by a dragon attack. How would you feel if that were your introduction to a new land?"

"Fair enough, my Thane."

"And the land was infested with Nords, on top of that. Truly a deplorable scene."

"And you wonder why they were going to kill you."

The wind began in the land that was once called Elsweyr, born out of the desert badlands. It raced
north, ruffling the fur of the soldiers who patrolled the border with the Empire. Raj’haara had been
gazing south, towards the village from which she hailed, as the wind came upon her. She tasted the
flavors of home, sun and stone and bright sweet sugar, and then the wind was gone. She turned
back to the north with a sigh, and resumed her watch, lest the Empire break their fragile peace.

Sweeping into the heartland of Cyrodiil, the wind rippled the banners over the walls of the Imperial
City and pulled at the cloak of Titus Mede as he surveyed his city from high atop the White-Gold
Tower. The warm breeze led his mind to wander, but his thoughts soon returned to the many
challenges facing his Empire. Rebellion in Skyrim, the entire province of Morrowind beyond his
control, and of course the looming threat of the Thalmor and their Aldmeri Dominion. Below, his
Empire waited, and Tamriel waited with it. The wind left the old man there, deep in thought.

Ever northward raced the wind, until it left Cyrodiil behind, and entered Pale Pass. Now bitter cold
and howling bleak, it wrapped around ancient ruins and took from them the scents of long ages and
distant lands across the sea. The wind roared down the northern slopes, and towards a burning
town, where it lifted the wings of a great black dragon as it rose into the sky, its first battle in
untold ages over too soon. As the dragon roared away to the north, its wings propelled an eddy of
the wind downward, where it curled about the mouth of a cave, and the figures who stumbled out.
The final gift of this long-traveled breeze was spent on a ragged Dunmer, clothed in rags, in
bloodstained boots and a singed cape, with a sword on one hip and a bow slung across his back.

Shielding his eyes from the sudden light, Velandryn Savani, for a brief moment, felt a warm wind
upon him. It smelled of ash and ruin, of fire and blood. To be greeted with an ashen wind here, in
Skyrim, was something he had not expected. He shut his eyes and thought of the home that he was
growing increasingly unsure he would ever see again. All too soon, however, the wind died away,
and the maddening chill that seemed omnipresent in this wretched land returned. And with it, as
ever, came the Nords.

"Shor's bones! It truly was a dragon!" The Imperial Legionary was named Hadvar, if Velandryn
recalled correctly. He had been halfway decent to the Dunmer, which almost made up for his
ridiculous accent and blindingly obvious observations. Thus far, he had managed to notice giant
spiders, a locked gate, and a bear. The list of allies Velandryn had in this blighted land was short,
however, so he would just have to make do.

"You two, what do you know of this? Speak!" Ralof, by contrast, for all his bullheaded bravery,
seemed to have a certain shrewdness to him. He had reacted quickly when the dragon attacked, and
when the three of them had met up during the chaos, he had been willing to work with them to
navigate an escape. Now that they were free, however, Velandryn could not help but see the
Stormcloak colors the man wore and worry. Those who had followed the Jarl of Windhelm into
rebellion often shared his view on mer: that they were unwelcome in Skyrim, and should be
encouraged to leave by any means necessary. Although Ralof had not yet said anything overtly
hostile, he bore watching.

"Less than you, traitor, but I wager your Jarl is mighty happy it showed up." Hadvar, clearly, was
also less than enamored with Ralof's allegiance, and not even a dragon could mend that divide.

Ralof snorted. "As if we need a dragon to drive out the Empire. You and your masters will not hold
the Nords of Skyrim to your craven treaty!"

"Hah! We captured Ulfric once, we will do it again, and all you rebels will get the block like you
deserve!"

"You're dreaming, Hadvar. We are the Sons and Daughters of Skyrim, and already thousands are
marching beneath our banners. In every village and town, they raise glasses to the true High King. Ulfric Stormcloak is the champion not only of Talos and Skyrim, but of all mankind!"

Hadvar's angry retort was lost to Velandryn as he took stock of where they had emerged. Helgen was above and behind them, burning well by this point. They had emerged near the bottom of a cliff, the cave entrance half-hidden from the road below them by low brush and scattered rocks. Assuming they did not want to return to Helgen, the only other choice was downhill, into the valley. By the look of the sky, it was nearing midday, and, now that there was no immediate risk of death by Stormcloak, Imperial, or dragon, he realized he would soon need to find food and drink. The Imperials had given them bread and water on the wagons, but the last of that had been nearly a full day past.

Velandryn noticed the silence suddenly, and looked at the humans. They had ceased their bickering, and were watching him. Hadvar looked expectant, Ralof skeptical. No doubt they were expecting him to say something. Fitting, considering he had grabbed the two of them and argued them into submission when the idiots had tried to split up entering the keep.

"Well?" Ralof had clearly asked a question, but Velandryn had no clue what. He said as much, and Hadvar responded.

"We need to warn people that there is a dragon loose in Skyrim. We should go to Riverwood first. My uncle Alvor is the blacksmith there. He can give us food and gear. Will you come with us? This is not your land, but I don't know how many survived Helgen. We will need every voice to speak of the dragon. Even…"

"Even if it is an elf doing the speaking." Ralof, at least, did not beat around the point. "I am with you as far as Riverwood, but my sister Gerdur is the one we should speak to. She runs the town, and is a true friend to the Stormcloaks. Riverwood is a good distance from Helgen though, and it will be several days travel at best."

Velandryn considered for a moment, taking the chunk of bread the Imperial offered him from his pack and chewing thoughtfully. This Riverwood, even from the little he knew, sounded like his best option at the moment. These Nords were willing to work together for the present, and even if the situation deteriorated to fighting, their primary ire seemed to be each other. Plus, these two seemed to know the area passing well, and any bandits or beasts would think twice before attacking three where they may not hesitate to take on one alone.

Velandryn swallowed, wishing he had thought to grab something to drink during his flight through the keep. "Very well. I will travel with you as far as Riverwood to spread news of the dragon and use my story to corroborate your tale." And then I will be gone so swiftly you shall feel the wind as I pass. Stormcloaks, Imperials, dragons, none of it is my concern! Coming to Skyrim was a mistake, and the sooner I am gone, the happier I will be.

Dusk found the three survivors of Helgen strung out along the road to Riverwood. The legionary led the way, with the Dunmer just behind, eyes flitting to the rocks and trees that flanked the road. When a thrush took flight from a tree, Velandryn's left hand dipped to his waist, pulling an iron arrow from its quiver, while his right dropped the worn wooden bow from his shoulder. In one movement he brought the bow to bear, nocked the arrow, and let fly.

The shot missed the bird by nearly a foot. Wings beating, it pulled for the sky…only to drop as another arrow pierced it cleanly through the breast. Spinning, Velandryn saw Ralof grinning as he trudged past to retrieve his kill. "I thought elves were supposed to be archers of renown."
Velandryn twanged the string and tested the pull, as he had seen the archers at practice do so many times. I missed! By so much, too. And in front of Nords! He had to make this right. "Nordic craftsmanship, if I had to blame something. Shoddy wood and a poor cut, and I think this string might be rotten. A poor bow, fit only for kindling."

"As is mine. We took them from the same rack" Ralof's smile seemed to mock Velandryn, and his ears burned as he looked desperately into the darkening woods, searching in vain for something else to bring down. He was a Dunmer of Morrowind, and would not be shamed by a Nord. Closing his eyes, Velandryn inhaled deeply, and twisted the magicka within him, funneling it into his eyes. When he looked again, the trees were illuminated as though there were ten thousand lights about them, and shadows had all fled. Now, he could easily make out a rabbit crouched in what should have been a dark alcove within a boulder. He had more than enough time to line up a perfect shot.

As he retrieved his kill, he heard Hadvar come up to where he had been standing. "How did you make that shot? Are elven eyes able to see in blackness?"

Ralof snorted. "Magic, I would wager." He looked at Velandryn. "No?"

Velandryn nodded as he worked the arrow out. "Night-eye." The shaft was cracked, and the arrowhead had deformed on the bone. "The School of Illusion has many uses." He tossed the useless arrow away. "A sadly overlooked path of magic by many." Rabbit in hand, he started down the road once more. "A fire to eat beside and then camp for the night?"

Hadvar started the fire, flint and dagger quickly igniting the gathered kindling. The elf watched impassively.

"No doubt you would have liked to do the honors, elf?" Ralof did not like that look the elf had on his face. He recognized it. Superiority. This Dark Elf thought he was better than them, by virtue of his blood, or age, or one of the other ridiculous things elves loved to prattle on about.

"I could have. But so could he." Velandryn Savani inclined his head at the Imperial, and handed him the rabbit. "You have the knife, and I killed it, so you prepare the food."

Hadvar gave the Dark Elf a frown. "You did not grab a dagger at Helgen? They are useful to have on the road."

Ralof paid them only half a mind, cleaning the bird he had brought down. The two of them were well suited for each other. The Imperials would rather bow to the elves then stand up and fight, and the elves were convinced that men were uncivilized brutes. Ralof would prove his worth, without relying on the elf or his magic.

As they ate, and Hadvar and the elf talked in low voices, Ralof considered the events of the day. Jarl Ulfric had certainly escaped. He had a good solid core of men about him, even if Ralof had not been by his side. When last he saw his comrades, they were breaking for the gate that led to the Rift. That would get them back into Stormcloak territory, and Ulfric should be back at his palace in Windhelm within the month.

Soon enough, full dark had fallen, and the light from their fire had begun doing more to kill their vision than illuminate their surroundings. Hadvar banked the fire from the road, and brought a bottle of water over to Ralof, from which the Stormcloak took a measured pull. The last of the provisions from Helgen, it would have to do for the night. Fortunately, they should reach the White River tomorrow, and the forests at the foothills of the mountains were rich in game. They might be a bit hungry tonight, but they would not starve before Riverwood.
Ralof capped the bottle, and returned it to Hadvar. He may not have liked the other two overmuch, but they deserved a chance to drink. He stood and, stretching, grabbed his bow. "I have first watch, so get some sleep. Who should I wake for second?"

The elf grunted what could be taken as assent, and Hadvar volunteered for the third. So, as the two of them tried to get comfortable, Ralof busied himself finding a good place to hole up for the next several hours. Fortunately it was Last Seed, at the tail end of summer, so the night would be relatively short and warm. The embers of their cookfire would warm the sleepers, and Nords were hardy against the cold in any case. Briefly, Ralof wondered how the elf would fare through the night. Well, it was no concern of his. If the elf couldn't stand the cold, he should never have come to Skyrim.

Ralof's watch began quietly enough. He was well-situated on an outcropping of rock shadowed by a leaning tree, and commanded a view of the road in both directions. Anyone who saw their fire would be seen in turn. It was unlikely anyone would come, though. Those who were headed to Helgen overnights in Riverwood, lest they be caught on the road after dark. So Ralof relaxed, and allowed himself to think of his brothers and sisters who had fallen today. May The Hall of Valor ring with their songs tonight, and Shor's Table crack from the thunder of their cups.

It had been a hard thing, leaving his kin in the tunnels beneath the keep. Beaten and hungry from Imperial interrogation, they had nonetheless risen up and attacked their captors. When he called out to them to follow, they had ignored him, intent only on vengeance for their imprisonment. He had struck down one of the Imperial guards himself, but the Dark Elf had kept moving, and the Imperial had followed, rather than move to the aid of his fellows. Ralof could not do less, the mission had to come first. Ulfric himself had told him to leave by another path, and bring word to the Stormcloaks of what had transpired. If not for the need to escape and carry out that mission, he gladly would have stayed. He hoped some of those brave souls had made it out of the keep. And I hope those bastards who chained and tortured them are rotting in unhallowed squalor!

Overhead, something flew across the moons. Ralof started, panic rising in his throat. Then, another, and another. Small, fast, flitting. Bats. Just bats. He contented itself with the fact that if it had been the dragon, whether or not he noticed it would not make the slightest difference. If it saw them, and deigned to descend, they were dead. It got him wondering, where had the dragon come from? They had been extinct for thousands of years.

He worried that thought like a bone as the moons rose higher. Either a single dragon had been hiding, and emerged, or else a dragon had managed to come back somehow. And if there was one, there could be more. They had to be ready. The dragon had been heading north and west, towards Whiterun and Solitude. Suddenly, Ralof had a beautiful thought. Ulfric Stormcloak was free, the people of Skyrim would take heart from his escape, and Imperial holdings would have a dragon to contend with. Talos, Ysmir Dragonborn, thank you for sending the dragon to free your chosen king and to bring ruin to the foe. I bless your name and will fight on for you, God of Man.

The remainder of his watch was untroubled. Even in the dark, Talos could see his children, and he would not forsake them.

Velandryn Savani woke when the Stormcloak shook him, none too gently. His home melted away before his eyes, replaced with the dark rocks that sheltered them from the mountain winds.

"Your watch, elf."

Velandryn pulled himself from under the singed and ragged cloak he had wrapped himself in,
already regretting his decision to take the second turn of the night. If he had been thinking clearly, he would have fought for first or third. As he was now, he was burdened with both the memory of sleep and the reality of his fatigue. Add to that the blistering cold that the fire only barely kept at bay, and some part of the sullen mer considered telling Ralof that he could go burn himself. If the Nord wanted a watch kept through the night, he was free to keep it.

But he found himself on his feet, and words were rising to his lips. "As you say, Nord." That was good. Not doing him any favors, but not beholden. It set the correct tone. He hoped.

Looking out towards the road, he realized that unless he moved away from the banked fire, even its feeble light would kill his vision in the dark. And trying to use night-eye for so long a time would drain him sufficiently that not only the meager sleep he had gotten, but any he would manage to get after his watch was done would be useless. So, he leaned against a tree, letting the dark surround him. And the cold. The cold was worse. It bit into him, and under him, and all he had were rags. The Empire had taken his clothing, armor and pack, little as they were, when they had thrown him in the cart with the Stormcloaks. He had pulled the cape he wore now off a smoldering corpse in Helgen, and the Imperial red was marred by scorch marks. Truth be told, he rather liked the look of it, but it was little protection against the chill. No wonder the Nords are so wretched, coming from a blighted land like this! He shuddered to think of what horrors must await should he ever venture to the northern end of the province.

He quickly decided that he would not pass his watch like this. He had been beyond the fire for mere minutes, and already his feet tingled, and his hands felt thick and clumsy. I am a Dunmer of Morrowind, and I will not freeze like some barbarian! He glanced back at the fire, and made to move closer, when he spied something off to his left. A glint of red, in the bushes. Almost without conscious thought, his hand snaked out and pulled it in. That could have been foolish. It was nothing though, just a few red berries. He almost dropped them, but then he remembered. On the ride to Helgen, high in the mountains, he had seen berries just like these. Half-buried in snow, but growing. Thriving in weather such as this.

He returned to the fire and huddled over it, studying the berries, though he couldn't quite figure out why. Something was important about them. He ran them between his fingers, thinking. His thumb brushed one, and he knew it then.

The Prelate had been immensely aged, and though his step was strong and his voice clear, his hair had become as grey as his skin, which had begun to sag. It was unusual to see one so old offering to speak. Generally, the elders of the Temple preferred to spend their days in meditation or study, and let their ambitious subordinates take on the thankless job of teaching the novitiates and ministering to the faithful. However, Eris Telas had announced that he would speak on the nature of alchemy and its relationship to the blessings of the Three Good Daedra, which, if nothing else, was bizarre enough to draw an impressive crowd. Kitaiah had speculated that the old priest was giving this speech to the Temple at large because the alchemists had refused to humor him. She was going because Telas was supposed to have served at the High Fane in Vivec before the Red Year, and Kitaiah was angling to be assigned somewhere on Vvardenfell. Velandryn went because he rather liked the irreverent acolyte, and figured that as long as he was sharing her bed, he could at least make an effort to share her passions outside of the sheets as well.

"Magicka is within all matter on this world, and is, in fact, the essence of being. It is through magicka that we not only work our spells and blessings, but speak to the Three as well. And it is this same magicka that has imbued the plants and beasts of our world with their properties that we refer to as alchemical. In organic matter, for instance, alchemical properties stem from qualities that help the plant or animal survive. These properties, often taken for granted by the alchemist,
are, in fact, the spirit of the Daedra shining through. Consider the coda flower, which, though commonly known for its negative effects on the mind, actually contains the potential for levitation. Likewise the plume of the cliff racer, now a rarity in our land. Although the plume is, like the coda flower, known to be draining on the mind and spirit, it too contains the gift of levitation. What do these two have in common? They both exist in a state of rising, of transcending their origins to stretch towards the sky. As the cliff racer nests on the ground but lives in the sky, so too does the coda flower rise from the swamp and grow straight up, straining for the light of Azura. Now, to relate this to Moren Fel's third law of Daedric Intervention…"

Organic matter contains alchemical properties inherent to their purpose in the survival of the species. Velandryn looked at the small red berry again. To grow in the snow, it must be able to resist the frost. It would be a hardy plant, but for the berry that would not be enough. To draw out the alchemical potential, I would need to grind it, mix with water while focusing magicka… It was impossible. He had no mortar and pestle. He could try simply eating it, but the odds of the quality that he needed being so easily accessible were slim to none. He tried anyway, popping it into his mouth and chewing experimentally.

Instantly he realized his mistake. The warmth of the fire seemed to fade, and the cold crept in where once it had been kept at bay. These berries must need to resist fire as well as frost. He was in trouble. He leaned in close over the fire, pulling at it so it flared up into new life, spreading himself above it, trying to feel it on as much of his flesh as he could. It was no good, the cold was behind him, slinking up his arms and legs…

The effect ended as suddenly as it had begun. A heaving sigh left him, and he felt the blessed warmth of the fire in all of its glory upon him once more. That was foolish. He dropped into a squat and thrust his hands into the crackling flames. That was more than passing foolish.

Centuries of life among the ash pits and lava flows of Morrowind had given the Dunmer an inherent resistance to fire. Even now, the flames that licked at his skin merely warmed him, where they would blister the flesh of any man. Were it not for the meager rags that passed for his clothing, he would have thrown himself upon the campfire before. Part of him was perversely proud that he had the presence of mind not to do so. He was already the shabbiest of their little band. Facing the morning's trek with nothing but a cloak and the Lover's garb would have done him no favors. They hate me already, but it is better to be hated and feared than hated and scorned. Not that they would likely fear him. Two warriors, each likely a veteran of countless battles. Only Nords, to be sure, but fools were slower to fear. He sighed. For all that I deny it, I am the fool out here. I should never have come to Skyrim. He could not leave until he brought warning to the cities, however. To stay in Skyrim was unpleasant, but to renege on one's given word was unthinkable.

Sadly, the gift of flame in his blood meant he got less benefit from the campfire, and so he settled on compromise for his position, leaning against the tree nearest to the fire, which still allowed for a decent enough view of the road that, should anyone come, he would likely notice before they were upon them. Not that anyone would though. Who in their right mind would be wandering these godsforsaken mountains at night? Bandits and beasts alike should be sleeping, and…oh.

Vampires. This was not Morrowind, he was not in Blacklight or on the road to Mournhold, there were no Redoran Guard or Ordinators-Repentant patrolling, no wayhouses or shellforts to offer respite from the night. The wretched spawn of Molag Bal would not stay relegated to their crumbling ruins or dark caves here. And with that, I have likely gifted myself a sleepless night. Velandryn sighed, easing back against the tree. In all honesty it was absurd to think there would be
vampires wandering the night, this far from civilization. They were well off of the road, and the fire would be only faintly visible, if at all. And, should a vampire fall upon them, he was still Dunmer. The fire within him gave power to the flames without, and the pyromancer's arts had always come easily to him. At the very least, he could give any bloodsucker who assaulted him a good burn to remember him by. *There is no shame in death in battle. Blessed Three, see my trial and carry my soul home.*

As he thought on the idea of a vampire attack, his mood began to improve. His natural gift with fire would serve him well. Even among his kin, he had always had an especial affinity for channeling flame, a skill that stood him in good stead with the priests. He wondered if it was an acolyte-sanctioned use of a burning hand to ignite a vampire. *Perhaps if I dedicate the resulting torch to Boethiah, the Temple Elders would approve.* The thought of the Archcanon speaking to a hall lit by vampires in torch sconces made him chuckle to himself, but he quickly stopped when he realized what he was doing. *If the Nords wake up to a Dunmer laughing in the dark, they will assume the worst.* Also, he didn't feel like explaining the joke.

He had approached something that could, under poor lighting, be mistaken for comfort; although he was still cold, it appeared that after a point it was possible to become resigned to this miserable the night wore on, he inched closer and closer to the fire, until finally he had to accept that, although he could survive a night's watch out here, he was doing nobody any good in his current state. The moons had reached their zenith and begun to fall, and he could pass on the watch to the Imperial with no shame. *It is fortunate, however, that we were not approached. It would not have ended well for me.* He stood, and stepped over to the sleeping imperial soldier, wrapped in his cloak. His watch was done, and Velandryn Savani was duly grateful.

"Hadvar, your watch." The low rasp pulled Hadvar from a light sleep, and he pushed himself into a sitting position. The Dark Elf was standing by the fire, looking absolutely miserable. His cloak was wrapped tightly around him but couldn't hide his shivers, and the angle of his body made it clear that the fire was the only thing on his mind. When Hadvar stood, he was struck by how small the elf was.

Now that they were not running for their lives or making double time along a road, he could get a decent look at this odd mer. Skinny arms, sharp features, dry red hair pulled back and bound with a cord, Velandryn Savani was clearly neither a warrior nor a hunter. Had he been standing tall, he might have reached Hadvar's chin, but as it was he barely came up to the Nord's shoulder. He only had those thin rags for clothing, and there was no chance he was used to this cold, mild as it was for Skyrim. Hadvar pulled the cloak from around him, and handed it to his companion. "Here, take this. Get some sleep. We should leave at dawn."

The elf's eyes narrowed, and he gazed at the cloak for a moment before his features softened. "Thank you. Truly." He hesitated, and then nodded over at Ralof, asleep on the other side of the fire. "I was...unkind...to you earlier. There are many Nords like him, and I forget about the ones like you." He took the cloak, and curled up so close to the fire that Hadvar half feared that it would scorch the fine red linen. Now that Hadvar looked at the campfire, it seemed to be burning a little brighter than it had been when he banked it. That was odd, but perhaps the elf had fed it during the second watch. Poor bastard had to be freezing.

Hadvar put it behind him and looked out into the darkness. He had been posting watches for ten years now, ever since joining the Legion. This one was a bit unorthodox, but nothing he couldn't handle. A nice, easy watch until sunrise. And so it was. He enjoyed the mild air, and thought of what had to come. It was likely that there were more survivors from Helgen, especially considering the haphazard nature of the attack. General Tullius and his retinue had likely made it out intact, and
sadly it was highly likely that Ulfric Stormcloak and the Thalmor delegation had both done so as well. That meant that the war would only escalate. The unknown entity that was the dragon also complicated matters. Hadvar had to make contact with the legion immediately and figure out where he was needed. Falkreath would serve for that, and he could spread word about the dragon in that direction as well. Assuming the elf could be trusted to get word to Whiterun, and Ralof would run back to Stormcloak lands, they would be able to… what exactly, would we be doing? Spreading panic? Could arrows bring down something like that?

Hadvar sighed. He was a soldier. He followed orders, and protected the people of Skyrim and the Empire. He would bring word to the appropriate authorities, and then serve in whatever capacity was required. *May Those above judge me, and Those below take me, if I fail in my duty.* He had always vaguely wondered who "those below" were supposed to be. Perhaps the Daedra got offended at a soldier's shirking of his responsibilities. He chuckled to himself, and watched the sky start to lighten.

Behind him, cloth rustled, and stone scraped on steel. He turned, half-tensing should some enemy have slipped past him, but it was just the elf. He was carrying the cloak, and tossed it to the soldier. "Again, my thanks. I think you should have this back though. If the Stormcloak saw us getting along, he probably wouldn't take too kindly to it."

"The two of you do not get along." It was not a question. "The Empire could use your help to bring an end to the Stormcloaks. Come with me to Solitude, and help your people by joining the Legion." The elf was inexperienced in the ways of war, but he had gifts with magic and was clearly no small intellect. Besides which, he was Dunmer. The Dark Elves of Morrowind were fearsome warriors, blending sword and spell to control the battlefield. Traditionally, legions posted in Skyrim had been almost entirely human, in large part thanks to the Nords dislike of the nonhuman races. The rebellion had changed things, however. General Tullius had been trying to diversify the Legion for some time now, recognizing the necessary tactical advantage the other races could provide. What Dark Elf recruits they did have were scattered throughout the camps, adhering to standard military doctrine. There were standing orders to encourage any likely Dark Elves to report to Solitude, and more than that, this one had a fire in him. He had browbeaten an Imperial and Stormcloak into working together to escape a situation where many officers and veterans had not kept their composure. If he could be brought to their side…

The elf interrupted Hadvar's thoughts, eyes narrowed again and mouth a grim line. "Did you forget why I was in Helgen in the first place? Your Empire was going to have my head off for being in the wrong place at the wrong time!" The intensity that had burned through in the muster yard at Helgen was back, apparently rekindled by rage. "Return to your masters, fight for them and die in this miserable land? The Empire abandons my people, then expects us to fight in her wars!"

"What do you mean? The Empire, and Skyrim in particular, helped many Dark Elves after their home suffered its disasters." Hadvar was confused. Certainly Morrowind had suffered its share of misfortune, but that could hardly be laid at the feet of the Empire. Besides which, the few Dark Elves he had known in the Legion were grateful to the Empire for taking their families in after the disasters that had struck their homeland.

The elf's eyes darkened to a deep blood red and the air around them began to warm. Every muscle of his face was taut with anger, and Hadvar could see the muscles of his neck tight with strain. "Your... Empire," he nearly spat the word at Hadvar "abandoned my people once when Daedra poured out from Oblivion, and then again when the Black Tide consumed half of Morrowind. While Ald\'ruhn fell, and Skar-that-woke was broken, your legions were fleeing to the mainland, instead of defending the people as they had sworn! Through ancient treaty your Empire pledged to defend our lands as part of your own, but the Eastern Legions pulled back when the Argonians
invaded!" He was close to Hadvar now, and the harsh lines on his angular face looked near
demonic. The elf's voice was half-growl, the rasp underlying every word only making it the more
unnerving. "You accepted those of my people who fled, but what of those who stayed? When the
Red Legion rebelled and marched to defend Mournhold, they did so against the orders of the
Empire. We survived, despite the Empire, and we do not forget." The last sentence was quieter,
more reflection than accusation. He seemed to have regained some control, and took a step back,
his face relaxing somewhat. "There is a word in our tongue, you would translate it as 'outlander.'
To my people it means more. It means that you have never danced in an ash-storm, or stood
beneath the Three Flames with the Chant of Azura about you. It means the Nammuhruhn may hold
your bones, but no vault ever will. A Dunmer who fled to the Empire and did not return to
Morrowind, or who was born here, is an outlander. It is not cause for shame, for life in Morrowind
is hard, but I am not the same as them. My voice is harsh because the sky rained ash upon me as I
learned to speak, and I know every saint and god of our people, and honor the Three as I surpass
the House of Troubles. Do not ask me to join your Empire again; we tell our children that while it
may be noble to forgive a wrong, it is inexcusable to forget one." He took another step back and
bowed slightly, eyes closed. "My anger overwhelms me, and I speak harshly. I forgive your Empire
the sins of the past, and for bringing me to the block at Helgen. To be attacked by a monster out of
legend; that is more retribution than even a Dunmer would seek." He opened his eyes, and stood
straight once more. "But I do not forget, and I will not join your fight."

"Hey! You two done talking, let's get moving!" Ralof was awake, and if he had feelings about the
two of them being at odds, he hid it well. Hadvar kicked out the remains of the fire, and they were
underway once more. He glanced over at the elf, who was peering into the trees. An odd one to be
sure, but he burns with a fire that we could sorely use.

He did decide, however, not to bring up the
fact that Morrowind was still an Imperial province, nor that this particular Dark Elf had clearly left
his beloved homeland. Ralof would get a good laugh, no doubt, out of seeing Velandryn try to
murder his onetime friend with his bare hands, but Hadvar had a suspicion that the elf might just be
the deadliest one of their little band. Anger like that makes a man keep fighting when he should lay
down and die. Anger like that can rout a foe, or turn a battle. Anger like that…and I wish he was
not angry at us.

The camp was perched under an overhang of rock, little more than a few bedrolls around a
campfire, a rabbit roasting on a spit. At the sight of the food, and the smells wafting off the scene,
Velandryn's hunger returned full force. He had put it from his mind upon waking, but he could not
pretend to be able to walk away in his current state. It had been hours since dawn, and Velandryn
finally let his hunger run free, and took a step in towards the succulent roast. Hadvar's hand
stopped him.

"Hold up, there, friend. Bandits like this area. Might be one of their camps."

Friend could be a touchy word, after their discussion this morning, but Velandryn did rather like
the Nord, and admired the attempt at camaraderie. "Hm, then we don't have to worry about them
going to the guard if we borrow their food." Hunger made him bold, and this bright day, with a
bracing chill but not too cold to endure, gave him a reckless courage. He moved past the Nord's
outstretched arm, and pulled the rabbit off of the fire. "I am hungry, and am taking steps to solve
that situation. You two are more than welcome to join me."

When next Velandryn looked up, Ralof was rooting through the sacks, grinning as he produced
various vegetables. "Elf! Roast these with the rabbit, and we'll be well fed indeed!" The Stormcloak
brought them over as Hadvar looked on disapprovingly.

"We should not be doing this. This food belongs to someone, and it is wrong for us simply to—"
Velandryn cut the soldier short. "We are fine any way. If they support the Empire, you are procuring supplies, and they can be compensated by the authorities. If they instead are Stormcloak supporters, then this one," his hand swept out and indicated the general direction of Ralof "can explain how they are donating supplies towards the liberation of Skyrim, and if they are bandits, well, then these goods are ill-gotten, and it is our duty as decent folk to relieve them of their foul loot." This was madness surely. *Has Sheogorath clouded my mind?* To act so boldly, so recklessly, he needed to reign himself in. He could attribute it to hunger perhaps, but he was a Dunmer in human lands. He needed to remember that. However, the Nords did not seem to mind. Hadvar looked amused, and Ralof was laughing outright.

"Ha! Were you a courtier in your homeland, elf? You should have talked at the bird rather than shooting it yesterday, and it would have flown into the fire for you!" The onion speared on his dagger was roasting merrily, and he took a long pull from one of the bottles. "Ahh, the good drink. Take a swig of this, friend elf, and you will sing the praises of Skyrim forever!"

Velandryn took the sloshing battle warily, near as suspicious of the Stormcloak's sudden geniality as of whatever liquid brought on such cheer. He raised it to his lips, and nearly gagged. It was sweet and thick, honey and fire and sunlight. He swallowed, and passed it back. "Strong. I take it that is the famous mead of Skyrim?"

"Not just any mead, but Black-Briar Reserve! From the hives of Riften, a good Stormcloak vintage. And you Imperial! Will you taste what you are missing in your western lands?"

Hadvar had apparently overcome his reluctance to join in, and accepted the bottle of mead. "By the gods, that hits the spot!" He sprawled before the fire, and grabbed one of the apples from the sack. "Shor's bones, I was hungry!" Velandryn didn't reply, his mouth full of rabbit and onion, plus whatever other vegetables Ralof had roasted. Many of the green land vegetables were strange to him, but right now they were as delicious as any roasted ash yam or comberry and trama compote. He closed his eyes and luxuriated in the sensation of the taste and texture. *One point in the Temple's favor: I never knew true hunger while I served there.* If less than two days with a chunk of bread and a bit of rabbit were enough to reduce him to this slavering state, how wretched must his ancestors think him? He would eat, and enjoy it, but the pleasure must not rule him.

With conscious effort, he swallowed, found his center, and opened his eyes. Ralof was sprawled by the fire, getting steadily drunk. By the noises he was making, the subsequent bottles of alcohol were not up the quality of the first, but it did not seem to faze him. Hadvar was more restrained, drinking from a bottle of what looked like wine at a measured pace, and eating a haunch of rabbit with gusto, but not Ralof's abandon. Looking at the two of them, Velandryn decided that he could live with them until Riverwood, and even further if need be. *Ignorant of other cultures and untrusting, but then I suppose the same could be said of me.* He knew little of these people outside of the stories about Skyrim, and for all their faults, neither of these two seemed a bloodthirsty conqueror, or a Tongue, calling down a Shout to shatter the bones of their foes. They might be men and worship the wrong gods but they were his allies, and had given him no reason to distrust them. He filled his mouth again.

Ralof rose, staggering only slightly, and moved towards the shadowed part of the camp, eyes on a pheasant hanging from a string. Velandryn nudged Hadvar. "Say what you want about him, but he holds his drink well."

Hadvar grinned. "Or you're a scrawny little thing who gets drunk on a thimble."

Velandryn hated to admit it, but the Legionary wasn't wrong. Each of these Nords easily had fifty pounds on him, and stood a span or taller besides. And, with this weather, they probably spent half
their lives drinking because the alternative involved going outside. Either, he had no doubt, could drink him under the table and then float said table in beer, or wine, or that wretched mead. He grunted. "Lucky for me. I get just as drunk on half the coin."

Ralof heard this and turned. "You call that lucky? When you have done great deeds, and the mead hall rings with cheers, you get to down all the drinks they can buy you! Otherwise, what's the point?" He turned back to the bird, and so the arrow grazed his shoulder rather than burying itself in his chest.

The Stormcloak cursed, and his bow was in his hand faster than Velandryn would have thought possible. In half a heartbeat, he had an arrow nocked and was peering into the trees on the far side of the campfire. To Velandryn's right, Hadvar had hunkered down behind his shield, sword drawn. And so, Velandryn Savani found himself in the middle of what was looking increasingly like a bandit camp; by far the most tempting target.

Velandryn realized this at the same time as the arrow tore a hole in his cloak. He dropped to the ground, and Ralof released his shot. A yell came from the foliage, and a trio of bandits emerged. In the center was a Nord clad in furs and hides, holding a great beast of a battleaxe and charging with reckless abandon, the wound on his chest showing where Ralof's arrow had found its mark. To his left was another Nord, this one all in iron armor with a sword and shield in hand. Behind them was the archer, lightly clad and one of the smaller mannish races, possibly an Imperial by her olive skin. Velandryn had his sword and bow, but he was skilled with neither. Either Nord would overwhelm him, and the archer would likely pierce his heart before he could land a blow.

Hadvar was moving up with shield raised, and Ralof had loosed a second shot into the charging Nord. All three bandits were focused on the two soldiers, clearly having decided that the Dunmer pressed to the ground was no threat at the moment. The two-hander passed him by, closing with Hadvar, bringing the axe up in an overhead stroke, clearly intending to cleave through his guard and end the fight in a single stroke. The Legionary was ready, however, and thrust in with his sword, forcing the bandit to abort his swing and hurriedly parry the blow. By then, Hadvar has his shield to bear. The big bandit could not cleave through it without opening himself to Hadvar's thrust, and Hadvar dared not lower his guard first, lest the big weapon's superior reach open him for the kill.

Across the clearing, the other two were in a similar predicament. The armored bandit was ponderous; hindered by a full suit of iron and a shield, but Ralof didn't have a prayer of breaking through that guard. Likewise, any blow the bandit made was easily dodged by the Stormcloak. For the immediacy, all four Nords were at a stalemate. The archer, however, had other plans. Velandryn noticed her moving out of the trees, bow drawn. By the look of things, she couldn't hit either of her enemies from her current position, and was moving around Hadvar's shield. She stopped, and Velandryn knew she would loose her shot in seconds. If he acted on the plan that had popped into his head, he could well die, but if he didn't, one or both of his companions almost certainly would. And if he fled, what then? If he abandoned them to die? It was unthinkable. He sighed. Nerevar the Redeemer, I ask your blessing. Let my strength be true and my heart unerring, that my enemies and yours may be undone. By the love you bear your nation, I invoke your name. He raised his head and grasped his sword.

"Hadvar! Arrow to the right!" The soldier moved instantly, slamming into his opponent to buy a second, and tucking himself behind his shield as the shot raced towards him. Velandryn heard no cry of pain, so presumed that the Legionary must have caught it. He had no time to look, however, as he was barreling across the ground towards the archer, sword in hard. He saw her turn towards him, and raise her bow once more. He would reach her first though, he raised his sword as she pulled back her shot, he was upon her, and he just had to strike—
Her arrow impaled his arm, sending his sword spinning out of his grasp. He fell to his knees dumbly, not three feet away from the bandit, as she calmly strung the bow across her back and drew a dagger to finish the job. She smiled down at him, and her lips moved. Velandryn presumed that she spoke words, but he could not hear them over the roaring in his ears. *I am going to die now. Here, in this nowhere, brought down by a bandit. By scum!*

No.

It could not be.

He would not die here, on some wretched *n’wah’s* dagger. She was not worthy. He was Velandryn Savani, a Dunmer of Morrowind and Anointed of the New Temple and he refused to let it end here.

The bandit stood above him and her dagger descended, slowly coming towards his face as he other hand reached out to grab his hair. How *dare* she! She was *nothing*, and she would *burn*!

His left hand, the only one he had at the moment, gripped her wrist and he let his anger flow into her, let it *burn* through him into the bandit. With it went his magicka, and she screamed as her arm blackened and blistered, flames licking along it outward from Velandryn's death grip. He released her arm, and she cradled it to her chest, and swung the dagger in his direction with a wild sweep. The blade was slow and clumsy, however, dulled by the archer's pain. Velandryn gripped the hand holding the knife, letting the flame flow out of him again and making the bandit's hand unclench, dropping her dagger and leaving them both without a blade.

*I have her now.* Velandryn pulled the arrow from his right arm, grimacing at the pain. The bandit was reeling back, scuttling away from him. He focused his magicka on his bleeding arm, and called forth the most basic incantation of the school of restoration. His flesh knitted, and the pain lessened. He would hurt like Oblivion tomorrow, but now he had two good arms. He glanced back to where the others dueled. The stalemate was holding, but now Velandryn had the edge. He grabbed the bow from his back and drew an arrow. He was no archer of renown, but the big Nord with the two hander was no challenging shot either.

The arrow punched through the light armor, and the bandit staggered. That was all the opening that Hadvar needed. His shield slammed into the big Nord, and Velandryn saw the point of the Legionary's sword emerge from the bandit's back. As he slumped to the ground, Hadvar looked up, and met Velandryn's eyes. His lips curled into a small smile, and Velandryn nocked another arrow, aiming at the bandit in armor facing Ralof. Hadvar grinned fully, and moved to flank the armored foe.

Velandryn's arrow failed to pierce the thick iron armor, or even stagger his target. However, it was enough to draw his focus, and once Hadvar closed, the thick armor did little good. Against two skilled foes, nothing short of exceptional skill could prevail. As Velandryn watched the bandit's guard crumble and his allies begin to overwhelm him, a noise from behind drew his attention.

Behind him, the final bandit had found her feet. Both her arms were badly burned, but either magic or sheer will gave her hands new strength. In her left she held her dagger. Her right held Velandryn's sword. She was mere feet in front of him, he could never draw and loose in time. He dropped the bow. *All or nothing. One last strike.* The bandit moved slowly, clearly pained, but her gaze was steady and her steps sure. The dagger guarded, and the sword drew back.

Magicka was the essence of Aetherius, Velandryn had been taught. It flowed into their world through Magnus the Architect who was the Sun and the Magna Ge who were his stars. It infused every living being, and was the raw material from which all feats of magic pulled. To do what he would attempt, he would be drained dry. If he took a wound, it would remain. He inhaled. *One*
Velandryn Savani erupted. His clothes and hair were buffeted by the magicka as it fled his body, and the air around him shrieked as the magicka combusted, roaring outward in a torrent of flame, red and blue and white. He lunged forward, and a battle cry rang out, from where he did not know. "Akkan suad'na vaet, Dunmer fi sholah zah!" Oh, from me. He looked into her eyes as he closed with her, as she swung the blades, as the dagger cut a line of pain into his ribs and he knocked the sword away. He saw her fear as her armor burnt and blackened, her determination as she brought the red-hot dagger up, and her panic as he grabbed her wrist once more. Then he saw something else, what he fancied might be despair, when he pulled the dagger out of her hand and drew it across her throat.

All at once it ended. His flames died out, and his energy went with it. Velandryn collapsed to the ground beside the corpse of his foe, spent. By the time the Nords had dispatched the final bandit and walked over to check on him, he had found his feet and was studying the dagger in his hands. The blade had cooled, but the leather wrappings on the grip were charred black. He looked at the Nords, then back down, at the blade and the woman he had killed. It was her or me. He knew he should feel something. Exalted in victory, or horrified at taking her life. But he didn't know how he felt. The Nords were watching him. Soldiers, they had killed time and time again no doubt. The dagger was still in his hands.

"A dagger has many uses." The voice of Hadvar, from yesterday. Many uses. Clean a bird, start a fire, or open a throat. The blade was dark and sharp, the leather strips burnt black. Crude iron, but it could kill. He didn't feel grief, or anger, right now. Skyrim was a harsh place, full of bandits, and dragons, and who knew what else.

But.

He had passed a night, even if miserable. He had slain a bandit, even if barely. He had saved his allies, and had a task before him.

The bandits had armor and weapons, and Velandryn had little of either. The idea of stripping the dead for their gear was repugnant, but he would not go into battle clothed in rags again. He turned to the Nords. "How far to Riverwood?"

"We can be there by nightfall, if we leave now." Clearly Ralof had no issues with looting the bodies. He had added the round iron shield to his arsenal, and was rifling through the armored bandit's pouches. Velandryn reluctantly pulled the bracers and chestpiece from the bandit he had slain. They fit poorly, but offered some warmth, and as long as he wore them over the rags he had on until he could clean or replace them, he could almost pretend that he was not wearing a corpse's armor. He cinched the belt around his waist, and dropped his sword through a loop. The dagger he slid into a sheath sown in to the belt. Topping off his arrows, he walked back to the camp. One of the sacks around the fire had a strap allowing it to be carried over a shoulder, and he filled it with food to carry, as well as a few trinkets that he could barter in Riverwood. He saw a book in the shadows and added it the bag. The Refugees. Hmm, something to read at least. Finally, he checked the chest the bandits had clearly been storing their loot in, opening the trivial lock with picks that were not six inches away. Did they lose they key? Or is this what passes for security among bandits? Either way, he found a few pieces of cheap jewelry and some furs, as well as a small purse filled with drake coins. At the very least, I will not arrive in Riverwood destitute. He rejoined his travelling companions.

"You ready to move on?" For once, Ralof had omitted the 'elf' at the end of his question.

"Let us go." Courtesy was a virtue, so taught Vivec.
I should be afraid, or guilty, or at the very least uneasy. Velandryn had killed the bandit, aided in the deaths of two more. They were n'wah, they had forfeited their claim to live by their actions. Velandryn knew why he felt no shame or guilt or sorrow. I fought for the innocent, even if they are not my people. The roads were safer, and the towns more secure. Velandryn Savani stepped back onto the road, to Riverwood and wherever he might eventually end up. I feel good. I feel... strong.

Chapter End Notes

Obviously, I am taking some liberties from vanilla gameplay for the purposes of telling a story that has some of the depth that I feel Skyrim lacks. When two options are presented, I adore exploring option C. The world of the Elder Scrolls is rich with stories both mundane and mythic, and I have been sitting on this one for some time. I make no promises as to quality or direction, except that I find a romance makes everything more interesting, and Serana is far and away the most engaging companion in the game. Take from that what you will. On languages: everything important will be intelligible, or made clear through context. Things like Velandryn's battle cry above will be translated at the bottom.

I am happy to answer any questions about intent with regard to story or character, or changes from canon, or even my own opinions about certain aspects of the Apocrypha. I don't promise I will agree with yours, but I am happy to listen and have my mind changed.

Akkan suad'na vaet, Dunmer fi sholah zah! – Pray to your gods one final time, the Dunmer are upon you! Language: Dunmeris

A battle cry whose origins predate the Tribunal, kept alive by the Ashlander tribes. Regained popularity among Great House Dunmer after the Red Year.
Favors for Fools

Chapter Summary

Riverwood, and the trials faced therein. Love letters, stolen heirlooms, and drunken lies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I have never trusted the Dark Elves fully, despite the good work they have done in my hold. Oh, the ones who were born here, who have lived here all their lives, born of good families and who worship the Nine, they are almost all fine. But then there are the others, the ones who come from the east. They worship Daedra and bring trouble, starting fights in the taverns and bothering the local girls. The guards tell me some even run off to consort with brigands and cultists in the hills! And then they have the nerve to act as though we are the ones who need to accommodate their heathen ways! If they come here, they need to learn how to behave like decent folk."

Hameth the Warden, Jarl of Riften 3E 145-188, *Personal Journal*

Velandryn had to give the Nords credit, they knew how to name a town based on its most obvious features. There was a river, and a great abundance of wood as well. Houses stretched along the water, and the major industry of the town seemed to be the lumber mill on a small island in the center of the river. As he entered the town, trailing Hadvar and letting Ralof bring up the rear, he noticed two things. The first was that the afternoon light made even the simple wooden structures beautiful, and its play on the water was something to behold. The second was that there were no guards. In fact, the town was completely defenseless. He wondered if this region were so safe that it was unnecessary, or if some other factor was at play.

There was little activity, with only a few people out on the streets. The smithy was on the river, across from what seemed to be a general store, with an inn or tavern not too far away. In between were squeezed various houses and walkways, lending the whole a disorganized but not unpleasant air. Although night was falling, Velandryn noted with pleasure that the valley offered far warmer evenings than their previous night's camp had. He felt the weight of the items he had gathered on his journey so far, and made a decision.

"I am going to unload some of this, maybe get gear better suited for this climate. Are the two of you going to find your kin?"

Ralof nodded, and stepped to one side. "Aye, Gerdur will be glad to see me, I'm sure, and I've missed her cooking." He stretched and inhaled deeply. "You know, I've been across Skyrim now, and seen a hundred places I could never have imagined." His arms swept outward, and his expansive gesture seemed to encompass not just the buildings and people but the light, the air and the faint smell of sawdust and fresh water. "With all that I have seen, this is the finest place I have known. Not Windhelm, in the shadow of the stone kings, or any grand temple or lost vale, but this little town in the shadow of Snow-Throat." He turned to regard Hadvar. "I don't regret any of the choices I've made, but when all of this is over, I'm going to come back here and never leave again." He clapped each of them on the shoulder, and started away, when he suddenly stopped and turned
And elf, if you decide that you'd like to spit in the Emperor's eye, come to Windhelm." A huge smile broke out over his face. "You might be a scrawny little bastard with no aim and too clever a tongue, but I'd be glad to stand at your side when we take back our home." He strode away, Stormcloak colors rippling merrily in the breeze.

Hadvar sighed. "For all that he's on the wrong side of this war, he's not wrong on this. You'll be hard pressed to find a better place than Riverwood to live quietly."

Something the Stormcloak had said struck Velandryn as odd. "That parting, and the two of you hailing from here. Did you know each other?"

"Aye, we did, though we did not part well, the last time. He grew up here, and I came to learn from my uncle. Never took to smithing, would rather swing swords than forge them, but Ralof and I got on well. There were few enough boys my own age here, and we were…close, once. I joined the Legion, and he planned on it, but then Jarl Ulfric raised his banners, and it all went right to Oblivion." He looked sad. "Maybe when this damned war is over, I'll come back here and make things right." He started walking again, and Velandryn followed. "I'm going to go check in with Alvor. Come find me if you finish up first, if not I'll come grab you." Velandryn moved to go, but Hadvar held out his hand. "You may not like the Empire, but there are those in Skyrim who hold true. My family is loyal to the Ruby Throne and Jarl Elisif, so maybe lay the hate on light when in his house?"

Velandryn's mentors had taught him that rash action was a spark in dry kindling. No matter how small, it could flare out of control, and consume far more than was ever intended. So it was with his rage. He had offended this Imperial, and were Hadvar less fair, it could well have poisoned the uncle against him as well. He frowned and folded his hands across his chest, left above right. He had no idea if humans used this gesture, but it was the only one he knew to indicate contrite sincerity. "I spoke harshly and without thought. I was raised to think of the Empire as an uncaring power that abandoned my people, and took that out on you, when you have done nothing but help me." He took a deep breath. This would not be easy. "I…believe I owe you my life for Helgen. You guided me through the fire and devastation, and cut my hands free. I am in your debt, and beg you forgive my ingratitude." He waited for the Nord's response.

Hadvar laughed, and Velandryn was shocked. He had expected triumph, or scorn, but not humor. "You nearly burned alive after we tried to cut your head off! I can forgive some harsh words, and I promise you this." He grew serious, and Velandryn was struck again by how badly he had misjudged this man. "I will not forget that the Empire has wronged both you and your people. I don't claim to know all of the facts, but you stopped me and Ralof from gutting each other in Helgen Keep, and I remember an arrow that let me land the killing blow on a bandit who was after my life. We are even, and the only thing I plan to tell Alvor is that you are a good man – ah, I mean elf, and he should give you anything you need." He clapped Velandryn on the shoulder as Ralof had. "I will speak with you soon. Finish your business quickly, and we will feast at the Sleeping Giant. Delphine keeps a fine table, and I am starved for warm bread and stew!" With that he was gone, and Velandryn turned to the general store, also ready to sit down with a meal that he had neither hunted himself nor taken from a bandit's stash.

As he approached the door, a voice sounded, "Ah, friend, a moment?" Velandryn idly wondered if he would ever reach the shop, but he still turned to greet whoever this might be. After all, he knew exactly two people in Skyrim. He could hardly afford to be rude.

It was a Nord that had hailed him, now standing awkwardly clearly wanting to ask something. "Ah, you're new in town, aren't you? I'm Sven, it's a pleasure. Are you just passing through?"
"I might stay a day or so, rest and buy supplies, but I will be on my way soon enough. Why?"

"If you could give this letter to the woman inside the shop, I would appreciate it."

"Let me guess. A letter of love, wooing the fair shop maid?"

The Nord laughed, an easy, pleasant sound. "Oh no, Camilla likes me well, and I've no need to win her love." He lowered his voice, and leaned in with the conspiratorial smirk of one who thinks themselves exceptionally clever. "However, there's a miserable little Wood Elf named Faendal who's nosing around her as well. This letter is 'from him' if you take my meaning, and should put an end to any notion of the two of them having a future together!"

Velandryn was mildly amused by this plan. In terms of lies told to get someone into bed, this stank of amateur foolishness. He personally disapproved of deception as a tool of seduction, feeling that it did a disservice to everyone involved. However, two decades of study at the Temple meant that he had seen his fellow acolytes engage in furious sexual subterfuge of every type, and this letter was a ploy so clumsy it begged for his involvement.

"Done. It will be in her hand by nightfall." He took the letter from Sven, and turned back to the shop.

"Hold on. Why nightfall? Just give it to her now." Sven was out of his element, clearly, and Velandryn could see that even a little confidence would allow him to dictate the terms of this con.

"Do you want this done right? A complete stranger walks into her shop and hands her a letter; that is no way to go about this. I meet her first, then I bring the news later, as a concerned acquaintance." If he was going to participate in this silly game, it would be on his terms.

"Well, you seem to know what you're doing at least, so I suppose I can leave this to you…" The Nord smiled again, though Velandryn fancied that this time he appeared the tiniest bit nervous. Has he realized how foolhardy this is? "Best of luck, friend!" No, clearly not.

The Riverwood Trader was rather small, as befit the town, but clean and clearly well cared for. As Velandryn entered, two humans were arguing with each other from either side of the store counter. Both Imperial by look and accent; the one behind the counter was likely the proprietor, while the other was clearly some sort of kin. She was young-looking, though Velandryn had always had trouble determining the age of humans, and attractive enough, he supposed. More than likely this was the Camilla who Sven had spoken of. Velandryn managed to overhear something about a theft. It seemed the woman was in favor of retrieving the goods, and the man was not. They stopped their talking as the door swung shut behind him.

"Welcome to the Riverwood Trader, my friend! Sorry you had to hear that, but what can I do for you today?" The man, at least, was more interested in bartering than continuing the argument. Velandryn was happy to oblige him. He divested himself of his pack and began to rifle through it, deciding what to sell. He settled on everything he had gathered save a couple of potions, various plants whose alchemical properties he wanted to investigate, the book he had not yet had a chance to read and a few tools, such as lockpicks and some strips of leather, that he felt were worth holding on to. As he was doing this, his curiosity got the better of him, and he asked about what he had overheard.

It turned out that the man's name was Lucan Valerius, and an artifact in the shape of a golden claw had been stolen from his shop early this morning. The thieves had taken nothing else. Here Camilla cut in.
"What my brother is not telling you is that I know where they are. I heard one of them mention Bleak Falls, an old ruin to the west of town. I know where it is, and can go—"

"No! Out of the question! I will not have you gallivanting off—"

"Lucan, it's only a few hours away—"

"I will not have my sister—"

Velandryn had an odd feeling, as he knew what he was about to say, even if the why escaped him. "I could go get that claw for you. I leave tomorrow morning, and am back as soon as I am done. The claw is in your hand before dusk."

Both of the Valerius siblings seemed taken aback. Camilla was the first to recover, turning on her brother with a triumphant look. "You see brother? He will do it, even if you will not let me go."

She turned to Velandryn. "Come back here tomorrow, and I will take you there."

"No, no! You are not going, and that is final!"

"Well then, brother," and here her voice took on an air of deceptive sweetness, "I can at least show our brave adventurer to the edge of town? Or are you afraid I will run off with him rather than stay here with you?"

"Fine, fine." He sighed, and turned back to Velandryn. "Come by tomorrow, and she'll get you on your way. We open before dawn, so don't worry about the hour. I have some gold left over from my last shipment, once the claw is back it is yours."

Velandryn was still processing the fact that he had agreed to go to some place with the name of Bleak Falls and deal with a pack of thieves. He had acted rashly again, caught up in the human's frantic pace. This was rash action, but it was also correct and righteous action, and so he would uphold his duty. Besides, the goodwill of the town merchant would go a long way towards making his transactions more profitable. On that note, he realized that it was probably a good idea to press his advantage here.

"Exactly how much gold are you offering? I am curious how much you think me risking my life is worth." Velandryn had spent time with acolytes who hailed from the old House Hlaalu families, as well as several merchants from the Cauldron Hold. He knew how to press for a bargain, and wondered how much coin he could get for this insane errand.

Lucan seemed to be doing a similar calculation. "I can offer you three hundred septims when you return. That's more than fair for a day's work."

"Most day's work do not involve tracking down bandits. I offer a counter. I will take the three hundred upon my return, and you purchase these," his wave indicated the goods he had stacked on the table, possibly worth one hundred drakes if one was being generous, "for one hundred and fifty drakes now. In addition, I want a warm cloak, for which I will trade this," he shuffled off the Imperial cape he still wore, despite its threadbare and battleworn condition. Another thought struck him "Also, I want a small handful of red clay and a bowl of shalk resin."

Lucan looked thoughtful. "Done. Camilla, go grab the brown linen cloak that's behind the stairs. You can make do with that one. Not fancy, but warm, and up on the peak you might be grateful for that." He began moving the loot off of the table, and slid a purse towards Velandryn. "Word of advice. Call them septims, not drakes. We love Tiber Septim here, and using his name might make some people look on you a bit more favorably." He paused, and Velandryn narrowed his eyes,
thinking. Honestly, it was something that had never occurred to him. In Morrowind, a single coin might be a septim if it bore an Emperor's profile, but any sum was always in drakes. Lucan continued, "The clay I can get from my stores, but I'm not sure about the resin. I might be able to scrounge some up by closing time. Strange items for a traveler though; why do you want them?"

"You might see tomorrow. I will be back for them around nightfall." He accepted the cloak from Camilla. "My thanks. I will speak with you soon." He was anxious to speak with the smith and Hadvar. If he was going off to do this madness he had agreed to, he would need to drag the Imperial along.

Upon leaving the trader, Velandryn saw Hadvar walking down the street with a heavyset bearded man who could only be the smith. "Ah, Velandryn, this is my uncle Alvor, the town smith. I have explained what happened, and he's agreed to help as he can."

"I am overjoyed to hear it." This could well be the most useful person he had met thus far. He approached the smith and held out his hand in the human style. "I am Velandryn Savani. May the Three—may the Eight bless you."

The big smith clasped his forearm and grinned. "Not too bad a grip for such a small elf. I am Alvor." He lowered his voice. "We should talk at my forge. This news is," he seemed to be searching for terms to describe it and failing "something else, and I don't want to go causing a panic."

As they returned to the smithy, Velandryn explained the situation he had found at the trader's to Hadvar. To his surprise, Hadvar shook his head, looking apologetic. "I must be on my way, friend. My road takes me to Falkreath, to report to the Legate commanding the garrison there. I must bring what word I can to Imperial forces, and seek new orders, now that the Helgen garrison has been demolished."

Velandryn was taken aback. He had honestly expected the soldier's help, but more than that he was not pleased by the news that they would be parting ways. It was a troubling realization that he would miss the big, reliable Nord. "When are you off? Surely you do not plan to travel by night?"

"No, I will overnight at the inn, and leave at first light. By the sound of it, you will be doing the same."

Alvor grunted apologetically. "I will tell you the same as I told Hadvar. I have no room in my home for travelers, but Delphine is a good woman, and will give you good rates I am sure. She's fair besides, and won't charge you more than she would a Nord."

Velandryn was mildly amused. "They do that here? In Morrowind, if they do not like your look, they simply kick you out." Sometimes with a few extra knives in them, if the unwelcome guest had the misfortune to be particularly obnoxious or excessively Argonian, but there was no need to tell them that. "At the cheaper places, that is."

They had arrived at the smithy, and as they huddled around the forge, they were able to talk unobserved. He heard Velandryn's account, though it likely did not differ much from Hadvar's, and offered him his choice of the weapons and armor the smith had available. Velandryn gratefully accepted a set of hide and fur cuirass, greaves, gloves and boots, while Alvor apologized for having no refined leather ready to work.

For Velandryn, who was simply eager to get out of his dead man's garb, it was little problem. He did keep the burned and blackened bracers the archer had worn, as a keepsake of his victory. The
rest went onto Alvor's table, where the smith assured them it would be turned to leather scrap, and be put to use to make good honest tools for Riverwood.

As Velandryn pulled off his cuirass, he had a thought. I should have gotten new clothes from the trader as well. I am a fool. He was still wearing his prisoner's rags, which hardly inspired confidence in those he spoke to. Frankly, given how he had looked when he entered town dressed in rags with bandit armor, armed with two blades and a bow, it was extraordinary that Sven had chosen to talk to him at all. I certainly wouldn't have trusted me with anything. Although, that could explain why Lucan had been so ready to let him go march off and die. Send a bandit to deal with thieves? Smart.

His new armor, while not of glamorous make, at least made him appear more a legitimate hunter than a bandit. Hadvar had left to find the inn and a tankard of some drink, so Velandryn was left with the smith. As Velandryn turned to leave as well, the smith called out. "Hold friend, a request."

"Yes? You've helped me more than I can repay, so I will gladly returned the favor as best I can."

"Oh, it's nothing as dire as all of that. I want you to bring word of Helgen to Whiterun. Jarl Balgruuf hasn't taken a side in the war, so neither Empire not Stormcloaks patrol here. We have to look out for ourselves, and he needs to know that there could be a dragon in his hold." He looked down for a moment. "It sounds so mad when I say it. A dragon! Here, in this age! They're supposed to be something out of the stories, for the great Tongues and heroes to slay." He made as if to wave Velandryn off, and then thought better of it. Waving him over, the smith pulled out a set of matched shortsword and dagger, of good steel rather than the old iron Velandryn was currently carrying. "Here. If you're going to be doing this for me, the least I can do is give you these. They're damn good blades, and they'll serve you well."

Velandryn swapped them out for his own gratefully. Buckling them on, he handed over the iron sword, but kept the dagger, as he had grown fond of the flame-scorched grip. "My thanks, truly." He bid the blacksmith farewell and was gone. One final task and then I can get off of my feet.

Velandryn found the 'wretched little Wood Elf named Faendal' easily enough, once he started looking. There were few enough mer in Skyrim to start with, and the Bosmer was the first of his race that Velandryn had seen since arriving in Riverwood. When he responded with a smile at hearing his name rather than annoyance or confusion at being mistaken for someone else, Velandryn knew he had his man.

"Faendal? I have something you might be interested in." He handed over Sven's letter. "I have agreed to give this to Camilla Valerius, but if you would like me to tell her who truly penned it…"

Faendal understood immediately. "Sven put you up to this, didn't he? That lout thinks that just because I'm an elf, he's better suited for her. Ha! Well, brother, we showed him! But I have a better idea…” the Bosmer's face contorted into the same satisfied smirk that Sven's had worn. Dagon's burning breath, he's going to suggest the same thing! "Or, with a single sentence I can convince Camilla not to ever look at Sven again!" He thrust Sven's letter back into Velandryn's hand, and vanished into what he assumed was the Bosmer's home. By the Triune and the Corners, this is madness!

Less than a minute had elapsed when Faendal emerged again, clasping a folded piece of parchment. "Here. Give this to Camilla, let her know Sven wrote it. My thanks again, brother. We elves stand together, eh?" He waved jauntily and departed, leaving Velandryn feeling more than a little bemused. I bring you this letter to let you make this deception right, and you expect me to carry more lies to Camilla? He slipped both letters into a pouch on his belt, and made his way
back towards the main street and the inn. He needed a drink.

"Sorry, we don't have sujamma or greef. I have mead from Honningbrew and some from Falkreath, six types of wine in the cellar, and more ale than you could drink in a year. Also some brandy, should you care for something more akin to those Dunmer drinks." Delphine was exactly as the blacksmith had described her, a no-nonsense woman who nonetheless greeted him politely and offered him food, drink and a room for the night for thirty drakes. It was more than a Temple wayhouse would have charged, but less than a cornerclub in Mournhold or Blacklight, and Velandryn called it fair. The inn itself was clean and spacious, and when Velandryn asked to use the alchemical apparatuses against the wall, she agreed on the condition that he clean up after himself. However, her lack of any decent alcohol was disappointing. He finally settled on a brandy that could possibly be mistaken for a Morrowind comberry vintage by someone who had lost their sense of smell and taste, and never set foot within a thousand miles of the Dunmer homeland. He planned to pass an hour or two playing around with the various plants he had found on the road to Riverwood. His unfortunate experience the night before had rekindled an old interest in alchemy, and he wanted to try to actually apply his theoretical knowledge; a proper potion that dulled the cold could come in very handy here.

Drink in hand, Velandryn made his way over to the alchemy bench, and unloaded the ingredients he had gathered. First up was some sort of mountain flower, purple in color, which should, when submerged in boiling water and sustained by a flow of magicka, impart its most basic alchemical qualities into the magically infused water. In theory, at least, this would allow him to learn what properties the plant contained. Conversely, there was a chance that the ingredient would react violently and consume itself in a burst of chaotic magical overload. A few months of lectures fifteen years ago was far from the most comprehensive knowledge base, and he hoped dearly that his memory was accurate on this point. In fact, the flower had been chosen as the first test because he was fairly certain that it would not do anything too drastic if misapplied. Probably.

As the flower failed to react in any way, Velandryn briefly considered just eating it and seeing what would happen. While his earlier experiment had not gone too well, it was unlikely that any quality possessed by such common plants could harm him significantly. Given that he was in a well-heated inn, he was likely safe. As he was debating, the flower emitted a magical signature that felt vaguely like rest, perhaps relating to physical rejuvenation, and he decided that should he be unable to ascertain any qualities through this method, he would try giving it a nibble when he was safely in his room tonight. It would not do to look a fool in front of a room full of Nords. Likewise, he could not ask for help, as the thought of exposing his ignorance of this craft was intolerable.

"Well now, working hard already!" Hadvar had likely not been quiet in his approach, but this extraction took no small concentration, and so Velandryn had not heard him approach. He tried to conceal his surprise, and turned to regard the Imperial. He had a full mug of some foaming nut-brown liquid, and looked very pleased with himself, as well as more than a little drunk. "V'lendryn my friend, we must share a story! We slew bandits and escaped a dragon, and we deserve a damn drink for that!" He grabbed the Dunmer and steered him to the table.

Velandryn, to his own surprise, was not opposed to this idea, though the timing was less than ideal. "I will be back here at dusk, Hadvar. There are still things I need to do before sunset." There was no chance he would have time to properly analyze all of these reagents before returning to the traders, and after that he would be engaged in drinking with a Nord, which could only end badly. It seemed that he would either need to go the tried-and-true method of consuming these ingredients while wholly ignorant of their effect, or else ask one of the locals for their insight. He honestly could not decide which one was more unpalatable. He deposited his pack in his room, and pushed the door open, thankful for his heavier cloak against the chill in the air as the sun went down. I
must find a potion that works tonight. This chill could become dangerous if I do not.

The Riverwood Trader was quiet, a single Nord leaving with a pack under her arm as Velandryn returned. Lucan greeted him instantly upon his arrival, beaming with joy. "I found it! Shalk resin from Morrowind!" He held out a wooden box, which Velandryn opened to find a small clump of tan material. He prodded it experimentally. It was as hard as a rock.

"Out of curiosity, how long have you had this?" He would need to treat it all night for it to be usable.

"I have no idea. I remember seeing it two years ago, right after we arrived. It's possible I brought it with me from Cyrodiil, or in one of my initial shipments. Really, you should thank Camilla for finding it. She was the one who went through the boxes."

Velandryn glanced at her, and she bowed her head. "It was nothing, since it will help you tomorrow, I trust."

"It will, though perhaps not as directly as you might have hoped. I am glad you found this, though. And the clay?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Here you are." The lump of clay was fresh and soft, perfect for use. Velandryn put it in the box alongside the resin.

"Well, I will see you tomorrow. Do try and keep the claw unharmed. It has great value to me. Purely for sentimental reasons, of course. Worthless to anyone else."

Velandryn indicated assent, and was turning to go, when he suddenly remembered.

"Camilla, could I speak with you for a moment? Someplace…" He glanced at Lucan "private?"

"Of course." She led him upstairs, stopping at the top of the stairs and turning to face him, one step below her. Clever. Gives her the advantage psychologically as well as physically. "Well? What is it you want?"

"I have two letters for you, from Faendal and Sven. Deception is the cruelest form of warfare, to be used against the foes' hearth and never your own, so teaches Mephala. Each was insistent that you read his, and each was certain he would win your heart. Through Revelation may we undo Wrong-Action and turn it right, so teaches Boethiah. I agreed to give them to you, and I have done so. The light of Truth dispels the comforts of our minds, and may be unwelcome, so teaches Azura. "Read them, and decide how you wish to proceed."

She was reading both letters, and looked as though she did not relish what she had read. Velandryn had glanced over them both, and knew that either would have easily turned her against the purported sender. Both at once? He would be interested to see her reaction.

She looked down at him. Her eyes glistened, and when she spoke her voice was uneven. "Can you go? I need to… I will see you tomorrow, give you directions…"

As he descended the stairs, Velandryn heard a faint "Thank you" from behind him. He exited to the street, and returned to the Sleeping Giant Inn, walking slowly and taking in the sunset while thinking about what it meant to lie, and to be in love. Lies he knew well, but he did not think he had ever been in love. From all that they say of it, if I was, shouldn't I know?

When he pushed open the door to the inn, it was to find the common hall a warm and glowing room full of townsfolk laughing and drinking. Sven was playing some tune on a lute, and Faendal was talking in low tones with a pair of Redguard hunters in patched leathers. Sven gave him a
conspiratorial smile, and Faendal a subtle nod as he walked by. He found Hadvar entertaining a
group of men and women with a fanciful recreation of their journey from Helgen to Riverwood.
Velandryn was amused to hear Ralof’s role in the bandit fight excised completely, and apparently
Velandryn had actually been a Dunmer spellsword who struck down a bandit with a single bowshot
and then turned an archer to ash with a wave of his hand. Perhaps outrageous lies while drunk are
a cherished Skyrim tradition. He sat down, and let the warmth and camaraderie envelop him.

Some hours later, a rather drunker Velandryn Savani staggered into his room and collapse onto the
bed. Oh, gods, Nords can drink. The other non-Nords had either paced themselves or grown
accustomed to the ridiculous amounts of alcohol imbibed, as most of them were able to leave
upright when they chose to do so. Hadvar himself had still been out there when Velandryn left,
entertaining the remaining patrons while Delphine kept their drinks filled and purses light. Ralof
had been right, he noticed. While someone was boasting of your heroic deeds, you didn't pay for
anything. Hadvar as the boisterous Nord and Velandryn as the stoic and mysterious Dunmer
seemed to work well enough for those buying. At first his silence had been because he didn't feel
comfortable talking to the Nords. Several drinks in, it had been to hide his drunkenness. Either
way, he hoped he had not embarrassed himself. I overcame my dislike of speaking to crowds long
ago, but it seems that an audience of my fellow acolytes does not impact me as deeply as does one
of drunken Nords. As he was pulling off his boots, he remembered that he still had to work on a
potion, as well as treat the resin for the morrow. The potions can get blighted, I need to sleep. The
resin though, I can set that to soak.

Delphine gave him the empty porcelain bowl that he asked for, but she wanted to know why. He
showed her the chunk of shalk resin, and explained that it was completely unworkable in its current
state. Her lips pursed. "Half an answer might be better than none, but if you are sleeping in my inn,
I want the whole of it. What are you making beneath my roof?" When he told her, she replied that
she would happily give him whatever he needed, provided he show her when it was complete. This
he promised gladly, and returned to his room, bringing a wedge of hard cheese and a bottle of near-
boiling water with him.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he put the bowl on the bedside table, poured some of the water into
it, and submerged the shalk resin. Holding his hand over it, he took the steel dagger from its sheath,
and passed his hand across it, letting flame purify the blade. Flame from below, flame from within.
The blade bit deep into the skin of his palm, and the blood flowed forth, splashing onto the resin,
which drank it in greedily. Blood of the Chimer, spilled on Resdayn, become the Dunmer, chosen of
the gods. When enough of his blood had spilled that the water had turned a swirling red, he let his
healing magic flow forth, closing the wound. Fatigue hit him from his use of magicka, and he
tucked into the cheese, occasionally taking a swig of the water as well. What kind of inn doesn't
even have guar milk? Savages. By the time he was done eating, the resin had absorbed all of the
blood, and taken on a bloated, reddish look. He upended the rest of his water into the bowl, and
tossed the clay in as well. Finally, he cupped the bowl in his hands and let his magicka flow into it.
The concoction bubbled and roiled, before calming. It would have to do for now. On the morrow,
he could see what he had wrought.

Velandryn Savani slept better his second night in Skyrim than his first. He was warm with a full
belly and the buzz of alcohol in his brain. When he woke, he felt good, better than he had since
Helgen. A look out his window told him that the sun was not quite risen, and as he dressed, he
checked his handwork from the night before. The resin and clay had molded into a thick paste that
stuck to his fingers as he checked it. Perfect. He took the bowl with him when he left, heading out
to the river with his armor under his arm. Still in prisoner's rags. Perhaps I buy a tunic and some
pants, if Camilla will speak to me after yesterday. He had not seen her last night, though her brother
had stopped by and mentioned that she was closed up in her room, feeling unwell. Velandryn
wished it had been different. She suffered a wrong, and I am the bearer of it, if not the cause.
Leaving the inn, he found Hadvar geared up and ready to depart. The Legionary was deep in negotiation with one of the carriage drivers who plied the roads between cities, but drew up and saluted, clenched fist over heart, when he saw Velandryn. The Dunmer looked for some trace of mockery in the crisp gesture, but saw none. He returned the salute, and turned towards the general store. *A good man, and one I am glad to have met. May his cause be true and his victories many.*

The bitter cold of the air was unpleasant, and reminded Velandryn that he had not solved the issue of a potion to combat the cold. Cursing his drunken weakness the night before, he resolved to ask Lucan or Camilla, assuming he could not simply buy some potion or amulet to ward off the chill. *An amulet might be wise, though no doubt pricey. I should have made that part of my deal.*

Despite Lucan's words, the general store was still closed when he passed it. He took the first path towards the river, and came upon it suddenly, the narrow walkway between houses taking a sharp turn and opening up, revealing a small embankment at the river's edge. Sitting on a tree stump was Camilla Valerius, looking over the river with a distracted expression. He turned to find another spot, not wishing to intrude, but she looked up and fixed him with red-rimmed, bagged eyes.

"Master Savani, isn't it? I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I'm not ready to take you to Bleak Falls just yet." Her voice was half-broken, and her hands trembled on her skirts. "It is fine, truly, and I should be the one apologizing." He had acted from a place of righteous indignation and considered his choices correct, but seeing her face lined with grief and lack of sleep, spurred him to defend his actions to himself as much as her. "I probably ruined your evening and these romances, and then I intrude on you here. I should— I'll go, and...I'm sorry." He was no longer certain, looking at her stricken face, that the sermons and parables of the Temple were as true a guide as he had thought.

She spoke over him as he was leaving, her words rooting him in place. "When we arrived in Riverwood, Sven was the first to greet us. He helped us unload the carriage, and told me that the town would be the better for my being here. Faendal brought me choice cuts of meat, and told me about the amazing things he would see while hunting. Sven sings songs of the great heroes of the past, and makes them come alive." She sighed. "I want more than to be a shopkeeper's sister all of my life. They were caring and kind and adventurous, and even if they fought with each other, it was nice to be desired. But this? They lied to me! Each tried to make me think the other was awful, and so cruelly! It was easy to see through when I read both letters, but I didn't want to believe." She looked back at him. "I blamed you at first. I thought it was some cruel Dark Elf jape you were inflicting on me. But how could you know my fears about each of them? It had to be them, much as I don't want it to be. Just tell me one thing. Why?"

"They love you, both of them, and tried to remove the other from your affections. However, lies are a tool of warfare, and while lies to destroy a rival in love I can understand, to make you the victim of these lies is cruel, and I could not let it happen. My people have a...long history with lies told from a place of love. And sometimes, to undo one liar, you must use deception yourself."

"That makes absolutely no sense, and what do you mean your people? Do you expect me to believe that Dark Elves have some special relationship with the truth —" Velandryn cut her off. "My people have suffered more than you can imagine from the lies of those who claimed to love us. Thrice the Dunmer have been deceived, and three times were we saved by divine truth. Lies told for love are nothing more than chains to bind shut your eyes. Those who tell you falsehoods while claiming to love you wish you immobile and restrained, living in a cage that they may control you. It is vile, and I shall not stand for it."

She nodded. "Tell me this, then. How did it happen? Did you put them up to this, or was it some
"Sven approached me first, and I went to Faendal to let him set things right. I would not have intervened had he not attempted exactly the same ruse. They were both liars, and so I was the only one who could give you the truth."

Her response was not long in coming. "Thank you, I think." She was still clearly upset, but her abject distress had gone, leaving with it an air of resigned suffering. "They are both good men, for all of this."

"I do not doubt it. Let them prove themselves to you again, if you wish." He stooped down at the edge of the river, and brought forth the bowl of thick paste and his fur and hide chestpiece as Camilla looked on in interest.

"This is what you wanted the clay and resin for?"

"Aye." He put two fingers into the paste, and began to draw on the right side of his armor, which would sit over his heart. A stylized hand, four fingers outstretched upward together, thumb beside them. The paste was a rich dark red on the dull brown of the armor as Velandryn applied the first coat. It behaved much like paint, but as it dried it seemed to sink into the armor like a dye, with only the rougher texture and different color showing where it had been applied.

"Is it some sort of decoration?" Camilla was watching him work, eyes glued to his hand as it etched the painstaking lines. A mistake would be unfortunate, as a specialized reagent was required to remove the oath-dye, and he did not have the knowledge required to make it. In truth, he had made this batch hastily, while drunk no less, and was not certain how it would behave. Hopefully, it would mark him well enough until he had time to get better armor and prepare a proper batch. "Or is it war-paint?"

"In a way." He finished the first coat and sat back, observing his handiwork. It was clearly hand-drawn, but the lines were clear and the color strong. "It will serve."

"So what does it mean? Is it some symbol of your clan or family?"

"It is a symbol of my people, and my devotion. It is Ghartok, the Hand." He began to apply a second coat.

"Ghartok? Is that a Dark Elf word for hand?"

"It is Ehlnofex, the first language. And it does not just mean hand, it is Hand. Ghartok is the hand that is a weapon, the part of yourself that becomes your servant when you are ready to do violence. Nerevar the Godkiller used it as his standard, and the Tribunal after him, though it has since been worn by many who follow the Great Council." He looked at Camilla, who still appeared confused.

"So, why are you putting it on your armor? Is this because you are going into battle? Are you some sort of religious warrior? Wait, I thought your Tribunal was those living gods who went and died hundreds of years ago."

"They are gone. Their names remain, and some choose to worship them. I do not, but I respect their legacy, and their work to defend the Dunmer."

"But why are you putting it on your armor?"

Velandryn had been hoping she wouldn't notice that he hadn't answered that part. It was a little embarrassing, after all. "Your people...don't like mine. Imperials are fine, for the most part, but by
and large Nords have no use for me. I had the idea yesterday, when I entered Riverwood, and found myself surrounded by humans. I mark my armor like this, and I am adorned with a universal symbol of my people, of our devotion to law and the defense of our home. I am victorious, and the Dunmer have victory. I die, and I have died on the path of righteousness. It brings peace to me, I suppose."

She had a strange look in her eyes now, one he couldn't place. Humans could be difficult to read; their eyes gave away nothing and it was their faces that moved. He had finished the second coat, and cleaned his hands in the river before beginning the final layer. She was silent as he worked, and soon enough it was done.

He slid the armor over his head, and laced it up as Camilla watched. "Is it another symbol of the Dark—the Dunmer to wear those rags instead of clothing?"

"It is a symbol of the fact that I was wearing these rags, have yet to change out of them, and keep forgetting to buy new clothes." He should have been self-conscious, but he was past caring. "Now, show me where these bandits are, and I will go do something exceedingly unwise."

She led him up the road, pointing out buildings of interest, but stopped while looking at the mill. "Lucan said he heard a story last night at the inn that you and the Imperial soldier saw a dragon. Is that true?"

"Saw? If I saw everything like I saw that dragon, I would be dead three thousand times over. It burned Helgen to ash around us, scattered an Imperial garrison, sent a pack of Thalmor into full retreat, and likely sent rumor flying across Tamriel. I'm honestly shocked that nobody brought word to Riverwood before us."

"Oh, Sven's mother claimed she saw it, but it's not that surprising that nobody came through here. We're not the most direct route to anywhere. Helgen was a military town first, and the Imperial forces mostly stay out of Whiterun Hold. We're neutral, so they don't want to cause an incident. Stormcloaks for the same reason. Both sides are trying to convince us to join them, so they stay out. And Thalmor aren't welcome at all. We might not be in rebellion, but we know that those damned elves are to blame for it." She realized who she was talking to. "Oh, I mean, ah, sorry."

Velandryn waved her apology away. "The Thalmor hate my people even more than yours, I think. I ran into some of them down in Cyrodiil, and learned that while they may not care overmuch for men, they despise Dunmer. It makes sense though, as we killed one of their gods when we left, and they are nothing if not traditionalists. Also, they might be upset about the part where the Tribunal gave Tiber Septim a walking god to crush their nation." He shrugged. "You won't hear me complain about insulting them."

They walked on, and finally came to the covered bridge that crossed the White River. She led him across it, and began giving him directions to the barrow. He thought he had the path well enough, and, before going, decided that he could risk asking one last question. When he did, she smiled.

"To resist the cold? Try the purple mountain flowers, plus snowberries or thistle branch. They should serve you well. I know that if I ever go up into the mountains, I bring a few with me. Here, take these." She pressed a few homemade potions into his hands.

"Thank you again. Now, I should be going. The sun is rising, and I have a bandit clan to contend with." This is still a terrible idea, but I feel a little more prepared than I did last night. And with that, he was off, over the river and up the path, to fight or bargain with thieves or bandits and whatever other horrors dwelt in an old Nordic burial hall. How bad could it be? Unfortunately, he was fairly certain that the answer was very.
Chapter End Notes

A/N: Not much to say here, but can answer a few questions.

With regards to character motivations and morality, Velandryn is young, by Dunmer standards, and a good person, also by Dunmer standards. However, his morality is neither our morality nor Nordic morality, and every action he takes will certainly not be classically heroic. As to why he came to Skyrim, it will be addressed in future chapters.

I do plan to include Dragonborn, though I've not decided where I should weave it in. probably later, given the nature of the story. By virtue of location, it will have to be largely self-contained, since Solstheim is harder to convincingly travel to and from on a whim. Miraak is a superb character, however, and my adoration of Hermaeus Mora and his Lovecraftian roots means there is no chance I will pass it up.

I hope to put out one chapter every week or two, and will try not to have them be less than 5000 words. If one goes much over ten thousand, I may break it into two.

Note on alchemy: I have made it decidedly trickier, inspired in part by Morrowind, where low skill could just lose a potion even if the correct ingredients were used. I like alchemy, alteration and illusion, and think they are powerful aspects that get short shrift, so I will try to give them all some time to shine.
"This is all your fetching fault, you know. I should have been on my way to Whiterun by now, but you had to go and be clever."

The Dunmer's only reply was to grin back at him. He sighed, and added some more wood to the fire.

"We're supposed to be better than this. I'm measuring every word I say, trying not to let them see that I don't have a gods-dammed clue what I'm doing, and you go and get me involved in this…this idiot scheme of yours. It's a disgrace, and so are you, you blighted four-cornered fetcher!"

Cursing at the thief made him feel better. Clearly the Dunmer didn't mind, he just kept grinning. The fire had blazed up well, the old wood and dry corpses burning merrily.

"I was supposed to be in and out. Get supplies from the blacksmith, let the Nords know a dragon is incinerating their towns, and be on my way. You fetching s'wit."

The tower was perched on the edge of the mountain, overlooking Riverwood far below. Jutting out from the slope, it had only one approach, a bridge leading off from the path up the mountain to Bleak Falls Barrow. Velandryn had been watching it for a few minutes now, and while it was clearly not any sort of headquarters or place of import, if they saw him going up the path they could easily make his life very unpleasant. There did not appear to be more than three or four in there, but even one of these bandits would be more than a match for him in a fair fight. However, there was a chance it wouldn't have to come to that.

Velandryn approached the bandit at the near side of the bridge slowly, hands raised in what he hoped was a nonthreatening posture. "Greetings, I was –"

Immediately the bandit drew her axe and shield, and made a menacing gesture. "Stay back unless you want to die!"

Velandryn had hoped that he could negotiate with them for information, or perhaps even use them to gain access to Bleak Falls Barrow. Unfortunately, it seemed that he would be unable to talk with them, if this angry Nord was any indication. As they were unlikely to be impressed by his extensive knowledge of Dunmer history and theology, his list of possible solutions was somewhat narrowed. Sneaking past was unlikely to work, and the alternatives…

Velandryn beat a hasty retreat down the path, far enough that the bandit was content to remain at her post and watch him go. Behind her, another bandit emerged, and stood beside the first. He had a bow, ready to cut him down should he return. Now that there were two, the beginning of an idea took root. He prepared the spell, letting his magicka pool first in his mind, focusing and
concentrating the raw energy. To do this properly, he would need to succeed where he had often failed. *I am in control. Now, and forever more. Rage cannot use me, I am in control.*

His first mentor had cautioned him from the start. "You have potential, but you are too easily distracted. Your blood boils, and you lose control. Rule your rage, be in control, and when you master yourself, you will master the world."

*Rule my rage. It was his, honed and sharpened through the years. He had learned to leash it, but it was always there, ready to be let loose. I have control.* He channeled that rage into his magicka, and thrust out his hand towards the axe-wielding bandit.

It was said that there were two ways to master a spell, to comprehend its workings and impose them on the world, or to have an instinctual connection with a particular effect and manifest it through magical potential. For Velandryn, he had always enjoyed study, but his greatest strength was those spells that channeled some facet of his soul. Fire to destroy, or blinding rage to suppress reason and turn an unsuspecting bandit into a mad berserker who would strike down their friend as readily as a foe.

Humans were short lived and quick-tempered, as a rule. Nords especially were slaves to their passions, fighting as fiercely as they loved and reveled. Those who had abandoned their laws to live as bandits were, therefore, likely even more predisposed towards excess. The woman shook her head in confusion as the spell worked its way into her mind; the archer reached out to check and make sure she was okay. Her axe took his hand off at the elbow, his scream ended in a bloody moan as her second blow bit into his neck. As she stood there, covered in his blood, another bandit emerged from the tower, yelling something to Velandryn's victim and drawing his sword, guarding against whatever threat had killed their fellow. This new bandit did not realize his mistake until the first was moving in, axe raised for the kill. However, blind rage reduced one's skill in combat, and the second bandit parried easily, shouting something at his fellow as he attempted to calm her down.

Velandryn had no idea how long the effect of his fury would last, so he unslung his bow and drew back his shot, taking careful aim. He did not have a natural eye for this; he needed time to line up the shot. Fortunately, his target was so far gone that she was swinging her shield as well as her axe in offense, giving no thought to the Dunmer she had seen earlier. His arrow punched through furs and clothing and the flesh of her back, causing her to stagger. She did not fall, however, but only redoubled her attack, yelling incoherently. *What did the other do to her? Even fury in the mind could not make one slay a lover or trusted ally.* It seemed that either these three had merely been allies of convenience, he had gotten lucky and enraged the one who carried a grudge against her fellows, or she simply hated all other folk. *Or I am a mage of unparalleled skill who wields power unimagined over the minds of lesser beings.* He was a nice idea.

The arrow had slowed the bandit, but her rage sustained her. The other looked to still be trying to disarm rather than kill, a difficult task when faced with incoherent fury. Velandryn's second shaft, which punched through his light armor into his side, did not improve matters. The first bandit took advantage of her target's pain and surprise, and launched an onslaught of blows that culminated in a heavy downward chop that split the lucid bandit's skull and fountained yet more blood onto the madwoman.

Now that both of her fellows were dead, she turned slowly, and her eyes met his. He had closed to within thirty paces of her now, arrow nocked and string taut. She roared out a wordless battle cry and charged. He loosed the shot, thanking the Three that in her rage she had thrown her shield aside to close the ground faster.
Her armor was light fur, fine to ward off bests or glancing blows, but no match for an arrow at nearly point blank range. The feathered shaft sprouted from between her breasts, and to Velandryn's shock she actually managed to reach him, even as blood bubbled from her mouth along with her gasping breaths. She drew the axe back, but it was sluggish and clumsy, blood loss already taking its toll. Velandryn had drawn his sword, however, and while he was certainly no gifted swordsman, he could finish off a single dying bandit easily enough. As the thrill of battle wore off, he realized that he was actually fairly cold. He unwrapped one of Camilla's potions from its cloth lining and downed it, silently thanking the Imperial woman for her generosity.

Looting the dead was a distasteful but lucrative few minutes. Those few qualms he might have had about rifling through the possessions of the dead were quieted by the potions, lockpicks, and coin he found on them. After all, it was not as if they were honorable foes slain in righteous combat. These were nothing but bandits, and their lives and property were forfeit.

Afterwards, Velandryn checked the tower, gathering what gold and potions he could. He came upon a locked chest on the top floor, and decided that he might as well try to open it and see what was inside. Judging by the lockpicks scattered around, the bandits had had a similar idea. When he tried the lock, he found it open, to his pleased surprise. Perhaps that is what they were up to when I interrupted. Inside he found some gold and a few gems, as well as a blue hood spun from some rough material. It looked plain enough, but when his fingers touched it he felt magic thrum within. When he pulled it on, he the flow of magicka within him intensified. Useful, to find a mage's hood here. Looking down on the blood-soaked ground below the tower, he felt a strange confidence. Perhaps I can do this after all.

The fire was burning well, but it needed more fuel before it would suffice. He pulled out a few more pieces of rotting old wood from the alcoves in the wall and added them.

"You are putting me to a lot of trouble, you insolent f'ghan. Are you proud of yourself?"

The Dunmer's grin remained, though the firelight gave it something of a ghastly cast. The axe buried in his skull made a strange shadow on the wall he was leaning on.

"Veathel Dunmeris ilo? If I spoke to you in the tongue of our homeland, would you know it?" he sighed. "Likely not"

The entrance to Bleak Falls Barrow had been guarded by four bandits. Now, two of them fought off a third, while their unlucky fourth sprawled dying on the snow. Velandryn lined up a shot, and watched with satisfaction as one of the two lucid bandits folded over, and was then dispatched by his maddened fellow. The final two came to blows, and the survivor fell quickly to more of Velandryn's arrows. He had never been a particularly passionate archer, but he was finding this immensely satisfying. As long as his foes were lightly armored and more or less stationary, he could hit them without much trouble. His shots rarely killed, but they were sufficient distraction to turn the tide of battle, especially when one of their own was under the effects of an illusion of rage. That particular ploy had worked twice now, and he had no intention of stopping. Symmachus the Red Son had once written that a novel strategy could be victorious only until the enemy learned of it. Fortunately for Velandryn, the doors to Bleak Falls were huge and heavy stone, and pulled shut, so nobody inside should be any the wiser. Pushing one of them open, he slipped into the shadows within, hoping against hope that nobody was watching the portal. Fortunately, the hall was cavernous and his end was dappled with light, and no cry of alarm was raised as he pressed himself into a shadowed corner.

The spell to silence one's footsteps was simple enough, as was the night-eye he used to ensure
nothing was lurking in the darkness. To cast them both in such quick succession would have drained him had he not been wearing that hood, however. As it was, he was only slightly fatigued as he made his way up the hall, to where two more bandits were conversing over a campfire. Drawing close, he managed to overhear them talking. Apparently one of their number, Arvel, was deep in the tomb trying to use the claw to recover some hoard of treasure. The others had been set to watch various parts of the ruin, and these two were keeping an eye out for intruders. One of the bandits was furious about being sent to be a door guard, and made mention of 'wringing that scrawny elven neck' when all of this was done, while the other seemed more accepting of his position, content to sit by the fire and drink.

Velandryn realized that he had an opportunity here. He could test the limits of his fury, and cast it here on the calmer of the two, or he could incite the other and have surefire madness. It took only a moment to decide. He could likely take both should the worst happen, and he needed to know what he was capable of. Even if this failed, he would still be concealed and could strike again. He had to know.

When the spell entered the calm bandit, he didn't respond at first. He stood up and moved around some, but did not attack. The other asked what was wrong.

"Nothing, just felt, something…off."

"Well sit down and be still. You're acting strange."

"Why don't you back off, milk-drinker! Don't tell me what to do!" While Velandryn's spell could not send him fully into violence, it had clearly upset him, and the other noticed.

"It's this place, I'd wager; something in the air. We shouldn't be in here. These barrows are evil."

This was less than ideal, Velandryn decided. He would have to be careful with this spell in the future, but for now his focus had to be on eliminating these two foes, as they guarded the only way deeper into the barrow. He could feel the emptiness inside that indicated he should take time to rejuvenate his magicka, but his night-eye was ending and he was too close to these two to be casting spells as he pleased. He needed to use his advantageous position to bring them down quickly. When he noticed a half-broken urn of some sort in the darkness on the far side of the fire, his plan took shape. He scooped a rock off of the ground, and tossed it into the urn. Its echoing clatter drew both of the bandits' attention, and the one under Velandryn's half-effective sorcery tromped off to investigate, while the other merely stood by the fire, bow drawn. Muttering about 'damn skeevers,' the bandit who was investigating was soon off beyond the circle of the fire's light. Now, one bandit was in striking distance, and the other was off blundering in the darkness.

Velandryn had no time for nerves, he must move quickly or this was all for naught. His footsteps still muffled, he ran up behind the bandit by the fire, and drew the iron knife with burned grip across his neck. As the bandit gurgled and his bow dropped from a lifeless hand, his body slumped down, and Velandryn fought to hold it aloft. He eased the corpse gently down, grimacing as the hot blood ran over his hands. Fortunately, it seemed he had not made much noise, so the other bandit should—

"Hey! What in Oblivion?" Oh. He had not thought this through as well as he could have. He stood silhouetted in the light, immensely visible to any in the dark. The fire also had destroyed the Dunmer's night vision. He should be thankful, he supposed, that his night-eye had dissipated, else the excess of light would have blinded him. Now he only had to contend with a foe who could strike from anywhere, while Velandryn was unable to anticipate an attack more than the merest second in advance. This is where actual training would have been useful. Supposedly one acquires instinctive responses for situations like this, and those would be very nice right now. He readied
his sword and tried to listen and scan the darkness all at once.

A deafening bellow suddenly came from the blackness to his left, and the sound of pounding footsteps soon followed. Velandryn silently thanked the Three that rage made people disregard tactical advantages, and readied his blade. He could hear the Nord approaching, and concentrated magicka in his left hand, letting it burn and prepared to ignite. If not for the hood he would be drained entirely, but this would be his last use of magic for the time being. It had to be right.

The Nord burst out into the light, roaring and swinging a crude iron mace, knocking Velandryn's sword aside. The weight of the blow meant that the bandit had to readjust before the backswing; all the opening Velandryn would get. He felt the fire rise with him, and let it burn. A gout of flame washed over the Nord, scorching his armor and burning his flesh. Still roaring wordlessly, the Nord clutched at his face with his off-hand, bringing the mace back in a wild swing. Velandryn could parry this, however, and closed to within the bandit's guard. His sword bit deep into the bandit's shoulder, and the mace clattered to the ground. The bandit lunged at Velandryn, his one good arm coming up in another wild, brutal blow. The impact sent him sprawling to the ground, and the half-blinded, moaning, one-armed Nord grabbed his mace with his left hand, and closed for the kill. Velandryn still had his sword, and it was obvious that this bandit was no great warrior either, so the Dunmer took a gamble and lunged at him. His blade bit deep and pulled back, and this time blood spurted not just from the wound, but from his mouth as well. Die, you bastard. I've killed you, now DIE! Finally, slowly, the bandit collapsed, and Velandryn sagged back down. His magicka was spent and his nerves were frayed, and he needed to take a minute to get his head back in order.

That went very wrong, and I got lucky. He had made a number of mistakes there, and would need to revise his approach. The first step was to better target his opening shot. He was under no delusions about his combat prowess compared to these bandits. Most were Nords, who outweighed him by no small amount and had a span or two of height on him. With longer reach and greater strength, they would win if they reached melee range and he had no magic to level the playing field. He would have to dictate the terms of the engagement before it began, and ensure that it ended swiftly enough that he did not lose control. During the fight, he had to keep his foes off-balance, to offset their physical and numerical superiority. To this end, he decided to see what new tools awaited him in the firepit's vicinity.

Neither bandit had much of interest on them aside from a paltry few coins, but the search allowed Velandryn to overcome the last vestiges of his revulsion at looting the dead. They were bandits, their human souls would never become ancestors, and thus their mortal bodies were no more than meat and blood. In a chest by the fire, he found two vials of a thick, dark, liquid, labeled with an 'X' and tightly stoppered. Likely poison, but he had no desire to test it on himself. He carefully applied a smear of the liquid to one of his arrows, and even more carefully put the arrow down beside him for when next he had need of one. There was a pot of water boiling over the fire, and after slaking his thirst, he poured a little over his hands to wash off as much of the blood as feasible. When he noticed a shank of some roasted meat over the fire, he began to find this ancient bleak necropolis just the tiniest bit homely. As he finished his impromptu meal and rose, grabbing the arrow he had prepared, he felt refreshed and ready for whatever lay ahead.

"I wish I could hate you, truly. It's not really your fault, though, my being down here." He rifled through the journal again. "You figured it out, didn't you? And now, I get to find out what this treasure is, and get paid by Lucan besides. So, thank you, I suppose. You fetcher."

As the enormous spider lobbed a mass of webbing at him, Velandryn reflected on how utterly
unprepared for this he had been. The bandits in the tunnels had fallen quickly, and one bottle of that poison was sufficient to mark half a dozen arrows, each of which sapped the strength of their victim and caused them debilitating pain, if their screams were any indication. Then he had discovered where the poison came from, when the giant spiders in his path failed to display any reaction whatsoever to his treated arrows. For them, he had to resort to fire and sword, hacking, slashing, and pouring forth a stream of flame until they were dead. After each died, he had to carefully cleanse the poison from his body with his healing, burning through his magicka at a prodigious rate. It had been slow going, but he had made constant progress, and was even beginning to notice a macabre rhythm to his fights.

Now, all of that was gone as he frantically backpedalled along the wall. What was either the spider queen or a grotesquely overgrown specimen was scuttling around the cavern, and it was all he could do to keep away from it. Several of its legs appeared to have been damaged in an earlier fight and it was oozing some vile black liquid from gashes along its sides and stomach, but that was not slowing it down. Indeed, it was steadily closing, and while Velandryn could keep it at bay with bursts of flame from his hand, he could feel the emptiness inside where his magicka was depleted. What did I think would happen? I am not a hero, I am a thrice-damned fool!

Behind him, one of the bandits was strung up in webbing, screaming his head off and begging for help. As Velandryn paused before, he sliced his sword through the webbing, hoping that if the bandit could get free, he would assist in this fight. The bandit's writhing soon partially freed him, but the spider's surprisingly quick approach meant he had to jump away and sprint for the other side of the chamber. This time, the spider's approach was long enough for him to ready a fireball and throw it directly into the monstrosity's face. The creature reared back, shrieking and chittering, as Velandryn threw himself around it and ran full-pelt for the trapped bandit. His hacking soon had the bandit mostly free, and to his surprise he realized it was a fellow Dunmer. His frantic cries to be freed changed their tune as soon as he was cut down, and he ran off into the tunnel behind him, laughing. As Velandryn had no particular desire to die at the fangs of the largest spider he had ever seen, he took off after him. He was hoping for some answers but would settle for someone to blame for this fiasco. Well, other than me.

The other Dunmer had vanished down the hallways, but by the sound of things his escape was not going as well as he had planned. When Velandryn found him, the thief had been set upon by three…things. They were clearly reanimated corpses of some sort, but they lacked the haphazard form of bonewalkers, and were too far gone to be simple reanimated zombies. The flesh and hair they bore ruled out skeletal reanimation, and the noises they made had guttural undertones that resembled speech. They fought with no grace, but were pressing the Dunmer thief back against the wall. Velandryn decided to take a gamble, and let hot rage flow through him, channeling fury into the leftmost creature. It hesitated, hissed, and then slammed its sword into one of its fellows. That one growled out some harsh exclamation, and wrenched the sword out of its flesh, using the weapons it now had in both hands to cut down its onetime ally. The remaining creature, unaware or uncaring of the fight beside it, continued hammering on the Dunmer, who had sustained several wounds but was still putting up a decent guard.

Velandryn had drawn his bow and was lining up a shot when he noticed that the creature that had killed his maddened one was bleeding; some thick black liquid oozed out of the gaping wound in its gut. It did not appear to notice the wound, but Velandryn had to hope that it was weakened. He began putting arrows into it; after the third shaft pierced it took notice and abandoned the other Dunmer to lumber towards him. In one hand it had the sword it had torn out of its own flesh, in the other it clasped a war axe; both weapons were of a style he had never before seen, crude and misshapen. It advanced, uttering cries in that strange tongue. Velandryn moved first, releasing one more shot into its torso then casting the bow aside and bringing up both hands. He had no chance with his one sword and haphazard style against those two weapons, but fire could be effective. The
slow, oozing liquid it bled should indicate significantly lower levels of moisture in the flesh, and its mummified appearance only reinforced that likelihood. There was only one way to find out if he was right, though. He poured fire from his hands, and the thing screamed like an animal in pain as it burned, falling to the ground and twitching. Velandryn was already moving, throwing fire at the other one. This one, however, while it burned, had the presence of mind to change targets and close on him. Velandryn drew his sword, and once again found himself desperately parrying blows from a much stronger foe. Each hit made him think his arm would break, and he found his idea of lighting his enemies on fire relied on the hitherto unexamined assumption that his enemies would care. As it was, this one was clearly made form sterner stuff than the other; it pressed onwards even as its blackened skin peeled away to reveal the flesh and bone beneath. Behind it, the other Dunmer had vanished further into the barrow; Velandryn knew he had to end this fight now and get after him. Fortunately, the fire had charred away much of the creature's muscle, and its attacks were becoming increasingly sluggish. Finally, he managed to spear through its arm with a lucky thrust, wrench back the blade, and with three frantic chops remove its head.

Panting, Velandryn leaned against the wall. He was bleeding from half a dozen places, none major wounds, but still in need of care. A single healing potion was enough to take care of the damage, though he felt strange as always while his body knit his flesh together before his eyes. Mortal bodies could not easily handle the energies of healing potions, and he knew he would have a voracious hunger that evening. However, he would be a fool to let queasiness stop him from using every resource available down here. These strange creatures he had bested were troubling not just for their unknown capabilities, but also for what they represented. Either they were active down here all of the time, which meant the lower halls could be infested with more of them, or they had been animated, which meant that someone or something that was capable of a style of reanimation that he had no knowledge of was present. Either way, he felt his tenuous control of the situation rapidly diminishing.

Hauling himself to his feet, Velandryn retrieved his bow from where he had tossed it, noting as he did so that he was abusing the weapon such that it would soon need replacing. It had not been made from the finest of materials to start, and he was half-sure that it was already warping. Either that or he was an even worse shot than he thought. Slinging it over his shoulder, he made his way deeper into the barrow.

After dodging the swinging blades that comprised some ancient trap in the hallway leading down, Velandryn stumbled out into the chamber beyond, and saw the Dunmer he had been chasing facing him, a hideous grin on his face. Behind him, one of the barrow-dwellers pulled its axe from his skull, and he collapsed to one side, sliding down into a slump and smearing blood and brains on the wall behind him. The creature hefted its axe and brought it down once more. This time, it lodged in there, and as the creature tried to pull it free, Velandryn charged one hand with burning magicka, as much as he could, and grabbed the monster by the face. The sound it made was like nothing he had ever heard, but Velandryn Savani was beyond caring. He watched dispassionately as the creature staggered back, head aflame, and silently drew his bow as more of the things emerged from various alcoves and sarcophagi. His calm shots targeted heads and torsos to cause significant bleeding, and any that closed were swiftly dispatched by bursts of flame. Archers he cut down with bolts of fire, and soon he had consumed three potions of magicka, which opened his body to Aetherius and allowed for more magic to be cast, but would give him shivers and aches as his body readjusted to its normal state. Fortunately, only two of the foes were the stronger variant of the barrow-dwellers, and one of them was an archer content to remain at range until his fire had consumed its body to the point that it no longer posed a threat. The other he emptied his quiver into as it approached and then hacked to pieces with numb precision. Each blow was methodical and emotionless, and as he parried a slash that would have opened him through his armor, he was lost in the clash of steel on steel and bizarre serenity of the moment.
As he slowly returned to himself, he realized that everything else in the room was dead, he was astride the corpse of the final barrow-dweller stabbing into it with his steel dagger, his sword had been thrown aside, there were tears running down his cheeks and, although it was likely not even midday outside, he was more exhausted than he had ever been in his life. Every part of his body ached, and the shivering chill that was upon him from the potions did not help matters, though it would pass soon enough.

He looked over at the other Dunmer, the thief. He could have been taking a rest, if not for the bloody scene on the wall behind him and axe sticking out of his skull. The first other of his kind he had seen since arriving in Skyrim, a worthless thief mistrusted even by his own band of outlaws. He noticed a pack in the other Dunmer's hand; when he pulled it open, it was revealed to contain some sort of claw made of gold, as well as a leatherbound journal. Reading through, it became apparent that this was Arvel the Swift, who had masterminded this entire plot, planned to betray his compatriots, and hoped to find some treasure by using the claw to somehow unlock a door. He looked over at the onetime thief. "Did you a lot of good, didn't it?"

He stood, ready to move on, but upon scanning the room he paused. The body of Arvel was jarring and wrong down here. **He is nothing. He is n'wah and a bandit besides, and he deserves no honors.** Nonetheless, something within him rebelled at the thought of leaving the body of this Dunmer alone in this unhallowed place. It would take time and he could not give a reason why, but he knew that he could not leave this one body to share the fate of all those he had slain. **I would have slain this one too, if it came to that. Alive, he was nothing. So why does his body demand such respect?** He began dragging the bodies of the barrow-dwellers together, and tore down planks of wood from the surroundings to add to the nascent pyre. A quick burst of flame got the whole thing burning, and as he watched it grow, he began to talk. It was a one-sided conversation, but it was the first he had had since arriving in Skyrim where he needed no pretense, had no honor to uphold or goal in mind. There were no bargains or threats here, just speech. His partner in this monologue kept grinning, which gave the whole thing a slightly farcical air, and called forth his rage once more. As he built the fire, he conversed with his dead companion, there beneath the earth.

Once the fire burned bright and merry, Velandryn knew it was time. Grunting, he pulled the axe from Arvel's skull, and tossed it into the fire first. Then, he half-carried the corpse over to the pyre. He was not strong, but neither was Arvel very heavy; and he managed to get the thief into the flames without too much trouble, if not very gracefully.

The bodies of Dunmer did not burn easily; it was traditional to anoint them in oil or cast spells of susceptibility to fire upon them before burning, but Velandryn had neither oil nor the magicka and concentration to waste on what was an intricate spell that ultimately only hastened the process. He could use the rest anyways, he reasoned, and slumped silently against the wall, watching the body burn. He had never spoken over an ash-pyre before, but he had assisted, and knew that words were supposed to be said, celebrating the deceased's life and triumphs, and ushering their soul out of the body to serve the Dunmer people as an ancestor. Velandryn did not know this one's history or deeds, but he would end his life with honor, if nothing else.

"Here lies Arvel, named the Swift. He solved the riddle of Bleak Falls Barrow, and perished trying to prove the truth of his discovery. Here, on a pyre of the bodies of his enemies and with the weapon that took his life, let his flesh burn away and his soul be consecrated anew by flame. Let it be, in the name of the Three who test that we may be proven. Let it be, in the name of those who passed before that we may follow. Let it be, in the name of Arvel the Swift, who joins the Dunmer people in death as he never did in life." He had changed the ritual somewhat, but it was only proper, as Arvel had not been a part of his culture, nor a contributing member of any society. In truth, this entire exercise had been more for Velandryn's benefit than the thief's, as he doubted this
outcast would have the devotion to carry his spirit to the Far Realms. Now though, as the blue-grey flesh blackened and split, he sat watching, and fatigue overtook him. He wanted to make it all right, to explain why he was here, but nobody was listening except the dead.

"Do you know why I came to Skyrim? To see the snow fall. I had never seen it except on the ground, and they told me in Cyrodiil that it was beautiful, and Skyrim's the most beautiful of all. If I'm being totally honest, it's nice enough, but on the whole, not worth it. I should have known better than to listen to Nords." He had one bottle of water left, and one of wine that he had taken from a bandit's sack. He took a long pull of the sour red, grimaced, and held it out to the pyre. "I'd offer you some, but, well, I doubt you're in the mood. You must be furious, you poor bastard. You figure this out, steal the claw, and then it all goes wrong and I wind up here. I have the claw, the journal, and I'm alive. So, you know, I win this round. I win the prize. I get to go deeper into this tomb infested by monsters, look for a treasure that may or may not exist, and then return to the wonderful land above where they can't decide if they want to kill me or just treat me as second-class trash because of my race.

"I'm not sure I blame you, taking up banditry. I might do the same, if I had to live here." Gods, to live here. Always cold, fire can't warm you, and they hate you besides. "Why didn't you come home? You could have returned to Morrowind, been with your own kind, been respected. We have need of every hand; it can be hard work, but rewarding. Till the earth, learn a trade. Be my brother in the Temple, or join the Guard and protect us all. Or maybe you didn't want that. Maybe you were violent scum who joined up with these human thugs because you wanted an excuse to hurt people.

"I should have been disgusted but I wasn't, today. I killed those humans, made them kill each other, and I felt nothing. They hurt people, robbed and murdered and raped, and they deserved to die." He took another pull from the bottle. "I wish you were still here. I wish you could tell me every one of their crimes, and yours, so I can walk away and forget. I wish you could tell me all of the horrors you committed so I could have left your body to rot down here like all the rest. I hope you were a backstabbing wretch who deserved to die. I…I'm sorry." He placed the bottle of wine, now less than half-full, on the pyre. "There. Take that with you when you pass through the Waking Door." He stood, and looked down on the pyre that held the slowly disintegrating mortal remains of Arvel the Swift. "The snow is beautiful, though."

The door was bound with a great lock and three rings, with the claw clearly intended to go in the middle. Velandryn pulled the golden claw forth, and studied it briefly. The symbols on the claw obviously represented the correct sequence of the symbols on the door. The rings rotated easily; locking into place and allowing the claw to slide into its slot and trigger the door's release. Velandryn watched the door slide into the ground, and saw blackness beyond. Whatever power had lit the torches in these halls did not extend past this door, it would seem. He had traveled fairly easily to this point, as the barrow-dwellers seemed content to rest in their alcoves unless disturbed. Several had awoken as he passed, but a single foe or small group was easily dispatched or avoided from the shadows. Velandryn had taken to filling his quiver with the strange old arrows he found down here; their heads were better made than the iron ones he had brought with him. He had not grabbed any of their bows, however, as despite the finer make they were sized for Nords, and exceedingly old besides. Many of the strings were on the verge of rotting away, and Velandryn would take a reliably bad bow over a superior one that could snap at any point. After leaving Arvel's body, he was glad to find only these creatures awaiting him. He had had enough of bandits for one day.

Entering the huge hall beyond the door, Velandryn briefly considered using night-eyes, but the grandeur of the scene urged him to experience it without magic. A waterfall crashed down, carved
through the rock over untold ages, and a huge wall with unknown writing dominated the far side of the cavern. Before it lay what was unmistakably a sarcophagus, and a large, metal bound chest. This place had to be ancient, predating the Septim Empire at the very least. The arts used to bind the creatures outside to unlife hinted at some ancient power, but the wearing away of the rock from naught but water would require millennia, he suspected. As he advanced, he could see the sunlight from outside lancing in through cracks in the rock walls and ceiling. It cast the entire vista as pools of light of darkness, and Velandryn found himself profoundly moved by what he beheld. Beauty such as this was rare, and he felt privileged to look upon it. *How long since any other man or mer has seen this?* In this, he felt peace, felt his hatred and tension drain away. Until he looked closer at the strange curved wall.

Try as he might, Velandryn's gaze could not avoid the wall. Its writing was completely unfamiliar but oddly compelling; as he studied it he felt the shapes ingrain themselves in his mind. He fancied that there was some echo of meaning etched into this carving, though he knew not what powerful magic had been used to accomplish this. His hand drifted out and traced what he thought must be a word, no, he knew it was a word. He did not know what it said, but understanding was so close. If he could see it from—

Behind him, the lid of the sarcophagus shattered his concentration, and another of the barrow-dwellers pulled itself through the wreckage. This one, bigger even than its Nord-sized companions, was clad in the remnants of armor and finery, and hefted an enormous axe in its withered hands. The axe bore a glowing blue-white spiderweb of magic along its surface that filled the surrounding air with icy malice; clearly it held some enchantment. Velandryn was far too close for his bow, and once again he wished that he had found someone earlier in his life to properly tutor him in the use of the sword. He made do by thrusting both hands forward and channeling a stream of fire into the thing's face. Its only response was to slam its head forward, cracking Velandryn's skull and sending a trickle of blood onto his face. As he retreated he healed the wound, but he was draining magicka at too fast a rate. Fire and healing both would drain him dry, unless…

Diving to one side, he ripped open his bag and pulled out three potions. One to heal, one to reinforce his magicka, and one to protect him against the cold that even now was emanating from his enemy's weapon. He downed all three in quick gulps while leaving his bag where it lay. He would need all of his agility to survive this fight. Behind him, the creature was closing rapidly, heedless of its smoldering skin, axe raised. The monster was wide open, but any blow Velandryn could land would be countered with a stroke that might well cleave him in two. For the moment, he needed distance.

The Dunmer drew his bow, and sprinted with all of his speed to the far end of the cavern, vaulting the crevasse carved by the waterfall and setting up a position from which to fire. He cast night-eye, and used the sudden clarity to rain shafts upon his burning foe. Many of them missed, but enough hit that his foe was soon bleeding as well as burning. As it lumbered forward, it resembled something out of a children's story about the Oblivion Crisis: a flaming corpse riddled with arrows, coming inexorably forward out of Mehrunes Dagon's hell to consume the lands of mortals. It paused at the crevasse, and Velandryn emptied his quiver firing at it. He slid the bow onto his back and pulled deep within himself, harnessing his gift for flame. It was time to make this thing burn.

The flames he had cast at the beginning of the fight had been made in desperation, as he turned to behold a foe bearing down on him. The fires he called forth now were born from pure magicka and focus, designed to do nothing more or less than incinerate his foe from within. Each bolt of fire ate through muscle and ancient armor, and the creature swayed and stumbled, on the verge of collapse. Then, it looked up.

"FUS!"
The shout was not especially loud, but it carried on a wave of air that knocked Velandryn off of his feet. By the time he had gained his breath back and risen to his knees, his foe was nearly upon him, axe swinging once more. Panic rose in Velandryn's throat, and he drew his little steel sword, so inadequate to halt the massive horror descending upon him. As it raised its axe high into the air, Velandryn thrust his blade and rose to his feet, hoping to cause the creature to defend, and give him time to get away. Instead, it took one hand off of the axe and grabbed the sword. *Oh. It could do that, I suppose.* Standing there, the two of them must have made a fine sight, a walking corpse wreathed in flames; holding a giant axe above its head with one hand, while the other gripped the sword that was his opponent's puny weapon. The monster *twisted* the blade, and it wrenched out of Velandryn's grip. His enemy looked at the weapon for a long moment, and then threw it to the ground and stepped over it, closing still. Velandryn found himself with a dagger in each hand, and a pain in his cheeks that could only mean his face was contorted in some terrible expression.

*Kill me?* "I will drag your soul screaming to Oblivion, monster!" He lunged.

The daggers gave him speed, and he was stabbing, hacking and slicing into his enemy as it stood there with axe still raised. It did not seem to feel the pain, but it was literally falling apart as he cut at it. Pieces of charred flesh were dropping off, and he could see exposed muscle twitching within the holes his fire bolts had carved. It still had not moved, and Velandryn only stopped cutting when the axe clattered to the rocks. Looking up at the creature's face, he saw that the light had gone out of its eyes, and when he took a step back, it collapsed into a pile of smoking meat and bones. He retrieved his sword on his way to the chest, too tired to exult in his victory. When he reached his bag, he pulled out the bottle of water and drained it in a single long breath. After that, he decided it was time to see what he had won.

The chest itself was unlocked, and what lay within was, for the most part, disappointingly mundane. He found some gems, coins in a style that Velandryn did not recognize, but which had to be some form of ancient Nord currency, leather armor that had once been finely made but crumbled away as he touched it, and finally a stone tablet that seemed to depict the province of Skyrim in bas-relief. After emptying the chest, Velandryn approached the ruin of his foe, and grabbed the axe from where it lay. It was not a weapon he himself favored, but he was willing to wager it would fetch a fine price from Lucan.

A path led out behind the wall with the strange carvings, depositing him on a ledge bathed in the sun. *Can it truly have been so short a time?* It seemed like days since he had left Riverwood. He made his slow way down the mountain, using the axe as a walking-staff. He found the White River easily enough; the uncut trees floating down meant that he was upstream of the town. He turned his face northward, and began to walk.

Lucan Valerius was overjoyed to have his claw back, and happily handed Velandryn a purse with twelve sovereigns within. Each of the heavy coins was worth twenty-five of the smaller drakes, though Velandryn realized that they probably called it something different here. Lucan had never seen anything like the odd stone map before, and advised him to sell both it and the Nordic coins in Whiterun, as he could get a much better price for them there. However, he was very interested in the axe, eventually trading it for a book on the alchemical properties of the common plants of Skyrim and a small pile of gold. He also gave some advice for free, letting him know that the monsters in the tomb were called *draugr*, Nord dead from ages long before recorded history. That they were walking about was likely because the bandits had disturbed their tomb. It was unwise, he said, to delve too deep into Nordic tombs for just that reason. Why they were able to rise at all, he could not say.

Camilla was nowhere to be seen, and Velandryn told Lucan to wish her well on his behalf. He bid
the shopkeep farewell and made his way back to the inn, where he showed the innkeep the emblem on his armor as she had requested. He then handed over fifty drakes for a bed, a meal now, one more that evening, a final one in the morning, and the right to murder anyone who disturbed his sleep. Delphine's lips quirked upwards at the last request, but she agreed readily enough. He ate without tasting, stumbled into the room assigned to him, dropped his gear on the floor unceremoniously, and was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

When he woke, he pulled back the curtains to see that the moons were high over the mountains, and the stars burned bright in the sky. That likely meant he was late for supper, though he suspected that, having paid, he could wrangle something out of Delphine or her assistant. Although he was still tired and would happily return to bed after eating, he should go out into the common hall. His throat was dry and his stomach aching from hunger, despite having eaten not long ago. He supposed this was the price one paid for drinking so many potions that wreaked havoc on the body's natural healing and magicka rhythms. With a groan, he moved to the door and pushed it open. Without, Delphine was wiping down the bar while a few last patrons sat at the tables in various states of inebriation. No bard was playing, and the quiet suited his mood just fine.

As he approached the bar to inquire about food, he felt a hand on his shoulder. Turning, he saw Camilla standing there, smiling slightly.

"I had heard you returned, and was hoping to see you before you departed. I asked Delphine to prepare a special meal. Won't you join me?"

As she led him to the table she had indicated, Velandryn reflected that she was either very patient or had a good sense of timing. It was far too late for any reasonable person to be taking their evening meal. They sat, and the assistant brought out choice cuts of meats and vegetables roasted to perfection. Camilla dug in with clear enjoyment, and Velandryn was hard-pressed not to shovel it into his mouth. Not only was he was outrageously hungry, but the food itself was exquisite. They ate in silence for a few minutes, and then she began quizzing him about his journey up to the barrow, wanting to know every detail. He told her most of it, leaving out his strange vigil for the thief, as he was still unsure why he had done it in the first place. When he was done, and she had made several appreciative noises for his story, Camilla reached under the table and drew out a folded bundle of cloth.

"Here, this is for you." She handed it to him, and he accepted it, his curiosity piqued.

"My thanks." He unraveled it, prepared to thank her either honestly or out of appreciation for the effort, but when he saw what she had done words failed him. The undershirt was deep blue and felt as though it was made of silk. The tunic was a deep ash-grey, and by the feel also had more than a little silk in the weave. On the chest, in lieu of a sigil, Ghartok Hand-of-Nerevar stood proud in blood red. The pants were fine black linen in a style that he knew to be fashionable in Cyrodiil. A supple leather belt adorned with silver buckle and weapon loops completed the ensemble. With garb like this, he would not need to fear the scorn of the Jarl or his court when he went to Whiterun.

"This is, I mean, you," words failed him. For once, he had no idea how to respond, or what to say. Camilla smiled. "Oh, did I steal the great speaker's voice away? You who 'brought truth to the innocent'?' Here her voice took on a mockery of his gravelly tones, and her smile widened.

He fell back on his most basic courtesies, still unsure of how to proceed. "It is magnificent, and I am honored to accept it." He realized something. "This morning you did not know this symbol." He tapped the hand. "Did you make this?"
Her smile changed subtly, and Velandryn knew that she was pleased with his response, though he still couldn't figure out what human faces were showing most of the time. "I liked the hand when I saw it this morning, and it fits you well. You seem to be fond of it, and I wanted to make the clothes show that you were special." Her cheeks reddened, and Velandryn looked at her quizically. As a Dunmer in Skyrim, it only made sense that his clothes should mark his heritage. He wondered if this was merely repayment for his aid, or something else. Whatever it might be, it was thoughtful and he was touched.

"Well, whatever your motivation, I thank you again. This cannot have been cheap, and I want to compensate you for materials used."

"No! This is a gift, for helping my brother out and for...the other thing." Her smile faded. "I talked to both of them today, and they each apologized beautifully. They want a chance to win my heart anew." Her smile returned. "I think I may even give them another chance, provided they live up to the example you set."

He considered giving her a human smile, and decided to risk it. Humans smiled with their whole face, not just the eyes, but he feared that a Dunmer smile would be lost on her. "They may yet prove themselves worthy."

"Well, if you ever find yourself back in Riverwood, you mustn't be a stranger. I've met only a few Dark Elves in my time, and none at all like you. I would very much like to get to know you better."

As she took the clothing from him and gathered it back into a bundle, she managed to brush him with her hand no less than three times, and Velandryn would have had to be blind not to take her meaning. He had heard that the people of Skyrim were forthright in their attentions, and this seemed the proof. It was something he was unused to, although he did not find it at all unwelcome. He had not been in human lands long, but he found her manner refreshing, and she was far from unattractive. Not to mention, thinking back on the day, he had no desire to be alone with his memories tonight.

"Well, then, in payment for my gift" as she opened her mouth in protest he held up a hand "allow me to buy you a drink at the very least."

She smiled, and moved to his bench, sliding in next to him and slipping her arm around his waist. "They make a wonderful spiced apple cider in Falkreath, and I know Delphine keeps a store in the back. That sounds divine right now."

Velandryn raised his hand to get the Nord server's attention. "My friend, a flagon of your spiced cider and two cups!"

Hunger woke Velandryn before the sun. He went to lift himself out of the bed, but Camilla had managed to trap one of his arms beneath her, and entangle his legs in hers. He suspected that it would be impossible to disentangle himself without waking her, but it would be even more discourteous to wake her with the growling of his stomach, so he was left with no choice. As he worked himself free, her eyes snapped open and she grabbed his hand in both of hers. "Leaving so early? Does the Dark Elf abandon his conquests in the morning?"

He kissed her hands and extracted his own. "The Dark Elf is hungry, and will be back shortly. And, conquest? If anyone deserves the credit, the crafty Imperial lass who seduced the Dunmer traveler is the wicked temptress in this tale."

"Hmm, Camilla the Conqueror. I like it." She stretched languorously, and smiled as he stirred in response. "I want one of Delphine's sweetrolls, and a mug of mulled wine. And you, but that I'll
have anyways." Her tongue flitted out to moisten her lips, and he leaned it to capture them quickly before pulling away.

"I obey my lady's desires." He finished pulling on his new undershirt and pants and let himself out into the common hall. Delphine was behind the bar, and he approached with a lightness in his step he had not felt in some time.

She looked him over, smirking. "Sleep well?"

"As a matter of fact, I did, thank you. My second night in Riverwood was more...charming than the first."

She snorted. "Cute. Well, your second morning may be worse."

He frowned at her. "Is there a problem?"

"Perhaps. A carriage came in from Falkreath while you were asleep yesterday evening. Their next destination is Whiterun, leaving at first light. I would suggest you are on that carriage when it departs."

His frown deepened. "I had planned on spending the morning here, perhaps leaving at midday. The road to Whiterun is safe enough to travel alone."

"Not for you. The carriage wasn't alone when it arrived. A High Elf came with them, with the kind of accent and clothing that makes folks around here nervous. He was asking about anyone who may have escaped from Helgen. By the sound of it, he wasn't looking to inquire after their well-being."

"And what did you tell him?"

"The truth, or enough of it. By the time he got to me, he knew he was looking for a Dunmer, among others. I told him that you spent a night here, and left before dawn. I also mentioned that you had headed up in the direction of Bleak Falls Barrow. Nothing he wouldn't have already heard, since Camilla couldn't stop talking about it. He left immediately, so it is unlikely he heard that you had returned. It is fortunate you slept so long; few saw you today. However, he may have already discovered you are no longer there. You would be wise not to be here when he returns."

"Why did you lie for me?" He appreciated her concealing the fact that he had been asleep not twenty yards from the Thalmor, but no innkeeper he had ever known would jeopardize their own safety for that of their patrons.

"I didn't. I told him the truth. Just not all of it. You're not from here, so I'll say this simply. Some people won't like you because you're a Dark Elf. But you want to make friends? Spit in the Thalmor's face, and you'll have people buying you drinks from here to Windhelm. But you need to be gone. I told the carriage-driver to expect a passenger, but he won't wait forever. Say your goodbyes, and be on your way. Get your message to Whiterun, bring news of the dragons, and then you'll vanish, head back home, and keep your head down for the rest of your days if you're smart."

"I will consider it." And I still wonder what you are keeping from me, innkeeper. Her behavior still made little sense, even if she did not like the Thalmor. She had lied to them, concealed him while he was completely helpless, and was now pushing him out the door to be safe. Do the dragons frighten her so, or does she have some other reason to hate the Thalmor? She was no Nord, but perhaps she had lost family or friends in the Great War. "Thank you again. And if you could prepare a sweetroll and mulled wine for Camilla and something for the road for me, I would be
grateful."

"Done. Your remaining balance can cover a breakfast for her, travel rations for you, and leave us square." She laid out a plate with a sweetroll covered in some sort of cream and a steaming mug of what must have been mulled wine. "I know the favorite foods of everyone in town. When I know Camilla will be having breakfast, I am well prepared."

"Truly your calling was as an innkeep. My thanks." He took the food and returned to the room, where Camilla had extricated herself from the sheets and was skimming through *The Refugees*, that book he had taken from the bandits but still not had a chance to read. She was fully nude, and his admiration at the way her breasts moved as she jumped up was tinged with sadness at the knowledge that he would have to be on his way immediately.

"My my, it seems Dark Elves deliver!" She took the sweetroll and dug in with gusto, while he adjusted the contents of his pack and finished garbing himself. He chose to keep the undershirt on, but covered it with his armor, and strapped his hide leggings over the pants. Over it all went the heavy linen cloak. As he bent to retrieve his boots, Camilla noticed what he was doing.

"Why are you putting on clothes?" She ran a hand down his chest and slipped it into the pants she had given him. "You are supposed to be taking them off." Her hand found him, and he felt himself stiffen. It was all Velandryn could do to not damn the danger and his duty and stay.

He forced himself to remove her hand and pull away. To her wounded look he said "Delphine warned me that a Thalmor agent was in last night looking for anyone from Helgen. He was asking about me in particular."

Her wide eyes met his and her hand drew back in alarm. "That High Elf? I saw him, but I was waiting for you, didn't pay him much mind. But, if he's after you…"

"There is a carriage leaving for Whiterun at dawn. I mean to be on it." He genuinely liked Camilla and had thoroughly enjoyed the previous night, but he had no desire to find out what the Thalmor wanted with him. He slid the bow over his shoulder, and buckled his swordbelt on. "I wish I could stay, but—"

She cut him off by thrusting his bag into his hands. "You need to be gone. I will talk to Delphine and get our story straight, but you have to get to that carriage." She leaned in and kissed him deeply. She tasted of spices and sugar, and it was with sorrow that he pulled away. "When all of this is done, come back and find me. We still have" her expression regained some of its earlier wicked charm "unfinished business."

In the common hall, Delphine had prepared a satchel of food for the road. He accepted it with thanks, gave her a handful of drakes in gratitude, and stepped out into the predawn gloom. The carriage was pulled up in front of the inn, and the Nord sitting on the driver's bench reached out to offer him a hand up. "Lady didn't say you'd be an elf."

"Is that a problem?" If it was, this entire plan could collapse quickly.

"You any good with that bow?"

"Good enough. Why?"

"You sit up here with me and keep an eye open for wolves; they're out in force this time of year. A hundred septims from you gets you to Whiterun, and I give you five back for every wolf you bag me."
"Make it ten and you have a deal." *I am certain he is overcharging, but I have no other options.*

The big driver grinned. "A High Elf who looks a lot like a Thalmor shows up, and then you need to leave town in a hurry? I think you are going to be on this wagon one way or another. You get five, or you get nothing, or you get to walk."

"Five it is. I thought Nords helped those in need."

"Not elves. You're on the run from Thalmor, so I give you a ride. But I've seen the mess your kind make in Windhelm, so you pay one hundred. You coming?"

He sighed, and handed the driver four sovereigns. "There. One hundred. Now, I want to be gone."

He placed his bag in the wagon bed behind him, atop stacks of cut lumber, bundled furs and hides, and crates of ore; he had hoped to be able to read *The Refugees,* but he had to work, it seemed. Settling in, bow in his lap and quiver to one side, he peered out into the grey before dawn. With a click and a whip of the reins, the horse jolted to a walk, and the carriage rumbled off.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N Some action in this chapter, and an attempt to write fight scenes from the perspective of someone who is in way over his head. I'd appreciate feedback on how I did for this in particular, or any aspect that you feel can be improved upon.

To address concerns that Velandryn will be an all-knowing lore dispenser: He was a priest in the New Temple for some time, and the Temple has the benefit of being founded by a trio of living gods, so they have an interest in divinity and its nature. His knowledge is fairly deep but reasonably narrow. He could name all of the Dunmer saints for you and describe the Reclamations ad infinitum, but is pretty sure that Alduin is just what the Nords call Akatosh and that Talos is the end result of having very good P.R. and conquering most of the known world. It's no fun if a main character already knows everything.

Also, what I did with draugr here is typical of how I hope to approach the more interesting enemies in-game. Rather than just being generic baddies with a zombie skin, these are ancient Nords animated by Dragon magic to serve for eternity. You have to kill them good before they stay dead, and while your standard little worker draugr might not have too much going for it, the more powerful ones were the most loyal and fanatical followers of the Dragon Cult, and they will tear you apart.
Skyrim Thalmor Embassy, Office of Intelligence, Official Dossier

Report of Tuanthel, Agent 3 rd tier Office of Intelligence

Subject: Velandryn Savani
Race: Dunmer (probable Morrowind origins)
Age: Unknown (Estimated under 50 years)
Affiliation: Unknown (Possibly Govt. of Morrowind)
Associates of Interest: Unknown

(15th Last Seed 4E201) Subject encountered north of Pale Pass. Heightened security around rebel prisoner transport led to confinement of Subject with rebels.

(17th Last Seed 4E 201) Subject arrived in Helgen on prisoner cart with rebels including [Ulfric Stormcloak] slated for execution. Arrival of Dragon prevented execution of Subject, who vanished in chaos following attack.

(18th Last Seed 4E 201) Arrived in Riverwood accompanied by Imperial soldier [Hadvar of Falkreath] and rebel soldier [Ralof of Riverwood] made contact with numerous individuals in Riverwood. Possibility of transfer of intelligence cannot be ruled out. Testimony of two locals [Sven/Faendal] indicates likely contact and collusion with [Camilla Valentina] possible sexual liaison and potential point of ingress should pressure need to be exerted on Subject.

(19th Last Seed 4E 201) Travelled to Bleak Falls Barrow, large numbers of corpses found within by Agent. Burned remains of elven corpse found within arranged in ritual pyre, alongside numerous [Draugr-designation Nord]. Numerous pre-Alessian artifacts found, consistent with Dragon Cult ruins found throughout province. Evidence of return to Riverwood and subsequent departure, likely for Whiterun.

Office of Intelligence Official Notes

Subject's presence at Helgen during Incident concerning, but we cannot rule out happenstance. Thus far has displayed signs of possible connections to Dunmer intelligence-gathering apparatus. Bleak Falls pyre remains possibly consistent with Dunmer funereal practices, indicates death of ally, potentially another member of Dunmer Intelligence. Possible contact made in Riverwood, Whiterun prime location for information drop-off.

Verdict: At this time, unlikely to be of direct interest. Any further reports that include Subject should be appended below. Status may be reevaluated should new information come to light.

The carriage rolled to a halt. "Out. We're here." The driver handed Velandryn a sovereign and five drakes, and the Dunmer grabbed his pack and disembarked. "Safe travels, elf."

"And you, human." He still did not like the man, but he had held up his end of the unfair bargain.
Six wolves, thirty drakes, and Velandryn was at Whiterun. Or, so he assumed. Having only heard stories of the city, he had expected something different than… this.

The geography was impressive, to be sure. The city rose out of the cold plains on a high hill, crested at the top by a massive structure that he presumed to be the jarl's hall. Around it though…

The walls of the city had been impressive once, perhaps, but now they were half in ruins, and the buildings peeking over them were all of wood. Painted and beautifully carved, to be sure, but from a grand trade city that he had once heard described as the "Crossroads of Skyrim," he expected more splendor.

What drew his eye as he approached, however, was the city beyond the walls; dozens of wooden structures and countless tents and haphazard shacks sprawled out around the city gates. Hundreds of people milled about, cooking food over firepits or bartering what they had brought with them for coin or other goods. By the look of things, news of the dragon had spread, and the farmers and wanderers of Whiterun District were taking refuge at what they hoped to be safe. If the dragon comes, wooden houses will not save them. Perhaps there were tunnels and halls within the hill proper. It would make sense, and offer greater security in times of war.

For now though, the only thing that mattered about this city was that he could bring to its leaders news of Helgen. Once the jarl had been informed, Velandryn's part was done. There were a dozen carriages clustered around the post where the roads met, and he was willing to wager that one of them was bound east soon enough. For now though, my road leads into the city.

The crowd parted easily enough around him. Closer to the walls, Velandryn realized that much of this collection of humanity might not be caused by the dragon, but simply be business as usual for the market city. Most of the permanent structures here were stalls for merchants to rent, and those who could not find space in one of them had set up shop wherever they could find a few square yards of ground. He saw a Redguard with a great curved sword accosting random passers-by and asking if they had seen a certain woman. A pair of Nords who wore naught but blue paint and loincloths were selling huge hairy slabs of meat and fantastically carved tusks from the back of a wagon made of bones. A cluster of robed and masked wizards hawked soul gems and enchantments to any who would listen, while a priestess in a scaled cloak alternated between shouting in some harsh language and demanding that people repent in the face of the dragon god who had returned. He even saw a clan of Khajiit sitting amongst colorful patchwork tents, their leader deep in conversation with a young Nord woman.

A cry went up from the crowd, and guards waded in, eventually emerging with a wriggling boy and a bulging purse. Velandryn had stored the better part of his coin and all of his gems in a pouch beneath his armor, but he did check the small bag he was wearing on his belt, where some loose drakes for food or bribes were jingling. I should buy a sturdier pack as well. His repurposed sack would not last long, and losing his potions and various sundries would be a great inconvenience. Besides which, I still want to read that book. When a child bumped into him, he glared at it suspiciously, but the little human only stared at him with wide eyes, some sort of sugared treat sticking out of its mouth. Velandryn snorted and moved on.

Besides the stalls in which the merchants had set up shop, there were a few businesses catering to the travelers and traders. In front of one inn, a trio of Orsimer in scaled armor argued fiercely with a stable-hand. The cause of the argument was plain, as the Orcish wagon was loaded up with weapons and armor, and being pulled by a pair of huge snuffling boars. These beasts were terrifying the horses, and the inn was refusing to let them stay. As Velandryn watched, one of the Orcs erupted with a string of brutish yells in his rough tongue, and the stable-hand lit up her hands with lightning. Moving along before things got any further out of hand, Velandryn's eye was
caught by a garish red lantern swinging above an expansive two-story structure. On the second story landing, a Nord woman wearing nothing above the waist and a Bosmer man wearing nothing below it were waving to passersby. A decent trickle of folk was going in and out of the building, so Velandryn had to assume that their crude promotion was successful. As he moved on, the two of them began coupling brazenly in full view of the world. Savages, though I doubt many here would defend them. It made sense though; a market town could alleviate many issues by making houses of earthly delights available. Past the brothel, a tavern with no walls was hosting far more custom as another carnal need was met. Going by the drunken singing from the patrons, there was never a bad time to be drunk in Whiterun. Or Skyrim. Might make the whole place stop smelling like Nord.

It would have been all too easy to lose himself here. Velandryn had always loved markets and meeting-places; it was exciting to be amongst so many bartering and passing, and each merchant sold their story along with their goods. As a child he would spend hours drinking in the sights and sounds of the Cauldron Hold, the great outlander dock in Blacklight where any merchant could do trade. Ducking around a pack of Bretons in fur and bone armor he watched a cackling seamstress display a scrap of transparent silk to a blushing young woman one stall over from a Bosmer fletcher who spoke with his hands as he showed off the bows and arrows he had for sale.

That last one actually interested Velandryn, and he made his way to the little mer, who first gave a revolted shudder when he saw the bow Velandryn was currently carrying and then insisted on showing him a variety of alternatives, from a huge longbow made of ebony and ironwood that would require a giant's strength to use to a gaudy moonstone monstrosity inlaid with gems and gilded scrollwork. In the end, Velandryn settled on a fine shortbow made of Heiroc yew, and the vendor threw in some catgut strings from Elsweyr, "Just don't tell the Khajiit, it might be their cousins, hmm?" Velandryn paid for his new bow, and handed the other over. The Bosmer accepted it with disdain, and assured him he would break it apart and burn it so nobody would ever risk having to use it again.

The sun was still above the mountains to the southwest, but having spent the last three nights on the road with a provincial carriage driver, Velandryn had no desire to spend this one outside as well. There were a number of traveler's inns and taverns he had seen already, but they looked full to bursting. Inside the walls might be better, but in truth Velandryn was hoping that news of Helgen would rate him a bunk in the jarl's palace atop the hill. Lords ate well and kept their halls warm and bright, and the wind off the plains was already starting to chill him. He readjusted his pack to account for the new bow, checked his hip for the balance of his quiver and blades, and set off uphill, under the old stone arches that led to the main gate.

"City's closed with the dragon about." Velandryn was not sure he had heard the guard correctly, but fortunately the man had been kind enough to repeat it when he did not immediately leave.

"Might I ask why? Are you afraid it is going to sneak in dressed as a refugee?" The frightened people camped outside the city gates clearly had their share of unsavory folk among them, but dragons seemed to be entirely lacking from their number. Velandryn himself was not indifferent to their plight, but he did want to get into the city before too much longer."I am here about Helgen. I witnessed the dragon attack, and need to speak with the jarl."

"Truly? We haven't seen any survivors from there yet. Might be you're lying, but I'll have someone take you up to Dragonsreach, they'll sort you out." He gestured, and another guard, this one shorter and in full-face helm, came forward. Velandryn followed him through a small door set into the main gate, and into the fabled crossroads city of Whiterun.

Velandryn's first impression was one of height. The city climbed the hill; a second wall girded the
area closer to the palace. His second impression was of placid prosperity. The gate they had come through opened on a small plaza; a blacksmith had set up shop on the right side, while a guardhouse dominated the left. The winding roads leading off from the square vanished amongst houses and small shops. Where the woodwork was carved, the theme was horses. Their wooden likeness adorned roofs and banners alike. At the blacksmith's a Nord in fine clothing was arguing with a woman in a leather apron while another worked the forge. A pair of guards casually leaned on long spears and the overall atmosphere was markedly calmer than the hectic barter and press beyond the walls. When Velandryn remarked on this, the guard was more than happy to show off his home. "We're in the Plains District now, but it's not the same as the lower market. The jarl only allows a certain number of shops and stalls within the city, and every vendor has to be a citizen in good standing of the hold. Anyone can trade outside the walls, but most of what goes on in here is local. Plenty of farmers come here to do business, but most people you'll see inside the walls actually live here."

As they made their way along one of the roads, the guard pointed out shops in passing that he was particularly fond of. Velandryn soon got the impression that this man was not the most hardened defender of the city. When asked, the guard happily confirmed. "Oh, aye, my da's a farmer to the east of here, my whole family really. We have a few acres, grow food for the city and feed for livestock. I came to town a few times with my da or brothers to sell, though truth be told once was enough. Once I saw Whiterun, I knew I'd be here for good. So, when I turned sixteen, I signed on with the guard. I get three meals a day, good pay, and I meet new and interesting people every day. Like you!" He removed his helm, and Velandryn was confronted with a beardless youth whose olive skin and sharp features showed him to be Imperial despite his Skyrim accent. The guard grinned. "Did you really see the dragon at Helgen? That's all anyone in the city's been talking about!"

"I did, closer than I might have liked." He wanted to keep conversation on the topic to a minimum until he had spoken with whoever would handle the issue, so he tried to change the topic. "I don't think I ever caught your name, friend."

As he had hoped, the garrulous guard snapped at the bait. "I'm Kenrik Green-Bend." He looked vaguely embarrassed. "That's the farm my family owns. Not very heroic, is it?" He brightened up. "Soon though, I'll do great deeds and earn a hero's name! Just you watch, friend. Ah, and yours? Your name, I mean."

"Velandryn Savani, of...Baan Malur, I suppose. I'm afraid I have no heroic deeds to add to my name either." Something about the young guard's enthusiasm was endearing, and Velandryn found himself interested in the young human's story. "If you do not mind the question, you have a Nord's name and speech, but look to be Imperial."

The guard grinned again. "Aye, noticed did you? That one takes a bit of explaining. My ma's ma, she was an Imperial, so my ma was too. Only thing is, my grand-ma came up to Skyrim years and years ago from The City, working out on the farms with her family. She married a Nord, and my ma did too, that'd be my da, Ulmar, see. So, I'm three parts Nord, but the Imperial comes out true in me and all my brothers and sister too. My ma found a book years ago, says there that the mother's look always comes out. I'm more Nord than not, though. Cold never was a problem, and I can down an ale with the best of them. Only thing Imperial about me's my talking, and me liking to meet new people. It's why they picked me to show you the way. They don't have to hear me jabber their ear off, and I get to walk the streets instead of just standing at a gate."

Velandryn had to admit that his choice of escort had been apt. The young man was clearly bright and friendly; a good choice to get the feel of visitors who could possibly be of import but did not require formality. They were coming up on another square, this one lined with stalls selling what
looked like various types of food. "A place like this is where you sold your wares, I imagine?"

Kenrik shook his head. "Farmers sell to the vendors, who sell in the city. We unload in the lower market; it'd be a nightmare trying to get those wagons up here." As they entered the square, the guard turned to look at an Imperial woman who was selling fruits and vegetables from a stall. Or, she should have been, but at the moment she was arguing with what looked to be a very well-groomed bard. The guard sighed. "Mikael is bothering Carlotta Valentina again. Most like we'll be called in when he gets too free with his hands or she snaps his lute over his head again." He took a left turn, and the path they were on began to climb. The next bend in the road revealed that they were approaching the inner wall. Helm under his arm, Kenrik waved to the pair of guards standing under the stone arch leading through the wall.

As they passed beneath the arch, the city opened up before them. Where the Plains District had been a sprawl of buildings punctuated by a few plazas and narrow winding streets of rough cobbles in dirt, this middle area was defined by broad thoroughfares of finely fitting stones, with elegant paved paths leading to impressive mansions of richly carved wood. Although they had the same general style of construction as the Plains District below, here foundations and adornments of the houses were more likely to be gilded or carved of some pale white stone. The larger streets were flanked by well-groomed greenery and open gutters running with water. Where poles and beams had ended in carved horses below, here every carving of wood or stone was dominated by birds, either in flight on a flat surface, or in profile capping wooden beams. Kenrik told him that this was the Wind District, and Velandryn could see why. The height and broad spaces up here meant that the chill winds off the plains scythed between buildings and gave the whole place a frigid feel that had been lacking below.

Directly in front of them was a great circular plaza dominated by a withered tree. When asked about the tree, Kenrik pointed at a building across the way. "That's the Temple's business. They say the tree is sacred to Kynareth, so they keep it. I'd think Kynareth would want a new tree, if it were me. Truth be told, I never cared much for Kynareth. She's good to us, but for real Nords, we get our blessings from Tsun, Shor, Akatosh and Talos!" He lowered his voice and glanced around. "Ah, I mean, just those first three, right?" he glanced nervously at Velandryn. "Er, maybe don't go spreading that about though. No Thalmor here, but still best not to be too open about Talos these days."

Velandryn shrugged. "I've no quarrel with your gods. They aren't mine, to be sure, but you seem a decent sort. So, let me keep my gods, and I do the same for you." I may not know much about Nord gods, but I know we killed Shor at Red Mountain. Best I don't bring that up though. His gods will never love me, but no need to antagonize him.

As they crossed the plaza, he noticed a huge hall in the shape of an overturned ship on a bluff to the right, overshadowed by a great stone bird seemingly carved out of the mountain. Kenrik's words pulled his gaze onward, however, to where the road turned into a long stair, climbing through a series of stone landings up to the palace above. "That's where we're headed. The Cloud District, Dragonsreach Hall, and the jarl. He'll hear your story and know what to do."

As they approached the stair, they passed a man in robes who was ranting about something or other. Kenrik sighed and leaned in to speak quietly to Velandryn. "Heimskr. Remember what I said before about Talos? I can't fault a man for loving Him, but Heimskr does more harm than good. Annoys people with his ranting, and if the Thalmor ever get power here, his head is the first on the block."

Leaving the disciple of Talos to his ministrations, they began to climb the carved stone steps to Dragonsreach. When they reached the second landing, which was surrounded by cool clear water,
Velandryn looked out over the city. It might not have the size and grandeur of Blacklight or Mournhold, but it was several miles to the outermost fringes of the lower market, and not a step of the journey here had been dull. Velandryn Savani was willing to accept that his initial assessment had been wrong; Whiterun was an impressive city, and possessed a fearsome command of the plains. Besides which, not one person had looked twice at a Dunmer in their midst, a welcome novelty in human lands.

Kenrik stood beside him, one hand shading his eyes as he gazed out over the city. "Gods, best view in the world, isn't it? One day, I'll make it to the jarl's personal guard, and be able to patrol up here every day."

By the time they finally summited the steps, the sun still shone on the steps and the Cloud District, but the rest of the city was in shadow. They had arrived on a landing that stood before another pristine pool, this one crossed by a sheltered wooden walkway that led to the grand front doors of the palace. The palace itself eschewed both horses and birds for an entirely different aesthetic. But for the banners of Whiterun, dragons dominated the crest of Whiterun's hill. Velandryn doubted he would ever forget how they looked, and either the carpenters had seen dragons in the flesh, or they had had a very good reference from which to draw. The heads that capped the huge wooden beams looked as though they would come to life and spit fire, and looking at them gave Velandryn a thrill of apprehension.

By the look of things, the Cloud District was composed entirely of the palace and its attendant buildings, and commanded a significant tactical advantage over the rest of the city. Should Whiterun ever fall under siege or turn against its lord, archers and mages could turn the approach below into a charnel-field, and a few dedicated warriors could hold only stair against far superior numbers. Velandryn wondered how many times in history this landing they now crossed had been stained with blood. Kenrik was going on about the first time he had seen Dragonsreach, and how it had gotten its name, but Velandryn was distracted by the view and his own thoughts of dragon's fire, and heard only one word in three.

The sun was low behind them as they approached the front doors of Dragonsreach. A pair of guards stood at the door, but where the city guards below had worn light leather and mail in the city's colors, these wore heavy steel covered with a golden tabard bearing the horsehead emblem of the city. Their weapons were of fine make and heavy cast; clearly these were the jarl's household guard that Kenrik aspired to. Just as clearly they were cut from different cloth than the ones below. He had best learn to school his face, and perhaps gain a few span of height as well. The man was not the largest Nord Velandryn had ever seen, though he came close; he stood with a great halberd in one hand and a pair of swords crossed on his back. The woman was of slightly more reasonable size, standing only half a foot taller than the Dunmer, but had a disapproving look on her severe face and moved to block their way with the haft of her spear. "What brings you and your guest to Dragonsreach, guardsman?" Her manner was brusque and professional, and Velandryn found himself hoping that Kenrik's love of people extended to a rapport with the Dragonsreach guards. Otherwise, a Dunmer would have to try to talk his way into the hall of a Nord jarl, which could end very badly indeed.

The city guard looked nervous, but stood tall and reported with a voice that quavered only a little. "Ah, this man brings news from Helgen about the dragon attack, Korpral Lydia. We thought it best to bring him to the jarl at once, sir." Man, is it? My mother would weep to hear. And you and the gate guard thought it best to bring me here? Such clever guards they have in Whiterun, able to take credit so easily.

Korpral Lydia, who was clearly in charge, turned to regard Velandryn. "Is this true?"
"It is. I was present for the dragon attack, and thought my testimony could be useful in defense of the city, should it come this way."

Her manner changed at once. Her cool disdain vanished, replaced with intense focus as she closed with him, urgency flaring in her eyes. "Do you believe it will move on Whiterun? Why come here in the first place? Speak quickly, lives could be at stake!"

"No! It headed northwest, not directly towards the city. I know for a fact that both the Empire and Stormcloaks have been alerted by those who were there. My understanding is that Whiterun is neutral in this conflict, and the smith in Riverwood thought I should bring my story here to assist the jarl with the defense of the District."

She relaxed back into her professional stance, passion submerged as though it never was. "Very well. House Guard Gulf, you have the watch." The big Nord saluted, hand over chest. "Guardsman, you are dismissed. Report back to the gate." Kenrik turned to leave, giving Velandryn a wave as he went. "You." She looked down at Velandryn. "Follow me." She rapped three times on the great wooden doors to Dragonsreach, and one slowly creaked open. She vanished inside, and Velandryn followed.

Jarl Balgruuf the Greater of Whiterun was a man who bore the burden of rulership heavy on his shoulders. Lydia knew that he had been up into the early hours of the morning every night since news of the dragon had reached them and the rumors of Helgen's destruction had only added to his worries. If this elf could help, she would see him to the jarl personally. Inside the main doors, House Guard Silga took his weapons into a side chamber; he handed them over without protest, if not happily. As they climbed the steps that led to from the lower antechamber to the jarl's hall, she heard heavy breathing from the elf beside her. Glancing over, she noted his eyes fixed on the steps in front of him and the weight of each footfall. If he climbed from the plains in one go, he is likely exhausted. Foreigners are never prepared to ascend to Dragonsreach. This was not High Hrothgrar, but the summit of Whiterun demanded a fearsome climb, as the elf was now learning. They stopped at the landing; they were hidden from the view of the dais, and could prepare for the final approach. She spoke in a low voice as he caught his breath. "Are you ready to face the jarl?" She would not humiliate a supplicant. If his claims were true, then he was to be commended for coming all this way. If he was a liar, he would be punished accordingly.

Something flashed in his red eyes that might have been gratitude. He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths "I am." He looked apprehensive, though the strange angles of his face and red of his eyes made it difficult to tell. Lydia had felt apprehensive around the Jarl's Dark Elf housecarl Irileth when she had first joined the guard and met the Dunmer warrior, but had come to know her as a brave soldier and true servant of the Jarl. Irileth could be difficult to read as well, though Lydia had grown much better at it as time went on. This one though, was a stranger.

She tapped her spear on the floorboards, and pointed onwards. "Approach from the left of the firepit, slowly. Speak only truth and with respect, but do not act the lickspittle. Nords have no liking for such things. When Irileth challenges you, do not move your hands. With the situation in Skyrim as it is, many fear an attempt on the jarl's life." She let him take the lead, and, as he approached the dais, took up a position two steps behind him. If he tried anything, her spear thrust would pierce him through, and then she could close with sword and shield and lop off his head. She thought he was likely telling the truth, but vigilance was the watchword of the guard.

When Irileth challenged him, he answered well enough, speaking of Helgen and his intent to aid the Jarl. If he felt anything at seeing a Dark Elf as a Housecarl, he hid it well. When the jarl beckoned him forward, he moved with confidence, bowed before the throne, and spoke in his low
gravelly voice. "The Imperials were about to execute a group of rebels that included Ulfric Stormcloak, when a dragon appeared and...generated some chaos. Numerous Stormcloaks used the opportunity to either escape or attack the Imperials. I managed to reach the keep, and escaped using a series of cellars and tunnels that exited outside of the city. I made my way to Riverwood, where Alvor, the smith there, suggested that I bring this account to you. He helped me while under no obligation to do so, and I thought it best to bring what news I could to you."

He fell silent, and the jarl sat back in his throne, thinking deeply. His brother, however, did not. Hrongar stepped forward, face hard and suspicious. "Elf, what were you doing in Helgen?"

Both the Dark Elves' faces tightened. Irileth was clearly bothered by Hrongar's mode of address, while the bowing Dark Elf whose name Lydia was just realizing she did not know looked more put out and worried. "I was...I had been seized by the Empire for being too near the path that the rebels took. I was entering Skyrim on my own business, unrelated to the Stormcloaks. It seems the Empire did not want to risk anyone interfering with their triumph." Well, at least he is likely being honest. Nobody would make up a story that stupid.

Hrongar disagreed. "Brother, we have no reason to trust him. He could be here for any number of purposes. The Thalmor would like to see Whiterun weakened, I have no doubt."

The jarl stirred. "It seems an odd thing to make this story up, but you are not wrong." He fixed the elf with his gaze. "Are you willing to swear to the truth of your words?"

"I am. By the Three Reclaimed I swear that I, Velandryn Savani, speak nothing but the truth here today, by the Spinner of Eight, by the Revelation Fire, and by the Dawn and Dusk, may they abandon me to wander without law or purpose at the mercy of Four Corners if by my lie I fail their Test." Lydia knew nothing of Dark Elf gods, but that seemed a strong oath.

Hrongar, however, was unimpressed. "Swear by real gods, elf. Swear by gods who will break you if you lie to us."

The Dark Elf—Velandryn Savani seemed to be his name—raised an eyebrow. "I have heard the Three disparaged many ways, by methods both clever and crude. However, this might be the first time that someone has accused them of being too merciful for an oath. If Daedra are not enough for you, pray tell, which gods should I invoke?"

Hrongar opened his mouth, but Balgruuf cut him off. "Enough! Brother, I believe him. Velandryn, did you say your name was? I thank you for bringing this news to me." He turned to his housecarl. "Irileth, I need you to send some men to Riverwood. The town must be protected from future attack. In truth, I should have done this long ago."

Proventus, the steward, interjected, as he always seemed to be doing. "My Jarl, the reasons not to send troops are all still valid. The jarl of Falkreath has stated numerous times that—"

"I don't care what that upjumped child says, Proventus! My people are sending messengers to me about dragons! Any political concerns are secondary, I will provide them the protection they need! Irileth, see to it."

The housecarl bowed. "At once, my Jarl." She turned to Hrongar. "You have the jarl's defense until I return." Without another word, she turned and strode quickly down the length of the hall, descending the steps. After a moment, the great front doors boomed, signaling her departure.

Jarl Balgruuf looked back to the remaining Dark Elf in the room. "And as for you, you have my thanks for what you have done, and a chance to aid the people of Whiterun. My court wizard,
Farengar, has been researching dragons since word reached us that one had been sighted. I want you to go to him and offer him whatever help you can. Perhaps it will be nothing more than telling him what you saw at Helgen, but I know in my bones that this dragon will return. I want every advantage we can have when it does."

The elf stood. "Very well. I shall give whatever assistance I can to your court wizard." He paused as something seemed to occur to him. "If I am to render aid as requested, I would be far more effective if not hungry and worrying about where I will lay my head. Might I have permission to secure food from the kitchens and a place to sleep when the hour grows late?"

Lydia shared a look with Hrongar. The elf had nerve, or did not know what he asked. Asking to shelter beneath a jarl's roof was asking for their protection, and to be considered a member of their household until they left. It was a mark of trust which this elf was still far from earning.

The jarl considered. "Speak with Farengar first. There are inns in the city below, but if you give good aid, I will allow you a place in Dragonsreach until our business is concluded." Lydia gestured to the elf, who followed her to the wizard's rooms, not far off the main hall.

Once she had deposited the elf with Farengar, she turned to go. She had barely reached the door, however, when an exclamation rang out. "That's it! That's the Dragonstone! It seems the jarl finally sends me someone who isn't a mindless brute!"

She could not make out the elf's response as she was due back at her post. She hoped, however, that Farengar might finally have made a friend.

Many hours after meeting Farengar, Velandryn reluctantly pulled himself away from his desk and allowed a servant to lead him to a spare room near the kitchens. It was a few hours until dawn, and he had been up since the previous sunrise, but he honestly wanted nothing more than to return to the wizard's workshop. It was small and crude by Dunmer standards, but it had the basics necessary for research. The wizard's interest in dragons bordered on an obsession, and his initial reception of Velandryn had been less than perfectly welcoming. That all changed when the Dragonstone entered the picture. When the wizard started going on about an ancient stone tablet that depicted the province of Skyrim and the location of dragon burial sites, Velandryn began to suspect that the relic he had removed from Bleak Falls Barrow could be more useful than he had anticipated. By the time he had produced a map showing ancient Dragon Cult burial sites, Velandryn was enjoying himself immensely. He got the wizard to agree to give him unrestricted lab and library access in exchange for one of these stones, then produced it with a flourish and handed it over. After hearing about Bleak Falls and the draugr, Farengar had returned to his books, feverishly searching for some half-remembered tome that posited a connection between the old Dragon Cult and draugr. Velandryn, meanwhile, occupied himself with perusing a catalog of the flora and fauna of the area surrounding Whiterun and decided that the alchemical potential of the region was significant, and this would be a very good field of study. He used some of the ingredients he had scrounged to mix up a few experimental potions, by which time Farengar had returned.

The wizard wanted someone to go dig up dragon bones, and he had just the mer in mind. Velandryn was not opposed on principle, but he wanted a chance to delve deeper into this library. By the time the servant came to offer him his bed for what was left of the night, he had learned the basics of several spells that he suspected would help shore up some of his weaknesses in battle. These Nords lacked subtlety in most of their magic, but the configurations described in these spellbooks, while crude, hinted at levels of strength that would be far above what equivalent Dunmer spells could produce. If I have time, analysis and integration of these principles into other spells could yield
interesting results. Or, I could consume myself in a tide of rogue magicka. As he stretched out on his cot and let sleep claim him, he decided that risk was worth it. After all, those who risked nothing could gain nothing in return.

"Come, the court wizard has need of you." Someone was intruding on Velandryn's sleep, and he had a horrible suspicion that it was a Nord. Opening his eyes only confirmed it, and he held back a shudder. Nobody should be forced to deal with a Nord so soon after waking up. It was one of the servants, with some sort of nervous-looking expression on his face. Either that, or the human just looked like that normally. Humans aged rapidly, and Velandryn suspected that this one was elderly.

"Did he say why?" A yawn threatened to eat the last word, and it occurred to him that perhaps one decent night's sleep did not make up for three spent fitfully on a carriage.

"You must come now. Farengar has asked for you, and the Jarl wishes you to be present as well."

Velandryn pulled on his boots and clothing, and followed the servant up some narrow stairs. "What happened to cause them both to need my presence?" They left the stairs and hurried down hallways that all looked the same. The servant said not a word, and Velandryn was left to wonder. The light was streaming in through the windows, and Velandryn realized he must have slept through half the morning. His excited studies last night might have gone on a bit too long, in hindsight.

He rather liked Farengar, he had decided. The wizard was arrogant and opinionated, disdainful of those who did not share his interests and aptitudes. He could almost be Dunmer; a Temple elder or Sadras mystic. He finds himself surrounded by mundane warriors and ignorant commoners, and his relief at finding a worthy associate should allow me to access what I need from his workshop. Ingredients, soul gems, spell tomes and books on Skyrim's magical and religious traditions; I could turn a healthy profit if I return to Morrowind after taking what I can. And yet, he knew he would not. The wizard had taken him in in good faith, rewarded him with coin and knowledge for the Dragon Stone and offered him interesting and honest work. It would be unworthy to take advantage for mere coin. Spells and knowledge though? Those he would take without regret or second thoughts. I hope this meeting, whatever it may be, is over quickly. I want to get back to things that matter.

The hallway emptied into a war room on a balcony overlooking the huge main hall where Velandryn had met the jarl the day before. The jarl himself was there, as was his Dunmer bodyguard, and those two humans who had also been present yesterday. A number of his household guard in their steel armor were present, including the woman who had escorted him into Dragonsreach; he was reasonably sure her name was Lydia. Farengar and several of the town guard rounded out the assembly. A Nord who looked somewhat younger than the others was describing something.

"...came from the mountains, hit the watchtower early in the morning. Three are dead, Serjeant Freya is trapped inside. I was on patrol, Korpral Grallius and I broke for the city. The dragon... it...breathe fire! I heard his screams, and I...I kept...I had to reach the city!" His eyes were wide; he looked on the verge of tears. "I didn't want to leave them, but I had to reach the city. I had to tell you, didn't I?" His words were tumbling out of his mouth now, and the Jarl intervened before the guard could devolve further into hysterics.

"Go, son, and get yourself a hot meal and a rest. You've done well."

Nearly weeping, the guard was escorted out of the hall, and the jarl turned to those assembled around the maps of Whiterun and the surrounding plains. "My friends, the dragon is upon us. Irileth, assemble a dozen of my personal guard, and the best of the town watch. Farengar, find me anything you can on how to kill a dragon. I want the group ready to move out to the western watchtower within the hour."
The other Dunmer spun on her heel and addressed an older Nord in steel armor trimmed with gold. "Kaptain Hrun, assemble third and fifth rotations. Bring Lydia, Gulf, Kemming and Bolli as well." Next she regarded the group of town watchmen. "Find Commander Caius. Have him assemble ten of his best archers and ten of his best with the spear. Arm them with atgeir and javelin, and the archers with bodkin shafts." She turned to Velandryn, who was still standing there taking it all in. "You're coming too."

"Am I?" He had seen the dragon once. It had burned down a town and incinerated several hundred soldiers and civilians. "What good do you think I will be?" He could barely fight, and he was fairly certain that even if his spell of rage worked on the dragon, making it angry probably wouldn't improve their situation. "Or am I acting as bait?"

Her eyes narrowed, and she fixed him with a glare. "The last dragon in Skyrim died so long ago that I can't even tell you when it happened! Nobody has fought a dragon in thousands of years, at least! You are, for better or worse," her tone made it evident that she felt it was solidly for the worse, "the sole person in the city who has faced the dragon and lived." She snorted. "Most like, you do nothing, and we are no better off. But, while you might not care about them, those are my men and women going out there to fight and maybe die. If I can save even one of their lives with some scrap of something you remembered, I will take it. So, get yourself down to the armory and grab what you need. You are coming."

He could not argue with that. She wasn't wrong. Had these been his people, he would have used every hope, every trick, to save them. He could not even begrudge her distaste for having him along. *Were I in charge of killing a dragon, I am the last person I would bring!*

He had suspected yesterday that she was more Nord than Dunmer, if she was willing to kneel to one of these jarls. An outlander in truth, but not without honor, in her way.

Farengar reappeared, arms full of scrolls and a travel cloak hastily thrown around his shoulders. "I'm ready to go! Let's be off!" He looked positively overjoyed at the prospect of seeing a dragon in the flesh.

His joy was short-lived, however, as the jarl put a hand on his shoulder and told him the sad news. "My friend, you must stay here. I cannot risk my court wizard on the field of battle." Farengar's face fell, and even Velandryn could see the heartbreak etched on his face. As the soldiers moved around the room preparing to move out, the wizard came over to Velandryn, and dropped his load on the table before him.

"Alright, listen up." Velandryn listened; it was possible the wizard's advice could be of some help, and while Velandryn was reasonably certain that the wizard did not know his name, the two of them had a fairly good rapport. Velandryn had helped as a he could on the dragon research, and Farengar had provided him with some excellent clues as to interesting spells and alchemical recipes. He had also provided a huge number of soul gems and his own expertise at enchantments, and all of Velandryn's armor was now imbued with fire resistance that, while it would likely not resist a dragon's breath, might keep him alive for few seconds more. And now, he seemed eager to give Velandryn yet more help against the dragon. "These are scrolls of ice and lightning. This dragon is of fire, and you said that your element is fire as well. Your spells won't do anything to it, so use these." He pulled out a vial of a thick blue liquid. "I made this from an ancient recipe I found in an old journal. It should poison the dragon's blood and slow it down." Velandryn tucked that one away, doubtful that the tiny vial could do much against the massive bulk of the dragon.

The wizard kept giving him advice, pointing out passages on flight patterns and diagrams of how certain parts of the wing were more vulnerable to being pierced. Velandryn tried to absorb as much as he could, but he had a sinking certainty that in the heat of battle, most of this information would
be as good as useless. As the wizard wound down, the guard from before, who he was more than half certain was the Lydia that Irileth had mentioned, stomped up the steps and confronted him.

"We are assembling at the lower gates. Irileth wonders where you are."

"I am here. I was thinking about spending the rest of the day reading, and maybe going out in the evening for some —"

Her hand closed around his collar, and she pulled him bodily out of the chair. "Get your armor on and get moving!"

"It's downstairs. Would you like to come watch me put it on, to ease your mind?" He had no idea where this was coming from.

It seems that certain death brings out the cynic in me.

As he strapped on various pieces of armor, with an unamused Lydia standing behind him, arms crossed, he chanced upon his fine grey tunic, emblazoned with the triumphant hand of his faith and nation. His armor's emblem had mostly faded, whipped by wind, scored by battle, and worn by enchantment. The tunic would serve to place Ghartok proud upon his chest again. He slipped it over his armor like a tabard; it was too snug to hang properly, but it would serve. It was a shame to put Camilla's handiwork in danger like this, but he felt it was the right choice.

If I'm going to die surrounded by Nords, I will wear Dunmer red to the end. He stood, and left the rest of his gear less a few choice potions on his bunk. Lydia led him out, and after retrieving his weapons at the main gates, they made their way out of Dragonsreach.

A crowd had gathered at the lower gates of Whiterun. Twenty of the town guard, a dozen of the jarl's household warriors plus his housecarl and an unfamiliar Dunmer was odd enough to draw a crowd. As they made their way to where the market ended and the western road began, many curious merchants and bored travelers followed to see what madness required so many to deal with it. As they reached the western stables and Velandryn saw the open road before them, an idea occurred to him. Irileth might go for it. It's dishonorable, but it would save some of hers.

He approached the housecarl, and voiced his suggestion. She did not like it, but she agreed to give it a try.

The crowd was rumbling. Velandryn heard mutters, and the word 'dragon' more than once. He saw Kenrik in the crowd, who grinned broadly and gave him a cheery wave. Irileth leapt up onto a nearby hillock, and raised her voice to be heard by all. "People of Whiterun, traders and adventurers, brave warriors all, hear me! You have heard of the dragon, now we go to slay it! Those who would be safe, stay here. But, those who would kill a dragon, who would do a deed that has not been done in ten thousand years," the crowd's murmurs grew louder as those within realized what she was saying, "come with us, and fight for Whiterun, fight for Skyrim, fight to show this dragon that it may have lasted this long, but on this day it dies!"

From the crowd, two Orcs stepped out. One had a huge bow on his back and a quiver of barbed arrows, the other a great spear with a cruel black head. Behind them came the two Nords in blue paint and loincloths, hefting crude weapons carved from bone and yelling war cries that shook the earth beneath their feet. A mage so swathed in robes that nothing was visible save its eyes from behind an ebony mask leading a pair of heavily armored goblins was next, and a half-dozen disreputable looking humans in piecemeal armor followed them. A Redguard carrying three swords and dressed in flowing robes walked over beside a trio of archers, Bosmer all, and a Dunmer in chitin armor who carried a slim carved staff that was taller than she was. The dam broke then, and many and more streamed over. Some were hardened warriors, others looked to be green boys. Kenrik sidled up beside Velandryn, and grinned at him, whispering "Don't let the Commander see me here. I'm supposed to be off my watch, and my free day is starting. I'm not missing this!"
They left Whiterun, nearly sixty strong, cheering and boasting, armed and armored in a score of styles and fashions, ready to do battle with a legend given flesh. Velandryn was in the midst of them, but his focus was on Irileth, telling her some of the more pertinent tips that Farengar had passed on. As he spoke, he realized how insane this all was. They were going to attack a dragon, a beast literallty out of myth, and kill it. Alvor had been right, this was Hero's work. Well, I managed to wrangle up a crowd of assorted fodder, so maybe it will all balance out. At the very least, the dragon should have plenty of more attractive targets now. And with this, we can kill it, and I can be done with this madness. At last.

Chapter End Notes

A/N Not much action here, but next chapter is the Mirmulnir fight, I promise. A warning: dragons are nearly god-tier beings, and bringing one down one-to-one is damn near impossible. This first fight, Velandryn will get lots of help from the crowd, but Mirmulnir has been around a while, and is not some punk kid dragon that just woke up and wants to go burning. Expect carnage.

I was planning on ending this chapter with the fight, but I got caught up in Whiterun and the people therein, and figured a little scene-setting now is worth it to establish the character of the city. If this really bothers you, then I have to regretfully inform you that you may be reading the wrong fic. I like world-building, and will indulge myself occasionally. In my defense though, every one of those characters encountered in the lower market has backstory that is not only lore-consistent but also pretty cool.

With regards to Whiterun, I have heavily modified the city from how it appeared in-game. I will do the same with any major city. These are hubs of a province dating back thousands of years. I refuse to believe that the place where three major trade routes converge does not have some sort of exchange. I would appreciate thoughts on the city, and how the descriptions worked. Too much? Too unclear?

Velandryn will get more competent, but he is not a fighter at heart. I don't want to spoil character development, but Housecarls do exist for a reason. (It's meat shields. They exist to be meat shields and smack things with their thumpy sticks)
In Fire Born

Chapter Summary

Fighting Mirmulnir. Possibly dying and ending the story here.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"We avoid fights whenever possible, of course, but if the safety of citizens is at stake, we will quickly step in to defend them, have no fear."

Kaptain Ulrich Battle-Born, Whiterun Town Guard 4E 104

"Out on the plains, we don't have the luxuries of the city patrol. Someone comes at you with a sword; you put an arrow in them before they can use it. That's just sense."

Patrol Leader Fonvar Grey-Mane, Whiterun Hold Guard 4E 104

"We defend Dragonsreach. If anyone looks to threaten the Jarl, we will strike first. In her hall, you live or die by the Jarl's command. We recognize that, and so should you."

Housecarl Borgen the Bold, Whiterun 4E 105

"Hah! Little man asks when fight? When hungry, fight beasts. When child, fight and make strong! When old, fight until Sovngarde. Fight good! Make strong or make dead!"

Hrunding Mammoth-Breaker, Clan of the Sky-Whale, 4E 100

Compiled by Imperial Ministry of Safety for Attitudes on Violence among Peoples of Skyrim
published 4E 105

Lydia had never been stationed at the western watchtower, but she knew it well enough. Located a full day's march from Whiterun, it had once served as early warning should an enemy approach from the west; its position at the confluence of three roads meant that it could warn equally well against incursions from Falkreath, Hjaalmarch, or the Reach. When Fort Greymoor had still been manned, the watchtower's beacon could be seen from the relay tower atop the fort as well. Now, however, the fort was overrun with lowlife outlaws, the relay beacons had been dark for centuries, and the watchtower was a punitive posting for those who had in some way offended the higher-ups in the guard. What chance did they have against a dragon?

The watchtower had been old and crumbling, she knew, but now it was more ruin than outpost. The wooden shutters and walkways had been reduced to smoking wreckage, and the stone itself seemed to have half-melted in places from the heat. The scouts that Irileth had sent ahead were spread around the area; Lydia saw one atop the tower scanning towards the mountains to the south. The army of hangers-on and would-be dragonslayers that had accompanied them from Whiterun was dispersing as well, eager to do battle. They had traveled through the night, and some among them seemed all too happy to get off their feet and take a rest. Velandryn, that Dark Elf that seemed to be serving as Farengar's proxy, uncorked a green potion and began to drink. At her look,
he produced another and offered it to her.

"Potion of fatigue" he said as he stoppered the empty vial and tucked it back into the bag on his belt. She idly wondered how he had managed to survive this long. He carried his weapons uncomfortably; moved like a city-dweller who had never spent a night out of doors; and thought himself clever, which was an unwise choice for an elf to make in Skyrim. He had not caused any trouble for her since leaving Whiterun, though she could not help but notice that he was accompanied once more by the guard who had brought him to Dragonsreach. All in all, Velandryn Savani was a burden she did not have time for. She refused the proffered potion; she had no need of it anyway. He shrugged and tucked it away, and Lydia moved forward, going to check on the guards from the watchtower.

At the base of the tower she found the injured laid out, some eight or so with burns and a few more with what looked like collateral damage from falling stone or accidental injury. As she approached, she realized that she knew the woman in the silver-trimmed cloak who commanded the watchtower. *Oh gods, Freya.* She had known the other woman was stationed out on the plains, but she hadn't thought she would be here.

Serjeant Freya was moving about doing what she could for what was left of her command; she gave Lydia an exhausted smile as the two passed each other. They had been so close once and joined the watch on the same day, but had gone their separate ways when Lydia joined the Dragonsreach household. *I serve as the elite, and Freya is stuck out here in the back end of nowhere. Gods, she must have been so scared during the attack; she must have needed me so badly.* But those days were over. One of the guards cried out in fevered distress, prompting the Serjeant to attend to her, murmuring soft reassurances. Lydia put Freya from her mind, and refocused on her duty.

As she knelt to check on another man, she noticed one of the Wood Elves who had come with them running towards the main party, shouting something in his tongue. One of his companions heard him, and raised her voice to spread the word in Imperial Common: "Dragon from the mountains!" A guard atop the watchtower was shouting too, and waving his arms. "The dragon is coming! Here in minutes! IT'S COMING!"

Lydia spun and ran toward Irileth, who had set up her command post on an outcropping of stone that still resembled the wall it had once been. Several other guards arrived as she did, and Irileth spoke to them all. "You know your formations, now get into them! Archers, aim true, spearmen, use javelins until it's downed, and for Mara's sake, don't get caught out of formation! Listen to your captains, and do not let the dragon close! If it lands, flank it in formation and remember to cripple the wings. Anybody gets themselves or someone else killed by breaking ranks, I will reach into Oblivion and pull your soul back out so you can suffer my wrath! Avoid the fire. If it can break stone, your armor won't last long." She took a deep breath, and looked over at the other Dark Elf, who had just arrived, panting. "We did not choose this battle, but we end this here. We will bring down this dragon, and return our hold to peace. May the gods go with you! For Whiterun and the jarl!"

When Irilieth had commanded his presence on her dragonslaying expedition, Velandryn had been unclear as to what his role would be. He had expected to pass along what scraps of information Farengar had wrangled out of his studies, which he had done as they marched through the night. The other Dunmer and her top retainers had listened as he spoke, and then, lit only by the light of Aetherius shining through the stars above and the few torches they carried, deliberated on how best to put knowledge of dragon behaviors and anatomy into practice. They had come to several conclusions, the largest being that while this information might be generally useful from a
command perspective, most of it would not help the average soldier as part of a formation. When the captains began discussing how best to position themselves with regards to the watchtower, he tried to pay attention, but quickly found himself woefully out of his depth. Now, as he watched the chaos around him, he realized that he did not have an assigned role in the battle to come. At least I am not the only one who thinks I shouldn't be here.

Irileth was giving orders to the Dragonsreach guard called Kemming; he nodded as she finished and led his unit off away from the watchtower. Velandryn approached her as she surveyed the field. "Where should I go?"

"Are you any good with that?" She indicated the bow on his back.

"If the dragon stands still, I can hit it. I have scrolls from Farengar—"

She cut him off as several members of the mercenary company that the Nords called the Companions moved up. "Good. Get to high ground and use them. Aim for the wings." She waved him away, and the leader of the Companions, a Nord woman with striking features beneath striped face paint, engaged her in rapid discussion about positions and baiting the dragon. Velandryn could tell when he wasn't needed. He made his way towards the tower. If it's high ground, there's none better. Should the dragon attack, he could duck inside and take shelter as well.

Inside the tower, the injured waited, looking more corpses than warriors. A healer who had tagged along from Whiterun was attending to one of them, waving his hands slowly over a burn as the flesh slowly knit. The soldier's face was tight with pain and he was letting out a high whining moan. Poor bastard. Velandryn recognized that spell of healing. It restored the body rather than accelerating natural processes, as a result it worked well against burns and other crippling wounds. However, it was also slow, outrageously painful and very tiring. Glancing around, he took in the state of the men in here; he had served as attendant healer enough to be able to assess wounds.

Even if some of these make it, none of them will be of help today. He began climbing the steps.

At the second landing, he encountered several guards peering out through the windows, though he did not recognize these. Assuming them to be the remnants of the tower's garrison, he ignored them as jogged up the next flight. However, a shout drew his attention.

The Nord woman was obviously their leader, wearing as she did a cloak trimmed in silver. She was also the one who was demanding to know what he was doing in their tower.

"I have spells. I need a place to cast them. Top of the tower is best vantage, so I am using it." He turned to go, but stopped when her hand landed heavily on his shoulder. He stiffened. "Remove the hand, human, or I will." How dare she try to stop me; I defend her people! When the hand vanished and he turned though, her face did not have the lines that he had come to recognize indicated human anger and aggression. The brow and jaw were key to figuring out anger in humans, but both were relaxed. Instead, her eyes were calm and cold.

"I have many wounded in this tower. Do not bring the dragon's fire back onto them."

He nodded. "I will do my best." A fair request, but soldiers die. I hope it does not come to that, but I will not die so they may live. Leaving her to her wounded, he finished ascending the stair and blinked as he adjusted to the bright light atop the tower.

Three archers were slumped behind the parapets while another stood and watched the huge shape sweep slowly towards them. He turned to look at Velandryn. "You're not one of ours. You from Whiterun?" On closer inspection, his gear was dirty and his eyes were dull even for a human. Elven eyes he understood. It was simple to read moods and passions from eyes that made sense.
These humans, however, kept him guessing. For this one, it was a good guess that he was bone-tired and half dead. If I had to pass a night not knowing when the dragon would return to finish me off, how would I fare? He pushed that to the back of his mind and regarded the four humans. They all had bows, and the dragon was closing fast. Velandryn moved to the battlement and looked out. Below, the Whiterun guards had broken up into spiky clumps; armored guards warding the archers while the spearmen hefted javelins, ready to throw. Elsewhere, the two Orcs had occupied a pile of rubble that provided cover from several directions, while many other groups were simply standing out on the rocky fields. Evidently they trusted that the dragon would not go for them. Or they are thrice-damned fools. They did choose to come, after all.

A roar echoed across the battlefield. The dragon, still far beyond bow or spell range, dived and let loose a plume of fire that moved along the ground, scorching the grass beneath it. It's coming in low and fast. Archers won't have long to react. He spun to face the guards. "Fire the instant it's in range! Those on the ground won't have a good angle. We do!" By the look of it, the dragon would actually come in below them, giving them good access to its back. It will ravage the forces down there, though.

The dragon was gliding in fast, claws outstretched. As it approached, something entered his mind. An uncomfortable feeling. Something was wrong about the dragon, something important.

Another roar reverberated off of the tundra as the dragon made its descent. In another moment it would be on the outmost scouts. They were all lightly armored hangers-on, and they broke as the beast swept over them. One hunter wasn't fast enough, and he screamed in terror as one of the dragon's claws slammed into him. His screams as his broken body flew through the air were ended with a crack as a boulder jutting from the earth broke his fall. The guards atop the tower, eyes wide and arms shaking at what they had witnessed, prepared to loose and Velandryn did the same. He had prepared the wizard's poison; there had been just enough to treat a single arrow. He did not have high hopes, but this monstrosity seemed to be almost eighty feet long from nose to tail, with a wingspan easily that wide or wider. It was fast as well, and clearly knew how to maneuver to its advantage. Azura save us, did we bring enough force to kill it? If this poison could weaken the beast, it was worth a shot.

He knew that he was not the finest archer likely even on this roof. Dunmer were renowned as versatile and multifaceted combatants with sword and bow and spell, but that was as much a product of culture as aptitude. For me, I just get to be grateful that the target is so bloody big! He loosed.

He had aimed for the broad wing as the dragon swooped beneath the tower, figuring that the scales on its hide would reflect his arrow as they were most of the shots being loosed at it. Shots at the wing were punching into the thick membrane before being knocked out by the force of the dragon's flight. Velandryn's arrow did the same, briefly sticking until a great flap of the wings sent it spiraling towards the ground. Gods damn you, but you are powerful, beast. If the poison had affected the dragon, it showed no sign. The great beast continued onward, sweeping over the clusters of soldiers down below. It would bathe them with fire or claw at them, all while moving fast enough that any arrow or spell that did not miss would most likely glance off of its hide. It scattered a group of hunters of some kind, and swept northwards away from the main host. It landed with an earth-shaking crash on a pair of guards and took to the air again, leaving them crushed beneath its massive claws.

The dragon's huge wings flapped at the air with lazy power, and it circled back toward the tower. This time though, Velandryn was ready. He had opened the scroll labeled "Lightning Storm", and power pulsed around him as he awoke the spells imbued into the parchment. He let his body's magicka attenuate to the power contained in the scroll, and the spell coursed into him. He could
feel his hair lifting on his scalp as the charge altered his natural magical currents, and his armor and clothing felt odd against his skin as the current reverberated through him. His magicka held this power in check for the moment; he would not burn out his insides or have lightning explode from him. He must release it soon, however; his moderate skill at magic was far below what was needed to contain this spell for long. For this brief instant, though, in the middle of the battle, he luxuriated in the power around him even as it threatened to overwhelm him. I am the storm, dragon, and you shall know my wrath. The dragon was closing fast, and Velandryn thrust his arms out above his head. The charge gathered in his hands, and he could smell the moment that the air between them began to crackle and burn. He brought his arms forward, and focused the spell towards the onrushing dragon.

The space between him and the dragon was calm for a single heartbeat. The wind died, and the tunnel of air became perfectly still. The dragon's head swiveled, and its eyes burned into him. Again, looking into this dragon's face, Velandryn realized that something was off here. He couldn't place it, but he felt a sinking deep in his stomach at the certainty that he was overlooking something, and it mattered.

The moment ended. The magical equilibrium was broken, and lightning surged out of Velandryn's hands, the magicka from the scroll using his body as a conduit on its path towards the dragon. The spell crashed into the dragon's face and played along its body, leaving burns and skittering snakes of energy along the great beast's scales. It roared, this time in either annoyance or pain, and aborted its graceful sweep towards whatever its target had been to pull itself up and come even with the tower's roof. Oh. This isn't good. This is bad. Yelling a curse that would have earned him days of penance had a Temple elder heard him; he bolted for the entryway into the tower, vaguely aware of the other guards on the roof doing the same. The dragon rose slowly, wings pushing its monstrous bulk over them, its shadow covering the entirety of the roof in a macabre parody of relief from the sun. With a crash, it landed atop the trapdoor, killing the two guards who had been closest to safety. Three remained on the roof. Its head snapped forward and its jaws closed around another; her screams ended as the great jagged teeth came together with a crack.

Two of them remained on the roof, and the dragon lumbered towards them. In truth, the watchtower's top was too small for such a huge creature, and its great clawed wings gripped the edge as it moved awkwardly forward. Its head reared above the two survivors, Dunmer and Nord, and Velandryn doubted that his resistance to fire would stretch so far as to save him from a dragon's wrath. He glanced at the watchman, who was shaking and staring helplessly at the dragon. The cloth around his groin had soaked through as visible evidence of his fear. Part of Velandryn wanted to do the same, faced with something as impossibly powerful as this ancient monstrosity. Not today. I won't die here.

Velandryn sprinted away from the dragon, passing the last of the four Nords, who was now whimpering with tears running down his cheeks. For what it's worth, I'm sorry. He reached the parapet, and flung himself into over the edge. As he did so, he cast one of the first spells he had ever learned, a simple trick that had amused his friends and now might save his life. Behind him, the rooftop lit up with orange and gold and the agonized cries of a dying guard.

The spell required only the merest trickle of magicka, and so little concentration that it could be cast by a desperate fool vaulting away from a dragon. The ground was ten meters below, now five, now…

The Slowfall spell he had learned as a child still worked as intended, thankfully. What had once let him make graceful descents from the crab-shell towers that surrounded Blacklight now meant that he could leap from a watchtower with something less than fatal results. He landed poorly though, twisting his ankle as he impacted the ground. So instead of rising triumphantly to the cheers of the
other novices, he rolled along the ground cursing until his leftover momentum had left him. Rising slowly to his feet with a groan, his world spun around him, and he had the unwelcome urge to heave his breakfast out onto the ground. He clutched himself and rocked back and forth, and the feeling began to pass. That's never happened before. Of course, it must have been thirty years since he last attempted it, and doubtless a dragon did not make the endeavor easier. As he took his feet again, he resolved to spend more time practicing minor spells like that. In this province? Seems like I'll need them.

His vision slowly returned to something approaching clarity, and he noticed with a lurch in his stomach that the watchtower no longer sported a dragon atop it. He spun around, trying to find the beast, but could see nothing. Then, a deep roar and a pillar of flame emerged from the far side of the tower and he slumped with relief. Around him, some of the eager dragon-hunters seemed to be reconsidering, while others were already dashing off to rejoin the fight.

His bow caught his eye, lying on the ground. The string was broken, but the arm looked well enough, all things considered. He focused on putting one foot in front of the other as he approached his bow, until he was standing over it. His pouch with the scrolls and potions bumped against his hip; he gave a prayer of thanks for Azura's foresight to fasten it after pulling out the first scroll.

He picked up the bow unsteadily and restrung it, a task that required every ounce of focus he had left. When he was done, he slung the bow over his shoulder and even had the presence of mind to check his quiver. It was empty. He noticed now; his arrows traced a path leading back to the tower. It was all too much. He collapsed, nearly sobbing with laughter. I got the bow but the arrows fell out!

Tears were streaming down his cheeks, eyes wide and without even breath to make a sound. He tried to inhale to laugh more, but ended up choking on his breath and doubled over coughing. He lay there for an eternity or two, until something pulled on the back of his tunic and hauled him up. A goblin stood before him, looking at him with dull ugly eyes. Its piggish face was half-concealed behind gilded plate armor, and it was holding two long spears whose heads were wings with razored edges. Behind it stood the concealed mage from Whiterun, wearing an ebony mask over dark robes. Nothing of it was visible save robes and mask, and if it had been in battle, it gave no sign. An Altmer, to use goblins as slave-warriors. But why help me? A second goblin, twin to the first, emerged from behind him and took its place beside its fellow. As the first handed back the spear to the one that had pulled him standing, the mage spoke.

"The fight is not done. Your spellcraft is uncoordinated, but you may yet be worth something." The voice was female, the speech flavored with the accents of the Somerset Isles and every syllable resonant with magical inflection. An Altmer indeed, and casting an incantation of courage. It was working. He felt strength return to him, his mind clear, and resolve reignite within him."The dragon yet lives. Tell me, Dunmer, will you let Nords show more bravery than you?"

"No. It dies here, and I am going to kill it." The spell was strong, massively so, and at the moment he felt that he could take down an army. Even distaste between Altmer and Dunmer burns away in a dragon's fire. The mage gestured, and two mer and two goblins moved back into the fight.

Leadership, Lydia had been told, was a team effort, reliant both on the example of the commander and the discipline of the followers. She had to wonder if the current fiasco was her fault then, or if the guards as a whole had simply lacked the courage and skill to secure victory. She only had two of hers left, an archer she did not know from the town watch, and Borje the Red from the Dragonsreach guard. Currently, the archer was firing at the dragon, although they all knew it would do no good, while she and Borje had shields prepared should it turn on them. She had lost
the remaining three in her command somewhere on the field. One she had seen engulfed by flames when he broke from the formation, and two others had been scattered. Some other guards and hangers-on had gravitated towards them, assuming that three who seemed to have kept some semblance of their discipline would be a good place to rally. Nearer the tower, she could see Irileth sending ice spikes at the dragon as she commanded ten or so guards in a concerted effort. The great beast itself swung lazily above the field, and dove to snatch another guard from the ground; this one had been cowering alone behind a boulder. With a sinking heart, Lydia realized that had been one of hers. She turned to her remaining two. "Keep firing and provide cover! All armor has a weakness; we just need to find it!"

From the direction of the tower, a torrent of lightning suddenly split the sky in two, as it had just a minute before. This time, though, it did not come from atop the tower, but from the west, where she saw a dozen warriors rushing her way. In the lead came a pair of huge Nords in nothing but blue paint, bellowing with a fury that shook the earth. The lightning was coming from a mage swathed all in dark robes and—

It was the Dark Elf, Velandryn Savani. He looked like he had pulled himself out of the grave, but he held a scroll in one hand and his other was projecting a stream of lightning at the dragon. The look on his face almost made her reconsider her earlier dismissal of him as useless. When the spell ended, he produced another scroll from the satchel at his side and summoned a great whirling ball of ice, which flew towards the dragon. The creature dodged easily, though, and dove on the newcomers. The robed mage threw its hands to the air, and the dragon's fire splashed harmlessly off of a shimmering dome of energy. The dragon, however, did not. It tucked its wings in and crashed into the shield, which vanished with a blast of purple light. The dragon plowed into the group, and suddenly chaos reigned among the newcomers.

Lydia pointed with her sword towards where the dragon was now on the ground, laying about with claws and teeth and flame. "It's on the ground! Pierce the armor! Cripple the wings! FOR WHITERUN!"

Her archer cheered and took off running, and Borje grinned behind his thick beard and clapped her on the shoulder as he bellowed past. Others must have been listening, as they too charged past her towards the grounded dragon. Lydia followed at a slightly slower pace. She had seen the power of that beast, and was not about to burn because of her own carelessness.

By the time she reached it, the dragon was surrounded, but it had done no small amount of damage itself. Her heart leapt into her throat at how many of the guard were down, and she prayed that most were merely out cold or wounded. If they are all dead…No. She forced such thoughts out and advanced, coming up behind an Orc in heavy plate with a twisted green longbow who was releasing bodkin-headed arrows at the beast. The Orc regarded her for half a second as she passed it, and resumed his archery. She wondered why the Orc would have arrows designed to punch through the heavy armor of guards or soldiers, and then, as she watched one of the shafts tear clean through a wing, decided it did not matter for the moment. Against a dragon, I will take the help.

The dragon spun in her direction and spat a great gout of fire that would have cooked her in her armor had she not raised her shield and thrown herself down. As it was, her steel armor heated and the fur that lined it began to blacken and smoke. When the flames abated, she regained her feet and looked about. The dragon had not been aiming at her, and a pair of smoking corpses was all that remained of two of the hunters. She began advancing again, keeping her body low and shield ready, and managed to get close enough to feel the buffet of the wind off of the dragon's wings as it took to the air once more and circled away into the sky.

The scene the dragon had left behind looked like it had come from one of the more horrifying
realms of Oblivion. Bodies lay torn apart or burned beyond recognition, and the ground was
furrowed by great claws and littered with broken and spent arrows and other weapons. The air was
thick with the smell of death and cries of fear and pain sounded from every direction. We are
broken, was Lydia's first thought, but she soon realized otherwise. Many had fallen, to be sure, but
the survivors were readying themselves for another bout. A good thing, too, as the dragon had
achieved some distance and was now swooping in low and fast to plow through them or burn them
from above.

"On your feet! Brace yourselves!" Lydia's cry preceded Irileth's similar exhortation by only a
moment, and the two of them shouting together managed to pierce through the exhaustion and fear
evident on so many faces. The Dark Elf housecarl was bleeding from a nasty gash over one eye,
but her expression was resolute and she was already preparing another spell.

Not far enough away, the dragon dove even closer to the ground. Now, it would come in mere feet
above their heads. It extended its claws, and Lydia knew what would happen next. The claws
would rake through them, and many would fall. Some of those would never rise again. She raised
her shield, and glanced around to see who else was ready. Too few. She needed to do somethi—

A war cry echoed from behind her, and the earth shook as thunderous footfalls echoed towards her.
She spun, shocked, to see one of the Old Clan Nords, naked save for a loincloth and his blue wode-
paint, running at the dragon. His face was contorted, mouth open, and in each hand he held an axe
of white bone, wickedly sharp and intricately carved. She realized with a start that the thundering
earth was not from the dragon or battle, but that it echoed with his footfalls and his war cry. He is a
Tongue! It was rumored that the Old Clans of Skyrim still passed down the art of the Voice from
parent to child, but she had never seen it used before. It was an inarticulate sound of rage and pain,
but if the power in the footsteps was any indication, it would give his blows incredible strength. He
passed her, traveling at respectable speed made terrifying by his crashing steps, and thundered
onwards towards the onrushing foe. She could actually feel the force of his cry as it washed over
her and the calm once it had passed her by. His charge took him directly into the dragon's path,
where he leapt high into the air. Clearly, the dragon was not expecting this, as no claw came to
knock him away nor fire to burn him down. She watched with slack jaw as his axes bit into the
dragon, and the shock of his war cry and blow smashed into the flying beast, roughly halting his
attack. Suddenly, the elegant and deadly swoop became a tumble of scales and wings that was
almost comical, the huge Nord a tiny bug clinging to axes stuck into this giant beast's breast. It
crashed into the ground even as the Nord leapt free and abandoned his weapons to their grim
sheath. The dragon rose, spitting fire and claws whirling, but the forces of Whiterun Hold had seen
the chance and attacked with renewed vigor. Lydia drew her sword and raised her shield to guard,
waving their forces forward. To her left, she saw Irileth and Kaptain Hrun do the same. The same
Orc from before with his bodkin shafts took up a firing position on an exposed stone, and to the
west the elven mage with the golden soldiers threw a great stream of icy shards into the air, where
they tore into the dragon's wings as it began to take to the air. Abandoning that plan, it instead
dove for the mage, crushing one of the golden-armored soldiers underfoot and snapping at the
spellcaster. Lydia charged in, intent on dealing some crippling damage while the dragon was
preoccupied with the mage. As she did so, she noticed the Dark Elf Velandryn Savani again. So he
still lives. Perhaps even by his own doing. He seemed to be throwing spells from Farengar's scrolls,
so it seemed he had decided he would actually fight. Then, she reached the dragon's great scaled
flank, and her world narrowed until only she and the beast existed within it. Time to die, brute!

Velandryn let the last scroll fall to the ground, the lettering on it still smoking from the speed at
which he had pulled forth its power. He felt drained and ready to curl up and sleep. Or die, more
like, if I do it here. He was in a good spot well behind the dragon, though not out of reach of its
lashing tail; for the moment it seemed intent on slaughtering the Altmer mage who had
reinvigorated him. *I suppose it would be ungrateful of me to let that happen.* He had found a quiver of steel-tipped arrows on a dying guard, and nocked one now, trying to find a chink in the armor. With the great beast grounded, he saw no purpose in attacking the wings for the moment. *Get it bleeding, and it will die.* At least, he hoped so. This monstrosity had proven absurdly resilient; its armoring should have made it slow, or its mobility should demand vulnerabilities. However, it seemed that the dragon had decided that it would simply be not only the fastest combatant on the field, but also far too resistant to the blows of its enemies. As it was now, the mage had been fending the dragon off well enough, but one of her goblins was already down and the other was falling as he watched. A buffet from one great wing sent the mage to the ground, but the dragon spun before landing a killing blow, and turned so its head was facing directly at him.

Absurdly, Velandryn's first emotion was not fear, but indignation. *I didn't even fire at you yet! Go kill someone else!* Then, as the dragon reared up and he saw the Nord sprawled on the ground beneath it holding a bloody sword, he realized that was exactly what was happening. He gave brief thanks as he began to move out of the line of fire, only to catch a glimpse of the dragon's next victim and have time grind to a halt. The shield that had last been slung across her back had been knocked out of her reach, and her dark hair was matted with blood. She was staring the dragon full in the face, and though her back was to him, he could imagine perfectly the expression on her human features. *She'll be staring that thing down, even to the end.* There was no reasonable way he could save her. It was the guard on the tower all over again. *He was already dead; I could only have died too.* But she had told him how not to be shamed before the Jarl and listened to his moronic japes in the morning. *She's just another Nord, and she is dead already.* If he tried to help her, he would most likely join her in death. Something else would snatch away the dragon's notice eventually, but it could kill them both easily before that happened. *I cannot die here, alone in Skyrim!* He did not hate her, but it was simple rational calculation. *If I live and she dies, I can honor the life she bought me and help bring down the beast.* He knew that he had to leave her to die, but that did not make it easier. With a curse, he began running, picking up speed as he went. The dragon would unleash its fire in mere moments, and he did not have much time.

Lydia looked up at the dragon above her, and tried to have her last thought be of satisfaction. She had drawn the dragon’s attention and scored a deep wound on it in the process. Her sword had found a weakness between the scales and slid deep into the meat of the dragon with an almost unbearably satisfying feeling, and even as the dragon had turned to kill her the wound had been gushing blood. She had done well, and brought glory to Whiterun with her final battle. She tried to be brave and embrace Sovngarde, but all that she could do was realize that she did not want to die. She wanted to go home covered in blood and glory, to raise mugs with the Companions and the Guard to a battle well fought, to earn the rank of Serjeant and stand behind the jarl on matters of import. She wanted to serve for a long life, and, though she knew she should rejoice at the prospect of Sovngarde, she wanted to go there after a life well lived. She did not want to die like this. She looked up into the eyes of the dragon, and saw her death as its head reared back, and flame was born deep in its dark gullet. *Lord Talos, I don't want to burn. Fire is a horrible way to die.*

Velandryn appeared from nowhere moving at a dead sprint, her shield clutched in his hands. He thrust it up above the both of them, and bent his head as the fire washed across the shield instead of roasting her alive. She curled reflexively, and the shadow of the shield provided enough space free of flame for her to lie there, stunned and trying to figure out where he had come from and why he was here. He was not burning, but he had one of the leather straps that held her arm clutched in each hand, and the dragon's fire was visibly eating away at the upraised shield. He was using some sort of warding magic on the shield, as the glimmer upon it showed, but it clearly would not hold forever. His eyes met hers, and she was struck by the expression on his face. She wasn't sure what she had expected, but he had put himself in the path of dragon's fire for her. He should have had resolve or some heroic spark within, but she saw only blazing anger and something else. She
thought it might have been fear, or sorrow, but she did not have the time to figure it out. Humans wore emotions on their faces and elves in their eyes, it was said, but right now she had more pressing concerns. She pulled herself kneeling, and went to assist in holding up the shield. She snapped her hand back as soon as she touched it, though. The metal was deforming and red-hot, and the wood was blackening.

"Don't touch it!" Saving her life had not sweetened Velandryn Savani's disposition. "I resist fire. You don't." Every word was growled through clenched teeth, and all the while his eyes burned as bright as the flames around them.

"Thank you, but why?" She had to ask, even as she adjusted her armor readied her sword. Either the flames would stop or the shield would fail, and perhaps she could land one more blow. "If your plan was to save me, you only doomed yourself."

"I know, you blighted Nord!" He braced the shield with his shoulder as it cracked down the middle. At the rim, the steel edge was sagging where it threatened to melt. "Bad plan." His speech was harsh and clipped. "I shouldn't have." His eyes burned into hers. "Shouldn't have tried to save you. Foolish." He closed his eyes, and without them blazing in rage, his features took on a striking cast, almost handsome despite the harsh angles of his face. His red hair had come free and now fell every which way like a fiery mane. "I did though, so now we die. Together." He opened his eyes and his lips peeled back as his face contorted into a smile. Lydia had to suppress a shudder at how wrong it looked. His eyes were bright, and the high broad cheeks and strong jaw gave his white teeth and large eyes a horrifyingly demonic aspect. She could almost have believed he was some Daedra sent from Oblivion, with a face like that. "Humans tell me I shouldn't smile. I believe them, because it makes the children cry."

"They…aren't wrong." The absurdity of discussing this now struck her, and she had to laugh. He joined in, as the shield gave another precipitous crack and he moved to adjust it. Golden-white magic flowed along his skin and he grimaced in pain as it worked its way into his wounds. She noticed that one of his boots was little more than scorched leather, and he had burns up his shin. The muscles in his leg twitched as the healing magic sunk into them.

"It's from spending time with you humans. Your faces twist up with your emotions, and mine wants to do the same." He was speaking more easily, she noticed, but she wondered if the pain had lessened or he was simply beyond caring. *Even a Dark Elf can die from fire, and his healing has stopped.* "You go to Morrowind, and we'll tell you your eyes are dead. I can't read anything in human eyes." He laughed again, eyes bright and huge in his smooth grey face. "Do that for me, hmm? Go to Morrowind." The shield cracked again, and the flames inched closer. "Bring my body back, when I die here."

She opened her mouth to tell him that they were going to make it through this, but with a mighty roar, the fire was suddenly gone. Immediately, she lunged out from behind the shield as Velandryn let it drop and shook his arms with manic abandon. She noticed the dragon rearing back in pain and a long spear sticking out of its side, and dove forward to end this fight and kill this dragon to make Skyrim safe again.

Velandryn let the burning shield slip from his fingers and almost sobbed in relief as the heat abated. He had trusted in his resistance to fire to save him, but he had underestimated dragon's breath. Now he had half-healed burns, soreness throughout his body, no magicka, and a headache from holding a ward in place on top of a physical shield. The dragon had shifted focus away again, and he was sorely tempted to clear the burned earth and simply press himself to the ground and wait for all of this to pass. The Nord woman Lydia was already back on the attack, though, so he
drew his sword and followed her to where the dragon was menacing some guard who had been foolish enough to draw its ire. Saved our lives though, so good on you, brave dead guard. Then, he saw the face that was behind the light leather shield and his heart sank. Gods damn it all, Kenrik, you blighted brave fool.

The dragon was almost contemptuous with the blow that felled the boy. One huge winged claw smashed through the shield and sent him sprawling, and the dragon raised another to crush the life from the guard. Velandryn found himself running towards the dragon with a blade in his hand, and wondered what he planned to do. In front of him, Lydia had reached a great bleeding wound in the dragon's thigh, and drove her sword deep into the bloody flesh. Others were doing much the same, and Velandryn felt the momentum of the battle turning. The dragon had become sluggish and its blows lacked the precise lethality of earlier in the fight. It was moving less and did not even try to take to the air. When one of the Companions in his wolf-shaped armor climbed onto its back, raised a great two-handed sword, and cleaved a wing off of the body in five mighty strokes, Velandryn knew that the fight was all but done.

The dragon gave a sudden spasm and threw the Companion bodily from its back. He landed, but the dragon had risen to its feet again, and thrown its head back to breathe a great plume of fire into the sky. At this, Velandryn was overcome again with the sense of the dragon being wrong somehow. Of course it's wrong! Dragons are all dead, and then I have to deal with one twice! First at Helgen, then here—

Oh. Oh gods. Blessed Azura, no. It was not possible. But it was there. He had been staring at it this entire time. The dragon was mighty, to be sure, but mostly smooth and grey-green. At Helgen, the dragon had blotted out the sky, and its black spiky form had burned itself into his mind like one of those pitiful silhouettes against the walls of Helgen Keep. Here, the dragon's fire had burned men alive. At Helgen, it had turned them to ash as they fell to the ground. They aren't the same dragon. As the great beast was dying on the fields of Whiterun, Velandryn found himself looking to the skies again. How many are there? If one had been at Helgen, and another here, were they all across Skyrim, or perhaps Tamriel? Were the Ordinators-Repentant even now fighting dragons on the streets of Mournhold? How many? And where did they come from?

He was jolted out of his thoughts by another deafening sound from the dragon, this one a deep booming growl that seemed almost to convey speech. "Dovahkiin? NOOOOOOOO!" The dragon's final roar reverberated off of the watchtower and the plains, fading slowly as the great beast died. When Velandryn looked at the dragon—one of the dragons—he realized that it had died looking straight at him. The light was fading from its eyes, and its huge limbs relaxed in death. It was unnerving, staring at something so old and terrible. He saw something in the eyes, and stepped back, worried that there was enough life in the dragon for one final blow. But although he saw light, Mirmulnir did not move again.

He paused. That name, Mirmulnir. He knew it belonged to the dragon, proclaimed him 'Most Loyal of the Great Hunters', and he had won it when the men still dwelt in Far Atmora and the elves wept for the sin of Creation. How can I know that? He felt wind beneath his wings—I do not have wings—and saw the screams of the mortals as they sought to kill him. His fire licked over them – What is happening to me?—and they burned. He saw fire then, around him and on him. He saw himself, standing there, wreathed in nine hundred colors of the sun, and he saw himself, lying there, vanquished by the grey elf of the red hand.

He died, and he flowed into himself, and felt something within him. He recalled the words far beneath Bleak Falls Barrow, the epitaph of a fallen king, and knew their meaning. He saw them on the back of his eyelids, and mocked the crude human hands that had shaped it. They meant well, to raise words of honor in the tongue of their masters, but it was crude work, manling work. He knew
the words though, and one in particular was pleasing to him. Whichever mortal had carved *Fus* had done a passable job, and the words resonance with him was pleasing. He thought on *Fus* and the power of force, so useful to showing the *Joorre* the power of the *Dov*. They cowered and knelt, and if they rose, *Fus* put them in their place.

Velandryn opened his eyes; he did not recall closing them. The survivors of the battle with the dragon were clustered around him, and he wondered why. *Surely I was not the only one to fall.* Then, he chanced to look at Mirmulnir. *How long was I unconscious?*

The dragon was no more. In its place lay a great skeleton, unnaturally clean given how recently it had been beneath flesh and blood. He found his voice. "What…what happened?"

A bellow came from the ring of watchers, and the huge blue-painted Nord strode forward. He had recovered one of his axes, and pointed it at Velandryn. "Elf. Speak Thu'um."

"What? What is thume?" *How do you know of Thu'um, manling?* He looked around him for help until he realized that among so many humans, he did not have a chance of reading their faces. He focused on a few. Irileth was confused and, unless he missed his guess, annoyed that something else had happened after bringing down the dragon. She could hold her face like a human, but her eyes couldn't hide anything from him. Lydia had wide eyes and a slightly open mouth; he thought that she might be surprised or upset. He spotted Kenrik, half his face scarred from battlefield healing and leaning on a spear; his eyes were so wide it was impossible to mistake his feeling for anything but excitement. Of course, the boy could just be feeling the rush of bringing down a dragon. He realized that the Nord was talking again.

"Not thume. Thu'um." The long 'oo' in the middle was punctuated with a glottal stop, it seemed. Velandryn gave thanks for his skill with tongues and mentally resigned himself to an impromptu lesson on whatever backwater dialect this Nord spoke and asked, "Very well, what is Thu'um?"

The big Nord pointed at the dragon. "Dovahzul. Thu'um, Nord Voice." He raised his voice and his wordless yell shook the earth. "Now you. Speak Thu'um."

He realized what the Nord was saying, and rage rose within him. "You want me to Shout? To be a Tongue?" The ancient High Kings of the Nords had been Tongues along with their fiercest warriors, and they had enslaved his people. Not since Nerevar slew the Ash-God-King Wulfarth-Shor at Red Mountain had a Tongue come to Morrowind. This Nord could do as he liked with his own shouting, but to demand this of him was an insult that would not be borne. He rose, ready to blister the Nord's ears with a demand that he stand down.

As he opened his mouth, the words he had prepared left him. He tried to speak, but nothing came out. Something within him was stirring, and upon his bones the Thu'um the Nord had used still echoed. It was Thu'um only by courtesy, half-formed and wordless and befitting only the paltry mortal that had uttered it, but it was a challenge nonetheless, and challenge must not go unanswered. To back down was to be subservient, and he was *Dov*! He ruled here!

"FUS!"

The word bubbled up from deep within him, leaving emptiness behind. He could not even breathe in its wake, and had to put a hand on his chest as he threatened to fall. He realized that the watchers had gone silent, and looked up. The Nord had been knocked five paces back, but now was striding quickly towards him. He looked around for his sword, certain the painted barbarian was about to attack. The Nord stopped a pace away, however, and sunk down to one knee.

"Dovahkiin." Just the one word. The surrounding crowd seemed as confused as Velandryn. He
looked at Lydia, but the roiling emotions on her face made her impossible to read. For Irileth, his use of the Shout seemed to have shocked her out of her annoyed glare. Kenrik was probably running out of space on his face for his eyes to get larger. The Nord stood. "Elf is Dovahkiin! Elf is Dragonborn!"

With that final word, chaos broke loose. Seemingly every Nord in the crowd began shouting all at once, and Lydia moved in to haul him bodily to his feet. "You are Dragonborn? And you did not think to tell us?"

"I don't know what Dragonborn is, and I certainly didn't know I was one!" He was trying to remain calm amidst the madness but failing miserably. He lowered his voice; the last thing he wanted was another one of those Shouts slipping out. "The dragon did something to me when it died; I saw through its eyes. That must be why I can Shout like that." He shuddered. "Believe me, I would not have chosen this." The distaste of being a Dunmer Tongue aside, he could still feel the dragon's mind rising within his again. He wanted these squabbling mortals to be quiet, and he knew that with just a few shouts, he could bowl them over and make them kneel. He forced that thought down. All he wanted was to figure out why this was happening.

Irileth approached, two of the Dragonsreach guard at her back. "Lydia, grab what you need. I don't know what's going on, but Hrun has explained a bit about this Dragonborn business. We're starting back to Whiterun this instant." She turned to Velandryn. "You keep your mouth shut until we figure out what's going on." He nodded, grateful to be leaving this place. The crowd stood aside to let them pass, the blue Nord bowing and many others giving him odd looks. The one he took particular notice of was the Altmer. Her masked face rose from where she was reattaching one of her goblin's legs to regard him. He glimpsed her eyes through the holes in her mask, and saw the dark joy there. A chill ran down his spine, and he turned away. Irileth took lead while Lydia and four other Dragonsreach guards surrounded Velandryn. Behind them, the crowd was still in turmoil, with many trying to break apart the dragon skeleton while others began leaving for Whiterun or some other destination. More were simply milling around, seemingly trying to figure out what had just happened. They are welcome to tell me once they figure it out.

As they got on their way, he approached the Housecarl. He had no problems with keeping his silence, but he needed to say this first. "Irileth."

Her eyes narrowed. "I said quiet. I don't want—"

"Listen." He kept his voice low, but the urgency in it bled through. "This wasn't the same dragon."

"What?" He knew that she understood; her eyes gave her away. She simply didn't want to believe.

"This dragon is not the one from Helgen. That one was black, spiked, bigger than this." He was fairly certain that Lydia could hear them, but he didn't care. "I'll stop talking now, but you needed to know. This isn't over yet."

As they moved on down the road, he was left alone with his thoughts. He had taken knowledge from the dragon, and it had given him the ability to read the inscription from Bleak Falls Barrow. The most troubling part of that was that he could not recall the writing now, nor would he have been able to beforehand. Somehow the dragon had wrested the knowledge form within his mind. Or, something kept the memory safe even from me until I had his knowledge and could make use of it. He recalled the tales of House Dagoth, and how those descended from its ancient bloodlines had been tormented with nightmares and waking visons. He had not missed the way that nearly every Nord on the battlefield had looked at him with new eyes after learning that he was Dragonborn. He just wished he knew what it was that they saw.
And what am I?

You are Dovahkiin, mortal. Enjoy it while you can. Alduin is returned, and your soul belongs to him.

Elsewhere

"Truly? A dragon?"

"Yes my lord. He says that it destroyed some town in the south."

"Well done. There are few of those proud beasts left. Let us hope that it decides to come this way. I would relish the chance to have a dragon under my control."

"Ah, my lord, there is one more thing. Vakken was investigating reports of our lesser kin in Eastmarch when he was caught by the sun. Fortunately, he remembered an old crypt near there, and took refuge. Dimhallow, it is called."

"I presume you are telling me this for a reason? If Vakken wishes merely to report that he is unable to tell when dawn is breaking, I will gladly remove the eyes he seems not to have any use for."

"Ah, yes my lord. Begging your pardon my lord, but what he claims, if true—"

"Speak, fool! Whatever it is, it cannot be worse than having to listen to your prattle!"

"My lord, he found sealing magic within the crypt. Ancient and powerful magic that he dared not break. It was hidden subtly, and only a collapsed wall revealed a portion of the array, otherwise it would simply have hidden its door away and been unknowable. He claims it exceeds any of its type he has ever seen"

"What magic is this, that one of my court fears it so? Is Vakken growing fearful?"

"My lord, it was vampiric magic, sealed with the blood of a Daughter of Coldharbour!"

...

"My lord? What shall we—"

"Assemble the court, ready yourself to travel, and send for Vakken at once. It is customary to reward those who find things you have misplaced, is it not?"

"Yes, my lord."

Chapter End Notes

A quick note about the Thu’um and Old Clan Nords. Prior to the release of Skyrim, a major part of the flavor for the province was the conflict between the Imperialized Nords who embraced Talos and the new gods, and the old ones who held to the Nordic Pantheon and revered the quasi-totemic spirits of Atmora. This was eventually merged into the Stormcloak Rebellion, but the notion of the Old Holds is canonical enough that I feel comfortable including clans of backwoods Nords who are on the 'barbaric'
side of the Nord civilization scale. They hold to the old gods, go nearly naked in blizzards, fight like madmen, some can use a rudimentary version of the Thu'um, and the wise among them know a lot about the history and legends of their areas. They won't be a huge part of this story, but they are a taste of the kind of interesting lore that was missing from much of Skyrim.
Twelve years before the return of the dragons:

Guardsman Lydia,

In the name of Jarl Balgruuf the Greater, it is with great regret that we inform you of your father Andron's death in the line of duty.

The deceased has bequeathed unto you the entirety of their worldly possessions. You are also entitled to a recompense in the amount of 500 gold pieces due to your father's valiant death in service of Whiterun.

The Jarl's court has levied an amount of 20 gold pieces from the inheritance, as the lawfully and honorably due tax. Andron's home, as well as all to be found within it, is now solely your property.

While all of the Jarl's court grieves with you on this day, we give thanks for your father's service as a guard of Whiterun Hold, and hope that you will continue to uphold the fine tradition of your family in the guard.

Your father will be laid to rest beside your mother in the Hall of the Dead beneath Whiterun in two days' time. We invite you to attend the ceremony and receive the blessings of Arkay if you so wish.

Our deepest condolences,

Proventus Avenicci, Steward

17th Sun's Dawn, 4E 188

They beat the news of what had happened at the western watchtower to Whiterun, but not by much. By the time they reached the Wind District, Irileth's brusque dismissals of curious citizens and concerned guards were becoming nearly constant, and the first time that she heard the word 'Dragonborn' Lydia was fairly certain the housecarl would break out into a run. She clearly wanted to get the news of this to the jarl before it got any more out of hand, and Lydia found it hard to
disagree. She kept looking over at Velandryn—at the Dragonborn—and tried to figure out why he would have been chosen. The Dark Elf clearly had no knowledge of what his status entailed, and a day and a night marching by his side had finished what had begun hunkered beneath a shield and dragon flames. She had always been good at reading people, even elves, and was starting to get the hang of this one. He was afraid and worried, and she would have expected nothing less. As it was, he had not spoken since his quick words with Irileth after the battle, and she was as anxious as Irileth to get him before the jarl. Jarl Balgruuf had spent time with the Greybeards as a young man, and had a respect for the Voice and those who could use it that might give him insight into this current situation.

Ordinarily, returning to Dragonsreach filled Lydia with a sense of security and home; now all she felt was unease at the changes around her. An elf was Dragonborn, and a dragon had appeared where he was twice now. She had heard what he said to Irileth, and knew that this was just the beginning. If dragons have returned, then he may be of great help to Skyrim.

As they crested the steps and the Dragonsreach gates came into view, Velandryn suddenly spun around, eyes flitting across the sky. Irileth’s blade was out before Lydia had time to blink; her own was only half a second behind. Her shield was strapped to her back, but in its deformed state it was of little use; she had kept it only because it felt wrong to leave it behind. She scanned the sky as well, looking for whatever had him so on edge. It cannot be another dragon. Not so soon.

The Dark Elf inhaled deeply, and closed his eyes. Lydia looked at the Dragonborn in confusion, wondering what in Oblivion was going on with him. He opened his eyes slowly, and a low rumbling sound began all around them.

Irileth’s sword lost no time going to Velandryn’s throat. "What are you doing?"

He shook his head. "Not me." His voice was strained and hoarse.

It broke above them then; a thunderclap, though sharper than any that Lydia had ever heard, and without lightning to presage its presence. It echoed and reverberated, and she saw Velandryn with his eyes closed again, lost in some thought or sensation. She heard it then, behind the thunder.

"DOVAHKIIN!"

It was not blisteringly loud, but it echoed as though from a great distance. With a lurch, she realized what it was she was hearing. And the Greybeards spoke ‘Dragonborn’ and called young Tiber Septim to crown him as Ysmir. She saw Velandryn narrowing his eyes, clearly trying to figure out what had just happened. He does not know. He is Dragonborn but he has no knowledge of what it means. He has no knowledge of Dragonborn past, or respect for the Greybeards. He responded with scorn when told he could use the Voice. Irileth resumed her approach to Dragonsreach, and Lydia steered Velandryn after her. He is not worthy. Akatosh, why would you choose this one to defend us?

It quickly became obvious that the mighty of Whiterun were better informed than the citizenry below. The jarl was surrounded by the powerful of the city, and they all broke into exclamations and questions when they saw the war party returning. Irileth ignored them all, shouldering between Olfrid Battle-Born and Danica Pure-Spring to go to one knee before the jarl. The rest of them did the same, though Velandryn’s attempt at a bow was clumsy and ended in him simply going to his knees on the floor. He looks worse than he did while losing a fight to a dragon. His eyes were dull, his dry red hair had been tied back in a sloppy attempt at keeping it out of his face, and every line of his posture indicated that he was one good push away from going to the ground right there in front of the jarl.
The jarl, however, had more pressing concerns than a single elf's comfort. "Irileth, the dragon is slain?"

"Yes, Jarl Balgruuf. It was brought down successfully, though not without losses."

"Irileth, your actions in this matter are worthy of any hero of Skyrim, and I am once more in your debt. All of you who were at the battle, come with me." He raised his voice to address the others in the hall. "I thank you all for coming in this time of uncertainty, and you will be sent for when I have need of your wise and valued counsel."

The volume in the hall began rising as the jarl stood, when it became apparent that he had no intention of making those in attendance privy to his further discussions. It was obvious that while the dragon had been at the front of everyone's mind just yesterday, the mystery of the Dragonborn was the reason that so many had gathered here. Eorlund Gray-Mane even made to approach the jarl, until Irileth planted herself in his way with such a look upon her face that Lydia half feared the Dark Elf might strike him had he not backed down.

Lydia reached down to pull Velandryn to his feet, and then hesitated. She remembered the burns that he healed even as they spread along his hand and up a leg, and felt the lopsided weight of her shield on her back. She extended a hand before him instead. Let him keep his dignity. His eyes regarded the hand for a long moment, then he looked up and took hold, pulling himself to his feet. Together, they followed the Jarl up the stairs set off to one side of the throne and deeper into Dragonsreach.

As he followed Lydia down richly carpeted corridors and past beautiful tapestries, his mind was still where it had been since he saw his own body burn. Not my body. That was Mirmulnir. Fortunately, it seemed that whatever piece of the dragon had passed into him was composed of memory and temperament rather than identity. Only at Mirmulnir's last moment was the line blurred, and Velandryn had his own theory about that. He had been trying to probe the depths of this new side of himself for the entirety of the return to Whiterun, and had arrived as several reassuring conclusions, and one extremely troubling truth.

First, he could rest assured that he was still Velandryn Savani, anointed as a priest at the High Fane of the Temple of the Reclamations in Blacklight. He did not feel the urge to identify with the persona of Mirmulnir, or any dragon for that matter, and his core self was still solidly his own.

Furthermore, he understood that any subsequent battle with a dragon would be far simpler. Looking back at the battle now, he could trace Mirmulnir's rationale for every decision it had made. Many of them were predicated on reasoning that was wholly alien to Velandryn, but in the future, he could not only possibly anticipate the actions of dragons, but eventually maneuver them into situations more to his advantage. It would require work, but he was confident that he could use this power to control the battlefield and bring the dragons down.

Confidence and ambitions were the final pieces of this change. He was filled with resolve as he had never been before. All of his life, curiosity and duty had spurred him onward. He would want to know something new, or he would understand that a certain course of action was undoubtedly the best for his people. Since coming to Skyrim, he had occasionally been overtaken by selfishness, but even then he held fast to his given word and tried to do what was best according to how he had been taught. Now, he had desires, burning wants within him that moved him in ways he had never known. When he thought of Mirmulnir's death, he did not feel relief that people were safe or even satisfaction at a fight well won. He felt exultant in victory. He had consumed Mirmulnir, and added that old one's strength to his. He had gained power, and now could vanquish his foes all the better.
And therein lay the part of this transformation that worried him. It was that all of this felt normal, right even. Of course he should want these things! He was Dragonborn! How dare the ruler of some timber town demand I bow before him! When I burn his hall around him and rend his offspring limb from limb—

No.

That was not him. When he had consumed Mirmulnir, when he had taken that dragon's soul, he had been given a glimpse of how that ancient creature felt about mortals, about Joorre. The certainty that the great dragon was a class of being they could not even begin to comprehend. And now he is dead. He had to remember that. He had been brought down by the mortals he despised. This was nothing but another passion, and passions existed to be controlled. The goal of the Dunmer was to conquer one's world, and that included base urges. He could crave companionship for an evening or even fall in love, but lust could never rule his actions. He might hunger, but once sated on ample fare he must be content to set food aside. In all things we must show temperance, for our desires test us, and our fate is to be found worthy. That was why they had left the Aldmer behind, after all. This was the truth of Veloth First-Prophet. He showed us the correct ways of thinking, so that we could find the path to right-action and pass through the test of the Arena.

He had concentrated on the teachings of his faith and his people, but tendrils of treacherous knowledge wormed their way into his meditations. He knew that he was more than those who had laid out these rules for his people. He had power Veloth had never even imagined. Why should he be constrained by archaic codes, he who was Dragonborn?

Because I choose to be.

It was as simple as that. All the power in the Aurbis was meaningless if he did not use it in a manner true to himself. He was Velandryn Savani, and the ambitious lusts of the dragons were another facet of his mind, to be understood and shaped into righteousness. I keep telling myself that, but is that what I really want? I could be as a god, and the thankless life of a servant is unfit for a Dragonborn.

He had been having this argument within himself for the better part of the day, interrupted only when the echoing Thu'um from the sky called out his title. He could taste the power of those who had sent the calling before his ears even perceived the sound, and knew that the voices he heard could show him much of this power. As it was, he felt the Thu'um was a trifle compared to the overwhelming force of a dragon soul, but he knew that it could shatter mountains and break the wills of the strongest men. I am going to have to learn, and whoever those voices belonged to, it was not dragons.

"We are here." With a start, he was pulled back into the space outside of his head, and realized that they had arrived at their destination. Past the open door was a room dominated by a long table and ringed with braziers and rich tapestries depicting hunting and battle. It had the look of a meeting-hall, and was decidedly more intimate than the cavernous main hall below. He took a seat at random, only to lift himself out of the seat when he realized he was the only one sitting. The jarl took the spot at the head of the table, and after he sat, so too did the others. Jarl Balgruuf had the big Nord Hrongar to his left, Irileth to his right, and that Imperial steward of his at his shoulder. Farengar the wizard entered from a side door and sat down next to an older man in the garb of the Whiterun Town Guard. As he got settled, the ruler of Whiterun never removed his eyes from Velandryn. Soon enough, the entire table was looking at him.

"So. You are Dragonborn." Jarl Balgruuf had gotten to the heart of the matter in four words, and the table waited for his response. Farengar's hands clutched tightly around the scrolls he had
brought with him, Hrongar's glare was intense, Irileth looked as annoyed as ever, and the eyes of every person who had been at the battle were fixed on him. Only the steward seemed not to be invested in his answer.

"I believe so. I…took power from the dragon when it died, and now…yes. I am Dragonborn."

The jarl raised his hand to forestall any discussion or outburst from the table. In the silence, he turned to his court wizard. "Farengar, what can you tell us about this?"

For once, the wizard did not look pleased to be the focus of attention. "Ah, very little, I'm afraid. The Dragonborn is a mortal who, according to numerous texts, is either born with a dragon's soul, dragon's blood, or both. Ancient Nord sources refer to the Dragonborn's ability to consume slain dragons, though little mention is made of what this entails. Imperial sources focus on the Dragon Blood as a prerequisite for wearing the Amulet of Kings prior to the Oblivion Crisis. The Dragonblood Emperors, as they are called. Other than that, mention is made of Tiber Septim being Dragonborn—"

"We know all of this, wizard!" Hrongar's outburst startled Farengar into silence, and the Nord in his scaled armor continued. "Why do we have an elf as Dragonborn?" He glared at Velandryn. "Is this some Thalmor trick?"

Irileth interjected then. "Before we get up in arms over what race, your Dragonborn is, we have something else that needs to be cleared up. Savani, tell the jarl what you told me."

"The dragon we killed wasn't the one that attacked Helgen." He was aware that he probably should have stood to address the table, but it had been nearly three days since he had really slept, he was still trying to figure out what in the Four Hells was happening to him, and at least one person at this table apparently took it as a personal affront that he had the temerity to be both an elf and Dragonborn. He would sit.

They took it well enough. Lots of outraged yelling and one guard bolting out of the room at a dead run, perhaps to warn everybody that they might still die horribly. The jarl and his councilors tried to restore calm and lay out some sort of plan while Farengar began paging frantically through one of the books he had brought with him. Finally, the jarl pounded on the table with his fist until silence returned.

"We have killed one dragon, and we can kill more." The Jarl spoke with a certainty that Velandryn worried was completely unfounded. "However, the greatest advantage we have is sitting among us." Velandryn waited patiently for the inevitable declaration of some additional task he had to do to bring an end to the dragons and restore peace to Skyrim. This is the part where I become a mighty hero and rescue a beautiful princess in the bargain. I wonder if they will ask me to cast down the pretenders and sit upon the Ruby Throne as well. "The dragons reappear, and so also rises a Dragonborn? This is not coincidence." He looked around at the table. "You heard the Greybeards call from High Hrothgar. We all know what that means." He faced Velandryn again. "You must go to the Throat of the World, to the sacred monastery of High Hrothgar, and learn from the Greybeards. Do this thing, and we can stand together and cast the dragons back into the legends where they belong!"

Velandryn nodded assent. "I have much I need to understand, and if these Greybeards you speak of can help me, I will gladly go to them." I will climb Monahven and show these arrogant mortals who think to teach—No. I will go, and I will learn. Perhaps they can help me temper this new arrogance. The thought cheered him, and as he relaxed, his fatigue forced its way to the fore and his vision swam. "Forgive me, but it has been days since last I slept and…much has happened that
Weighs heavily on my mind. I am afraid I am doing nobody any good here as I am."

The jarl clapped his hands. "Of course! Any who need it, go get some rest. Bathe, eat, I have been remiss in my duties as your jarl!" Velandryn rose, and nearly fell right away. Gods, I need that bed. As a servant led him from the hall, he worried briefly that he was not upholding the dignity expected of a Dragonborn. Tomorrow, I will wear royalty as mantle and splendor as armor, but for now I need some gods-blessed sleep.

Lydia had been, if not as visibly wasted from her ordeal as Velandryn, at the very least most appreciative to be back in her bunk for a night. It was with considerable displeasure, then, that she found herself being shaken awake by Gulf. The huge guard looked only a little better than she felt, and she managed to pull herself into a sitting position without groaning out loud. "Gulf, why on the Holy Bones of Shor are you waking me up?"

"Apologies, Korpral Lydia. Jarl wants us. Everyone who was at the battle. Now." She noticed that he was unarmored, so she threw on a simple tunic and leggings while he waited and followed her subordinate through the pre-dawn corridors to where the leaders of Whiterun waited. She noticed as she took her place at the table that more had returned from the battle. Kemming was there, and Borje grinned at her through the ruin of his beard. As she took her seat, the Jarl addressed them all.

"First, I want to offer my thanks to all of you, and commend you for what you have done." He smiled at them all. "You have slain a dragon! For this feat, every one of you will receive a bonus of two month's pay, a trophy from my personal armory, and the eternal gratitude of the people of Whiterun." He sobered, and continued. "Sadly, many perished to bring us this victory, and while we mourn them, our first thought must be for the safety of our Hold. Kaptain Hrun!"

The highest ranking member of the Dragonsreach Guard and Irileth's second-in-command stepped forward. "Guardsman Borje, Guardsman Gulf, step forward!" They did so, the towering Nord looking nervous, the bearded one excited. "For victory in the field, and courage in facing the enemy, you are to be commended. For your achievements and merit, you are to be rewarded. You are both promoted to the rank of Korpral of the Dragonsreach guard effective immediately. You will receive duties and patrols on the morrow." He saluted, and every soldier there did the same. The silence was expectant, however, as only one Korpral had fallen, but one Serjeant had as well. Somebody is getting promoted. He turned to Lydia, and her heart felt as though it would leap from her chest.

"Korpral Lydia, step forward!" As she did so, she struggled to hold her face in solemn dignity as a smile threatened. I have earned this, but it is not just an honor, it is a duty. Dragons return, and I will serve my hold. "Korpral, for extraordinary daring and outstanding discipline in the face of a foe unmatched in living memory, you are promoted to Serjeant of the Dragonsreach guard, and charged with the duties and responsibilities of such. You will receive rotations and commands on the morrow. Congratulations to you all!" The guards raised a round of cheers, and Lydia felt as though she were drunk on the finest wine she had ever tasted. I have done it. Serjeant of Dragonsreach, at eight and twenty, the youngest in decades!

The jarl had started talking again, and Lydia forced herself to return to the task at hand. She was a serjeant now, and had to behave as such. "This evening I am holding a great feast for the people of Whiterun, and your new ranks shall be announced to them then. We shall also announce those newly inducted into the guard, as well as several strategies to counter dragon attacks in the future. You are all veterans now, and I expect each one of you to make your knowledge and skill available to those who request it." He looked at them all once more, hesitated, and gestured at Proventus. The steward stepped forward, unfurled a proclamation, and began to read.
"Jarl Balgruuf the Greater and the people of Whiterun Hold, in recognition of valorous deeds and extraordinary ability, hereby bestow the title of Thane of Whiterun upon Velandryn Savani, the Dragonborn. From this day until the end of time he is named protector of the Hold and champion of the people of Whiterun. Signed, Jarl Balgruuf the Greater, et cetera, et cetera." He finished, and stepped back.

Lydia felt as though she had been punched in the gut. *That little elf, a thane?* Skyrim would eat him alive. Beside her, her fellow guards seemed to agree.

The jarl addressed his stone-faced audience. "I have not made this decision lightly, nor will I be swayed from this. We need to show both the Empire and the Stormcloaks that we are not a weak branch to be snapped from the tree, and even Ulfric will hesitate before making war on a Dragonborn. Besides which, he brought news to us, fought with us, helped our people, and gave aid at the western watchtower. He is more than worthy of being a Thane." Lydia knew that these days thane was largely an honorary title; it was even possible, in certain Holds of lesser honor, to purchase the position with sizable 'gifts'. Nonetheless, she had a hard time thinking of Velandryn as Thane of anything.

The jarl was still speaking. "As a thane, he is entitled to a housecarl if he so chooses. Given the unique nature of his position, I feel that he should have one well versed in arms and war-craft. However, I would not ask any of you to do this if it were against your desire. I have no doubt that many will leap at the chance to be housecarl to the Dragonborn, but my first choice would be for him to be accompanied and protected by one of proven valor and loyalty, who will remind him of his duties as both thane and Dragonborn. I ask of you who have fought beside him, do any among you wish to take up this task?"

The room was dead silent. It was an honor to be a housecarl, to be sure, and to the Dragonborn nonetheless, but at the same time, he was no warrior, and an elf besides. When presented with the facts of his being Dragonborn, he had at every point responded with disdain, apathy, and aversion. His very culture was opposed to all that Nords were, and his being Dragonborn did not change that. Even Lydia, who liked to think that she could judge any on their own merits, found the idea vaguely nauseating. It was simply *wrong*, to be subservient to an elf. It was one thing for Irileth to serve Jarl Balgruuf and command them in battle; she had served Whiterun since the Great War and besides, she served the jarl as well. She might give the guard orders, but Whiterun was still ruled by a Nord of proven honor. But this? A thane's word became the Houscarl's bond. He could order them to do *anything*, and they were honor-bound to obey or die in the attempt. There were stories of thanes who went mad, and their housecarls obeyed increasingly horrific demands until finally they slit their own throats to escape from the obligation to do evil. To be so bound to an elf was… unthinkable.

The silence in the room grew ever more uncomfortable. Irileth's eyes were narrowed as she gazed around the room around at them, the jarl had faint sadness on his features, Farengar clearly would rather be anywhere else, and even Hrongar looked vaguely displeased at the entire group's refusal to speak up. Lydia looked up, and found Irileth staring her full in in the face. It was only for a moment before she shifted her red eyes away, but Lydia felt shame flood her, and blood rushed to her cheeks.

She could tell herself that he was of unproven honor, but that was not it. She knew why it was, for all of them there. It was one thing to see elves every day, even to fight beside them or share meals and call them friend. But this was a bond of trust, and every Nord knew deep in their bones, that truly trusting an elf could only end in betrayal. The Thalmor were the enemies of all Mankind while the Dunmer worshipped Daedra and behaved in perverse and profane manner. Elves breathed magic and practiced dark and unknowable craft in their secret places, all knew. It was
only natural not to trust one. Irilieth had laid her life on the line for Whiterun more times than Lydia could count, but she still wondered what she was really thinking sometimes, when those eyes fixed on her or gazed off at nothing. It was uncomfortable to admit, but she was not sure she could trust herself to trust him.

Then, all at once, she remembered, and wanted to shrink away in shame. She remembered his demand. "Bring my body to Morrowind." She remembered him bracing the shield above her, and his eyes burning bright while he tried to explain to himself and to her why he was saving her life. She remembered him offering her a potion for no reason other than that he had two, and the way he had gone rigid every time the dragon had been mentioned. He was terrified, and came anyways. He was not a warrior, but he had fought. He needs a strong sword by his side. He had held a shield against a dragon's fire and saved her life. He had no reason to defend me, but he tied his life to mine. I cannot do less.

Lydia had dreamed of being in the guard all of her life. She had joined the Town Watch at fifteen as a gangly girl, was serving in the Hold Guard by her nineteenth name-day, and had joined the Dragonsreach Guard after cutting down four bandits on her own, all before she was twenty-one. Now she was the youngest serjeant since the Great War, and with the dragons about, she would not lack for important and exciting work. She would have to be mad to throw it all away for this. I wonder if he felt this way when he dove into dragon's fire.

"My jarl, I will present the title of thane to the Dragonborn." Every eye in the room turned to Lydia, and her heart once more tried to drown out her thoughts as she realized what she was doing. "I will do this as his housecarl, and swear to his service upon my honor my sword and shield, to be his until my dying day."

At that, the dam broke and Lydia was nearly crushed beneath a tide of congratulations and genial slaps and hugs. Now that they do not have to serve him, they are overjoyed. She made her way through the crowd towards the jarl, who clasped her hand warmly and congratulated her, calling her by her given name, without rank. That was the gesture that hit home for her. I no longer serve the Jarl. I no longer serve the guard. I serve Whiterun, but my first service is to the thane, an elf I barely know. Sweet Mara, Mother of Mercy, what have I done?

Suddenly panicked, she left the guards congratulating each other and speculating on who would get the position she had just vacated, and stepped into the hallway to catch her breath. She tried not to think about what she had sworn to do. They had shed blood together, to be sure, but a housecarl was typically a dear friend or sworn shield-companion. He would be well within his rights to reject her. He would not do that, would he?

"I was wondering how long it would take you to figure it out." Irileth offered her a mug; she sipped at it to find fine rich Riften mead which she downed gratefully.

"You knew it would be me?"

"Not for a certainty, but who else? I saw that stunt he pulled with the shield. You owe him your life, guardswoman." It seemed that despite her new position, Irileth would not be using her name any time soon.

"I do, but, to be a housecarl…"

Irileth snorted. "Ha! As the only person in that room who actually knows what it means, you'll be a fine housecarl once you get the way of it. You'll serve, aye, but you have enough brains and an excess of spine; in no time at all you'll be telling him which way to march. That one doesn't know the first thing about Skyrim, and even less about this Dragonborn business. You have that honor,
showing the Dragonborn the customs and honor of your people. Isn't that some great Nord tradition, breaking down misconceptions about your race?"

In the face of Irileth's hard-nosed optimism, Lydia felt better, albeit much like a child that feels reassured by an adult. It was easy to forget that she had a full head of height on the Dark Elf; the housecarl—the other housecarl—dominated any space she was in, even when standing before the jarl. The jarl could order someone jailed or executed, but Irileth would kill to defend her charge without blinking. *Could I do that? Serve without hesitation?* "Irileth, how long did it take before you could serve as you do now?"

"You mean how long before I became the guard dog that scares all of the little petitioners?" She snorted again. "I was doing it on day two." That did not reassure Lydia as to her own ability. Irileth put a hand on her shoulder. "There's one thing to remember, the same thing old Housecarl Margus told me. No matter what, as long as someone else is watching or can listen, you are an extension of your master. Serve without question; carry out any order to the best of your ability. Those we serve will have the world trying to break them down and tear them apart; they need a strong right hand against that. If you need to question something, phrase it as a clarification. You'll get the hang of it soon enough. In private though? That's when you tear into them and make them explain what in Dagon's great red ass they thought they were thinking."

Lydia could not help but grin at the image of Irileth berating Jarl Balgruuf like that, and the Dark Elf returned the smile. Lydia decided that since it clearly was possible for a Dark Elf to smile successfully, she would ensure that Velandryn learned how. "Thank you, Irileth. I think I can do this."

Irileth looked thoughtful. "One thing more. That one, Velandryn Savani, he's Dunmer."

"I had noticed, but I thank you for your insight."

"No, listen. Now that you've managed to overlook the fact that he's an elf and decided to trust him and judge him for his deeds and not his blood," Lydia winced at how transparent the guards in that room must have been, "you need to take a step back and take his blood and background into account."

"I'm Dunmer, a Dark Elf, because my parents were. For me, it means I'm a little better than most with magic, warm up slower than some, and can hold a sword as well in my left hand as my right. Other than that? I was born on the road, fought in a dozen wars by the time I was sixty, and settled down here. Velandryn Savani though? He's Dunmer because his ancestors were and because he's been immersed in that culture since birth. You noticed the hand on his armor?" Without waiting for Lydia's nod, she continued. "That's the mark of Nerevar the Indoril, one of the great generals, from thousands of years ago. Killed a lot of Nords, and broke their Tongues twice. The Tribunal, the living gods of Morrowind, they used it too. Tell me, do you think he's wearing that to honor the general who humiliated your people or three living gods ascended from his?"

"I—I don't know."

"Exactly. I don't either, because I'm not Dunmer like he is. He has a hundred beliefs you've never heard of, I'd wager, and I'm sure there are just as many ways for him to accidentally offend you. So, when he mentions Boethiah or Mephala, don't get bent out of shape because he worships Daedra. They do that, and from what I've seen, it's not the worst way to live. And if he mentions some Nord god wrong, work with him to fix his mistakes." She took a long pause. "I get the feeling that a lot of people are going to be waiting for him to fail. His housecarl needs to be on his side always. Even if he does get Tsun and Stuhn mixed up. Can you do that?"
Lydia thought. She had never been as devout as some, but she knew the stories of her people and was fiercely proud of her heritage. "So long as he makes an effort to understand and to be respectful, I will stand beside him." She shivered as the magnitude of what she had done occurred to her once more. "It's frightening. I'm being asked to swear my life away."

"No you're not. You volunteered. And you'll do fine. You wanted duty, didn't you? I remember the day you joined the Dragonsreach Guard, so proud in your new armor. I asked you why you wanted to be here. Do you remember what you said?"

"That I wanted to serve the jarl and the people of Whiterun, and be worthy of the trust they had placed in me."

"Was that the truth?"

"Yes, of course."

"Good. Well, right now there is a Dragonborn asleep in this palace. I won't pretend that means much to me, but that matters to you Nords, and a lot of people are already trying to figure out how to use that to their advantage. I'm telling you right now that I trust you to watch over him, and he needs someone whose only agenda is doing right by him. It's not an easy thing, to swear your life to another, but you have the chance to serve as no other Nord has in thousands of years, as sword and shield to the Dragonborn. You'll do yourself proud."

He lay in the bed beneath Dragonsreach, unsure of how long he had been like that, lying there in silent contemplation. He had slept for a time, before coming awake all at once. He had no memory of dreaming, but the feeling of wind beneath him echoed through his mind. Was I flying? Not, he could not fly. He was in Dragonsreach. The battle's done. I'm...I'm Dragonborn. He wondered what that actually meant, and how it would change his time here. For one, it means there will probably be quite a lot more of it. He suspected that the Nords would not let the Dragonborn leave Skyrim just as the dragons made their return. And if he tried hard enough, he might be able to trick himself into thinking the two events were not related. He doubted it, however. So, that meant he had to understand what all of this meant, and what would happen next. No doubt that would mean asking a Nord; perhaps Farengar could explain some of this madness.

Also, I must ask about Alduin.

It had been the last echo of the entity that had been Mirmulnir as it vanished within him, a certainty whose memory still chilled him. Your soul belongs to Alduin. The statement had not been a threat or boast, it had been a simple declaration of fact. He knew Alduin was a Nord name for something, possibly the Time Dragon, but beyond that, nothing. If the dragons revered Alduin, it could be useful to know more about it. Speculation is pointless. I need to learn more. He still felt vaguely disoriented and more rest would not have been unwelcome, but as he was now, he needed answers and peace of mind far more than sleep.

His room had not had a window, but the light in the hallway outside showed him that it was the dark of night, with silvery moonlight filtering in through a paned glass window. Truth be told, he had mostly lost track of the time of day since the dragon battle. At some point he would have to return to something resembling a coherent sleep schedule, but one of the upsides of being some sort of Nord hero was that he could likely wander Dragonsreach unmolested even after most were abed. As appealing as the prospect of accosting random Nords in their sleep was to him, Velandryn decided to go see Farengar, only to find his workshop empty and his bed rumpled but vacant. Annoyed at the wizard's absence, he found himself oddly reluctant to bother anyone else. He had left the wizard's chambers and was passing into the main hall before the reason occurred to him.
Farengar is the only person here who likes me.

It hurt more than it should have. He should be doubly inured from the sting of loneliness. He was a Dunmer in Skyrim and Dragonborn besides; the reality of the situation was that he was the ultimate outsider. Perhaps these Greybeards knew something of the Thu'um, or of being Dragonborn, but he would wager every coin he had ever seen that every last one would be a Nord. The only Dunmer he had encountered since coming here were Arvel and Irileth; he had burned one and the other seemed to tolerate him at best. Have I ever been so isolated?

A sudden urge took him, and rather than retracing the steps down to his own modest cell, he took one of the stairs leading upwards from the main hall. A railed gallery ringed the great hall on all sides, offering a commanding view of the long approach from the massive wooden doors to the ornate thrones of the jarl beneath the dragon skull. With a start, he realized that while he had seen the skull several times, he had not actually noticed it until just now. Looking at it from above, it was easy to see the power inherent in every line and ridge of the bone. These are what we face. But this one had fallen, and its skull served as a trophy. He turned and made his way to the outer walls of the gallery, where tall glass windows stood tightly shut against the chill outside. Each was etched with a scene from what seemed to be a story of a hero capturing a dragon and putting it in chains, and he wondered if it had actually happened even as he admired the craftsmanship. He could not have said how long he gazed at them, but by the time he regained his sense, and pulled away, the sky through the windows had lightened to a murky gray. Silently, he resumed his vigil on the balcony, and watch the servants begin preparing the hall for the day. He watched them work, but his thoughts were of dragons.

It took Lydia far longer than it should have to find her new thane. After leaving Irileth and speaking briefly with the jarl and Kaptain Hrun she went looking for him, only to find that his room was empty and none of the servants about had seen him leave. She did not want to start her time as housecarl by having to admit that she had lost her charge, so she looked by herself, not knowing where or why he might have gone. It was by pure happenstance that she glanced up while crossing the main hall of Dragonsreach for the third time and saw him up there looking down at her. Annoyed, she took the steps up to the gallery two at a time; upon reaching the upper level, she found the Dark Elf leaning over the rail before her. The sun had risen and was shining through the great glass windows etched with the tale of King Olaf One-Eye and Numinex; it cast great columns of light upon the gallery. One such fell on him as he gazed down at the hall below.

"Why are you up here?" She should have been more diplomatic, but it had been a long morning and she was in no mood for games.

"I felt like it, I suppose. I've had a very long past few days. Some solitude is nice for a change." That took her aback. Considering everything he had been through…

He broke into her thoughts as he turned to face her, suddenly asking "Who is Alduin?"

The random inquiry caught her off-guard. "What?"

"Alduin. I would like to know more about it."

She had to take a moment to gather her thoughts; it had been years since she had given the matter of the Nord gods more consideration than the standard devotions. "Alduin is the World-Eater. He will consume Nirn at the end of time, and takes the form of a mighty dragon."

"So he is a god?"
"Yes, I think so." She vaguely remembered hearing someone mention that Alduin was the Nordic aspect of Akatosh, but didn't feel confident enough in her knowledge to bring that up. "Why does this matter?"

He waved her off. "It is not important. I was merely curious." He leaned against the rail again, and resumed his vigil of the morning activity. "My turn to ask you, why are you up here?"

"It is not important." She gave him his own words back. "I can come back later if you wish to be alone, though there are things I want to talk about before the feast this evening."

"Feast?" His red eyes narrowed in what was likely confusion and she realized that he would have had no way of knowing.

"Ah, that is, yes, the jarl is feasting the mighty of Whiterun and honoring the dragon slayers. And…announcing other matters as well." She would find the right time to tell him about his new position, and hers, but she did not think this was it.

He made a thoughtful noise. "Hmm. I would assume that one of these matters is my new…status?"

She felt momentary guilt over his obvious discomfort at being Dragonborn. It was not her fault though, any of this. "Yes. You are Dragonborn, and the jarl wants to make it clear that you are here to stand against the dragons."

He turned, and his eyes were different, lighter somehow. She remembered him saying that elves could smile with only their eyes, and wondered if this was what she was seeing. "I don't suppose anybody is hoping that there were only two dragons out there, and we've managed to kill half of them?"

She almost had to laugh at that. "No, not even Proventus would claim such a thing right now. By dusk, everyone will be ready to fight a host of dragons." She tried to take the measure of him, half-facing her in the pale morning light. "With you at our fore, as Dragonborn."

He sighed. "Yes, Dragonborn. I somehow take the soul of a dragon, and now I know things I shouldn't and can speak Thu'um without training."

She knew of the Shouting, of course, but the knowledge… "What do you know now? And what do you mean you shouldn't?"

"Do you remember when we were beneath the dragon's fire?"

"Yes, and if you are just reminding me that you saved my life—"

"No, listen. We should not have survived that. There were a dozen ways it could have broken through my ward and your shield. It could have bought down a claw on us, and broken me physically. It could have moved its head and avoided the shield, or simply left. It was surrounded by foes, so why try for so long? It makes no sense."

"It was otherwise distracted, I had thought. That guardsman attacked it, for one. Besides, though it seemed a long time to us, our peril made us remember the time we spent differently. It happens often in battle. Only a moment passed in truth."

"Kenrik landed a blow of the kind that it had knocked away too many times to count just minutes before. And yes, I'm sure the eternity I spent trying not to burn to death is exaggerated somewhat in my memory, but we had a chance to talk, which takes time."
She had to concede the point. "Why was it then? You seem to know."

"It was because I challenged him. He would have burned you, but I placed myself in the path of his flames and denied them. To do anything other than overwhelm us with the same attack would be admitting that we had defeated his fire. He refused, and continued his attack." His lips twitched. "A happy accident. I wonder what would have happened had the Dragonborn died. Would my soul have gone to Mirmulnir?"

"Mir-who?"

"The dragon. It doesn't matter, really. The point is, I know this now. This kind of knowledge. Imagine what can be done with it." He left the railing and paced into the shadows, apparently deep in thought.

Lydia knew that it had to be now. He understood how important it was that the Dragonborn be present for the fights to come. "There is one more thing." She took a deep breath, and pushed it out in a single breath. "The jarl has named you Thane of Whiterun, with all of the duties and honors that come with it."

She glanced over at him. He had stopped walking, and the light glinted dully in his red eyes. Suddenly, he made a grandiose gesture in the general direction of the railing and the hall below it. "Very well. I accept gladly. Make ready your finest treasures and most succulent foods." She had only a moment to gape at his light tone and airy wave of his hand before he continued. "Next, if you tell me what a thane is, I can decide how I actually feel about it."

It took her a moment to realize that he was teasing her. "You…it…" Words failed her. She had been anticipating this moment, and had a speech prepared about the honor of the position, and how despite his blood he would be welcome among the highest of the city. And now he was mocking her! She focused on the floorboards beneath her feet, imagining the look of scorn that must be on his face. If she looked up and saw that, she could not be held to task for what she did next.

Her indignation was interrupted by the Dark Elf moving to stand directly before her, hands crossed across his chest. "Lydia? Are you all right? I am sorry. I meant only to point out that I don't know what it means to be a thane. I intended no offense." She looked up, and saw his eyes dark and intense, brows furrowed and all joviality gone. He reached up and tentatively put a hand on her shoulder. "Forgive me. I did not mean to offend you."

She looked at his hand where it rested on her. The skin looked darker than its usual gray, almost blue in the half-light. This close, she noticed for the first time that his body was all but hairless; the only place she could see it sprouting was from the crown of his head. Where a human would have stubble or a moustache, he had nothing. It was beyond strange, to see no hair on a male face.

"Can elves not grow beards?" She blurted it out unthinking, and stood in mute shock at what she had said. He pulled back and looked at her expressionlessly, bringing his hand back down to his side. Oh gods, and he was apologizing! He must think her an utter fool.

On the contrary, his eyes lit up in one of his smiles, and his lips twitched upwards again. "We do, though slowly. I shaved the night I arrived in Whiterun, and before that it had been several weeks. It can take years to grow a full beard." He leaned against the railing casually, and she felt the tension ebb out of her. He continued. "If you ever see an elf with one of those huge beards that reach down to their chests, you know they have been cultivating it for decades or more. As for me, even for an elf I grow little on my face." He shrugged. "I shave every now and then, and my face stays clean and smooth." He ran a hand along his sharp jaw thoughtfully. "Why? Do Nord women prefer their elves bearded?"
She snorted, but felt more at ease than she had since this conversation began. He chuckled, and she knew that she had made the right decision. "I can answer your real question now. A thane is a person of importance in the hold. The title is awarded by the Jarl in recognition of a deed done or to accompany an appointment to some special office. In your case, it is a little of both. You are Dragonborn, true, but the only reason we even know that is because you helped kill the dragon." There was more to his particular appointment, but there was no need to complicate the issue at this stage. Let him learn the complications slowly.

"So, I would imagine that one of the duties that goes with this title is some sort of obligation to defend the hold." The elf was speaking slowly and deliberately, clearly thinking through every word.

"Yes, although in reality thanes generally serve as advisors or commanders. As thanes are given honors beyond the ordinary citizen, so too are they expected to serve the will of the jarl and the hold."

"Interesting. From what I have been able to gather, the Dragonborn is a phenomenally important figure in Nordic tradition, associated both with the Draconic myths that dominate your prehistory as well as Tiber Septim and the Empire. So, for a neutral hold like Whiterun to install a Dragonborn as thane would present any Nord force that meant to take the hold with a serious problem." Suddenly, she recalled Farengar ranting about how sharp the Dark Elf was; how quickly he picked up information and approached problems from unconventional angles. "Given that Ulfric Stormcloak has predicated his rebellion on the worship of Talos and veneration of Nord tradition, he would need to delegitimize me as Dragonborn if he wished to mount any serious assault on Whiterun." He looked at her questioningly. "Would an average Nord soldier attack a city if they knew that a Dragonborn was defending it?"

"I'm…I'm not really certain. You have to understand, this is unheard of. Dragonborn come out of the very oldest stories, fighting dragons in the days of Ysgramor! They aren't something that we would actually meet in this day and age. It's like…like…"

"Like the greatest hero of your people being reborn after four thousand years and casting down a few living gods? Because that one happened to the Dunmer." His eyes went from smiling to dark and serious in a heartbeat. "I am not a Nord, and I am certain that many will never forgive me for that. However, I am Dragonborn, and I will defend your people whether they like it or not." The smile returned to his eyes, and he stood straight and briefly clasped her shoulder again. "Thank you for coming to tell me about all of this, Korpral Lydia of Whiterun."

"About that…" There was one more part, and this would be the hardest. He seemed to like her well enough, but to have another bound to you… "I am no longer in the service of Whiterun. A thane is entitled to a housecarl, a personal warrior. Your housecarl will serve as sword and shield, the embodiment of your will. I have chosen to serve as yours, should you have me." Her prepared speech about serving well and the honor of the Nords was gone, as was her clever little bit about working together to show that elves could work with humans. She had given him the facts, and that was all. She looked at his face, but could make out nothing from his expression.

His response was not long in coming. "You chose this? It was not demanded of you?" His voice was even, with only the slightest inflection to signal that he was questioning rather than making a statement.

"I chose freely. You have proven yourself worthy of following, and I believe that I can be of assistance in the challenges you will face." As she said the words, she meant it more than she ever had when saying it to herself. Facing him here and now, she saw honor in this strange elf who was
the Dragonborn, and felt confidence in her decision.

He looked at her for a long moment more. "I lied earlier, you should know."

With a lurch, everything she had thought, every judgment she had made up on this balcony, was thrown into doubt. *What lies did he tell?* Was it her youth or his actions during the battle that had led her to trust a strange Dark Elf? She opened her mouth to demand that he explain himself, only to be cut off as he continued.

"I said I came up here because I desired solitude. That was untrue. I came up here because I had nowhere else to go. Of all those in Dragonsreach, Farengar alone seems to tolerate me for anything more than my status." He waved a hand dismissively. 'Oh, the servants bow and scrape and guards salute and call me 'Dragonborn,' but that is for the title, for something that still feels like a false name I have taken from some worthier host. Would your jarl have named me thane if I were simply another outlander who had participated in slaying Mirmulnir?"

She shook her head reluctantly. "No, you would have been given a token reward and sent on your way."

"So, I am given this honor and a title I have no connection to. Once more, the Dragonborn is cast into the light while Velandryn Savani is ignored." He held up a hand to forestall her as she started to protest. "I understand why, but it has become tiring after little more than a day, and I have no doubt I will grow even wearier of it with time. Rest assured, I don't resent you for it! Remind me to tell you the tale of the Nerevarine." A brief smile tugged at his lips and that same brightness flitted through his eyes. "I simply want to know that you wish to be housecarl for me, not for the Dragonborn."

That took her aback, and to her shame she had to think on it. *Would I follow him if he were not the Dragonborn?* He was not a warrior, but he had helped kill a dragon. He was not— she stopped abruptly as she realized that she was simply rehashing the struggle she had had before declaring to the jarl that she would serve. *I made my decision then, and my thoughts were only of the person he is, not of his title.* She met his gaze unblinking. "I do. You have acted honorably and aided us in a time of need. You worked with Farengar, fought the dragon despite your fear, and risked your own life to save mine. I would be proud to serve you as housecarl."

He looked up at her for another long moment, and then held out his hand. She clasped his forearm firmly as he gripped hers, and he looked up at her with fire in his eyes. "Lydia of Whiterun, I accept you as housecarl. I do not know what form the path from this place will take, but I am glad to have you at my side." The fire faded, and that laughing light returned. "Now, it seems I am going to be presented to Whiterun at a feast. As your thane, my first order is to show me how not to humiliate myself. It would not do for the Dragonborn to use the wrong fork."

"Then you are in luck, my thane." Lydia had attended too many of these feasts since arriving at Dragonsreach not to know how they went. "There is only a single fork per person, and it is used to hold in place any item that requires cutting. However most food can be eaten with the hands. Bringing a dagger to cut one's meat is fine for a jarl's feast, though in a lesser hall it could be perceived as an insult, suggesting that the host is too poor to provide a knife for each guest. As the guest of honor you will be seated..."
preparations, though Farengar did stop by to let Velandryn know that the Dark Elf was still welcome to stop by and help with research any time he wanted. He was practically salivating at the chance to interrogate a Dragonborn, but Lydia placed herself between the two of them and assured the wizard that while his enthusiasm was welcome, they still had a lot of work to do in little time.

"Am I truly so hopeless that we might run out of time before the feast?" The question might have seemed accusatory or wounded, were it not for the tone that she had come to recognize as his attempting humor.

"Not at all, but as your housecarl, I am sworn to defend you. That includes from impositions on your time. We do have a feast this evening, and you could well wish some time to yourself before it begins."

Her thane stopped dead in his tracks and turned to regard her. "It seems I made a fine choice accepting your service." Lydia grinned as he returned to studying the table. "Explain to me the status of this group that calls itself the Companions."

Soon enough, Lydia felt confident that Velandryn would not embarrass himself at the feast, and was comfortable calling for a halt. He seemed happy to hear this, and made to depart. As he did so, Lydia suddenly remembered her duty.

"My thane, might I know where you will be? The jarl has ordered finery prepared for you, and you mentioned wishing some time alone before beginning preparations for the evening."

"Beginning preparations." He rolled the words around his mouth as though he was unsure of their taste. "I suppose the Dragonborn must be made ready before such events." He sighed. "I will be in my cell, should you need me."

"In Skyrim, a cell is for prisoners. Do you not mean your room?" He had taken off down the hall, but her longer legs and quick stride brought her even with her thane in moments.

"No, a cell is what it is. Small, unadorned, a place to sleep but not to relax." He seemed distracted, somehow managing to exclude her from a conversation of two.

"Is something the matter, Thane Velandryn? Are you displeased with your lodgings?"

Her use of the title jolted him out of whatever reverie had held him. "Ah? No, no, just…lost in thought." He was still out of sorts, but was at least paying attention to the conversation now. "No, no, my cell is fine. Truth be told, I was expecting a bunk in the guardhouse when I asked for lodging. I was just thinking."

"What about, if I may ask?"

"Alduin." He did not seem inclined to say more, and Lydia could tell that pressing him for details would only strain their fledgling partnership. We work well enough together, but we are still strangers. She let him go on his way, and was returning to the hall when she saw Freya exiting one of the side passages.

The serjeant looked only a bit the worse for the ordeal they had been through. Though her uniform was pristine, her face was lined with fatigue. She was flanked by several of her subordinates, though upon seeing Lydia she waved for them to continue on without her and moved to intercept the new housecarl.

"Lydia! Thank the Nine!" Freya stopped short of throwing her arms around her, but Lydia could tell that the other woman was restraining herself. "I have so much to say, is there somewhere we
could talk?” She gave a little laugh. "You know this place better than I, after all." Lydia led her into one of the halls to the left that would eventually lead to a perfect place to speak. Beside her, Freya followed amiably, though Lydia could not help but wonder why she was so intent on speaking after so long apart.

The terrace was empty; the plains of Whiterun Hold stretched out before them, with the White River drawing a shimmering ribbon across the scene. Far to the south, the foothills of the Throat of the World pushed up through the trees; the mountain itself looming above all. From this distance, the top of the peak was shrouded in clouds, giving it an otherworldly appearance. *That is where we must go.*

Behind her, Freya shut the heavy wooden doors that led into Dragonsreach, and then joined her in looking out over the city and the plains beyond. She still wondered why Freya had called her out here, though part of her suspected that she knew the reason already. Lydia turned slightly, and looked at her out of the corner of her eye.

Her hair had darkened, childhood wheat-blond locks now closer to brown. *I wonder if she would still giggle if I ran my fingers through it.* She had held onto her baby fat for a long time, but that had melted away, and Lydia couldn't help but feel a slight sense of loss contrasting the chubby cheeks she had loved to kiss with this lean face. She looked good. *She looks beautiful. Admit it, to yourself if not to her.*

"Seven years since you left the Hold Guard." Freya faced Lydia, the wind off of the plains throwing her short hair this way and that. "Has Dragonsreach been good to you?" Lydia had never been able to tell when Freya was teasing her.

"It has. And you? I see you made serjeant of the Hold Guard." The awkwardness was almost unbearable. What did you say to someone who had collapsed to the ground sobbing the last time you walked away?

"Serjeant of the western watchtower, you mean. Before that, I commanded a roving patrol on the Riverwood Road. Before that, the caravan escort from the city to the eastern watchtower." She snorted. "Positions overflowing with prestige. They made me serjeant because I served long enough and didn't get too many of my people killed." She shrugged. "You should have been there. You would have had command, of course. You always had a knack for this." She smiled, glancing down at Lydia's body, at the guard's tunic she wore. "There were many nights out on the plains, when the cold winds cut through the tents, that you would have been welcome beside me. Huddled for warmth, who can say what would happen?"

Lydia knew she was flushing, but thoughts of Freya had always done that. *That is why I broke this off when I joined the Dragonsreach Guard. So, why now…*

Freya was talking again. "I've been transferred to Dragonsreach! I'll be here every day now, and we can be together again!" She slid one hand up Lydia's arm, and the housecarl felt the flesh beneath her onetime lover's touch prickle. She knew she could take Freya in her arms, unstrap the armor and carry her to one of the rooms in Dragonsreach where they could be alone, lay her down and touch every place that would make her scream out Lydia's name.

But all of that had been long ago. The feelings were little more than an echo. She could remember a hundred moments of breathless passion with this woman, but they stirred her no more than any conjured fantasy. "Freya, we cannot."

"Don't be absurd, of course we can! I heard you have been promoted to serjeant, which means you decide guard shifts. Tweak things around a little, and we can be off together. It's perfect!"
Seven years. Had Freya changed so little? They had behaved this way when they were newly-minted guards, adjusting shifts and begging moments to fuck in empty storerooms. They had eschewed the guard barracks to sleep in Lydia's house, curled into each other beneath the sheets. They had been little more than children. Lydia had only been fourteen the first time she kissed Freya, and it had been on Freya's sixteenth name-day a month later that they had first made love. It had been beautiful, intoxicating, and utterly stupid. *The past is past.* Freya had consoled her through the death of her father, but only one of them had found the resolve to pursue their duty all the way Dragonsreach.

Lydia pushed Freya away gently, disentangling her soft fingers. "We cannot, Freya. I have a duty now, and we have been apart for seven years. We are different people."

"Liddy, stop it. I know you want me. That's why you followed me out here, isn't it? You wanted an excuse to be alone with me. You've been stuck with the Dragonborn all morning, haven't you? A dreary duty, I imagine." She moved to slip back into Lydia's arms, but the housecarl stopped her.

"Freya, this will not happen. I am Velandryn Savani's housecarl, and it is my duty to follow him as his sword and shield."

The other woman could not have recoiled more quickly if Lydia had professed to worship Daedra. "You are bound to him? You are his housecarl? How could the Jarl command this?"

Lydia knew that many would ask here these same questions in the coming days. "He did not command it. I saw in Velandryn a thane worth following, and as the Dragonborn he is in need of my support. I am sworn to be his sword and shield, and my duty to him supersedes all personal desires."

"No, it doesn't! We can make it work! And when did you become so formal with me, Liddy? We can be together again, at last!"

*Please don't make me say it, Freya. Don't make me break your heart again.*

"Freya, it was seven years ago! We're different people now! Be honest, how many others have you taken to bed since me?" She knew there were some, men and women alike. Freya had always had a wandering eye, and while she had been faithful to Lydia for their time together…

"None that mattered!" Panic had spread across Freya's face and infected her voice. "I always thought of you, but when the cold winds come off the plains…you know how it is, Liddy. You…weren't there. I missed you, but…"

"Freya, I don't begrudge you a one of them." She put warmth into her voice; she had no desire to hurt Freya any further than she had to. "I hope you all the best in your future, but it is not one I can share. I am sworn to follow Velandryn Savani as housecarl to the Dragonborn, and you should understand that this is an honor I will not refuse."

"It doesn't matter! He's a thane of Whiterun, you'll still be here for most all the time. We can make this work!"

Lydia knew what she had to do. Freya had always been adept at not hearing what she didn't want to; when Lydia had left her it had been like this as well. "Freya, it isn't just because of the Dragonborn, or my new duties. Even if I were in Whiterun all the time, we could not be together." Freya opened her mouth, but Lydia continued. She had to get all of this out. "When I was a child, you were my best friend. I fell in love with you, and I think you with me. What we had was wonderful, and I will never regret it. But, that time is done. I didn't leave you because it would be
impossible for us to be together, I left because you couldn't understand." Tears were trickling down Freya's cheeks, but Lydia plowed ahead. "I left because I knew that the calling to serve the people of Whiterun took priority over any love, and you did not feel the same. I tried to explain that I would always put my duty to the jarl and the hold first, and you teased me for it. Seven years ago I cried myself to sleep every night for a month, but I knew that it was better to weep and move on than to live my life with a woman who didn't believe in my duty. I'm sorry. I loved you, Freya, and…I'm sorry."

"Liddy…"Freya's voice was a broken thing, and Lydia had to force herself to keep looking at her. "Liddy, I love you…I'm sorry." She looked at Lydia with reddened eyes, and turned away.

Lydia had loved Freya once, but she was not that person anymore. She had made herself clear, and if Freya could not let her go, that was not her fault. As she left the terrace, she kept telling herself that. If she was being honest with herself, though, what hurt the most was how little Freya's tears moved her. Seven years ago, it had been the hardest thing in the world to walk away. She had doubted, and wavered, and nearly gone back half a hundred times. Now? She pitied Freya, and wished her well, but she was beyond her. I have chosen my path. She set off down a hall. Her thane was waiting.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Using this chapter to cram in a whole bunch of Lydia backstory and characterization. Not entirely sure all of it is entirely up to what I want it to be, but it will serve for now. Next chapter introduces the Dawnguard, and should move the plot out of the Greater Whiterun Metropolitan Area.
Comes the Dragonborn

Chapter Summary

Time passes, and word spreads

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Elsewhere

"But dragons?"

"Crazy, isn't it? First Helgen, now Whiterun. Battus saw it in the flesh, though, and I won't call him a liar. Said it took sixty to bring it down. Apparently some elf used magic to kill it in the end."

"Hmm, wonder how the Nords felt about that. So, what else did Battus find?"

"She's in Whiterun, most likely. A woman matching her description came in on a carriage from Falkreath a month or so back, and nobody remembers her leaving, though that hardly proves anything."

"Damn it. She could have slipped out at any time. How many come and go every day? Or she could still be in the city. Who'd notice one more Redguard in a city as mixed as that? For now, Whiterun is looking promising enough. Either she stayed or she left, and with any luck somebody was paying enough attention to notice."

"Battus left a few of his to watch the gates. She sticks her head out past the walls, we'll know. Meanwhile, we keep patrols on the roads, and keep asking questions. She'll want big cities to hide in, and Whiterun is better than any place in Skyrim for one of us to go to ground. We'll comb the city, just you see."

"That's Kematu's call, but I'd agree with you. You going to report now?"

"Battus has already left. We get to enjoy Rorikstead for now."

"A Nord farming village. We can look at crops! I think I saw a sheep yesterday!"

"It isn't that bad."

"Feel free to stay."

"You miss home?"

"I miss my husband and my child. But we find this woman Iman, we go home rich."

"I like the sound of rich. I'll drink to that."

"Me too. Innkeep!"
As the guest of honor, Velandryn was obligated to remain at the feast for as long as any still wished to engage with him. As a result, it was well into the early hours of the morning by the time he bid Olfrid 'Patron of the great Clan Battle-Born!' and Nazeem farewell and watched them wander off in the direction of the main doors. Their companions had left hours ago, but both had hung around in hopes of getting the last word with him. An… interesting pair, to be sure. Olfrid was the patriarch of what seemed to be a powerful House in Whiterun, and had clearly figured that warm relations with the Dragonborn would be beneficial to his House's interests. Nazeem, as far as he could tell, was simply a lickspittle who wanted to ingratiate himself with a new power player in the city. He had spoken to the man for what had seemed an interminable amount of time but, in truth, was likely no more than ten or fifteen minutes. The Redguard farmer had managed to mention his connections to the jarl three times, his impoverished beginnings four, and the frequency with which he visited Dragonsreach an astonishing eight. Olfrid had been more restrained in his descriptions of Clan Battle-Born's ventures, but laid out in no uncertain terms his willingness to assist Velandryn in whatever the Dragonborn might require. The Dunmer had been overjoyed to see their backs.

He surveyed the hall, mostly empty now but for Lydia, him, and a single servant banking the firepit. He turned to find his housecarl's face set in a grim mask that managed to convey discontent across any racial barrier. She had left her seat as the hall emptied and been in place behind him for the entirety of Nazeem and Olfrid's ingratiation. He beckoned for her to take a seat, and she slid into the chair that Olfrid had vacated.

"Were you not enthralled by the conversation, Lydia?" Much of the food remaining on the high table had yet to be collected; he grabbed a few roasted nuts from a bowl and popped them into his mouth.

"Nazeem comes to Dragonsreach often, but I can usually leave before he starts talking." She tore a chunk of bread from a loaf left on the table, and slathered it with the thick yellow butter they used here. She took a huge bite, chewed thoughtfully, and swallowed. "He had you captive, though, and I couldn't help without being immensely rude." She speared a roasted onion, now long cold, with her dagger. "Apologies, my thane."

"For not removing Nazeem's head?" He cut a slice from the loaf with the iron dagger he had taken from that first bandit he had slain, back before even Riverwood. "I'll let it pass just this once." He had no great love for cow's milk, but this butter was not bad; he spread a thin layer on the bread and topped it with cold roast boar and some green vegetables grilled black. "We made it through the second-longest dinner of my life, and I believe that I am now both Dragonborn and not entirely despised by the people I am protecting." He regarded his creation for a moment, then ran magicka through his free hand and held it over his food.

Not quite enough to combust in the air, just enough heat to…there. He pulled his hand back, and began eating, the food piping hot and steaming.

Wordlessly, Lydia extended the half-eaten onion on her dagger.

"You handled yourself well tonight, my thane." She took a bite of her onion, now crisped and steaming, and nodded appreciatively. "Many who were doubtful at the idea of an elf Dragonborn are now likely put at ease."

"I prefer the term mer, actually. Elf is a human construction." He filled his mug with the dark red wine they had served; it was less distasteful than most of the alcohol here, and it seemed Nords did not like drinking water at their feasts. A thin beige beer was the closest they had, and Velandryn was not fool enough to try such a wretched drink twice in one evening. "And you humans manage to make it sound like a curse so often, I have grown tired of hearing it."

"I see." Her tone was slightly stiff, and Velandryn realized he might have upset her. "My apologies, thane." She took another onion and began to eat it cold.
"Oh, give that here." He held out his hand but she continued eating. "Lydia, come, give me the onion, no sense in eating it cold." Still she ate. He felt anger rising within him, and the dragon's mind rose with it. Before the feast, he had spent hours in mediation, and while it had worked for a time, he could feel his restraint slipping. She is brave, to ignore me! "Housecarl, if you have something to say, do so now!" It came out harsher than he had intended, and he almost regretted saying it in such a way. Then that remorse vanished beneath a tide of righteous indignation as she made no response. He could feel the Dov within him bristle in anger at her dismissal. She serves me, and she acts like this? "Lydia!" The moment her name left his lips and he heard the tone that flavored the word he knew he had gone too far.

As she turned towards him, she seemed all at once amused and angry. "Are you serious, my thane? You want to know why I'm upset?" She spoke in a manner that was quietly intense; even if the feast had been in full swing, few would have been able to make out her words. As it was, the few servants straggling around the periphery of the hall certainly could not overhear her, but he felt her words' full force. "You don't know how you sound?"

He blinked a few times, his momentary rage at her impertinence disintegrating in the face of her response. The Dov within him took umbrage at her tone, but he silenced that feeling as soon as he recognized it. I do not need a dragon's pride right now. "How do you mean?"

"You are Dragonborn, as well as an honorable and brave thane, and I am proud to serve you, make no mistake, but right now you sound like a whining child." She was facing him fully now, hands clasped on the table and the remainder of her onion forlorn and abandoned on its plate. "I didn't use elf instead of your name, or call you grayskin or ashface. I was making a point, and used the right word to stress my meaning. Elf is a human word, and I used it. I am human, in case you had missed it, and I see no reason why I shouldn't use my race's word! It isn't an insult, but you still took it as one!" Her voice had risen at the end there, and she checked the hall furtively; their conversation still went on unheeded.

He opened his mouth to retort, but she continued, clearly intent on making her point regardless of her thane's response. "You act so damned superior to us, telling us that you 'grow tired' of being called elf! Of course you do, if you're taking it as an insult every time someone refers to your race! It's a word, and I meant it kindly, and you have to have known that! You want us to say mer? It would sound like something out of an old book on the Snow Elves! 'Ysgramor, descending upon the unsuspecting mer with his Companions…' You'll be hard pressed to find many among the people of Skyrim who talk like that!

"You'll find damn fools everywhere, and some of them will say damn fool things to you. Some will insult you for being a mer, some will hate you for being Dragonborn or for looking at them the wrong way. And when they do? I'll grab them by the throat and demand they apologize to my thane, or I'll put them through a wall. But not for this. You don't get to scorn my people just for being Nords." She fell silent then, and for the first time this evening, he was truly at a loss for words.

It was an odd sensation, Velandryn mused, being shown up by a human. She wasn't wrong, though. He did feel that way, and it was not truly warranted. He knew, of course, that by and large humans used 'elf' simply because it was the word they knew. Most meant no harm, and he could acknowledge that on an intellectual level. However, they were human, and that made a difference. He had known since his earliest years that the Dunmer were a race apart, and that others would tear them down at every opportunity. Since journeying to Cyrodiil and from there into Skyrim, he had broadened his experience with humans, but it seemed that he could not stop his deepest prejudices. He had known Lydia meant no harm, but he had wanted to establish…what? Did I want to prove my superiority, or just put her on the defensive? He had no cause to do so, so why had he done it?
"I think…I think you're right." He spoke slowly, reluctant to concede but knowing that these words had to be said. "I should not have said that, and I did you a disservice." It had never been particularly easy for him to apologize, and doubly so to a Nord. "I am sorry."

Lydia nodded. "I'm sorry as well. I should have responded better. You are my thane, and I don't want to fight with you. It's just…you're the Dragonborn. You're the hero of Skyrim. Literally! Remember the song?" He did. Our hero, our hero, the Dragonborn comes! Or, something to that effect, at least. They had played the song at least twenty times during the feast, but he had only ever heard snippets over whatever conversation he had having at the moment. "The Dragonborn shouldn't be telling people off for using the word elf."

Velandryn knew that she was right. The Dragonborn needs to be above such petty things. He wasn't certain he could do that, though. "Lydia, how is this? I will extend you and yours the benefit of every doubt with regards to what you choose to call me." He paused for a moment, carefully considering his next words. "But, when the people of Skyrim do wrong me on account of my race—which will happen, make no mistake—I want you to acknowledge it for what it is. If we can both do this, we might just have a chance of making it through this without hating each other."

She nodded. "Done." She speared the remaining half of the onion on her dagger and handed it over. "I am your sword and shield, my thane, and I will do my best to help you however I can."

After heating the onion and passing it back, he watched her eat as he considered her words. The Dragonborn must be more than I can be. He could pretend it did not bother him, but he was still a Dunmer, and the thought of losing that in this foreign land agitated him like a thorn beneath his skin. I cannot both be Dragonborn and reject the Nords, but I will not let myself forget who I am! Add to that these new passions that he had started thinking of as the Dov within him, and he worried he was at a very real risk of waking one morning to find himself completely lost. The thoughts of home had grown more remote these past few days; though the Sermon of Seven still echoed through his mind, thoughts of warmth sparked memories of dragon's fire rather than the holy flames within the Temple. He was Dragonborn, but what did that mean? How did this end for Velandryn Savani? Unbidden, the thought rose within him. It doesn't matter what they want. Take their power, take what you want. You are Dov, and they will kneel or they will—

"My thane!" His eyes jolted open and he jerked up in shock as his senses returned to him. Lydia was leaning across the table. "I'm sorry, my thane, I had not even noticed you drifting off. You must be exhausted after the feast. Come, the Jarl has given you fine quarters on the upper levels of Dragonsreach." She stood, and he got unsteadily to his feet as well.

Who am I?

It ate at him as he followed Lydia up the stairs. He still felt like Velandryn Savani, but the idea of being the Dragonborn sat uneasily upon his shoulders. He had meditated on it, before the feast, but reached no conclusions; even the ever-present specter of Alduin could not pull his mind away from this disconnect. He liked Lydia, and thought that he could work well with her, but for the rest of them? He needed…

He needed to be the Dragonborn. It was as simple as that. Skyrim had need of him, these Nords had need of him, and his conscience would not let him walk away. He clearly had some power, and whether it had come to him from a god, from the dragon, or by random chance, he had a responsibility to help these people. So, he would do it. He remembered his first sermon, and the words of the old Canon who was mentoring him. They do not know your fears, they can only see your actions. They expect the voice of the Three. Give them that.

"Lydia." His housecarl turned to face him. "Thank you."
"Of course my thane." She looked a little confused as she responded, and he knew that it would take longer than he cared for to explain why he had thanked her. They moved on, and Velandryn let the thought roll about in his head, liking the taste of it more and more.

*They expect the Dragonborn. Give them that.*

"Not like that, my thane."

"Then how? Your explanations make no sense."

"Like this. Less on the lips. You spread them too wide, show too many teeth. If you want people to respect the Dragonborn, you need to be able to do at least this."

"This is absurd. If I can kill a dragon, why is this eluding me?"

"I will note that the dragon died shortly after you smiled. The two could be related."

"You are hilarious, Lydia. I am laughing on the inside, I assure you."

"Well, it looks a lot like a bad smile."

Velandryn brought the blade up just in time. The blow that would have taken him in the neck instead slammed into his sword, slid upwards along his guard and locked against his hilt. The rapid impacts sent shivers down his spine and he pushed with the blade, the awkward angle forcing his opponent's weapon out and away from their bodies. His opponent was open, and his blade was within her guard. He needed only to bring it in to be able to—

He saw the shield half a second before it slammed into his side, sending him staggering to his knees. Head whirling, he took a moment to let his vision right itself, and looked up. Lydia stood above him, casually brought her blunted sword down, and tapped his head gently. With a sigh, he drove the tip of his practice weapon into the ground and hauled himself back to his feet. His side ached, and he found himself glad that Lydia was going gently enough on him that he had no cracked ribs with which to contend. He was equally glad that the secluded courtyard had neither windows nor an audience; watching the Dragonborn get thrown around like a kwama grub would doubtless damage the mystique of the title.

"Good work on the parry, but do not ignore my shield. It is every bit as much weapon as defense. Are you sure you don't want to try with one?" Lydia had been trying to get him to take up her style of fighting, with sword and shield, since they had started this morning.

Velandryn shook his head. "No, I want the other hand free. If things ever get so bad that I'm the one doing the swordfighting, I'll want to at least shove a fireball down their throats while I'm at it."

He took up his stance, and something drifted up from his memory, a week he had spent at the Temple of Mercy in Mournhold, and the training he had observed there.

His housecarl pursed her lips. "Your guard is wrong. Do it like I showed you."

"This is a Dunmer stance, used by the Ordinators-Repentant. Shouldn't I be using a guard better suited for my size and race? Especially since I do not have a shield."

"The stance I showed you is designed for a single blade with the offhand free. I modified it to emphasize your smaller stature and shorter reach." Before he had a chance to adjust, Lydia brought her blade up and saluted. "Begin!"
This time, he tried keeping one eye on her shield, noting whenever she moved it from its resting block. However, noticing it did little good when she drove it forward, sending him scrambling desperately back to avoid being knocked to the ground. Her sword's blow followed swiftly, easily knocking the blade from his grip and sending it skidding across the courtyard.

"My thane, are these Ordinators-Repentant skilled warriors?" Her question came seemingly from nowhere. Velandryn stopped halfway to retrieving his fallen weapon and turned to regard her. A dozen answers bubbled up, each indignant and rich with the culture and history of their order, but they all boiled down to one salient fact.

"Yes. Exceptionally." His pride must have shown, because Lydia snorted and brought sword and shield to ready position before her.

"Well, you aren't. So, you'll use the stances I teach you, and maybe you'll live long enough to learn something! Now, attack me!"

Velandryn picked up his sword, hefting it in both hands; while it was possible for him to swing it with one, if he wanted any hope of breaking her guard he would need the power of a two-handed grip. He was completely untrained with using two-handed weapons, of course, but he didn't seem to be doing much better with just one hand, so he decided to risk it. As he closed, and saw her eyebrows raise at his choice of stance, he had a wicked idea, and knew his eyes must be grinning.

"That was an…interesting way you addressed me back there, housecarl. Tell me, is it typical to insult one's thane and tell them they will die, or do you reserve that honor for your Dragonborn?"

It was interesting to see the panic spread across Lydia's face. They had become comfortable with each other over few days since the feast, and truth be told Velandryn had no problem at all deferring to her on matters of combat, but he was still her thane, and could use that. By the look of it, she had committed a serious breach of protocol. And I am Dragonborn besides. I will wager that is enough...

His first blow was overhead, a huge arcing sweep that, in her distress, Lydia came close to letting through. Her shield, did rise, however, and the blow glanced harmlessly off. Velandryn had anticipated this, however, and was able to angle his strike such that it slid along the shield and fell off to her left in a single motion. Using both hands, he was able to bring it up under the shield and slam the blunted sword into her arm. She gave a sharp curse, and Velandryn drove the pommel into her side. As she staggered back, he saw her blade closing fast on him. By now she had recovered her presence of mind, and this looked to be one of her swift and merciless strikes that could crack bones if it hit full on. He could heal, of course, but both the wound and the cure hurt like Oblivion, and he had no desire to go through that again. In desperation, he dropped to his knees and thrust the blade at her sword arm. He felt the impact, heard the curse, and looked up to see his housecarl standing before him, both arms held awkwardly at her sides. He stood unsteadily, and reached out to tap her on her leather jerkin with the tip of his sword. "I think that round is mine."

She gave him a look that he would have called measuring had it come from an elf, so he supposed he could consider it the same from a human. "You used your prestige and my words against me."

She did not sound entirely displeased.

"I had no chance of beating you by skill at arms, so I used what I had." He pulled his lips back to show his teeth. "There is a saying among my people that the only unfair battle is the one you lose."

His housecarl reached out and patted him gently on the shoulder. "My thane, every warrior culture has a saying like that." Her lips twitched. "I would advise you not to think yourself too profound on your first day of training."
"Ah…yes, of course." He could feel heat rising in his face, and realized how much of a fool he must have just seemed. "Ah, Lydia…"

His housecarl, however, seemed unconcerned. "It's a good feeling, isn't it? Winning?" She smiled. "Hold onto that. It's the last one I'll give you for some time yet." She readied her weapons again; with Lydia the shield might be even deadlier than the sword. "Again, my thane? Try not to go down to easily, I would like to break a sweat."

"Ready when you are, housecarl."

"On your guard!"

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**Agent Darien of Whiterun, Report 421, 22 Hearthfire**

*My initial assessment of the dragon assessment (Report 420) has been confirmed. Dragon bones at watchtower along Reach Road fresh, signs of battle apparent. Rumors in city of Dragonborn unconfirmed but likely given state of dragon corpse and numerous eyewitness accounts. Unsubstantiated reports of Dark Elf as Dragonborn, no further identity known at this time. Guard presence and activity increased, widespread panic averted but mood in city remains restive. Number of Thalmor agents in city greatly increased, Stormcloak sympathizers also showing high levels of activity. Courier services running day and night, message traffic at all-time high. Recommend further investigation immediately.*

Written in the Service of the Council and the Emperor.

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**Agent Darien of Whiterun, Report 422, 27 Hearthfire**

*Follow-up to Report 421. Dragonborn confirmed. Named Velandryn Savani, is a Dunmer of indeterminate but not advanced age. Likely to be Morrowind-born. Associated with red hand sigil, meaning unknown (See sketch below). Raised to rank of Thane in Whiterun, assigned Housecarl (name Lydia), remaining in Whiterun for time being. Likely next destination is High Hrothgar to consult with Greybeards. Will send more information as becomes available.*

Written in the Service of the Council and the Emperor.

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"You may enter, Dragonborn." Irileth motioned Velandryn through the heavy wooden door, and shut it behind him. She and Lydia both remained out in the hall, an unusual occurrence from what Velandryn had been able to make out of housecarls. He had detected a hint of approval in the other Dunmer's eyes, though for what he could not say. Once through the door, however, he was taken aback what he saw before him.

As much as Velandryn hated to praise the aesthetic sensibilities of the Nords, he had to admit that Jarl Balgruuf's private study was a masterwork. The chamber was richly adorned without being opulent and conveyed the character of its occupant well. Trophies adorned the walls and held places of honor on sideboards and tables around the periphery. Some seemed ancient, while others looked brand new; Velandryn noticed a long tooth that he somehow knew had been pried from the mouth of Mirmulnir. The floor was smooth pale wood; the pillars that supported the arched ceiling made of the same but carved with flowing vines and water. Three braziers lit the room, and by the pleasant smoky scent, were burning some rich wood rather than the common scrap wood that usually filled braziers like these. While many Nord buildings with such heating had a tendency to fill with smoke, some enchantment had been laid upon these that rendered the air about them perfectly clear. The jarl himself was reclining on a great chair lined in furs, its twin sat across from
him, and a gilded carafe with two cups and an assortment of food was laid out on a table.

"You honor me, Jarl Balgruuf." Considering how carefully everything involving the jarl had been designed up until now, it was clearly a strong component of Nord culture that the leader was seated at the center or the head of any gathering, preferably physically above his underlings if possible. To meet like this was clearly a gesture of esteem and trust. Or, it is an insult of some kind. As soon as he had that thought, he stamped it down. The Dragonborn is worthy of esteem, and will act graciously. Even if insult is meant, to take it as honor robs it of its power. It felt strange at times, this air of confident superiority, but the majority of the Nords here seemed to take it in stride. In the past few days, he had watched the reaction of the guards change when he simply acted as he felt the Dragonborn should. Even Lydia had remarked on it, though she found it amusing rather than inspiring. She had given her blessing to his attempt, however, as well as some hints on how best to proceed.

"Please, take a seat, make yourself comfortable." Velandryn did so, feeling slightly ridiculous as he sank into the soft furs of the chairs opposite the jarl. "Have a drink if you would like, it's a Cyrodilic brandy from the Surilie Brothers in Skingrad. 162, a banner year." Velandryn poured a modest dram into one of the carved stone cups. He noticed the other cup, and the jarl's empty hands. Does the guest pour in Skyrim if there is no servant?

"Would you care for some as well, Jarl Balgruuf?" At the Nord's nod of assent, Velandryn filled the other cup and handed it over. For a moment there was silence as they drank. Velandryn was unused to such fine fare, accustomed as he was to the rough comberry brandies of Morrowind. However, while a jug of greef or sujamma might suffice for passing around at a cornerclub, it seemed the jarls of Skyrim supped on finer fare. I thought Nords drank mead, though?

When he asked the jarl about his choice of beverage, the Nord cheerfully admitted to favoring mead and beer like most of his people Velandryn had met. "I've no quarrel with bloods of the grape, but I won't seek them out. However, I heard that you favor such drinks, and we had this in the cellar."

I wonder what he wants from me. Or is it a perk of being Dragonborn that your hosts break open their reserves on your behalf? "You heard? From whom?"

"The servants at Dragonsreach did not earn their position merely by virtue of luck. They notice the favorite food and drink of everybody of import and, when I need to know, the understaff has that information." He shrugged and reached out to take a morsel from the table. "Would you care for a mudcrab leg? They are steamed and shelled then dipped in butter, and go wonderfully with the spiced goat's cheese." Velandryn considered accepting for a moment, but felt uncomfortable enough trying to drink while drowning in this chair. He did not want to risk eating as well, or getting butter everywhere.

Velandryn half-suspected that this was the set-up to either an exorbitant request or an attempt to kill him, but he had to admit that the brandy was superb. Surilie products were prized even in Morrowind, and their finer vintages commanded high prices and higher praise. If I am to be Dragonborn, there are worse ways to assist Skyrim. "Jarl Balgruuf, as thankful as I am for this," his wave indicated the refreshments and setting together "I suspect that there is something you would like from me. I am happy to help in whatever way I can." That was even true, most likely. The jarl had seen fit to provide fine chambers, new clothing and armor, and an open offer of whatever aid he could render the Dragonborn. He had even gone through the trouble of having a set of cloaks and tunics made up with the red hand of Ghartok on them; while he doubted that the jarl knew of its significance, he appreciated the gesture immensely.
The jarl sat forward and his countenance grew more serious. "Indeed. First though, I would ask, how have you found Whiterun thus far?"

Another pointless pleasantry? "It is a good city. You and yours are to be commended for keeping it so." He was trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice, and was fairly certain he had succeeded, which gave him a bit of a shock when the jarl gave a mirthless laugh.

"The question has a point, I assure you. You see a prosperous city, but my palace sits atop a mountain of snow, ready to collapse at the merest touch. Whiterun is a city divided and afraid, and I want your help to keep it peaceful." Velandryn was taken aback by the admission, but indicated that the jarl continue.

"The Stormcloaks have stepped up activity in the east since Ulfric's escape, and the Empire would like to use Whiterun's plains as a staging ground for thrusts into Stormcloak territory. General Tullius, the military governor," his mouth twisted "has sent me a number of letters, each less polite than the last, reminding me of my duty to the Empire, and 'encouraging' me to choke off trade to the Stormcloak holds. He has been kind enough to offer additional Imperial protection for Whiterun should we agree. Hah! Meanwhile, Ulfric send couriers telling me that every true Nord must fight for freedom and Talos, even against the Empire he founded. I am playing the shy maid for now, courting them both but offering nothing in return, and soon one or the other will demand I make a choice. They will do so with swords and spears, and whatever I choose, my hold and my people shall bleed. And now, there are dragons in my hold. Have you heard? Another dragon was sighted near Rorikstead two days ago; I got the missive this morning. A merchant from Riften saw one of the beasts near the ruins of Valtheim; he says it was only by the grace of the Divines that the beast did not attack. So tell me, Dragonborn, what do I do? Akatosh sent you to us in our hour of need. So now I am asking you, where do we go from here?"

Velandryn was at a loss as he felt a chasm open up beneath his feet. Asking me about this is… it was exactly right. I am Dragonborn. Who else should be consulted about the dragons? No doubt this sort of thing would be all too common in the days and weeks ahead. I may not know anything, but neither do they. And I can think like them, to an extent at least. Thinking like the Dov conjured up troubling desires, but he had been meditating on the Virtues and the Homilies of Service every night, and was growing more skilled at locking away those parts of himself. Of late the question had come slithering into his mind of whether it was wise to tamp down the Dov to protect that bit of him that was mortal, that was Joor. He had decide that, wise or not, for now it was necessary, and he would suppress the draconic desires for the present. They have a time and place. But not here, not today. But he could think like a dragon, and use that against the others. "Your first goal should be to fortify key locations." Dragons would accept a challenge, but they were not suicidal. "Forts, watchtowers, any town of size. Use ballistae and stone-throwers, or scorpions if you have them." He only had the tales and histories he had read from which to draw his knowledge of these weapons, but he could see them tearing through a dragon's great membranous wings, and suspected that any so torn would stay away in the future. "And mages, as many as you have." The Dov laughed at the thought of a single soldier on the field, but a mage was an enigma, and even a single master wizard could turn the tide if left to its own devices. They complicated matters, and a dragonwanted battle to be straightforward, a chance to show its strength. "Strengthen patrols around the hold. Ensure that any sighting of a dragon is reported and tracked." Mirmulnir had attacked the western watchtower because he had hidden for so long, and wanted to display his strength. Would other dragons do the same? "These patrols may come under attack, but they should draw attention away from civilians."

The jarl sighed. "These are good ideas, many of which my other advisors have proposed, and I wish I could do them all. There are few enough mages in Skyrim. Ever since the Great Collapse of Winterhold, most of my people view magic as dangerous. Those who have chosen that path, such
as Farengar, are a minority. Siege weapons we have, though most are in dire need of repair and trained soldiers to man them. There are some in Whiterun who served in the Legion as artillermen, but most are old. Those we have are training others, at least. The Empire is unlikely to send any of theirs unless I roll over for Tullius. Farengar has encouraged me to send to the College for more wizards, and I may do just that. As for patrols..." He gave Velandryn a long look.

"How many men do you think I have who would be willing to ride out and draw a dragon's wrath? To flee from it, knowing they would likely die?" He shook his head sadly. "I thank you for your input, Dragonborn, but it is as I feared. Unless something changes, I cannot fully protect my hold." The jarl rose, and moved to stand before a bookshelf that stood taller than he did. His words came as he faced away from the Dunmer. "But now, we return to my true purpose in asking you here. What of you, Dragonborn? How will you assist in defense of my hold?"

Velandryn had given this idea some thought, and several of the Jarl's comments had given him the clarity he needed to make a decisive answer. "I will leave Whiterun soon enough, and make for High Hrothgar, to learn from the Greybeards. If even half of the tales I have heard about the Dragonborn are true, I can be of far more use once trained than I ever could here in Dragonsreach without their knowledge." He fell silent then, and awaited the jarl's response. He would be free to leave the city, he had no doubt, but Jarl Balgruuf had done much and more for him, and if he insisted on Velandryn remaining in the city to aid the defense in some way it would be difficult to refuse.

To his relief, however, the jarl had turned to look at him and nodded. "Good. I agree with you, the Greybeards will give you the knowledge and training you need." He looked away then, at a hooded grey cloak hanging on a mannequin in one corner. "Truth be told, I would like to go back up there myself, but I am jarl now, and needed here." He turned back to face Velandryn. "It is a long road to High Hrothgar, and both the northern and southern roads cross territory contested between the Empire and the Stormcloaks. I will instruct Skulvar down at the stables to wait only on your word to make your horses ready; Whiterun breeds the finest horseflesh in the province and it should cut your time on the road by half or more." Velandryn vaguely remembered a mustachioed man from the feast, boasting about how he would give the Dragonborn and his housecarl the swiftest steeds in Skyrim.

The jarl sat again, and took up another mudcrab leg. "All is not as dour as I made it out, perhaps. Thane Eitarr has announced his intention to raise a unit of dedicated dragon-fighting cavalry; hopefully his experience with keeping our roads safe from bandits will help him against this new enemy. The town watch has added twenty new recruits in addition to replacing those that fell against the dragon, and the Hold Guard has added thirty as well. I have received reports from Rorikstead that mercenaries and adventurers are pouring in in hopes of finding another dragon to fight. We have the men to fight another dragon, if not exactly the mages and siege works you desire."

A wave of unease overtook him at the thought of these adventurers trying their hand at dragonslaying. "Let them fight if you wish, but you will only be offering the dragons more prey. I suggested siege weapons because they can cause massive trauma with a single blow, and mages because they can skew advantages on the battlefield. The soldiers were only meant to draw the dragons away, not to fight them! If you throw bodies at the dragons, you will only get back charred corpses." He could still see the dead from the battle with Mirmulnir, the broken bodies smoking and the dying souls screaming.

"And what would you have me do, Dragonborn? Tell them off from patrolling the plains, or arrest anybody looking for a fight? I have no good solutions here, so I will make do with bad ones! If the Empire sends me some siege engineers out of charity or fifty mages arrive tomorrow and swear their service, I will use them, have no fear! But for today I must do what I can to protect my people,
and this is it. They come to my hold and my city, spend coin and buy goods from my merchants in these troubled times, and I am thankful for that. I will not dishonor these brave visitors by keeping them from the fight. You had best learn quickly, Dragonborn, that we are not always given the chance to make the perfect choice. Men like us, those burdened with power and responsibility, must work with what we have."

Velandryn decided, in this instance, to overlook being called a man. "I understand, though I still don't like it. Work on getting those siege engines, and fortifying your watchtowers and forts. I will go to High Hrothgar, and see about becoming the Dragonborn of which the bards sing."

"And I will wish you all the luck of the Divines, my friend. Now, how about some more of this brandy?"

Jarl Ulfric,

I was relieved to hear of your escape, and assure you that your friends in Whiterun continue to work towards the liberation of the city for the true sons and daughters of Skyrim. This letter travels by trusted courier and there is no risk of intercept, so I will speak frankly. The Dragonborn is a churl, an ungrateful Dark Elf who cannot even understand the honor bestowed upon him. We all know that such honor should belong to you, and there are those who whisper that all of this is a Thalmor ploy to discredit you. His name is Velandryn Savani, and I would encourage you to move quickly to liberate Whiterun before whatever foul plan the Thalmor have concocted is brought into play. I cannot say if he truly can slay dragons, but surely he can do nothing that cannot be better done with the stout hearts of men.

I remain your obedient servant,

Avulstein Gray-Mane

"They think it was us."

"Was it?"

"Not that I've heard."

"What is a Dragonborn, by the way?"

"Some Nord thing, I'd wager. Anyways, make a copy and put the letter back."

"Done and done. He'll wake in a few minutes and think he just dozed off on horseback."

"Nice work on that spell, kinsmer. To charm both man and beast to an insensate state so quickly, not an easy task. I'll make a note in our report"

"My thanks. You should go do something impressive now so I can return the favor."

Velandryn sat cross-legged on the floor at the foot of the bed in his chambers, looking at nothing and focusing on the in-between. He had taken the extreme step of casting an Illusion on himself and locking the Dov away for the time being. Any longer than an hour or so and the spell would decay, but he could afford no distractions or divided focus while performing a ritual of this delicacy. It was taxing and potentially dangerous, but exhilarating as well, to feel one's mind thread the intangible barrier between Mundus and Oblivion. If all goes well, I add a weapon as potent as any to my arsenal.
He had found three books in Farengar's library on exactly this topic, two penned by some enchanter from the College of Winterhold and one compiled from various writings of the Imperial Synod. All had dismissed the very idea as appalling in its heretical recklessness and urged any aspiring conjurers to under no circumstances even consider it. While one Synod researcher had been kind enough to note that 'certain Dunmeri religious traditions condone covenant with a select few Daedric Princes to enhance one's connection to Oblivion' the book went on to warn that this was a dangerous and backwards tradition. *Because some idiot humans try to pull one over on Clavicus Vile or Boethiah and are shocked that their scheme doesn't play out like they want, suddenly all Daedric rituals are evil.* The Dunmer had been invoking the favor of the Triune in one form or another for three thousand years; an attenuation ritual such as this was somewhat unusual but hardly extraordinary. And so, he found himself sitting naked on the floor of a Nord palace, with a potion that boosted his magicka by astronomical amounts coursing through his body and a soul gem humming with power suspended in the air before him. He did not look directly at the soul gem, but rather through it, letting the bleed-off of raw life force permeate reality and draw Oblivion 'closer.' He grimaced at the thought; it was useful to think in terms of distance, but ultimately misleading, since physical space was the first of the rules that went away when dealing with trans-liminal distortions. As he manipulated the soul gem's output, he felt the barrier that warded Mundus resist his violation, and intensified his efforts, a bead of sweat working its way down his nose.

Two hundred years ago, Martin Septim, last of the line of the Dragon Emperors, has sacrificed his life and the powerful artifact called the Amulet of Kings to summon Akatosh and end Mehrunes Dagon's incursion into Tamriel. Akatos had not only thrown Dagon's Deadlands back into the Void, he had fortified the barriers that surrounded Mundus, effectively hamstringing thousands of years of summoning and Daedric study. The Dunmer had come up with workarounds for many of the more restrictive problems, but it seemed the Nords were content with the scraps of Conjuration that remained to them. Farengar indicated a disdain for ritual magic that fit perfectly with all of Velandryn's worst preconceptions about Nord mages, and the tomes he found seemed to regard it as, at best, an auxiliary form of spellcasting for when a wizard could not be bothered to maintain a spell on their own. Fortunately for Velandryn, ritual magic was still studied extensively by many Dunmer mystics and sorcerers, and it remained the single best way to establish a strong magickal connection to the trans-mundane. Not for the first time, he gave thanks that his ancestors had been open-minded enough to embrace the Planes of Oblivion governed by the Triune as the Far Realms; any Dunmer who knew the way of it had a far easier time drawing from these three Planes than would any other mortal who had not specifically pledged to that Prince. He felt the soul gem *thrum* with resonance, and sighed in relief. The path was clear.

Any spellcaster in this Era could summon an atronach or bind a soul if they knew the way of it; such cantrips did not require true communion with the Daedric energies that permeated the Realms of Oblivion. However, he figured that the Dragonborn would need something more powerful, a spell of binding that would catch his enemies off guard and offer a decisive tactical advantage. The Nord spell tome that lay open before him detailed the process by which one could go about creating a bound weapon, but emphasized that it was a weapon of last resort for a mage, and required extensive training in conjuration to be more potent than honest steel. Velandryn knew better. This book contained a crippled spell, a makeshift remedy forced by circumstance, and could be circumvented. He had the connection to Oblivion open, and now he *pulled* the raw Daedric creatia through, and used the framework of the tome to attenuate it to the idea of a *sword*. Here his own mind took over, and his subconscious biases and preconceptions of what constituted a sword began to take shape. Before him, the soul gem was the epicenter of a roiling mass of light and sound, and a keening wail went up as red and blue ribbons suffused the mass and flickering silver threads appeared and vanished, weaving through the whole, shaping a cage made of more than merely magic or matter, a weapon that would hold at its core the malevolent essence of a Daedra
and use its rage at being summoned to strike against his enemies. He poured every drop of his magicka into maintaining the connection, and felt the power flowing through the soul gem intensify. This was it. The spell was burning itself into his mind as he created it. If he could just hold on, it would work. The sword took shape, reminiscent of an Akaviri katana with one edge slightly curved and razor-smooth but with the other edge rough and harsh in the half-finished style of ancient Velothi ritual knives. It was longer than the Nordic blade he carried, but he knew that it would be feather-light in his hand. It was a mottled black and red, and glowed with otherworldly malice. It was exquisite. He reached out to take it.

The door slammed open, and Lydia charged into the room, clad only in a shift but with sword and shield at the ready. "My thane! I heard noises…" She went quiet as she took in the scene, and Velandryn was struck by how sinister this would look to someone not versed in Conjuration ritual magic. The spell tome was burning merrily by this point, the sword hung in the air, rotating ever so slightly, and the soul gem was vibrating with increasing—

Velandryn realized what was happening half a second before the gem exploded. The shield he threw up did not completely enclose the blast, but channeled it downward, obliterating the spell tome and burning a hole in the carpet. He quickly contained the mess, passing his hand over the smoldering fire and extinguishing the flames. The sword itself quietly dissipated as his concentration slipped, and he found himself annoyed both at his housecarl for interrupting and himself for not anticipating that this could happen.

"My thane, what in Oblivion were you doing?" Her voice was strained, and she looked more terrified than angry. Velandryn realized that he was getting better at reading her, and felt a perverse satisfaction in realizing this now.

"We shall see." He uncorked a potion of magicka, downed it, and sat upright. He held his hand out again, retracing the steps in his mind. Now that the mental framework existed, he needed only apply magicka and intent to the latent nodes, triggering a cascade that would transcend the Mundane Ward and—

The sword appeared an inch from his fingers, he took it in his hand, and magical exhaustion hit him like a diving dragon when he realized how carelessly he had been spending magicka. He was bone dry, and though this summoning was simpler than the last, it still wreaked havoc on his reserves. Inefficient, but successful.

One.

Lydia had been giving him pointers in how to smile like a human, and he tried it now. "I was succeeding, Lydia. A bound sword, of superior make and might than the Nord variant."

"Congratulations, my thane." If she was happy for his victory, she hid it well behind a wall of taciturn disapproval. He wondered if this was partially to make up for her fear earlier. He regretted that, as he had genuinely not thought it would wake her.

"Lydia, the ritual was completely safe, and I should have warned you. My apologies." He was getting better at these apologies, he thought, though at some point it would be nice not to have to make them at all. To be fair, Lydia was also quick to apologize when she was at fault, so he could live with it for now.

She raised a single eyebrow, and looked pointedly at the charred circle below where the soul gem had been. He shrugged. "The soul gem served as a conduit as well as a focus, and limited the rate of transfer of magicka. I used a lesser gem; it would be incapable of generating anywhere near the power necessary to do real damage. What you saw was the worst-case scenario, and even that was
trivial compared to the reward."

He turned the sword experimentally, marveling at the look and feel of it. It weighed almost nothing at all, but had the feel of momentum when he moved it. He released the blade, and it vanished again. So long as I am touching it, the binding remains secure. That was good. He had been worried that the more powerful Daedric creatia necessary to house the essence would cause a constant depletion of his magical reserves, but it seemed that the spell, like most of the School of Conjuration, front-loaded the cost from the caster to achieve a clean summons, then sustained itself for a period on its own energies. The possibilities are...significant. This blade would give him an edge in melee fights, and he already had some ideas about how best to use it for more… unorthodox…tactics.

Lydia sighed. "I suppose I shall have to design a new training regimen for you, my thane. I wish to thank you for keeping me so constructively occupied." Once she had gotten more comfortable in her role as housecarl, the sardonic side of her had emerged, and Velandryn actually found himself liking it when she showed some hint of a personality. Dangerous thought, liking Nords.

"Any time, housecarl. Now, I am going to sleep. Spellcrafting is tiring, and no doubt you will be thrashing me up and down that little courtyard bright and early tomorrow." His victories had been few and far between, and he could count on the thumb of one hand those won without the use of some trick or subterfuge.

Lydia made her good nights and closed the door once again, and Velandryn set to work cleaning up the detritus of his night's work. As he finished, he put his hand out before him, and arranged the summoning in his head. He cast, and the sword appeared once again.

Two.

This time, he nearly lost his balance. The exhaustion was getting worse as he depleted those stores of magicka that he had been using of late to sustain himself through Lydia's training and long days spent learning all he could. However, he needed to push himself to have any chance of improving, and if he did not become stronger, he could not hope to survive another dragon. He released the blade, and moved to lie in the bed. The Illusion shattered as he lay down, and the Dov came roaring to the front of his mind, though he felt nothing but joy at this potent new weapon to subdue and destroy his foes.

One more time, he raised his hand, and stretched it out to one side, so he could not see. He visualized, and cast the spell with his last drop of magicka. Instantly, his body gave out, and he slumped powerlessly onto the covers. Too much, perhaps. He felt the weight slide into his hand, and smiled.

Three.

He had time only to feel the sword slip from his fingers and evaporate into nothingness before sleep claimed him.

Dearest Dee,

It was so good to hear from you! Of course, you must have heard the news by now! A Dragonborn! And a Dark Elf no less! It's all anybody at the Mare can talk about. I even saw him when he came back after the battle. A whole crowd of guards, and him in the middle looking so odd himself, with a strange red hand on his armor and that sharp elf face. It's strange days coming, Dee, but having a Dragonborn, even an elf, makes me feel safe, you know? You need to come visit Whiterun! It
must get so boring down there, I don't know how you do it.

All my best to Orgnar, and you take care too!

Hulda

The best informant in the world was a chatty friend. Send a letter every few weeks, and any news in Whiterun was on its way to her the morning after it had occurred. Delphine had told Orgnar she needed a few days, saddled Ysmir, and set off northward, towards the ancient barrow-hall of Ustengrav. She had heard the Greybeards call Dovahkiin, and that meant the Dragonborn would be on his way to them soon enough. Eventually, they'd send him for their precious horn, and she would make sure that led him to her. A Dragonborn. For Hulda it meant safety, but not for her. For Delphine, it meant cold nights and risking her neck on foolhardy missions like this. It meant new dangers and more like than not an early death. It meant having a purpose again, and riding off to save the world. It meant hope.

As they moved through one of the markets in the Plains District, Lydia realized that this was the first time her thane had left Dragonsreach in the almost two weeks since their return from killing the dragon he called Mirmulnir. In between training, meeting with Farengar to discuss Divines only knew what, meeting local notables and complaining about them to her once they had left, going to private discussions with the jarl, and nearly killing himself creating new spells, Velandryn Savani had been very busy. By extension, that meant Lydia had been cooped up in the palace for just as long. She was fond of the mighty hall, but it was nice to breathe crisp air and hear the hubbub of commerce again. And that is worth the annoyance of being the center of attention, or at least next to him. Clearly, word of the Dragonborn had reached every last citizen, given the number of looks both surreptitious and overt that they were receiving. Velandryn, to his credit, seemed not to notice, moving with measured grace made all the more impressive by the extraordinary string of curses she had awoken to this morning when he tried to get out of bed. She had suggested he eschew magical reinforcement and recuperation for one day of training, and he had agreed. Yesterday, he fought using only the strength and durability of his own flesh and bone, with no healing whatsoever. Today, he had glared at her with what she had momentarily been concerned was real hatred. However, the glimmer in his eyes and muttered request for some 'gods-damned ice for every inch of me' put her at ease. Had he truly resented her, he would simply have healed his soreness. As it was, his resolve to act as a Dragonborn should masked any hint of his unhappiness.

She was proud of him; his willingness to eschew his area of comfort to improve a skill was admirable. Besides which, she had to admit that his skill with a sword was improving. At this rate, he might soon be able to handle one of the bandits that infested the remote places of the hold. They would be leaving the city in just a few days, but she planned to keep them on the main roads until they reached Ivarstead, and from there the ascent up the Seven Thousand Steps based on what she had heard should be free of anything beyond wild beasts. His current level of skill was enough to get them to the Greybeards, and hopefully they would be able to improve his Shouting and tech him whatever dragonslaying lore the Dragonborn should possess. Once or twice the notion had come to her that perhaps there were no special skills that could slay dragons with ease, but she rejected that as absurd. Why would they be sent a Dragonborn if he was not able to vanquish their foe?

Lost in thought, she realized suddenly that the passerby was focused on her no longer; she had lost her thane. Glancing around, she saw no trace of him or the finery gifted to him by the jarl. Cursing herself for a useless bodyguard, she pushed her way back through the crowd, searching for any trace of the red hand sigil that the jarl had ordered put on his cloak. It had pleased Velandryn when he first saw it, and he had seemed happy to wear it today. Now, it allowed her to mark he charge;
her thane was deep in conversation with a pair of warriors in strange segmented armor with sunburst crests on their cloaks. One was showing him some sort of contraption of wood and metal while the other wrote on a piece of parchment and handed it to the Dragonborn. As she approached, the two went on their way, and she noticed that the one with the strange device had been an Orc, of all things. Velandryn noticed her then, and gestured to an empty stall off in a lightly-trafficked corner of the market. As they moved beneath the woven awning and leaned against the rail, he produced the parchment on which the stranger had been writing.

"We may have a detour on our way to the Greybeards." He showed her the paper, and she took note of the crude map scrawled there with a name beneath it.

"Dimhollow Crypt? What is there for us in a crypt?" She had no desire to go trudging through caves when all of Skyrim was in peril. Besides which, this Dimhollow Crypt looked to be located in the no-man's land between Hjaalmarch and The Pale, one of the main areas of conflict in the Stormcloak's rebellion. "This looks like a terrible idea, my thane."

He looked at her with bright, happy eyes. "Ordinarily, I would agree with you. However, they have something we need. A weapon that could very well turn the tide for Whiterun against the dragons."

That got her interest. "What weapon is in Dimhollow, and how did those two know about it?"

"Not in Dimhallow. That Dawnguard Orc showed it to me, a crossbow!" He seemed almost giddy; such excitement looked out of place on his long angular face as he gestured animatedly.

"What's a Dawnguard? And of all people shouldn't you use the word Orsimer?" In truth she did not care that much what he called the Orc, but she did enjoy poking at his pride.

However, he simply waved her complaint away. "Orcs are barely mer. But the Dawnguard, they're vampire hunters of some sort. That's what's in Dimhollow. Apparently a pack of the bloodsuckers torched one of the Vigil of Stendarr's halls, and a survivor heard their plans. The Vigilants want payback, and went to the Dawnguard. The vampires are looking for something in Dimhollow, and I received a guarantee of crossbows, bolts and schematics for Whiterun if we assist in taking down the pack." He looked almost as pleased with himself as when he had summoned that wretched sword.

"Very good, my thane. Now, what is a crossbow, and why does it excite you so much?" Not for the first time, she wondered how old he truly was. He had mentioned before that he was forty-seven years old, but what that corresponded to in human age was unclear. At times he seemed almost ancient with his esoteric knowledge and unconventional thinking, but then he would go off and get so very agitated over something trivial, like being called 'elf' or this crossbow weapon.

He was excited now, describing this weapon, and as she heard the details, she began to understand why. "Think of it as a handheld ballista. It fires a bolt that can punch clean through plate armor, and can be locked in ready position and fired in an instant. We arm the Whiterun guard with these, suddenly every wall has two dozen mobile scorpions when the dragons come by. It could change everything!" She had to admit, it did sound good.

Almost too good. "If these are such magnificent weapons, why have I never heard of them?" It also had not escaped her notice that this weapon would let any thug so amred bring down even the Dragonsreach Elites with a lucky shot.

He looked slightly abashed at that. "That is…an unfortunate series of events, I would say. The design was originally based on Dwemer technology unearthed on Vvardenfell late in the Third Era, and several outposts of the Imperial Legion had begun experimenting with mass-producing them
around the time of the Incarnate's Return. However, with the Oblivion Crisis and then the Red Year following, the crossbow became a low priority. For all of its power, it was an impractical weapon for any but strong soldiers serving in low-mobility formations; it was ruinously heavy and had a long reload time that required the use of a foot to brace the weapon or a second soldier passing off and reloading crossbows. Combine that with difficult and precise machining being necessary for it to be at all practical, and it was quickly deemed an unnecessary complication when arming ourselves against the Daedra and later the Argonian raiders. It shouldn't come as much of a shock that the only examples I had ever seen before today were housed in museums or as conversation pieces in estates or temple halls."

Part of Lydia wanted to ask about the Incarnate, as she had heard him take that name as an oath several times. However, more pressing matters called. "If the weapon is so impractical, why are you so overjoyed? It sounds a useful tool, but hardly the all-mighty weapon you claimed."

His enthusiasm was back in an instant. "Because somebody did the work! Somebody went through the trouble of making it a viable alternative to the traditional bow! That one he showed me had had the mechanism updated and portions of the frame replaced with wood. It is half as heavy as any crossbow I've seen, can be reloaded in maybe a third of the time of the older models, and a skilled craftsman could make dozens in a week or less! He said the schematics are at some place he called Fort Dawnguard, but he was willing to give us a copy if we help with this cleansing." He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "He knew who I was, and I'd wager the real reason this is going through is he figures getting a thane and the Dragonborn on his group's good side is worth giving up those schematics. Dimhollow just sweetens the deal" He looked up at her, and twisted his mouth into a human-style smile. This one was notably less ghastly now that she had been giving him tips on how best to make it a gesture of affection and not intimidation, though he still showed an unnerving number of teeth. He was getting better at them, though. "What do you say, housecarl? Shall we go kill some vampires, and get crossbows for Whiterun? A chance to exterminate the spawn of Molag Bal and a windfall for your hold, surely that's worth a detour."

He was right. If these weapons were as good as he claimed, they might make a real difference should a dragon attack again. "Very well, my thane. We clear Dimhollow Crypt, then on to Ivarstead, High Hrothgar, and the Greybeards. When will we be leaving?"

"Early tomorrow morning. I'd like to get this done quickly; I have many questions for the Greybeards, and this seems a good week away even mounted."

"Do you ride, my thane?"

"Guar, I ride badly. Horses, even worse. You?"

"I have spent some time on horseback." Not much, truth be told, but she could plod a mare down the roads of Whiterun Hold well enough. "We have horses set aside for us in the stables, I was told. We should have them prepared for our departure."

"Sounds good. I suppose I should meet the beast I will be riding." He gave a slight shudder. She took the lead, cutting through the crowd, as her thane moved by her side. The stables were not far past the main gate, and there was much to do.

++Prism-spore active++
++Sub-aetherial contact established++
+Status report
+Talos reduction proceeds as projected rebel escalation within predicted parameters no evidence of extramundane interference

+Report status dragons

+Unknown origin capabilities goals structure significance

+Report known information dragons

+Massive power exceptionally dangerous

+Priority 1 obtain further information on dragons contain control destroy

+Understood request permission utilize Thalmor resources

+Denied

+Current resources insufficient for comprehensive analysis

+Utilize extant resources Priority 1 do not alert Empire to existence

+Understood Aldmeris Survives

+Aldmeris Survives

++Sub-aetherial contact terminated++

++Prism-spore dormant++


Chapter End Notes

A/N Late update, apologies, life got in the way and a few parts of this chapter were a slog. Only big thing to address from last time is Lydia's reaction to Freya. I intentionally made it jarring and out of nowhere to signify that this was a part of Lydia's life that she had left behind. Freya was a young love, but Lydia moved on and excelled as a guard. Freya is not a long lost love, nor does Lydia harbor secret feelings for her. She thought of her very briefly before the battle, but she isn't the type to dwell on other things during a fight. That's much more Velandryn's thing. Basically, Lydia needed an emotional core in her past to contrast with the duty she has embraced, and while this was cheap and easy, it gives her some badly needed characterization and sets up a few arcs for her to undergo in the future.

As always, questions, compliments, complaints, all welcome.
Aiding the Light

Chapter Summary

Travelling to Dimhollow, and the trials within

Chapter Notes

Coldman9: Thanks! I was irked by the lack of deep character customization in Skyrim, so this is partly a response to that. They gave us a richly textured world, but the game doesn't always live up to the potential; it needs characters and stories that make use of the setting and the depth. I hope that I can keep working up to your expectations.

Jason: Thanks! I can't promise fast updates, but they will keep coming.

Julie5: Thank You! I have barely scratched the surface, so stick with me and let me know what you think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The ignorant will tell you that all vampires are the same, while those with a little knowledge would declare that vampires in Skyrim are called the Volkihar. Neither is true, and believing either can get you killed. Centuries ago, a coven of vampires from Clan Cyrodiil, the bloodline that dominates the province of the same name, migrated to Skyrim and wormed its way into the cities of our beloved home. While other clans skulk at the corners of the world, it is Clan Cyrodiil that will most concern the aspiring hunter. They are not to be underestimated, but also not to be feared by the well-prepared hunter; their greatest weapon is concealment, and once brought into the light they can be destroyed by any of the accepted methods. The first part of this book will deal with revealing these creatures as they hide among us, and the second with exterminating them once they have been unmasked.

However, every hunter in Skyrim must be aware of one other threat that lurks always in the night. I speak of the once-mighty Clan Volkihar, who can move undetected through ice and mist; warp the minds of mortals so that their prey walk willingly into a deadly embrace; and even, it is whispered, transform their very bodies into hideous and bestial forms that confer upon them a host of unholy powers. Once, these horrors terrorized all of Skyrim and the eastern extremities of High Rock, but time and the tireless work of brave hunters have all but ended their rule of the night. Today, they are a shadow of their former selves, and while numerous diluted strains of the Volkihar bloodline can be found in remote caves and holdfasts, they are rarely seen hunting amongst the populace of Skyrim. However, they should not be disregarded, and cleansing a Volkihar den should only be undertaken by an experienced and well-equipped hunter. The third part of this book will deal with what we know about this clan, and how best to combat it.

Isran at-Elinhir, Vigilant of Stendarr, Introduction, On the Hunting of Skyrim's Vampires, 4E 188

Lydia grunted as she drove her sword through the wolf's neck into the ground. Its final whine
trailed off and she turned to see how her thane had fared with the final foe. The last of the wolves was running full-tilt for the rocky hill from which the pack had ambushed them. Velandryn's eyes were intense and his bow sang as it loosed; the arrow punched into the wolf's flank and sent it staggering to one side. The wolf continued to limp away until her thane loosed one final shot and brought it to the ground. She followed him as he closed with the fallen beast to finish it off, but it had expired by the time they got to it.

"Did they give you any trouble, my thane?" They had been watering their horses in the gathering twilight when six of the lean black wolves had rushed from the thicket surrounding a craggy hill jutting out of the plain. Fortunately Lydia's bellowed taunts and swift movement had let her draw four of them; two had managed to engage her thane, though it appeared neither had landed a blow. She had watched him set one ablaze, but had been forced to engage her own enemies and had not seen the fight transpire.

He shrugged. "Wolves don't like fire, it seems. A taste of my magic, and they panicked. After that, it was easy."

Lydia frowned. "You seem very calm about it, for someone with so little experience in battle."

"The beasts I've seen since arriving in Skyrim are, with a couple of exceptions," His lips twitched and he raised a finger to gesture briefly skyward, "more hunting than battle. Compared to the things living in the wilderness back home, these wolves are nothing. I grew up on stories of blight-maddened nix hounds rampaging through homesteads and herds of gravid netches menacing whole towns. I'll take these wolves any day."

"In Skyrim, there's a good rule to live by. The further north or higher up something lives, the more dangerous it is. Mountain wolves are fiercer, and ice wolves are nastier still and twice the size of the tundra wolves on top of it. So, keep your eyes peeled." She had no desire for overconfidence to get her thane killed.

"Lydia, you do know you are something of a spoilsport, right?" He approached the hill without waiting for her reply and regarded a cozy-looking cave that looked to have been where the wolves had made their home. "What about here for the night?"

It was a good location, save for the danger of any surviving wolves from the pack. When she voiced her qualm, however, he pulled out a soul gem and grinned. He is getting better at it. His smile still looked forced, but was no longer frightening. "That first wolf was kind enough to donate its soul to guard us tonight. I can set up a barrier that will hide the entrance from any eyes, and more importantly, noses. Any wolves will be confused, but even if they find us, we will have plenty of warning."

"My thane, did you pick this location so you would have a chance to practice this…sorcery?" She knew that soul gems were not truly necromancy, but the idea of using a soul's energy to fuel magic still made her uncomfortable.

He gave no answer as he worked on the spell, or ritual, or whatever it was; his finger passed over the rock walls and the stone blackened as he scribed intricate designs around the entrance. He held the soul gem in his left hand, and light pulsed from within. As she watched Velandryn work, she noticed their horse had come up, and felt a brief flush of shame for forgetting about them. Fortunately, they were as well-trained as had been promised. Her thane was clearly unused to being around horses, but made for a fair enough rider, all things considered. That being said, she was grateful that they had not been attacked while mounted. That could have ended badly. As it was, the cave was large enough to hold them and the horses, and even had a few plants rooted in the cave floor that would give them something to graze overnight. Not the worst place, all things
She left the cave briefly to gather wood for a fire, and returned to find Velandryn standing within a ring of symbols around the cave mouth, tossing the soul gem from hand to hand as he stared out into what was now nearly full night. As she passed him, she heard him muttering under his breath in what she assumed was the Dunmer tongue. "My thane? Is anything amiss?"

He stopped his mutters and held the soul gem up. "Just waiting on you. Let's see if this works."

That did not sound as certain as she would like. "Is it in doubt?"

His focus returned to his work. "It's only Illusion, so worst case scenario is that we see, hear, or smell something very odd." He gazed at the array, and his next words seemed as much to himself as to her. "I wasn't able to layer tactile input into the array, as the sigils to fool the mind are significantly more complex than the ones already laid down and would be haphazard at best given the crudity of the construction. So, that won't work, and using Alteration sigils would also prevent smoke from escaping unless integrated on a piecemeal basis. And I'm not nearly confident enough in using integrated ritual arrays to trigger cross-disciplinary effects to try my first one under these conditions. So, we hope nothing touches the barrier tonight, or we have a guest."

Lydia thought she could follow the basics of what he was saying, even if the precise principles and a few of the terms eluded her. However, she remembered that ritual and conjured sword, and could not help but make one final remark. "Be careful, my thane."

"Always, housecarl." His hand glowed with violet light, and he held the soul gem above the center of a spiral pattern on one wall. When he released it, it stayed in place, rotating slowly. Purple light flared out along the symbols above and below the gem, and Velandryn moved his hands gently over the symbols above him as they flared into life. He spoke softly in his own tongue, and she was unsure if he was activating them, guiding the magic from the soul gem, or merely praying over them as they worked on their own. When the final symbol, directly opposite the soul gem, glowed, Velandryn sagged against the cave wall and turned to his audience. The horses looked somewhat spooked, and as Lydia looked at both a rock wall and the view beyond it, she could not help but feel a tremor of unease. My thane uses magic. I knew this. I will become comfortable with it. It was easier said than done, however, so she began setting up the fire to prepare dinner. They had pouches of dried meat and hardtack, but earlier in the day Velandryn had brought down a pheasant with a well-aimed burst of flame, and that sounded far more appetizing.

As she plucked the bird and her thane inexpertly shed the horses of their saddles, she got to thinking about what they were going to do. Killing vampires was no easy task, and while she had done so in the past, it was usually just a single bloodsucker holed up in some damp cave or the basement of an abandoned home. Besides which, she had had a full contingent of the guard to assist her. Here, they would have only whatever Vigilants and Dawnguard were there, and she knew little of one group, and nothing at all of the other. The Vigil hunted Daedra worshippers, she knew, but other than that and how to recognize them by their garb, she was at a loss. "My thane? What do you know of the Vigil and the Dawnguard?"

He had finished with the horses by then, and moved to sit across from her. He thrust one hand into the unlit wood and the whole thing flared to life. She had to admit, it was nice to have someone who could do that on the road. "The Dawnguard, only what the ones in Whiterun told me. They hunt vampires, and think the Vigilants are fools. So, I agree with them on their core tenets." She finished cleaning the bird as Velandryn looked into the fire thoughtfully. "The Vigilants, I have to say I don't care for them one bit. They are not... nuanced in their views on Daedra, and I have heard unpleasant stories about what happens to Dunmer who practice our faith too openly in Cyrodiil. In
Cheydinhal, I had the chance to see the Vigilants bring down a 'dangerous Daedric cult,'" his voice dripped sarcasm, "that numbered four in all, one of them so old she had to be dragged bodily out of the house. They worshipped Azura, and prayed for guidance in troubled times. The Mythic Dawn of old was dangerous, to be sure, but the Vigilants have gone too far in the other direction. They are overzealous thugs, and I'll shed no tears for them." He accepted his half of the bird, tore off a chunk, and held it above the flame with a bare hand. The meat cooked, and his flesh did not.

Not for the first time, Lydia was left to wonder about how odd it must be to be able to stick your hand in fire. "My thane, I must say that it still strikes me as very strange to see you do that."

"The fire, you mean?" He gestured at their bedrolls, where his thick furs took up nearly twice as much space as her thin fur-lined hides. "That first night on the road, I thought you might be playing a joke on me with that bedroll. Every time you think it odd what I do with fire, I feel just the same about you and cold. I've taken to just adding frost resistance potions to my water skins when the winds start howling." A smile danced through his eyes, a momentary light that she would not have caught even a week ago. "You Nords, though. In the farmer's house, there you truly surprised me. I knew you were strong. I didn't know you were that fast."

"Did you think I was going all-out on you in training, my thane?" The old mutt had only wanted to lie down before the hearth, the farmer said afterward, and must have thought the guests occupying its favored place would not mind some company. When Lydia had been awakened by a cold nose in her ear, though, years of restive sleep and midnight drills led to the poor mutt cowering in the corner as her half-conscious battle cry brought the farmer, his wife, and their children thundering into the room to see what had happened. She knew her face was reddening now, though it would be difficult to see in the cave, and prayed to all the Divines that he hadn't figured out what that meant for humans. He might display dignity around those who knew him only as the Dragonborn, but the real Velandryn Savani had shown that he enjoyed poking holes in his housecarl's professional demeanor, and would be entirely too pleased with himself for the rest of the evening should he figure out how easily he had embarrassed her. The best way to counter that, she had found, was to put him on the defensive. "You yourself seemed none too pleased, my thane. Disappointed that it was not someone else in your bedroll, someone more…amorous…that woke you?"

Lydia noted with interest that while he apparently did not blush red, the darkening of the skin around his eyes shouted out his embarrassment to the world. Useful. The farmer's daughter had been a woman only by the most generous definition of the word, but she had flirted relentlessly with Velandryn from the moment she laid eyes on him. Lydia would have wagered good gold that only a few years before, if that, the girl had been playing with dolls and wooden swords, but now she seemed intent on seducing the Dark Elf. She had not even known he was Dragonborn at first, though learning that only intensified her advances. To her thane's credit, he had been both unfailingly polite and unflinchingly proper, though the girl could not seem to take the hint. When she had entered the room after Lydia had encountered the dog, it almost seemed that she had taken the time to rumple her sleeping shift in as titillating a manner as she could manage. She had not managed to attract Velandryn's interest, but did at least succeed in raising her parents' ire. When they left the next morning, the girl had not been there to see them off. Lydia was getting better at seeing through her thane's dispassionate façade now, though, and his discomfort with the whole ridiculous situation made it a potent weapon.

"Housecarl, you should not be lecturing me, given how her brothers were with you." Velandryn's voice was light, but she had no idea what he was talking about. The two had been good solid lads, twin brothers a few years older than the girl, but nothing they did had been inappropriate in the least.

"They were very kind, my thane, but nothing compared to that girl."
"Lydia. Are you going to sit there with a straight face and tell me they were not trying to impress you? That they were not acting like f'ghan to make you notice them?"

Putting the Dark Elf word aside for the moment, Lydia tried to cast her mind back to that night and focus on the twins. One was dark and one fair, but both had been the soul of courtesy. They had been perfect hosts, offering the choicest cuts of meat and making sure her cup was always full. One had shown her a woodcarving he was working on, and the other had asked her to spar with him, though she had not had the time. They had even had a good-natured competition going to see which one could make her laugh more—

_Oh, gods. Oh, Mara save me._ She could console herself for her blindness by knowing it was due to the camaraderie and casual affection of the Whiterun Guard that she had missed the signs. Besides which, Nords valued playing host to guests as a sacred tradition, and it was not unheard of for wanderers to receive treatment far beyond what even a family member could expect. Or, as was now looking increasingly obvious, sheltered children living dull lives on a farm had tried for a bit of excitement.

She ran her free hand through her hair, hiding her face from her thane. When she glanced at him, his eyes were burning with a cheery light. "Enjoying yourself, my thane?"

"You have no idea." He tore a chunk of the bird with his teeth and chewed thoughtfully, eyes still alight with that laughing gleam. "You would have done well to take advantage. Make them fight for your favor, or just take them both. Nords are open about these kinds of things, I've heard."

"We are, but bedding your host's children is frowned upon in Whiterun, as in all decent places. Besides which, they were…" No sense in hiding it; he find out sooner or later. He had never expressed any interest in her that way, so it shouldn't change anything. "They were men, so I had no interest in them." There.

He nodded. "A good policy, I've always found. Men are far more trouble than they are worth."

She was confused. What in Oblivion was he talking about? "My thane, I do not understand…"

"I don't care for Men in a great variety of ways. Philosophically, religiously, culturally…just can't stand you lot. I think it's the ears. All rounded and short."

The hint of laughter in his eyes kept her from growing angry, and she suppressed annoyance that it had taken her until the end of his little joke to catch on. She had noticed that he had seemingly taken her words after the feast to heart, and was making an attempt to give and take humans and elves in a lighter humor. Besides which it seemed that of the two Dunmer she had ever known, neither gave much of a damn who she chose to bed. It was better than the handful of Nords who had grown angry when they learned she would never be interested. Of course, she could not let his jibe about humans pass… "You are not half as funny as you think, my thane, but I know that you deeply admire humans, and your words are merely an attempt to hide your elven jealousy."

"It eats me up at night, Lydia." He leaned forward and fixed her with an intense gaze. "I wake myself weeping when my dreams end and I am Dunmer once more." He traced lines on his cheeks, mimicking tears. "I try slathering rancid cheese on myself and hitting myself in the head with rocks, but it just isn't the same as truly being a Nord."

Lydia did not smile. There was no need to encourage him, but she felt a twitch of her lips that might have given her away. "And I tried shoving a stick up my ass, but my ears won't go all pointy. Any advice on that?"
Her thane snorted. "You speak of matters beyond your mettle, human." His voice took an air of mystery. "First you must go to the hidden isle of Artaeum, and harvest wood from the Silver Hist to forge your stick—"

Lydia threw an apple at him. He tried to catch it, but wound up losing his balance, the apple, and half his roast fowl. The rest of the meal was spent in companionable silence.

After washing his dishes, her thane stood and moved over to their gear. "A quick bout so you don't break your record of pummeling me strange colors every night, and then I'm for sleep. Wouldn't want to deprive you of a nice long watch."

Lydia had learned much about her thane since meeting him, but his sleep habits still seemed at odds with his heroic destiny. No ballad she had ever heard made mention of the hero going to sleep early, or growing unfocused if kept awake through the night. Her thane preferred to be making camp by sundown, and asleep well before the moons climbed high; if he could accomplish that he would be rested and restored by the time he woke for the second watch. Lydia had no such problems with remaining awake and generally associated going to bed early with disobedient children, but as someone who despised the predawn hours with a burning passion she was just happy another was willing to take the morning watch. She had to give him credit for a kind of discipline, however; even when there was no watch to be had, he always rose early and was alert by the time she dragged herself out of her bedroll. She had a suspicion that rising before the dawn had something to do with his religion, but being neither especially religious herself nor knowledgeable about the Dunmer faith, she decided to leave it be.

That evening, they sparred unarmored, a single blade each, one hand, live steel. Her thane was showing constant improvement at swordplay, and though he would always be smaller than any Nord foe, his strength was improving and his agility was impressive for a novice. His decision to sacrifice a shield for magic ran counter to her every belief about melee combat, but she supposed that it was her job to stand as his shield should one be required. She knew that he considered this training at best of secondary concern and largely did it to keep her happy, but he was already improving, and she had noted with satisfaction that his body was beginning to show the results of his training. He would never have the musculature of a Nord, but the visible changes meant her regime was having an effect. Whatever it takes to keep him alive. At the end of the day, a housecarl's duty was to protect their thane, and Lydia took her oaths deadly serious.

After they had concluded their sparring and Velandryn had healed his bruises, she settled in to keep watch from the cave side of the illusion. Behind her, she heard a faint scratching sound and turned to see Velandryn working rather than sleeping. He had a mortar and pestle he had gotten in Whiterun, and the small leather-bound journal where he recorded his discoveries and mistakes was open on his lap. The pack in which he stored his various alchemical ingredients lay at his side.

"Try not to poison yourself again, my thane."

"It was a very potent magicka restoration potion, and if not for that side effect, would have been quite useful." He finished whatever he was writing and put the journal away. "I found an interesting insect today and wanted to see how its various parts would respond when introduced into a solution containing extract from tundra cotton. Only the wings reacted, if you were wondering."

"I wasn't, but thank you for sharing your discovery. Get some sleep, my thane." He settled into his bedroll with a grunt, and she resumed her position watching for any danger that would chance upon them in the night. Let it come. She would be ready.
While following the map had proved fairly doable for the most part, one they got into the mountains where Dimhollow Crypt was located their progress slowed considerably. They had sheltered last night in a tiny settlement called Heljarchen nestled in a valley at the end of a winding mountain road, left their horses there early this morning, and spent most of the day clambering over rocks trying to find the crypt itself. They had encountered neither Imperial nor Stormcloak patrols, as the area they were searching was far too remote and inhospitable to be of much interest to either side. The Dawnguard member who had given Velandryn the map had done a good job of copying what he had, but it quickly became apparent that whoever had made the original was exceedingly optimistic about what qualified as a 'road' or 'landmark.' The mountain slopes were littered with goat-paths and false ends, and more than once they found themselves returning to areas that looked depressingly familiar. Finally, as the shadows began to lengthen, it looked as though they had succeeded. Six horses were tied up before what Velandryn assumed to be Dimhollow Crypt. Two were barded with Dawnguard colors, and the others with the blue and gray of the Vigil. Of the riders, there was no sign.

He had never actually fought a vampire before, but he knew the theory, and had a general idea about their strengths and weaknesses. He had heard that there was a particularly deadly clan in the far north of Skyrim living beneath the ice. The…Volkar or something, I think. Most likely, though, those in Dimhollow were nothing more than some degenerate offshoot of a real clan. Just freakishly fast and strong bloodsuckers cursed by the Lord of Rape with immortality and an insatiable hunger. Simple really. He had a brace of potions in traveler's vials on his belt, and a dozen doses for curing disease stashed were throughout his gear and in his saddlebags. He had given Lydia plenty as well, and hoped it would be enough. He silently recited the first line of the Litany of Azura, and felt the magicka within him roil in response. Lydia had shown him the proper way to hone his blades, and he had oiled his bow and strung it with new gut. Within him, his eagerness at the chance to best a new foe warred with dread over facing it. Dov drives me forward, Joor keeps me safe. They weren't separate, not really, his dragon and mortal halves, but it helped to think of it like that. Hopefully the Greybeards could help him reconcile this imbalance. "Are you ready to do this, Lydia?"

"I am, my thane." They were both fully armored, but she wore heavy steel where he had the fine leathers gifted to him by the jarl. Her helmet hid most of her head, and the spaces between the steel plates were hard boiled hides over leather and wool. Any vampire that wanted to sink its fangs into her would have to carve open a hole first, possibly with a battleaxe. Her shield had a steel boss and rim over some dark wood, round in the Nord style and painted in the gold of Whiterun. She had asked him if there was some symbol or color he would prefer, but it had made him uncomfortable to tell someone else what to do with their own things, and he had demurred. This shield was also a gift from the jarl; the one Lydia had carried into battle against Mirmulnir, and that Velandryn had used to save her life, was hanging above her bed in their chambers in Dragonsreach. This new shield was so heavy that it took him two hands to carry it more than a few paces, but Lydia was deceptively quick with it, and a part of him looked forward to getting a chance to see her use it in a real battle. All in all, she made a formidable sight, and he felt more than a little grateful to have her as his housecarl as he followed her into the cave.

The cave entrance opened up into a cavern that Velandryn would ordinarily have liked quite well. Water ran through it in several small streams, and light from cracks in the ceiling speckled both the ground and the few small plants that had made their home here. One side of the cavern was dominated by ruined stonework of some sort, likely part of the crypt that gave this place its name. The scene was marred, however, by the corpses sprawled at the far end of the cavern, before a tunnel leading down.

"My thane, come and see!" Lydia was standing over the bodies, and as he approached, he saw what had drawn her interest. Five bodies lay there, two in the robes and armor of the Vigilants, and two
more that looked to be bandits or mercenaries. The fifth, though, was unusual. As first glance, it
looked to be a man of middling age. It lay sprawled on its back with half of its torso blackened and
burned and three crossbow bolts sticking out of its chest. It was the face, though, that was so very
wrong. The eyes were open, and glinted dully in the half-light. They glinted with golden light, and
the face around them looked almost animalistic in its aspect. The nose was distorted, with slit-like
nostrils, and a pronounced crease ran down to the mouth. One hand had fallen into a patch of
sunlight, and now only a pile of ash dirtied an empty sleeve. Another pile of ash and clothing lay in
a pool of light nearby, enough volume to account for an entire corpse.

"Vampires, but different." Lydia seemed torn between interest and disgust.

"How?"

"The face. As far as I know, we only have the Cyrodiil Clan in Skyrim. They…blend. They look
like us, though their eyes glow red when they get hungry. I've killed those, but never seen
something like this."

"So, what is it? Another clan?"

"Maybe. There was some old clan way up north in the distant past, a clan or two that came over
from High Rock back in the Third Era, and I've heard that some will sneak in from Morrowind
every now and then."

"Likely true. The Vvardenfell clans were all wiped out during the Red Year, as far as I know, and
the Temple does a fairly good job of keeping decent folk well-educated and safe from those that
have avoided our hunters. Some might have looked for easier prey in Skyrim."

"Well, whatever these are, at least they die. Let's press on, my thane. It looks like the Dawnguard
could use our help."

He left the bodies there; he noticed with some amusement that that someone had already stripped
them of their potions and valuables. He would return after and collect some of the dust from the
vampires, however. It was a procedure he had only ever read of, but one that yielded a potent and
valuable alchemical reagent. "Let's go then. And Lydia, eyes open. I don't want these things getting
the drop on us." He marched towards the tunnel down, roughly hewn out of the stone.

"Of course, my thane."

He saw no need to tell her about the inert array that covered the wall around the tunnel, scribed in a
magical language that was wholly unfamiliar to him. A large chunk of it was missing, likely
smashed through with brute force. Someone hid this place. On top of that, he knew enough about
magical theory to feel very uneasy from that array's implications. He knew at least a little about
most of the major elven and human schools of thought with regards to magic, and this array
belonged to none of them. The closest parallels would be…Daedric. That was all wrong, though.
This looked like a Daedric array from a certain point of view, but it was lacking key unifying
concepts, which should have rendered it very weak. The fact that he could still detect it after its
destruction, however, meant that it was anything but. Clearly it belonged to a school of magic
unknown to him, and the idea that there was something so significant that he did not know ate at
him like a hunger. Without the central component, though, he could not tell anything more, but it
was a mystery that weighed heavily on him as they moved deeper into the crypt.

As they exited the tunnel into a burial chamber lined with alcoves, Lydia was scanning the walls
and ceiling, hoping to get a glimpse of any foe before it could ambush them. She had not needed
her thane's advice to be on her guard when dealing with vampires. Even in houses and common basements, vampires were tricky; in a tomb such as this, she had no doubt they could work even worse trouble. However, it seemed that the battle had already moved on. In one corner was a pile of corpses, though they looked far too old and dried to have been recent kills, and the doorway leading further in had another pair of corpses before it. One was another of the strange vampires and the other one of the mercenaries or bandits in their ragged hides and leathers. She nudged the corpse of the non-vampire with her boot. "My thane, be on your guard. Some vampires use thralls to serve them, and I think these might be some such."

He nodded, but his attention was on the desiccated corpses in one corner. "Aye, I'll do that, but I'm more worried about those." He gestured, and one of the corpses rose jerkily to its feet. 

"Blessed Talos!"

"Down, my thane!" Lydia rushed forward, and removed the thing's sword arm at the elbow with a single strike and its head with three quick blows. The torso stood there, swaying, slightly, and Lydia recalled stories of undead that kept coming even with limbs hacked off. She bull rushed the abomination, slamming her shield into its chest and driving it to the ground. As it crumpled onto itself, its body dissolved into ash and scattered around them. She readied her shield, and waited for something else to come from the pile. Behind her, she heard Velandryn sigh.

"Lydia, in the future I will warn you before reanimating a body, and you will do me the courtesy of not destroying my reanimations. Do we have a deal?"

"Ah, yes, my thane." She had known that the Dark Elves practiced necromancy, but she still considered it a revolting practice, and the sight of her thane performing such spells coiled in her gut like a poisonous worm. "My thane, about your—"

"Later. I am relatively unskilled at reanimating dead flesh; if these had been dead for very long, the memory of life would have been gone, and it would not have risen. Someone killed these, and within the last few hours." He adjusted his leather helmet to scratch at his scalp. "What do you know about draugr?"

"They are the walking dead. Is that what you think these are? I'd heard stories, but never had reason to disturb any tombs before this." She emphasized those last two words, just to drive home the point that her life had been relatively normal less than a month ago.

"They aren't just walking dead. Any necromancer can do what I just did and innervate a fresh corpse. These are guardians, bound to their resting place, like the ones I encountered in Bleak Falls Barrow. And they aren't dead. Not truly, at least."

"Wait, what does that mean, and how is it you know this? You've killed them before at Bleak Falls, no?"

"Some, but not cleanly." He sat on his heels and cut into one of the corpses with his dagger. He had insisted on keeping the crude iron weapon with the scorched hilt for some reason, though she had insisted he have it well-honed at the very least. "Farengar had a report from some scholar who made a study of them. Supposedly they served the ancient Dragon Cult priests, and were… gifted…with eternal servitude. They roam their burial chambers and attack any who disturb them. Look." He held up the dagger, and she studied the dark smear on the blade. "This is their blood, or what is left of it. The blood of a dead thing. They are bone-dry, and burn easily, but this scholar thought they had some hint of life left in them. Supposedly they fed the priests with their unlife. Have you heard anything about this? I'd like to know more about this Dragon Cult, and what magics their leaders used to bind the draugr as they did."
"I would imagine the Greybeards know, my thane." Occasionally, the Dragonborn would descend into a sort of reverie, engrossed in whatever oddity had caught his interest. When this happened, it was best to humor him and encourage him to move on. Right now, she did not want him dwelling on how best to bind someone to an eternity of service. She knew, or at least hoped, that his interest was just academic, but she had seen that he burned with curiosity for the strangest things, and her scant knowledge of the mythical cult was unlikely to be enough to satiate his appetite.

At any rate, he pulled himself away from the corpses, and took the lead for the next tunnel. "Draugr are deceptively fast, and single-minded. They won't stop until one or both of us are dead." He loosened his sword, and fire surrounded his hands for a single moment as he flexed his fingers beneath his thick leather gloves. "Downward we go."

They heard the fight before they saw it. They were descending yet another gradually sloping tunnel when they heard the clash of steel and raised voices ahead. Lydia stopped, hand raised in a fist, before motioning them forward. They moved slowly onward, and Velandryn was finally able to see not only the Dawnguard in action, but vampires as well.

The cavern was low where they entered it, and rose to a bluff overlooking them at the opposite end. Directly in front of them, two warriors in Dawnguard armor and one in the armored robes of the Vigilants were locked in melee with a brute in tattered leather armor, a yellow-eyed swordswoman who moved like a striking snake, and another Vigilant. This second Vigilant's puppet-like movements and gaping wounds revealed it as the automaton servant of some spellcaster. The culprit was fairly obvious, perched on the bluff above. This vampire was male, heavily bearded, and flanked by three skeletons. Two of the skeletal minions were firing into the battle below, while the third simply stood there with a huge axe, guarding its master. The Dawnguard and Vigilant were heavily pressed, and they were giving ground even as Velandryn watched.

Velandryn met Lydia's eyes, and gestured upward. "I'll distract the caster, I want you to break those three down there, then close with the spellcaster if he's still up. Hit the vampire first, you'd likely have to chop that dead Vigilant to pieces to slow it down. I'll try to keep the archers occupied." He focused, and the air around his hands ignited. "Ready?"

"On your attack, my thane."

He opened with a pair of fire bolts; he intentionally made them very weak, only barely strong enough to maintain cohesion and speed. One went slightly wide, barely missing both the skeletal archers and the vampire, but the other found its mark and impacted the vampire, who gave a shriek of pain and unleashed a torrent of lightning into the air. Lydia's bellowed battle cry followed his housecarl as she charged towards the melee fighters. Shield braced before her, she did not slow down as she passed within half a span of one of the Dawnguard members and slammed full tilt into the vampire woman. The bloodsucker hissed as she staggered back, and the thrall immediately broke off its assault on the sole surviving Vigilant to flank Lydia instead. She met its mace with her shield, and scored a hit under the thrall's guard before pushing it back and spinning to face the vampire again. By this point, the Dawnguard member who had been engaging the vampire moved up and crushed the thrall's skull with a swing of her warhammer. Velandryn discerned this through glimpses while firing at the vampire on the ledge and ducking from the arrows loosed in retaliation. Almost. He popped out from a fold in the cave wall and hurled two more fireballs, as weak as the ones before had been. This time, instead of hitting the vampire they fizzled out on his ward. Now. He gathered magicka in both his hands, draining himself all but dry. He placed the tips of his fingers together before him, and the air between his hands first turned to red flames, then blue. Pain lanced through his hands, and he knew that neither his natural resistance to fire nor the
magicka wreathing the flames was sufficient to protect him for long. He rose, and released the final bolt of flame, feeling the familiar emptiness that signaled his magicka reserves were depleted. He watched, fascinated, as his missile streaked towards the vampire. The blue fire had reverted to a reddish hue as soon as the magicka sheath from his hands had dispersed, leading to a projectile that was larger than those previous and misshapen with magical flame seething within. The heat it radiated caused the surrounding air to shimmer and deformed his view of the vampire and his minions. *By Azura, quite the fireball...*

It was a cardinal rule of battle magic that any counterspell should be just stronger than the spell against which it was deployed. There was no sense, for instance, in making a ward of monumental strength to resist a Dunmer who was clearly only capable of conjuring meager fire bolts. In Farengar's library, there had been spell tomes detailing the use of wards. It was very Nord-like, he had thought, to focus on a spell that functioned the same as a traditional shield. The tome also insisted that this class of spell belonged to the School of Restoration, when any half-wit could see that it belonged in Alteration, though that was a semantic argument if anything. While the Dunmer traditions generally emphasized the use of shields that completely surrounded the caster, Velandryn was willing to accept that concentrating protection in a single direction had its uses. More interesting, though, had been the fact that the amount of magicka put into a ward had to remain constant. Too little, and it would fail to retain its form; too much, and it could overload and cause backlash. To adjust the strength of a ward, it was necessary to either be using a specialized ward spell which required significantly more finesse and magicka to activate, or to dispel the ward and summon another. Velandryn's gamble was twofold, but if this vampire was anything other than a skilled battlemage, his shield should be utterly annihilated by Velandryn's feint and strike. It was foolish to rely entirely on that though, so Velandryn readied his bow and nocked an arrow tipped with a rather nasty poison he had been working on for the past few days. *I may whip up ten potions to inure myself against the cold for every other one I create, but the poisons are the most satisfying.*

The fireball arced in, and the vampire extended his hand, and the ward with it, to meet this newest attack. Whether he had seen the difference in this bolt, Velandryn did not know. He could only wait, arrow drawn to his cheek and tip trained on the bearded vampire, breath held both in anticipation and to steady the long shot. Half a second before the fireball would impact, he loosed. *Better to spend an arrow needlessly than regret the shot not taken,* said Tuthon Kall. He had no idea why it was the words of a Breton four hundred years dead that came to mind, but he saw no way that taking the shot could hurt.

He never saw the moment of impact, only the eruption that billowed from it. His arrow vanished into the conflagration, and he thought that surely his ploy had succeeded. Nothing could emerge unscathed from that maelstrom of fire; the vampire's ward must have collapsed. As the flames cleared, he saw no sign of his foe. Where the vampire had stood was nothing but bare earth. The back blast had destroyed two of the skeletons; only one archer remained, once again firing unhurriedly at the battle below it. *Firing...* There was no skeletal binding he had ever heard of that allowed survival past the caster's death. Ice ran down his spine, and his stomach began a descent to the floor. He was suddenly aware of the shadows in the corners of the cave and of the darkness shrouding the ceiling. Stories of how vampires could vanish entirely in anything besides full sunlight raced to the forefront of his mind. A whisper came from somewhere, a noise that might have been a flutter of cloth or nothing at all. He saw no trace of any foe. Before him, the battle was going in their favor; the reanimated Vigilant had crumbled away, and the vampire was fighting fiercely but futilely against four foes. Perhaps that skeleton belonged to her. Perhaps it was bound by ritual to this place. Perhaps he was worrying for nothing—

A hand clamped down on his shoulder from behind, hard and cold and painful. Nails bit into his skin, and another hand gripped his head, wrenching loose his helmet and pushing his face down,
baring his neck. He tried to twist away, but the strength in those cold hands was beyond his ability to overcome. He was pushed down, and something wet and cold pressed itself against his neck. A soft, slithering thing swept over his skin, and he thrashed, yelling incoherently, trying to break free from the creature's probing tongue. He heard Lydia's cry of alarm as though from a great distance, and saw through hazy eyes his housecarl racing towards him. Twin pains pierced through him, and nausea filled him as he realized what was happening. Panic rose, and as the vampire began to feed, his vision blurred and darkness crept in. No! I will not become—I will not! The magicka available to him for spells had been drained from using his fiery barrage and was not yet fully recovered, but he had one final card to play. He had burned another foe, the bandit from his first battle in Skyrim, in a similar manner. It would take every ounce of his magicka; he would need to pull even the latent power from his blood and combust it in a single stroke. My blood...Through the pain, he grinned. Then, the flames came.

He rode the fire, feeling it course out of him. He shivered as his last drops of magicka ebbed away, and thrust the burning ruin of what had once been a vampire off of him once the flame had run its course. To call Red Mountain's wrath and burn the magicka from one's blood in a cloak of flame was a technique of last resort, immensely powerful but leaving the user drained. Common knowledge held that it took a full day and night to restore the body's magical balance to the point where it could be used again, though some mages could recuperate more efficiently. It was also damned exhilarating, feeling yourself on fire without any pain or danger. Velandryn stood there, swaying gently, letting the peace that came after a battle suffuse him. On the ledge, the skeleton collapsed in a clatter of bones while closer to hand Lydia and the three she had aided rushed to him.

"My thane!" His housecarl's face was drawn, and her eyes were wide and bright. "Velandryn, speak to me! Are you okay?" She pulled him around and inspected his exposed skin, focusing on his head and neck. Under different circumstances, it might have been amusing how easily she handled him, her overbearing strength when compared to her ostensible master. Not these.

"I've been bitten." As he spoke, his hand was in one of his belt pouches, rummaging around for a potion. He had specifically put it in a special bottle, smaller, leather-lined, and distinctive to the touch—

There. He raised it to his lips and downed it eagerly. It tasted foul, likely because a key ingredient was mudcrab innards, but heat ran through his body, and relief followed soon after. He had no idea if he had contracted the vampiric disease from the bite, but he didn't want to find out the hard way.

Eventually, Lydia determined that he had no further injuries, and let him go. "How do you feel, my thane?"

"Fairly good, circumstances considered." He became aware of the others around them, the Vigilant bleeding from a few cuts, and the pair of Dawnguard looking surprisingly collected given where they were and what they had just been doing. "Greetings. I am Velandryn Savani, this is my… partner, Lydia of Whiterun, and we are offering aid in cleansing this place of vampires." He made an effort to stand straight and project confidence in his voice. He had found in Whiterun that the tone he had used for sermons back home was also very useful in making Nords listen.

"How did you find us?" The speaker was the Dawnguard who had been wielding the hammer, a Nord woman of a height with Lydia. "Who sent you?"

"Your associates in Whiterun. An Orc, Durak, and a Nord whose name escapes me. They mentioned the activity in Dimhollow Crypt, and we worked out an arrangement."

"And why are you doing this?" Clearly, this woman had no issue with checking a gift guar's belly. "What's in it for you?"
"Crossbows. I want crossbows, The Dawnguard wants aid, so we both win." He noticed that both members had the aforementioned weapon slung across their backs.

Lydia stepped forward. "We saved you, so why don't you show some courtesy? Your name, for one."

"Injard, for what it's worth. That there's Lynoit," She indicate the other Nord, an undistinguished-looking man carrying a war axe in a similar style to the hammer, "and the Vigilant is Tolan." She clapped the man on the shoulder. "He brought us word about the Hall of the Vigilant being sacked, then came back with us to clean these monsters out!" The man looked uneasy, and Velandryn reflected that the Vigilant corpses they had passed had performed similar acts of heroism yet were not here to bask in praise. Perhaps Tolan is wondering how long he’ll make it down here in this crypt. He could not, however, quite find it in himself to feel sympathy for a Vigilant of Stendarr.

Injard continued. "We've been down here nearly a day, or maybe not, it's hard to keep track of time in the dark."

"Less than a day." That was Tolan.

"The vampires are moving slowly, but it looks like they've been here for a week or more. We know they're searching for something. Tombs smashed, every door either opened or broken, and dozens of bodies lying around. Some recently dead, some those undead freaks."

"Draugr," Velandryn supplied.

"Yeah, them. They fight the bloodsuckers and us, but the vampires have been cracking open everything, so they've had to wade through the things. We just put them down if they get up to hit us. Side halls are filled with them. They don't go down easy, I can tell you that.

"Anyway, it looks like they work their thralls half to death then feed on them." She shuddered. "Sickening. We clear them out, thralls and all, as we go. It's slow, but we make sure we aren't leaving any behind us."

Velandryn considered this. When he and Lydia had entered Dimhollow they had simply followed the most obvious route downward, as they were neither searching for any artifact nor trying to cleanse this place of vampires. Clearly, this group had been doing the hard work for them. "You have no idea what they are looking for down here?"

Tolan spoke then. "One of my order, Brother Adalvald, he thought there was some long-lost artifact down here. He found markings of some sort that indicated as much, and told us that vampires might looking for it, but none of us paid him much heed. He, he was at the Hall when…" He trailed off, and Velandryn nodded.

So, the vampires got the information from him? Or did they already know? There was no way to find out without talking to one of them, and he very much doubted that would happen. "How did the Dawnguard in Whiterun know about Dimhollow then?"

"They came from Fort Dawnguard with us." It was a bit of a shock when Lynoit spoke; Velandryn had nearly forgotten he was there. "Durak wanted to check Whiterun Hold for likely recruits. With the Hold neutral, might be more boys want to sign up."

Lydia snorted. "Not likely. They just go marching off to Solitude or Windhelm."

"Ah, right. Well, it seems to have worked well enough at any rate if it brought us you two." Injard was poking through the remains of the vampire. Much of the body had gone to ash from
Velandryn's flames, but the grisly chunks of flesh and bone that remained fazed her no more than did the clothes and strange that lay around them. He wondered what she had been, before the Dawnguard. "Help us out, grab anything of value, especially notes or whatnot. Information is power when fighting these things."

They found nothing of any real interest on any of the bodies, though Velandryn did take a scorched amulet that thrummed with magic from the corpse of the vampire mage. The expression on Tolan's face when Velandryn offered to perform a funereal ritual for his fallen comrade was priceless, however, and it almost made him wish he had the equipment to perform a full consecration of a corpse to the Three. The Vigilant would probably die of shock and outrage. As they pushed deeper in, Velandryn noticed his arrow, sticking out of a patch of dirt. *Seems I missed.* All in all, this had not been a successful fight. They had won, but his plan had failed completely, he had underestimated his foe, and he had been forced to use his final line of defense, a power that was now impossible until long after they left. *I live, I learn, I live some more.* Hopefully.

They had found more vampires and thralls on the way down, and Velandryn had finally had a chance to see the Dawnguard at work. They moved well together, Injard smashing through lines of defense while Lynoit exploited openings and kept thralls occupied. With Tolan's aid, Lydia's bulwark presence on the front line, and Velandryn dropping fireballs on the bloodsuckers every chance he got, they were making good time. He was particularly impressed with the Dawnguard's ability to cancel out the abilities of the vampires they faced. Their weapons were silvered steel, and wounds inflicted on vampiric flesh smoked and burned. The crossbows they carried did not share these properties, but they parted armor and undead flesh as easily as paper, and dropped thralls in a single shot when fired at close range. It was no coincidence that the only time they had been caught in a losing situation was when facing an opponent who not only had superior position, but was also a powerful mage. Velandryn consoled himself with the fact of that mage's obvious power, though in hindsight he realized that it had been utter foolery to rely so heavily on a gambit like that when he had no real knowledge of his foe's capabilities. As they made their way further into the tomb, it was sobering to watch a skilled tactician, which Injard undoubtedly was, at work, and he reflected that while he might be Dragonborn, he was far from invincible.

The *Dov* had been quiet within him, but he could feel himself itching to *prove* something, to demonstrate his might before these Nords. However, he also recognized that that could well end with the Dragonborn bleeding out in some forgotten crypt, so he waited. If there was a chance to shine, he would take it, but not until then.

Velandryn heard the battle before he saw it, as seemed very common in these tombs with their limited lines of sight. They had entered the chamber from above, creeping along a low-walled balcony overlooking the ruined hall below, where a pair of vampires and their servants were locked in combat with a veritable horde of draugr, fifteen or more at a glance. One of the vampires was slashing about with a pair of swords, while the second directed icy blasts out of one hand and gestured at six or seven skeletons with the other. The skeletons, in turn, were funneling the draugr into chokepoints and killzones, where a pair of hulking thralls the vampires had brought engaged them.

Vigilant Tolan's eyes opened wide, and Velandryn suddenly noticed that two of the thralls were holding a man in Vigilant armor. He reached out to stop what he knew was coming even as Injard did the same, but both of them were too late.

"Brother! Adalvald! Fight them!" Velandryn pulled the idiot down behind the wall, hard, but it was too late. The vampire mage spun, yellow eyes blazing, and sent a cascade of lightning in their direction. Injard, cursing, unslung her crossbow and leaned out from behind a pillar to loose a shaft
at the vampires. Lydia unslung her sword and shield, face grim, and Velandryn flexed his fingers, feeling the magicka hum under his skin. Lynoit was firing as well, though judging by the panic on his face he was falling back on training rather than using any sort of tactical thought. Velandryn chanced a glance over the wall; the vampire mage had directed a pair of skeletons towards the steps leading up to the level the mortals occupied, and a few draugr were heading their way, seemingly to investigate the disturbance. The thralls who had Adalvald were dragging him towards a gate on the far side of the room while several more cut a path through the undead, and both vampires were moving towards the gate as well. The remaining skeletons, it seemed, were acceptable sacrifices to keep the draugr occupied.

They mean to leave the draugr to finish us off as they head deeper. They have Adalvald, whatever they are after must be down there! Velandryn let loose a pair of fire bolts, and one impacted the sword-wielding vampire, causing him to hiss and gesture at a thrall, who in turn began shooting arrows at the Dunmer; the second shot sliced through his armor and left a thin red line of pain along his side. At the stairway up from the main level, Lydia smashed her shield into the ribcage of one of the skeletons; its bones cascaded down onto the draugr below.

The vampire without a sword, who was clearly the senior of the two, reached the heavy iron gate. He ripped the head off of a draugr that managed to push its way past his thralls, and hurled it away contemptuously. He raised his gaze to look at their embattled party, and Velandryn met his eyes. Even across the distance, he could feel the malice, the overwhelming contempt for mortalkind, contained in that glowing yellow look. He found himself unable to move, to turn his head. Something, a presence, surrounded him. His vision grew dim and he had to grip the wall to stay upright. Inside him, a seductive voice whispered, hinting at pleasures unimaginable and power undreamed of, and it could all be his if he just let go. All he had to do was let the Master in, and he would be free.

Then, within him, Dov awoke. Rage at the impudence of this creature consumed him. A vampire, a wretched undead worm, trying to bind him? From the depths of his soul, flame roared out, and his fury was echoed in both his people's ancestral speech and another, a tongue he had never learned. He knew that this battle would not leave the inside of his mind, but the words and the power echoed there, and the vampire's shadow fled.

Staggering, he returned to himself. Across the hall, two of the thralls were heaving on huge levers, winching the gate higher. The vampire with the sword and the rest of the skeletons were engaged with more of the draugr, though the crypt guardians had broken most of the skeletal minions. Lydia was lashing out with her shield as a hulking draugr wound up for an overhead strike. His allies were firing, Tolan was praying, and the entire situation was getting wildly out of hand. The master vampire, however, was icy calm. His gaze held Velandryn's for one long moment more before he turned away. He lifted the Vigilant bodily, heaved him over one shoulder, and strode towards the gate.

Velandryn grabbed Injard by the shoulder. "The gate! Two levers, vampire going in!"

She understood instantly. She hit Lynoit and Tolan to get their attention, and moved over towards Lydia during a lull in the assault up the stairs. The draugr she had been facing had tumbled down to the floor, and was laboriously finding its feet again, but they would have time before it reached them. Injard pointed at the gate. "Tolan, is there another way out of the crypt?"

The Vigilant shook his head. "Adalvald never said, only that the ruins keep going down."

Injard grimaced. "Some of these crypts have a second exit. Usually hidden, like an escape route." Once more Velandryn wondered what she had been in her previous life. A mercenary or an
adventurer? Or was she a bandit holed up in a place like this? She looked at Velandryn. "We need to get through the gate, and quickly." A crash punctuated her words, and the guttural battle cries of the draugr swelled.

Velandryn chanced another look. Down below, a draugr in a horned helm buried his sword in a thrall's chest, and hurled the corpse aside. Another thrall cleaved off the draugr's arm, but the ancient undead Nord paid the ensorcelled slave no mind, and trudged towards the nearer of the two thralls working the levers. The specimen that Lydia had knocked down earlier was almost upon them again; his housecarl readied her shield as Velandryn shot out a spurt of fire that caught on the desiccated flesh and soon had the monstrosity burning and moaning. Lydia slammed her shield into it again, and the creature tumbled down again, this time shedding flakes of smoking skin and chunks of charred flesh. It crashed to the floor at the bottom of the steps and lay still.

Velandryn scanned the little group. Injard looked prepared and nearly calm at the thought of battle, but Lynoit and Tolan were both clearly rattled, and would not last much longer. "We need to bring them down, and we need to go now. Far too many draugr for us to clear this room."

Injard glanced down at the carnage below. "Can you clear a path with your flames?"

"I can turn it into a horde of burning draugr if you would like, but it will not kill them. We must move quickly."

Suddenly, a crash. The gate had been raised, and the vampires began leading their macabre procession through. The two thralls who held the levers were left behind, but the three remaining thralls, both bloodsuckers, and the unfortunate Vigilant Adalvald passed beneath the heavy gate and were soon lost to view. The thralls lasted less than ten heartbeats after that; literally torn to pieces by the frenzied draugr. One of them, larger than the others, heavily armored, and wielding a mighty black spear, pointed its weapon at them and let loose a stream of guttural speech, punctuated with pounding words that could be nothing else but Thu'um. Velandryn felt it in his bones, and wanted desperately to respond. No, we don't need that kind of trouble right now. He quashed the impulse ruthlessly.

"Change of plans. Go now, and go fast!" Injard charged down the stairs, warhammer in hand, sending the first draugr in her path flying back with a swing that used her momentum to its fullest. From above, Velandryn could see the tide as the draugr shifted to attack her, to surround and overwhelm.

All at once, everything was clear. The draugr commander with his spear, the dozen or more underlings moving together, the crash as another sarcophagus burst open to reveal a passage teeming with the undead. They defended the tomb, responded to the greatest threat. He knew how to get to the gate. "Lydia." He did not speak loudly, but his housecarl arrested her movement to join Injard and was at his side instantly. "Move to the edges, then to the gate when I attack. Do not attack the draugr, and don't stop until you are through." She began to protest, but he held up his hand. He gestured at Lynoit. "Fire at the commander when I make my move. Keep up the pressure." He gripped the front of the Vigilant's robes and fixed the Nord with a glare. "Defend him. Both of you fall back once we are through." He pushed a scroll into Tolan's hands and turned to Lydia once again. "Go help Injard, get her moving when I go. I'll see you at the gate."

She saluted, hand on chest, though her face was grim. "I am your sword and shield, my thane. I serve."

Injard was embattled, but Lydia's assistance gave the Dawnguard some breathing room. Velandryn stood on an old bench of some sort, in full view of the draugr below. He inhaled.
"FUS!"

The *Dov* roared silent approval, and the draugr lord roared defiance. His underlings surged forward, and Velandryn saw them converge on his housecarl. *Now.* He leapt.

Four things happened in the time between Velandryn Savani leaping from the ledge and crashing inelegantly to the ground. First, Lynoit overcame his fear and fired a bolt from his crossbow. It punched through the ancient armor of the draugr commander and lodged in his chest. Second, Lydia grabbed Injard and pulled her to the side, avoiding the press of draugr up the stairs. Third, Tolan opened the scroll and read the words within; the Vigilants, for all of their many, *many* flaws, at least made sure to train all members in the use of rudimentary magical items. The frost storm turned the steps into a treacherous blizzard as it moved down, and transformed the draugr upon it first into statues, and then into shards as they toppled down the slick slope. Finally, Velandryn downed a potion; he had been forced to purchase this one from an apothecary in Whiterun, as ingredients that granted invisibility were few and far between. It had come dearly, even with the discount that his being Dragonborn afforded. It was worth it, however, as he landed and was not set upon by the draugr all around. Some looked at his location in what he almost fancied was puzzlement, while others were already moving to strike down the foes above. He kept as quiet as he could, and in a short time reached both the gate and Lydia and Injard beyond.

"We should go now, while they are distracted." The invisibility broke as he started talking, and Lydia jumped.

Injard spun on him. "You left them!"

He shrugged. "They have a path up, and a good defensive position. I told them to fall back when we were through. Hopefully they will listen. They have done us more good as a distraction than they could have against the vampires down there in any case. They might even live, if they run now."

Through the gate, the commander bellowed, and the floor shook. Injard just looked at him. "You're the Dragonborn. You Shouted."

There was no sense in denying it. "I am, and right now I am helping you." He began walking into the gloom. "We must go. The draugr are single-minded to a fault, but one of them might remember that three of us are gone."

Injard did not move. "Go." She turned back to the hall. "That's my underling up there. I don't leave people behind, Dragonborn."

He wondered if that was meant to shame him. "Your underling would be best served by running. He should know this. I did not kill him."

"Dragonborn, you might be clever, but you have a lot to learn about leadership." She unslung her crossbow and bolts and handed them to Lydia. Readyng her hammer, she stepped through the gate, grabbed one of the levers, and dislodged it. The bars slammed down with a crash, and some of the draugr turned. "Go! Kill those vampire bastards! I've got these ugly bastards! Lots of bastards today!" She grinned. "You'd better live, Dragonborn. I've got to beat your ass for this! These are mine, now get moving!" The last they heard of her as they descended was her maniacal laughter and the battle cries of her foes.

"My thane?"

"Mhm?" He no longer felt the need to speak nobly, trudging down through the darkness.
"Would you abandon me, if it were required?" He twisted the magicka in his eyes, and the gloom became bright as day. Lydia, walking beside him, looked as troubled as he had ever seen her.

"I did not abandon them. We needed a distraction, they provided it; they have a superior position and a clear line of retreat. If they are too stubborn to take it, I cannot be blamed."

"So you leave your allies when it is convenient for you?"

Is it really that difficult to understand? "We parted ways, and they get to avoid this. If anything, you should be angry with me for bringing you with me past the gate."

"I see." By her tone, she did not, not truly, but there was no use for it. We are each tested in our way, and we struggle that we may succeed. He had given them a fine test, and now he had one of his own ahead.

"Lydia."

"My thane?"

"Be ready."

"Always."

His night-eye faded, and he cast it again, silently, as he had learned to do while sneaking out of his room to procure sweetrolls from the dormitory kitchens as a child. Ahead, a thrall waited in inky blackness, no doubt thinking himself concealed. By the way the Nord stood, he could not see in the darkness, and was listening to judge when they got close enough to strike. Another spell from his childhood muffled his footsteps, and he raced ahead of Lydia. As the thrall stepped out into the pathway, blissfully unaware of the Dunmer behind him, Velandryn's dagger slid into the unarmored flesh of his throat. He drew the blade sideways, and the bandit slumped down with a gurgle as hot blood poured over Velandryn's hands.

Lydia heard the noise, and was only partially mollified by Velandryn's hurried explanation. "Next time, my thane, let me know when I'm your bait. A tap would suffice."

"Of course, Lydia. Next time I won't keep you in the dark." There was no immediate response; the problem with Lydia was that her missing a joke, her ignoring it, and her playing it straight were nigh indistinguishable. Forget what those Imperials say about Dunmer, it's Nords who need a sense of humor.

"Don't be. It was well done. I just want to know beforehand next time. I will work with you, my thane, but I am not some tool who only exists to be used as you see fit."

"Deal." Now, hopefully they could do it again. Two thralls and two vampires remained. Or more. There could always be more. After all, who knew what was lurking down here in the timeless dark?

Chapter End Notes

This is part 1 of what was originally intended to be one big chapter, but morphed into something significantly longer to the extent where I felt the need to go for two. It happens, and I assure you that part 2 will be coming soon. I'm not going to rush to or
through Serana's introduction though, and I would rather do something right than do something fast. I did spare you a few thousand words I had written of Velandryn and Lydia's roadtrip shenanigans, so count your blessings.

Things to add: I will be adding small settlements and numerous farms to this story; there is no way that a province with four and a half Eras of continuous human habitation doesn't have more hamlets. If it shows up the game, it is of some importance to Skyrim at large, while little hamlets like Heljarchen that exist simply because some people live there may not have any major significance. Skyrim needs more people though. All of those Stormcloaks and bandits have to come from somewhere.

About magic. It may rub some people the wrong way that I am emphasizing ritual magic when it is only vaguely mentioned in lore, and never really covered as a player mechanic, but much of the stuff that we see done with magic is clearly designed as long-term installation, and Velandryn is exactly the sort of person who would prefer the intricate elegance of a ritual to a sloppy casting should the opportunity to use the former arise.

I tweaked vampires a bit, and while I think I made it rather clear in context, here is the explanation again, with some out-of-character information. There are numerous clans of vampires, and each has abilities of their own. Skyrim is largely dominated by the vampire clan that originated in Cyrodiil, they of the red eyes and human faces. They blend, seduce, and feed in secret, and hold concealment as the highest goal. They would rather go hungry than risk exposure. The Volkihar are native to Skyrim, and their particular strain generally deforms the face but gives greater advantages in magic and combat than those enjoyed by the Cyrodiil strain, except when very hungry. Their eyes are yellow, and they would rather risk a hunt than hide and go hungry. All Volkihar are descended from Harkon and his family, who are the only 'vampire lords' known. Harkon guards his immense power as a 'lord' jealously, and his court is filled with those who are either one, two, or three generations removed from him. He considers anything more, or any vampire not of his court, little more than a savage beast, barely higher than a mortal. There may be a few appearances by members of clans from other provinces, but vampires tend to be territorial, and going to a place where you have no network is extremely unwise.

One final thing, if you have anything to say, please leave a review. I like hearing from people, even if you don't think it is substantive, or I don't respond (I am really bad about responding. I'm sorry), I have read it. I guarantee it means more to me than simply another pageview. Also, if something is bothering you about the story or you want to tell me I am a hack fraud, I promise you will never get an answer if you don't make your opinion known.
Serana

Chapter Summary

What does a vampire hide away? And what does a vampire treasure?

Chapter Notes

NoviceReviewer: Thanks for the kind words!

praeeunt: No worries, I procrastinate on finishing my chapters, you get to procrastinate on the reviews. I agree, Skyrim is a magnificent framework that suffered greatly on the execution; "a thousand miles wide and an inch deep," a friend once said of it. The world Skyrim built deserves better than the game Skyrim could give it, so that's my overarching goal for this story. I am glad you think I'm succeeding, and I'm always happy to hear your praise or criticisms.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Before

She remembered innocence…

Sneaking through the gardens, beautiful, striking flowers set against stone and snow. Jumping out in front of her mother, pale and slender in the half-light, reading by the moondial, smiling and spreading her arms upon seeing her daughter. Sitting beside her father, bearded and smiling, leading a hall full of his men in joyous song. Learning Aldmeris, the tongue spoken by the elves to the west, at her mother's insistence. Learning why when her mother gave her a book of Aldmer poetry; the songs of Alinor and Firsthold, spun from sunlight and star-glass. Plucking out a few clumsy notes on an old warped lute; her joy when her father had a gorgeous new one shipped from Solitude. Watching the last of the great sky-whales, who had followed brave Ysgramor from Atmora, frolic in the clouds. Casting her first spell at dinner, and the laughter on her parents' faces when she set the tablecloth on fire. Greeting the subjects as they bowed low before her, done up in her finest clothing on her name-day.

…and its end.

Her father, beard trimmed short and going grey, hunched over a burned scrap of paper mumbling words. When he saw her, he spoke harshly, ordering her to return to her room. Beside him, her mother, face drawn, whispering spells she had never seen before. Commoners, no longer smiling, paying their tithes to her father with terror in their eyes. Strange men and women, and a chamber in the castle where she was never to go. Her proposed marriage going nowhere, her betrothed offering no explanation and her parents mocking his weakness. The name of Molag Bal, and the oaths she was expected to swear. Her mother, fussing over her hair as she had not done since she was a child, telling her how beautiful she looked. The long walk, through empty rooms and cold corridors. Her father, standing among the bodies, beckoning her forward. The altar, and upon it—
She did not dream, but in the instant after the stone closed around her and her mother's face was lost from view, she remembered.

The vampires had Adalvald completely at their mercy, but by the sound of it were getting nowhere with their interrogation. Lydia knew that a strong mind could resist the seduction of a vampire for longer, though she had never heard of someone who could not be turned eventually. For the moment, however, the vampires seemed entirely unaware of the two mortals on the ledge above. They were hiding in a building that covered most of one huge wall; it had likely been a grand structure once, but only the stone skeleton remained. The stairs down to the floor were treacherous in their age, as Lydia could testify, having almost tripped while descending to their current vantage point. The room itself was something incredible. It was a huge cavern, dominated by a lake with an island rising from the center. The island was covered in ruins of some style she had never seen; a huge circular stone floor studded with plinths and surrounded by arches. There was some sort of pattern on the floor, and the entire thing gave off a most disquieting air. Velandryn also seemed ill at ease, though that could well have been because of the foes below. They had not encountered any draugr since passing through the gate; the crypts must have ended back there, though these caves went deeper still. That single thrall had been the only foe they faced, and now it seemed the rest of their enemies were gathered before them. The vampire with the swords, the subordinate, was pacing impatiently, while the other, in more ornate armor and carrying no weapons, was overseeing the Vigilant. The thralls were holding the Vigilant in place, and all four had their attention anywhere but where it should have been. They are convinced they outsmarted us, so they got sloppy. It was the weakness of vampires, she knew. They were convinced that they were better than mortals, so if you let them think they had the upper hand, they would take it without question.

Behind them, the thrall came stumbling down. He took the stairs clumsily, and on taking the landing, almost looked as though he might fall. He kept going, however, and managed to reach the ground while still relatively upright. Once on level footing, he stumbled towards the vampires who had made him a living tool.

The pacing vampire noticed him first. "Were we followed? Have you slain them?" the thrall shambled closer, and Lydia held her breath. It was uncomfortable, relying on the thrall like this, but could have been worse. At least it wasn't her out there.

The vampire closed with the thrall, and Lydia wondered which he would notice first. The gash across the thrall's neck that still dripped blood, or the unnatural sheen of his skin and armor, glistening and slick in the half-light. She was no weak-kneed civilian to turn pale at the first sign of blood, but she could not help feeling faintly ill as she recalled what Velandryn had done to the corpse. If it worked, however…

The vampire must have realized something was wrong, for he recoiled from the body with all the speed his inhuman abilities could grant. He was too late, however, as their trap was sprung. His trap, in truth. It was a horrifying and unconventional use of their resources, and a darker part of her admired him for it.

The bolt of flame was of middling strength, Lydia estimated, cast for speed rather than intensity. It took less than a second to span the gap between master and puppet, whose final act was to lurch forward, as if to embrace the nearer vampire. The other, the master, rose and stretched out his hand in a furious gesture. Lydia wondered if he knew what was going to happen, or just understood that something was terribly wrong. And it was wrong, what they had done. Her thane could claim that using a corpse in battle was fully in keeping with his people's beliefs, but to Lydia, it was abhorrent. When they had stood over the body of the thrall and Velandryn had noticed the lamps full of unlit oil hanging from the ceiling, he had formulated his plan. As he was elbow-deep in the
dead man's entrails, sawing and pulling, she had understood. And when he mended the flesh around the oil he had poured into the space where the man's insides had been, forming a fleshy sack that held a great quantity of the flammable mixture, she had nearly upended the contents of her stomach onto the floor. Soon enough, though, the puppet had been ready. And now, the nameless, luckless Nord who had been a vampire's thrall was getting revenge on his former masters in the most dramatic fashion possible.

Velandryn had had nearly half a jug of the oil left after filling the interior sack, so he had poured it all over the thrall's skin and armor. When the fireball hit, the oil went up in an instant, and Lydia ducked into cover. Beside her, Velandryn was doing the same. The dead flesh was soaked through with oil, and it took only a second for the heat to work its way within. The explosion was deafening, and the blast of heat was palpable even in her cover. When she checked over the low barrier, it was to witness a scene of carnage. He did it. She glanced at her thane, who was gazing at the devastation with eager eyes. For him this is no horror, only the victory.

It was everything Velandryn had hoped for and more. He had angled the fire bolt squarely for the back, where he applied the oil more liberally than elsewhere. Given that he had had ample time to take the shot and was also controlling the dead thrall's movement, it had been a perfect impact. As a result, though the flames spread over the body quickly, they first reached the reservoir within from the back, meaning that the initial combustion projected the oil forward before igniting as well. It was a glorious fountain of flame, a cone spreading outward and upward in a thousand burning streams that splashed on the stone or on flesh, living or dead. He felt a momentary stab of pity for Vigilant Adalvald, but quashed it quickly. The human had chosen a life of zealotry and fanaticism, and if he died here, he would at the very least have assisted in the killing of a true threat.

The conflagration burned brightly, and Velandryn could make out no hint of how effective it had been. Where the thrall and the nearer vampire had been, he could see a few burning chunks of some indeterminate material, and beyond that was some large shape, perhaps the master vampire, or one of the stones. All was aflame, and he waited for the fire to die. Let it burn. If any live, they will only grow weaker. If they are fighting the flames, they must fight longer. And if they were already dead, well, with vampires it never hurt to make sure. Or so the books say. He was putting much of his reading to the test since coming to Skyrim.

As the fire died, the large shape became clearer. It was a dome of shimmering energy, opaque to the eye, and it occupied the space where the master vampire had stood before the trap was sprung. Lydia moved up beside him, awkwardly holding the crossbow Injard had tossed her. The flames danced along the dome's surface, but they could not penetrate whatever energy was being used to project it. It was not unheard of to mitigate a spell, but to block it entirely like this was truly high-level magecraft. Velandryn drew out a potion that fortified his magicka reserves and another that served as a broad-spectrum magical resistance. That second one would leave him nauseous and shivering in a few hours, but clearly they faced a being of no trivial power. The shield began to dissolve, and he saw the vampire clearly for the first time. Not across a hectic hall filled with undead, or a glimpse from a hiding place, but facing him squarely across a floor of burning oil over ancient stone. He stood in the center of where the dome had been, one hand raised as though to offer prayers to some god, and the other down beside him, bleeding frost and cold into the air around it. Behind him, Vigilant Adalvald was whimpering and rocking back and forth, and the sole remaining thrall pulled himself to his feet, gingerly trying to put weight on a cracked and smoking leg. He saved three with his shield, though he was not quite fast enough to spare the thrall. He'll be slow. Good.

The vampire gestured at the space between them. "He was here as a reward." His voice was low,
every syllable laced with subtle power. "Vakken found this place, uncovered our master's lost treasure. He was young, and arrogant in that youth, but he showed promise. And you killed him with…that." His lip curled slightly. "It was you, wasn't it?" Now, he locked eyes with Velandryn. "That ploy, turning the corpse into a weapon. It stinks of elven cunning." He smiled, revealing his pointed fangs, and took a single step forward. "It was clever, and well-done. You knew you could not best us fairly, so you resorted to trickery. I applaud your ingenuity, but you have failed." He reached out, and Adalvald screamed as he was lifted from the ground. "He knows nothing that I need, but he is one of you. A mortal who thought to challenge us!" That last was said with mockery. "He told us that we would be undone, that the righteous would punish us for our transgressions and save him." He closed the hand into a fist, and Adalvald's scream cut off with a snap as his head twisted around in a full circle. His dead eyes, on a head atop a twisted neck, stared into Velandryn's accusingly. "You did not save him." He took another step forward, and Adalvald's body, still floating in midair, began to gush blood from every orifice. The streams combined and converged on the vampire. He smiled as they became a fine mist about him, and inhaled deeply. "You mortals are so…frail, you…cannot comprehend…this…exquisite…sensation!" The half-burned thrall struggled to his feet, but before he could so much as take a step the vampire extended another hands and pulled him with a flick of his wrist. The hapless thrall collapsed before his master, and the vampire's hand closed around his throat. He lifted the burned Nord with one hand, while his other writhed its fingers in gestures alien to Velandryn's understanding. The thrall jerked, twisted, and screamed before going limp. The vampire opened both hands, and the thrall crumpled to the ground. The vampire spread his arms wide, and the thrall began to rise once more. "The living flesh is weak while the dead flesh is servile. Behold—"

The crossbow bolt punched through the thrall's neck. Lydia was already shoving another bolt into place as the vampire pivoted in rage, hands coming up to begin some attack. Velandryn preempted him with a pair of fire bolts, forcing the undead to summon a ward and letting Lydia put a second bolt into the rising thrall. This bolt tore through armor and chest, and blood flowed freely as the thrall collapsed to the ground once more. It tried to rise again, but the body was clearly not functioning as it should. One arm was pulling it up, but the other lay limp, while both legs were moving as though trying to make it walk, though it was on the ground. Velandryn knew little about advanced necromancy, but the more precise reanimations required relatively intact bodily functions, one of the reasons necromancers generally preferred to seduce or sacrifice their targets rather than kill them in pitched combat. He gave silent thanks that he had only needed the crudest form of walking corpse for his scheme; removing the innards and filling it with oil would have rendered it largely useless for anything else. Finally, the vampire hissed in frustration and snapped his fingers. The flesh rotted away in a matter of seconds, and the bones pulled themselves up. The skeleton took up the thrall's huge axe and stood beside its master.

The vampire was no longer sanguine in his approach to them, but seemed now almost amused by their actions. "An elf and a Nord brute, trying to deny me my glory!" He gestured, and the skeleton leaped forward, swinging for Velandryn. However, Lydia's charge brought her barreling into the reanimated minion, and her shield sent it staggering. It was made of sterner stuff than the skeletons above however, and retaliated with a mighty overhead blow that rang through the cavern when Lydia blocked it. The vampire sent an ice spike towards Lydia's back, but Velandryn's cry of warning let her bring up her shield and block it in time.

"My thane! I cannot fight two!" She spun back on the skeleton, and her sword struck twice against its arm, opening its guard for a devastating shield bash to the skull.

Velandryn was snapped out of his fascinated observation; he moved swiftly around her and positioned himself opposite the vampire. "Face me then, bloodsucker." He felt curiously calm. This creature was far beyond the others he had faced. He had likely lived for many times longer than Velandryn, honing his craft. Clearly he had mastered not only magic, but the spells and arts
unique to vampiric traditions. The fine mist of Adalvald's blood lingered around the monster, and his hands were grasping at nothing. His eyes burned a piercing yellow, and his face was a mask of cruel mockery.

"Elf, you are so naive, so foolish, to challenge me. I am Lokil of Volkihar, and I shall reap Lord Harkon's reward." His hands glowed blue, and Velandryn pulled on his magicka quickly, using the Nord-style ward but tuning it like a frost shield. He had not seen any of Farengar's books cover the issue of elemental shields, but it had only taken an hour or so of work to slap together a dual-aspect spell that allowed for elemental tuning and the ward structure to coexist. The increased cost of structuring the ward with frost resistance was compensated by the ward requiring less magicka upfront to bring into being. It still drained magicka at a prodigious rate, but Velandryn had been practicing the efficient use of his magicka and this vampire had shown himself fond of ice projectiles. A momentary ward should allow him to nullify the attack at little cost to himself. And so, when the first shard of ice impacted the shield, he was ready, and gritted his teeth and held firm as the shards scattered over his aetherial shield and dissipated into cold air. It was only when the second spike failed to come that he realized something was wrong. He had all of a heartbeat to panic before the lightning came at him, a continuous surge that would burn through the ward in little time. Clearly, this vampire was no fool, and his attack was specifically designed to overwhelm a spellcaster like Velandryn. Either his ward would persist, and he would expend all his magicka storing off the attack, or he would abandon the ward and the lightning would shock him, destabilizing any remaining magicka reserves. Either way, he would be drained of magicka and at the monster's mercy. Unless…

This might be the worst idea I've had yet. He braced himself against the attack, using his free hand to pull a potion from his belt as he did so. I need but a few seconds. He swallowed it in one gulp, and felt magicka pour into him, hopefully bolstering his reserves enough to pull this off. If the shield failed, the attack would simply hit him. However, if it was destabilized by an overload of magicka it would self-destruct outward, disrupting any magicka in its immediate vicinity. Hopefully. He kept falling into situations where his only chance out was trying these absurd tricks, but perhaps that was to his advantage. Nobody in their right mind would see this coming. He charged.

He could not see Lokil through the attack, but the energy crackling along the ward was a good guide for direction. He ran with his left hand holding the ward as he drew his sword with the right. Three steps after drawing the sword fully, he judged the distance correct. He would not retreat, so if he is standing in the same place, then I should be where I need right—NOW! He poured magicka into the ward, and felt it ripple and surge in response. The lightning rebounded from parts of it, while it pierced other regions. The smooth edges became jagged, and the dimensions swelled to a full third again as large. He had perhaps two heartbeats.

And…

The ward exploded outward, and the lightning branched in every direction. The magical theory behind it was almost insultingly simple. Lightning, though tremendously destructive, also required an absurd amount of magicka to manifest at the necessary strength. As a result, all spellcasters who used lightning in any fashion relied to some extent on workarounds to reduce the magicka they had to put in. Consequentially, lightning spells, so damaging against enemy spellcasters, functioned as they did because they siphoned off the target's magicka to sustain the focused flow. In fact, a fraction of the magicka Velandryn had been putting into the ward was actually sustaining the assault against him. However, altering the environmental conditions could disrupt the spell, even if momentarily. Just like now, when a cascade of realized magicka in the form of a ward was projected violently outward into the stream of a spell. The lightning drew on the increased levels of ambient magicka and branched everywhere, but it was dispersed enough to do no more than raise
the hair on Velandryn's head, and, critically, the zone between them was largely free due to the residue of the ward. Lokil stood in the same spot as he had before beginning his assault, one arm outstretched and pouring out the lightning. His other hand was held before him, manipulating the blood mist, to what end Velandryn could not say. The look on the vampire's face was one of undisguised shock. *He did not expect that.* Velandryn had only bought himself a moment, but it was a moment of no spell or shield between them. *I only have a second, but that's all I need.*

"FUS!"

There was no way the vampire could resist an attack like that. As Velandryn used it for the third time in his life, he couldn't help but notice that it was completely unaffected by the magical disruption he had unleashed. *Interesting.* Clearly the Thu'um was not merely magic. He had known on some level that it was not a spell, but—no, no, it was affecting the magicka. The lightning and charged magicka between them had been pushed as well. *Impossible.* But he had no time to ponder the implications of this information, as his shock was nothing compared to Lokil's. If his overloaded ward had taken the vampire by surprise, this looked to have shattered foundations of his world. His face was contorted, yellow eyes open wide, and his hands gesticulated frantically as he staggered back. Velandryn knew he had the opening he needed. He aimed the point of his sword at the chest of the vampire's grey-black armor and charged. He only had to take two steps, and then the lunge.

Blood fountained out from Lokil's back, and the vampire staggered. However, he did not fall. His head slumped, but he remained standing, and Velandryn was suddenly seized with doubt. *Did I pierce the heart?* If he had missed, the wound, while grievous, might well not be mortal. Suddenly, the body shook. From behind, he could hear Lydia's sword, or possibly shield, clanging off of the skeleton's own weapon. The skeleton, he realized, that was still fighting. *Damn.* Lokil raised his head, and the mist of Adalvald's blood flowed to the sword. The vampire had regained his composure, laughing as he straightened his back.

"Well done, mortal." Lokil grabbed the blade sticking out of his chest, gripping the steel in a vice-like hand. Velandryn tried to wrench the sword out, but the vampire deformed the blade with a twist of his wrist. "Your blade cut deep and reached my heart. Were I of lesser kind, you may well have slain me. But," the blood mist around him pulsed as his eyes glowed, "I am superior to any being you have ever beheld." He pulled the twisted and useless sword out of his chest with one hand while his other went to his wound, stroking it gently. "Brave of you, to charge. And that spell, I have never seen the like." Velandryn released the sword and made to retreat, but Lokil's hand came up to grip his wrist. He pulled with all of his might, but the vampire's hold was iron and stone. "I think I shall turn you. Return to Lord Harkon with a new disciple as well as his prize. You will join a family of superior beings, blessed beyond the hopes of the common kyne." Velandryn's mind raced as he considered what items he had in reach. He had a dagger of steel and one of iron, but clearly neither would do much good. "I can offer you an eternity of knowledge, of power." He heard Lydia bellow some taunt or war cry as she staggered into view, shield raised against the skeleton's onslaught. His spells might wound the undead, but the vampire could kill him easily from his current position. "Your brutish companion would make an...adequate...thrall, but I think it will be for the best if she does not leave this place. Instead, I shall make her your first meal. It is always best to feed on a trusted companion as an...appetizer to the eternal feast that follows." His gaze was far from Velandryn, eyes fixed on some long-past reverie. Disgusting as the vampire's clear enjoyment of the situation was, his arrogant distraction was for the best.

Velandryn extended his left hand behind him, fingers wide. He had enough magicka, but the leverage would be difficult. He focused, and felt magicka ebb out of him, and the indescribable feeling of Daedric Creatia take its place. Even as his body rejected the protean substance, the mental framework he had constructed rejoiced at its presence. It was at once infinitely alien and
utterly right. A paradox, the impossible center. Dov and Joor. He smiled, and an impossible blade manifested with a keening wail in his outstretched hand.

Lokil's head snapped back down, fixing on the weapon, but he was far too late. The moment the weapon had taken form, it was over. The blade was whispering to him, a current of malice from the unwilling energy that had crossed the liminal divide to make his weapon.

Kill him cut him burn him slay him boil his blood rend his flesh devour his soul end him forever.

He had heard stories, that Creatia pulled into this world could take on a 'spirit' of sorts, and that its most primal form was unthinking hatred and rage. It had not happened when he summoned it with a calm mind during meditation, but in the heat of battle it thirsted. He felt heat radiating off the blade, but this was not the magical heat he could call into being, or even the holy fire of the Dunmer, borne outward from the heart of Red Mountain. This was Daedric flame, called forth for battle, and it burned only to destroy. The blade burned with flame of an unreal shade, and was impossibly sharp besides; this weapon was as far removed from the steel blade he had lodged in the vampire's chest as dragons were from the tiny lizards that scuttled across the dunes of Stonefalls. This is a blade that can kill an ancient vampire.

Velandryn's left arm was positioned awkwardly for the cut he needed to make, but it hardly mattered. He cut upward as he pulled his own arm back, slicing through the Lokil's arm at the elbow. The vampire reared back and shrieked in pain, and Velandryn was free. The undead's lower arm and hand still gripped his wrist, but he could move again, and so his right hand joined his left on the blade's long grip. He faced the vampire, still reeling from the wound, and prepared to finish this fight.

The blade's burning edge had cauterized both the stump and arm fragment, and now Lokil's wound were smoking and slowly bleeding ash as the fire ate at the undead flesh. Lokil's mockery and humor were gone, replaced with agony and loathing, but Velandryn had no time to savor the vampire's humiliation. He had begun to move, so Velandryn took a firm stance and swung the blade with both hands in a cut that was nearly horizontal. The edge, sharper than any razor, parted the skin of his neck like thin paper and sheared through bone with a feeling not unlike snapping a branch from a tree. The expression on Lokil's face was absurdly surprised, as though he could not have imagined this outcome. His body crumpled to the ground with a whisper of cloth and armor folding, and his head rolled away into the darkness of the cave. "Superior, was it?" He was tired, but the feeling of victory was never less than sweet.

"My thane! Are you well?" The skeleton too had collapsed to nothingness, and Lydia moved over quickly, sporting a set of nicks and a worrying amount of blood leaking from her right pauldron. Despite that, as his housecarl approached she was hurriedly assessing his condition rather than worrying about her own. Her speed abated somewhat when she saw that he was mostly unharmed, though she did rip the still-clenched hand from his wrist with enough force to be more than a little painful, and it left some unpleasant residue on the cuff of his armor. She acquiesced easily enough when he made her remove her armor so he could heal her wound. As they sat, his hands on her shoulder and golden light suffusing the gash, she exhaled heavily.

"That skeleton, it was more than I anticipated, my thane. I'm sorry, I should have been there to assist." She tested her shoulder with a wince and slumped against one of the walls.

He had never seen her like this; could she be feeling like she had failed at her duty? He did not know what to say to make her feel better, but he had to try. "I would wager that skeleton would have been a match for any warrior in the Whiterun Guard, at least. It was raised by a master necromancer from a fresh corpse, and likely had spells beyond count running through its bones."
The best I can do, for now. He flipped over Lokil's headless corpse and began rifling through the vampire's pockets; he wanted to know more about this 'prize' of which the vampire had spoken.

Lydia let out a short bark of a laugh. "Master or not, he's dead now, no thanks to me. I fought a skeleton, while you killed a vampire! You did it, my thane! A dirty trick, but you killed them all." She leaned her head back against the wall and looked upward into the darkness.

"Don't sell yourself short. I would have gone down in seconds if not for you keeping that skeleton off of me. We make a damned good team, housecarl." He found a bloodstained journal, a pouch of coins and gems, and an ornate dagger that looked to be made from ebony. It hummed with power, and he felt an enchantment that seemed to pull the vitality from his skin as he touched the blade. A sight better than steel, at least. He tucked the valuables and knife away, and glanced through the book.

The journal had belonged to Adalvald, and while the late Vigilant had not come to any concrete conclusions, he seemed to have decided that this crypt had been built in two stages. The same culture that had made Bleak Falls, what Farengar had called the ancient Nords, or the Dragon Cult, had done most of the work and then, some number of years later, the culture that had established this ritual circle on the island had altered the crypt according to their own inscrutable designs. Now that he had a chance to simply feel the presence of the strange construction, he could detect the subtle pressure that came from being near an active ritual array. He would wager that this was what the vampires had been after, the weapon or relic that Lokil had sought. "Lord Harkon's prize," the vampire had called it, though apparently he had been as mystified by its workings as Adalvald, if he had gone to the trouble of interrogating the Vigilant rather than simply interacting with the array. The fact that Adalvald had not recognized the architectural style indicated that it was the work of some smaller faction that had not spread extensively, or else they had been utterly destroyed. Velandryn likewise did not know the style, thought the arch structures were vaguely reminiscent of pre-Alessian Ayleid construction. Unfortunately, this was a thousand miles north of even the most optimistic range of the Ayleids' expanse. Under different circumstances, he would gladly have remained down here for a time and surveyed these ruins. However, this prize was the more urgent matter, and doubtless either was the circle itself or lay within whatever function the structure had been built to provide.

Velandryn crossed the bridge, Lydia in tow, and entered the area demarcated by the arches. From up close, certain aspects of the construction jumped out at him, and he found himself increasingly curious about the group that had made this. The arches were free-standing and clearly had some sort of ritual significance, indicating possible Daedra worship, as those cults were most likely to incorporate doorway iconography into their rituals. Magicka hummed around him, and he had a sneaking suspicion that if he were to pull this apart and investigate the underlying array, it would be of the same style as the one he had encountered when first entering the cave. The floor was composed of sections divided by five radial and three concentric troughs. There was a single pillar, roughly waist-high, located at the center of the whole, and several braziers dotted the outer reaches. He checked one; it was filled with what looked rather like a thick purple tar.

"My thane!" Lydia was peering at the central pillar curiously, and Velandryn saw the large dome-shaped trigger as Lydia pointed at it. "I think this is the key!" She reached out curiously.

"Stop!" Velandryn's shout brought his housecarl up short. He peered at it closely, and tapped it experimentally. "I thought so. A blood seal." The small hole in the center through which the spike would rise, and the grating around the edge to drink the resultant blood.

"A blood seal, my thane?"
"It uses blood to fuel magic. I would recommend not pushing down on the button just yet, though doubtless we will have to." He studied the pillar. Whoever created this had designed the entire complex to power the ritual, clearly. The array was inside and underneath the structures. It would have been wholly admirable, if not for that moronic blood seal. "Blood seals are a fool's game. I wonder why they used one here."

"What's so bad about them? Is blood that sacred to you?"

"Hmm? Oh, no, not at all. It's simply that requiring a bleeding wound any time you want to activate an array is idiotic. Either you have to heal yourself up after activating," his hand took in the gloomy arches around them, "this, or you grab an underling and make them do it." He paused, and looked over the pillar again. "Not that we have a choice, though." He might not know what this thing was, but he would never pass up a chance to find out, which meant feeding this thing. Sadly, Adalvald's corpse was drained dry, both thralls and that sword-wielding bloodsucker were piles of ash, and Lokil was likely mostly assorted soot and bones by this point. He grimaced and pulled off his gauntlet.

"My thane, I insist!" Lydia likewise had her gauntlet off, and grabbed his wrist with her other hand. Before he could say a word, she jammed her hand onto the button, and gave a stifled cry and hiss of pain as the spike lanced through her hand.

He pulled her hand away the moment the spike retracted and handed her one of his cure disease potions. "Happy, housecarl?" He healed her hand quickly as she downed the potion, and watched the pillar begin to glow.

"It is my duty to take a wound rather than you, my thane. I would be remiss to allow you to press that button knowing what would happen." She doubtless would have said more, but light exploded from the ground, lancing upward while following a line along one of the radial troughs. She jumped away from the magic, and her weapons were in hand a second later. Disconcertingly, while Lydia's actions had caused significant shifts in the array, he could feel that the vast majority of the ritual had remained perfectly static. The system governing the pillar and blood seal is not only separate from the main function of the device, but is so trivial in comparison that it doesn't even cause a fluctuation in the array. He stomped his foot against the ground experimentally. There was only one type of array he had heard of that used this configuration, and that raised one burning question. *If this entire setup is a key-locked vault, what in the name of Azura does it hold?*

Velandryn glanced at the light briefly and followed it to the nearest brazier. He nudged it, and the brazier wobbled in place; closer examination showed it to be cleverly set on some rolling mechanism within the floor. "Lydia. Help me move this." Together, they pushed it to the point where the light ended. As it reached that point it settled into a hitherto unseen slot and would move no more. The thick liquid inside took on the purple glow of the light, and the path continued to trace itself out along the floor. Velandryn sighed. "Very well, Lydia, on to the next one."

Some time later, as they moved the third brazier into place, the question that Lydia had been obviously suppressing for some time finally squirmed out. "My thane, why are we doing this? Why not simply tell the Dawnguard what we found and leave this as we found it? Or smash it beyond repair, make it unusable to anyone?"

"All of this, what we can see, what's obvious, it's a lock." The third brazier thudded into place and they moved onto the fourth. "There is something else, something utilizing magicka in a configuration I've never felt before. It's under the central pillar, most likely. And, unless I miss my guess, it's old." Daedric, too, possibly, but he didn't see the need to worry her with that.

"And you want to open it, to see what's inside?" Lydia gave the brazier an experimental shake to
make sure it was secure.

"You don't? You aren't just the slightest bit curious to see what we've been fighting for?" The fifth brazier had become stuck in place at some point in its long life; it was a miracle that none of the others had after so long down here. "Besides which, we've earned the right to know. This puzzle is trivially easy, so anybody with a functioning brain could saunter down and open this up. We did the work, now we get the reward." He leaned his shoulder into the brazier, and felt it give slightly. "Some help here?" She joined him at his labor, and the brazier slipped free.

"Well, when it goes horribly wrong, I'll be ready to haul you to safety, my thane."

"It seems you've grasped the first rule of dealing with unknown magical devices. Expect the worst and plan accordingly, and always bring twice as many potions as you think you could possibly need. Once this last piece is in place, I expect something will happen. To be safe, we should probably get out of the way." The moment the final brazier locked itself at the junction of the troughs, they both moved back, taking up positions by the arches well back from the area demarcated by the light.

The light flared up, and the array shifted. "Lydia, something is happening, I can feel it. Something big." She unslung her weapons, and Velandryn readied his hands, flexing his fingers beneath his gloves and letting magicka rise through his skin. Below their feet, he could feel magicka swirling, as some massive ritual that had been operating for untold eras ceased to be. The floor beneath them gave a shudder, and the center segments of the floor descended, leaving the blood seal pillar and the area around it as a five-sided column taller than Lydia. It stood alone and proud in the venter of the violet light. Velandryn approached cautiously, noticing as he did so that it felt as though the array was completely inert. Was that it? Was this its entire purpose? He wished he had studied up on spells to detect the undead. He knew how to sense the living, and there were none but him and Lydia anywhere near, but vampires required more specialized spellcasting to detect. Sadly, he did not have that skill, and would have to find out what—or who—was inside the monolith in a more mundane manner. He reached the pentagonal stone and noted its clean edges and smooth construction. Finely made, sharply hewn, completely unknown. Well, I've come too far to stop now.

He reached out and touched the stone. For a moment, he thought he could feel the cold of the age-old monolith through his leather gloves, but that thought vanished as seams appeared in the stone, widening rapidly. A cleverly concealed panel fell off of the pillar and crashed to the ground, revealing a dim chamber. Inside was—

Well, I wasn't expecting this.

She remembered eternity...

Traveling across Skyrim, staying away from the cities but feeling so free beneath the stars and moons, luxuriating in the feel of wind on her skin, of rain on her wings; hunting and racing her mother, almost forgetting why they were doing this. Seeing the chamber for the first time, prepared painstakingly just for her, deep beneath an ancient crypt. Sneaking in, taking care not to disturb the guardians, but savoring the feel of the stone and the play of the lights. Settling in, knowing that she would not remember, would not dream. Her mother had promised her that much, that she would not even know time had passed. The final touch, a brush on her cheek, and a promise to see her again. The first touch in a very long time.

…and its end.

There was no thought, no sense of time. She did not sleep, she was. Years, centuries, the rise and fall of nations and the birth and death of heroes passed her by with not a flicker of an eyelid. On her
back, the item she carried hummed and sang a song that none with ears could hear, and burned colors that unmade the eyes of those who had the wit to see them. It whispered, too, secrets both terrible and beautiful, but she was not sleeping, and could not hear. Until, from above, a sound. Inert flesh required prompting from the soul, suspended in an array of timeless magic, to pump blood and twitch muscles. Thought came slowly, reason slower still. From without, faint voices. Language she half-understood. And finally, the grind and crash of falling stone. This far below the surface, the air was feeble, but even the slight current in this cavern was more than her skin had known in untold years. She drank the feeling of air moving, though she could not consciously recall being without it. She gave this feeling a long moment more, but knew she must address those who had opened her tomb, and fulfill whatever duty those who had sent for her had in mind. Whether her mother's plans come to fruition or her father tracking her down, she must play her part, as was demanded of a Daughter of Coldharbour.

Serana opened her eyes.

Velandryn had expected a relic, when he first heard about Dimhollow Crypt. Some sort of ancient enchantment or weapon. Once faced with it, once he had heard Lokil's proclamations and seen the chamber for himself, he had begun to harbor a suspicion that what lay down here was a being of some sort, sustained through the array he had felt. This Lord Harkon clearly considered it a prize to be possessed, but he had reserved judgement until he could see it with his own eyes. Now that he had, he felt himself at something of a loss.

The woman was still, looking as though she could be sleeping. Her skin was pale and nearly luminous in the purple light, and though Velandryn had long found the word exquisite trite and irritating when he heard it leave the lips of some poet or merchant, the aspect of her features brought the word to the forefront of his mind. However overused it had become within the markets of Blacklight and Mournhold, it would always be the word that described the lone coda flower rising from the marsh, or the parting of the clouds that let Azura's dawn illuminate the towers of the Great Fane. Perhaps anywhere else it would not strike him as such, but here, after battle and mystery and in this pale violet light cast by an unknown mage long ages ago, her beauty was exquisite.

Her eyes were shut, her full lips pursed slightly, and he did not miss that her chest did not rise and fall. Nonetheless, he was unsurprised when she stirred; when she opened her eyes and regarded them with irises of bright gold, it only confirmed what he had known since the stone fell away.

Lydia was already in motion, doubtless to menace the vampire, extract what information they could, but Velandryn raised a hand slightly and she stilled. The woman watched them for a long second, and then abruptly shrugged and gave an inelegant stretch, craning her neck and opening her mouth experimentally as though roused from nothing more than a long sleep. Her teeth were white and straight, save for the two long incisors that marred the clean lines of her mouth.

"Unnuhh, Hokkan istten thoug?" The vampire made no move nor spoke any more, as she seemed to be waiting for a response. A pleasant voice, though.

Velandryn looked at Lydia, who leaned in and spoke in a low voice. "She asked who we are, I think. It's old Nordic. Extremely old Nordic. We had to learn a few words for when we had dealings with any of the Old Clans who came down onto Whiterun Plains."

He considered this for a moment. It was exceptionally rare, in this day and age, to meet anyone who couldn't speak at least some Imperial Tamrielic, but he recalled the hulking Nord who had spoken with the Thu'um when fighting Mirmulnir. He had been of the Old Clans, and Velandryn could well imagine him speaking the harsh tongue of the ancient Nords. This woman, though?
He was about to inquire, in as many tongues as he knew, whether she spoke any other language at all when she suddenly spoke, in archaic and only slightly mangled Imperial. "Forgive my rudeness, esteemed slaves, but art thou of the most heretical Dwemer?"

Mother, you liar, you said I would not feel the passage of time. It seemed lying in a tomb with an Elder Scroll strapped to your back would be enough to make one a little sore. She stretched as she pulled herself out of her chamber, luxuriating in the feel of muscles moving beneath her skin. For all that she could not remember any of her time in there and felt no more hunger than she would have after a good night's sleep, her body was reminding her of its long stillness in subtler ways. She could feel her blood, such as it was, pumping beneath her skin, and her breath, though not necessary for her to exist, filled her lungs. Even down here, the air seemed sweet. She was struck by the desire to be above the ground again and see the stars. She knew it was nighttime, a vampire always knew, and the thought of the stars burning in the void filled her with longing. For now though, the present demanded her focus.

Serana didn't know what she'd expected, but it certainly wasn't this. Directly before her stood an elf of a breed she had neither seen nor even heard of, with dark grey skin and harsh, angular features. He was garbed in leather armor that looked as though it had taken a great many beatings, and bore a red sigil like that of a hand upon his breast. He wore a bow slung upon his back, and had the most unusual face, even for an elf. It was perfectly still, save for his eyes, which burned a red that put her uncomfortably in mind of the fires she had once loved to read beside. What is he? He didn't have the look of a thrall, but any free elf out on his own in Skyrim would have to be much better armed, and he did not look a runaway or outlaw. Besides which, the woman, a Nord, stood beside and behind him, in the position of a guard—or a servant. No. No Nord would stand subservient to an elf.

It was all too much to take in, so she had to make it small. Little pieces, little bites. Start with the simple. She focused on the woman, trying to make sense of these two by starting with the easier puzzle. The elf was clearly an anomaly of some sort, but she had seen the woman's type before. Her clothing was ornate metal over furs; clearly she was some sort of lord or great warrior to wear such fine armor. However, she did not have the look of one used to greatness. She could sense the self-righteousness that came with renown, in the subtle movements and tells of the body, and neither of these was a commander or a great hero. The elf carried himself as though he were half a lord, but the woman seemed no more than a soldier. Could she be his guard?

"Umm, who are you?"

It slipped out without conscious thought, and she felt mortified at her first words being something so foolish. However, neither gave any indication that they would answer. Instead, they seemed to be conferring, with the Nord giving advice to the elf. Why would she do that? Who was this elf to be attended by a Nord in such fine armor?

The pieces came together then. Dwemer! She had never seen one in the flesh, but from the stories, it all fit. A strange elf, beneath the earth, accompanied by a servitor in strange and heavy armor, could be nothing else. Perhaps some Nord clan had a deal with the Dwemer of this region, and got armor in exchange for service. He looked nothing like what Dwemer were supposed to, but the Deep Elves were reclusive, and it was not out of the realm of possibility that some of them could be like this dark creature. She had never learned the Dwemer tongue, as they saw little point in teaching any not of their race, but she remembered some of her Aldmeris. She was about to inquire in that language when she recognized a few words of what the Nord woman was saying.
To Serana, the woman's words sounded suspiciously like the Cyrodilic slave tongue. That language was a mangled blend of Ayleidoon, Aldmeris, Nordic and the Nedic spoken by the peoples of Heiroc and Iliac Bay to the west. Serana had only learned it after her transformation, but it had been one of her favorites. Her father had bartered with Ayleid traders numerous times, and would always bring back a piece of human cattle or two for them to feed upon. She had been curious about these strange humans, and learned their language one terrified slave at a time. Now, she could put it to good use. She framed the sentence she intended to speak, and let it leave her lips.

"Forgive my rudeness, my friends, but are you of the most clever Dwemer?"

The elf looked at her for a long moment. His angular face remained still, and she found herself wondering if they had actually been speaking Cyrodilic or if she had misheard. The armored woman looked displeased at something, or else her face just looked like that all of the time. For her sake, Serana hoped not.

"Why do you think I am Dwemer?" The elf's voice was surprisingly low, and had an unusual gravelly undertone that lent his words an odd gravity. He raised a hand. "No, before that, who are you, and why were you sealed away down here?" His words were simple and direct, and she appreciated that, as it had been some time since she had tried to use this tongue. It was coming back to her, but she still had to mull her words before speaking. As she did, she realized that she had called them 'slaves' in her earlier address, and her face reddened.

"I was supposed to be waiting for—well, it isn't important." She was certain neither of them was a vampire, and she didn't want to go spilling her family's secrets to anybody who didn't need to know. "How long have I been down here? Who is the High King?"

Well, some things never change. "Glad to know the world didn't get boring while I was gone. Who's fighting for it?" Again, she didn't expect the names to mean anything, but there had been a hint of humor in the elf's voice when he mentioned the conflict, and she wanted to warm them up as much as possible since she would likely need their help. And questions can do that.

The Nord woman answered first. "The war is about more than just the throne, but Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak of Windhelm has raised his banners for a free Skyrim, and will be High King should he prevail. Jarl Elisif was High King Torygg's wife, and she leads the jarls who have sided with the Empire."

Empire? She supposed that could mean the Nord Empire, but that had been seated in Windhelm, and the woman had mentioned a 'free Skyrim.' The Jarl of Windhelm should be High King, so what had changed? If anyone was likely to rebel, it would be the Reachmen in their mountain holds or the Chimer of the east, who had only recently fallen under the Nord banner. This was all far too confusing. "Empire? What Empire is that?" And how long was I asleep?

The elf spoke now, his words deliberate. "The Mede Empire, successors to the Septim Dynasty. From Cyrodiil."

"There's an Empire in Cyrodiil? And it rules Skyrim?" If there is an Ayleid Empire, little wonder this Jarl Ulfric is rebelling. No Nord would welcome elven dominance.

"How long were you in there?" To the Nord woman, it was clearly an offense of some sort not to
know about this Empire.

"Apparently longer than we planned." These two spoke of this Empire as though it was a fact of life, and if an Empire could rise, then certainly the strife between her parents had been resolved. Only one way or another. Why they had not sent for her, she did not know. Unless... "Why were the two of you down here in the first place?" If they had been sent for her…

"We followed some… friends of yours; people like you." She should not have been surprise that they knew what she was, and did not have to ask what the fate of those other vampires had been. He steepled his fingers in front of his mouth as he continued. "Then, we found you. You speak ancient Nordic as your first language, considered me as Dwemer rather than correctly identifying my race, and used words indicating that you learned Cyrodiil when it was still a tongue confined to slaves of the Ayleids." At that last, the armored woman gave Serana a very strange look. "You are unfamiliar with the concept of an Empire in Cyrodiil, and your first instinct was to ask after the High King as the power in Skyrim." He cocked his head. "I believe I can tell you how long you were away, if you give me an answer in turn. Why were you sealed down here?"

"For a very good reason. How long was I sealed?" She would not give him the satisfaction of dominating this… conversation, she supposed it was.

"For an amount of time greater than one day and less than the lifespan of the Mundus. What do you have on your back?" His eyes were bright red now, though whether that was a trick of the light or some part of his physiology, perhaps cued to his mood, she could not say.

"Something that is mine. What race are you?"

He snorted. "I am the race that I am. This is getting us nowhere."

Serana had been enjoying herself, but she had to admit that neither one of them was getting the answers they wanted. "All right. One answer for each of us?"

He was silent for a long moment, something he seemed fond of doing. The long pauses were slightly off-putting, but perhaps that was his goal, to throw her out of balance. Finally, he nodded. "Very well. I will answer to the best of my ability, and you will do the same. I swear this by the Three, and I expect you to swear by whatever god or oath you hold."

Do you now? He expected her to swear. It would be an easy thing to choose a random Nord god and make a pointless oath; only Molag Bal had any claim on her soul. However, it felt wrong to do so. He was engaging with her in good faith, perhaps she should do the same. It had been a long time since she had engaged with anyone not of Clan Volkihar as an equal; but these two had freed her, and so they earned that courtesy. "I so swear, by the Mace of Souls." If she used that name for Molag Bal, she might get away without them knowing who she was referring to.

"Then ask." His sudden statement took her aback, not having expected to be given the first question, but she had to know how much time had passed. She did wonder, though, at what point she had lost control of the conversation.

"How long have I been down here?"

He gave her another long, measured look. "To my best guess, somewhere upwards of four thousand years."

Serana felt her knees go weak from shock. She had known, on some level, that it was longer than she had expected, but four thousand? She made a conscious effort not to let her shock and horror
show, but didn't know how successful she had been. *Impossible. What could have happened?*

*Mother said it would only take—*

*Mother…oh Lord, what happened?*

The elf was watching her impassively, and she almost thought she saw compassion hiding somewhere in those alien eyes. As she composed herself, she straightened and faced him.

"Your turn. Ask and I will answer."

He nodded. "Who is Harkon?"

At the sound of her father's name, bile rose in her gut and panic clouded her mind. She saw his face, bowed and bloodied before the altar. She heard her mother whispering prayers, and her own sobs. She felt the cold of the stone and the warmth of the blood. Her flesh tore, and pain lanced through her once again. *No, that is done. It is done with.* She steadied herself with a hand on her pillar, only to find herself leaning on it for support.

The elf stepped closer. "I gambled on that question, and now I want my answer. You know the name. *Who is Harkon?*"

She could not have said why hearing his name affected her so. She had never been overcome like that before. Could her sealing have affected her, made her emotions raw again? She should have been beyond that. Fortunately, the second time she heard nothing. *Perhaps it was just the shock.* "Lord Harkon is…he's my father. Did you hear the name from the others sent to find me?"

The elf made an affirmative noise. "I don't suppose you'll tell me why you were sealed down here?"

*And give away my power over you?* She had the elf figured out now. He was the type who could not stand mysteries. He demanded answers, and would dig until he got them. She could handle folk like those. After all, she was much the same. And right now, she was overflowing with questions. However, she could also prioritize, and knew that if her father was sending forces to search for her, then she would have to return. If he knew where she was, her father would never relent until he had what he wanted, and she had no allies to speak of. These two looked to be vagrants or adventurers, and could help her little if she sought to escape or oppose her father. For now, she should return home and take stock of the situation. "I need to get back to my fath—my family. If you help me, I'll tell you everything you want to know."

She had had her suspicions, and the way they processed her decision made it clear that the elf was the leader of this odd pairing. The Nord had glanced at him immediately, and at his nod, had relaxed her stance. Well, relaxed it slightly; clearly she did not trust Serana much. Not that the elf did either, if she was reading him correctly. He held himself stiffly, and she could feel the magicka pulsing through him. She had the feeling that if she so much as sneezed at the wrong time, he would do his level best to turn her to dust. After the backbiting and intrigue of the Volkihar court, however, she was pretty sure she could handle these two.

The elf fell into step beside her as she passed him. The Nord took up position behind them both. *To take me down should I prove false?* While Serana was fairly certain that she was fast enough to kill one of them before the other could react, she would rather not test that if she didn't need to. As long as they went along with what she wanted, she would leave them be. *And perhaps, if the elf is very well-behaved, I'll let him see what's in the bundle.* She wondered if his expressionless face would crack at the sight of what was beneath the wrappings in the sling on her back.
"Where is your family's...abode?" The pause before the final word made it clear that the elf originally had a different word in mind. *Lair? Coven?*

"North and west of Solitude. Is Solitude still a city in this age?" Serana's question spurred the elf to glance at his—what was the armored Nord to him? Her blend of obvious competence and inexplicable deference was puzzling.

"It is. The seat of Jarl Elisif, and the center of Imperial power in Skyrim." Well, that was good. Serana could point them to the right area from Solitude, and she should be able to pierce the wards that hid the castle once she got close enough. She still wanted to know more about this Empire, though that would have to wait.

"Lydia, what is the best path from here to Solitude?" *Lydia.* So, that was the Nord. In that moment, she realized that not only did she not know the elf's name, but likely neither one of them knew hers. They hadn't known she was down here, so it was unlikely they had a name.

The woman was silent for a moment, clearly thinking over the best route. "Retrieve our horses in Heljarchen, then north along the foothill roads. With any luck, we avoid major Imperial or Stormcloak operations, though I'd wager we run into at least a few patrols. Down into the Hjaalmarch and Imperial territory, and take ship from Morthal to Solitude. We can be on the docks of the city in less than ten days, if all goes well."

The elf nodded. "I'd wager it's nearly morning now. Let's try to be in Heljarchen early, get a full night's sleep, and then be on the road at dawn." He glanced at Serana. "Can you travel by day?"

"I can." The Volkihar were weakened by the sun, but they would not be destroyed by it unless some other blow brought them to the edge of death. *A superior breed.* If she had to fight, though, she would be little better than a human as long as the sun shone down on her. "But first, I would know your name. At some point I will have to call you something, and I do not think *elf* is ideal."

"Neither is *vampire.*" He almost smiled, a miniscule lift of the corners of his mouth. "I am Velandryn Savani."

She mulled the name he had given her. *Certainly not Dwemer.* They had all of their strange z's and k's. This sounded elven, to be sure, and the style was vaguely familiar, though she could not place from where. "I'm Serana." Her own name felt strange upon her ears. For all that she had not perceived the passage of time, clearly it had affected her.

Part of her wanted to ask what his race was, but it was interesting trying to figure it out. His skin was too dark to be Ayleid, Chimer, Altmer or Direnni. She had only ever seen one Bosmer in her life, but this elf seemed far too tall, and he clearly had too much mass to be kin to the whip-thin little mer she had seen. He was not an Orsimer, that much was certain, and while she had never seen one of the legendary Maormer, she had heard that they were so pale that they glowed beneath the moon. The Falmer were extinct, unless some had hidden themselves away and survived the years, and she could not see this dark creature being kin to the Snow Elves. Some elves supposedly lived on far-flung Yokuda, though she knew nothing about them, and while there were rumors of strange furred creatures living in the deserts south of Cyrodiil...

"Is there another way out of this tomb? Your...friends woke a great many draugr above us, and we closed the gate on them. It is unlikely we would be able to make our way back without a very unpleasant fight." His question interrupted her musings, and she had to think back to before she had been sealed.

"Yes. A path to a hidden exit at the base of the mountains. I've never been on it, but my moth—I
know it is a way out."

The elf nodded. "We will make use of it. Your mother was wise to tell you of it. Was it her who sealed you down here?" He strode off without waiting for an answer and Serana was left feeling slightly a fool. He figured it out, I need to be more careful. But, he could not resist showing off that he knew. A weakness. His pride, I can use that somehow. These two would get her home, and from there, well, from there she would figure something out.

Lydia was not pleased. As she followed her thane and the woman—the vampire—across the bridge away from the ritual site, she kept both eyes on Serana. Her thane might be clever, but he could be a damned fool when the mood struck him. He coveted secrets and lost knowledge, and this woman was offering him both. He had spent days reading about the dragons because he thought there might be something he could glean from being Dragonborn. Now he had agreed to help this dangerous creature reconnect with more of her kind, and all he had received in return was the promise of secrets. The woman claimed to have been locked down here for millennia, and just like that the Dragonborn was clay in her undead hands. She had known men—and one woman, she admitted ruefully—to do stupid things for a beautiful woman, which this Serana undoubtedly was. However, she had a suspicion that Velandryn's sudden willingness to aid a vampire had nothing to do with a desire to bed her. She had to get him alone and find out what in Oblivion he was thinking. Or if he even was.

Up ahead, Lydia noticed a pair of gargoyles at the top of a stair that led to a down-sloping tunnel which seemed to be the only exit on this side of the cave; she had a sudden urge to smash the ugly statues into tiny pieces. She wanted to pound something; for the last few weeks she had had to hold back when practicing with her thane, and the skeletons, thralls and draugr from before had only been brief, unsatisfying skirmishes. It would feel good to vent her frustration, but she supposed it would make her emotions too obvious. Those two up ahead were playing their little game of secrets, a game for which she knew she had no skill.

Her thane was the first one to set foot on the stair, and the moment he did so both gargoyles shuddered and rumbled to life. They descended ponderously, and Velandryn dodged backwards, thrusting out his hand and pouring flame onto one of them. For her part, Serana was throwing ice that slowed them but did little more.

Lydia had no idea if her grin was showing as she charged forward. Meet me, freaks! As she slammed her shield into the nearest one and pounded its head with her armored gauntlet and sword hilt, she felt the stone-like flesh crack beneath her assault. She didn't know if this was some mage's creation or a Daedra or some creature that lived in dark corners of Nurn. Those were questions for people like her thane to worry about. She was a warrior, and she knew her duty. She kicked the gargoyle away to gain space for another blow, and saw her thane channeling fire and ice onto the other foe's face. It screamed, and the vampire swooped in, her ornate blade cutting into one of the gargoyle's wings and nearly severing it. As the three of them brought the two brutish creatures down, Lydia could feel the battle-lust take her. She wanted more, and she wanted it now.

No. She was better than that. She took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. She knew her duty. She would defend her thane, and protect the people of Whiterun Hold and Skyrim. She watched the vampire sheathe her sword and continue onwards. From everything that would harm them.

She might be acting unfairly towards the vampire woman, she knew. Perhaps Serana was innocent and untainted by the crimes of her kin, but Lydia had never seen nor heard of a vampire that, when its hunger rose, would not consume the blood of others to sate were a threat, and she dealt with threats. She watched the vampire out of the corner of her eye; the creature could likely tell where
she was by the smell of the blood in her veins. After so long asleep, she was likely to be hungry. Lydia wondered how her thane would handle that.

Velandryn pried a glittering gemstone out of one of the dead foes' flesh, and held it up to the light, turning it this way and that experimentally. He pocketed it, and followed Serana, who was already heading down the tunnel out of the room. Lydia had to be fair; the vampire had spent a very long time in this chamber and had to be eager to be gone. She kept one eye on the vampire, though, and hoped her thane was doing the same.

Serana could see the exit. Her vision in the dark was far better than the mortals,' and even across the huge arena on whose rim they stood, she could make out the cold iron bars set into the stone and the lever that would open their way. She could even smell a hint of the sweet air of the outside. Of course, she didn't need to breathe, but she could appreciate the delicate scents of life and light when they were offered to her. First, though, they had to reach them, and the array of draugr lying dormant around the arena would doubtless pose a problem in that regard. There was at least a dozen of them, and while the ones roaming the halls they had just passed through had died easily enough, the caution with which her two…rescuers…were proceeding made her think that these were of a different type, more worthy of caution. The elf, whose race she still could not figure out, was looking out over the arena, seemingly into darkness that mortal eyes should not have been able to penetrate. He jumped slightly as she slid in beside him.

"What is it?" He did not look at her as he spoke, instead scanning the blackness. Her eyes could make out some sort of huge curved wall in a far corner, and he seemed to be looking in that direction as well.

"Why so cautious? We killed the draugr in the last hall easily." They had been decent combatants, but his fire, her sword work and spells, and Lydia's overwhelming strength had made short work of them. She still couldn't figure out what the Nord woman was; she was clearly the more skilled of the two but her deference to the elf bordered on servitude. For instance, she deeply distrusted Serana, while the elf was at least willing to work with her. However, she had gone along without audible complaint when Velandryn agreed to help her. It was puzzling, but she would figure it out, and then she would have another piece of knowledge. In this unfamiliar world, knowledge was power for her, and she needed all the power she could get. She had considered the possibility that they were lying, that this was all some scheme, but either Lydia was a master of deception, or the Nord woman's ill-concealed mistrust proved the truth of their words. The elf was harder to read, but she did not think he was lying. However, as now, she found herself wondering what was going on behind those strange red eyes. *Fascinating eyes, to be sure, but disquieting.* She wondered if all elves like him had such eyes, or if he was some unique case. She had certainly never heard of any race of elves so afflicted.

"Most draugr are servants, tending the crypts of their masters. The ones back in the hall, simple enough to deal with. Those down there are lords and warriors, and we must be cautious."

_How do you know this? _"So, what's the plan?" She wondered how much knowledge she must have missed, sealed away for so long.

He pointed into the gloom. "Over there is a great wall, carved in Dovahzul. We must reach it."

"Wait, why? _Dovahzul?_ He had already stood, and was clearly preparing to go.

"They will not wake until we will it, if we are adept with our movements. Lydia, far wall, right side. Move quietly. Serana, you too."
"But why?" Her protest was cut off as he began picking his way along the cave wall, but as Lydia moved up beside her, she saw her own confusion writ plain upon the Nord woman's face as well. This unexpected kinship brought her an amusing thought. *I'm a Nord too, aren't I?* It had been a long time since anything except *vampire* had been a relevant identifier. She set off beside the *other* Nord woman.

The wall resolved out of the mist as they got closer, huge and curved, and as they approached the inward side, something very odd happened. Velandryn seemed to go into a sort of trance. He abandoned subtlety and marched up to the wall, extended one hand and reached out to touch one of the words inscribed there. So intent was his focus that when Lydia shook his shoulder, he did not even acknowledge her presence. She shook him harder, but again he gave no sign of awareness. Serana began to grow alarmed. Was there some spell on the wall that she had not noticed, one that had taken the elf's wits? Could this be another trick of her mother's, like the gargoyles that had spring to life when a mortal foot touched the stairs? If he died, or was rendered insensate, she would be stuck with nobody but Lydia to aid her. She had no doubt she could enthrall the Nord, given enough time, but she would prefer not to resort to such crude tactics. So, she too reached in to jostle the elf back to reality. However, before she could touch him, he calmly returned his hand to his side and shrugged free of Lydia's hand.

"Gaan." It was almost a whisper, but she felt *something* in the air as he the sound left his mouth. It was gone in a moment, and so faint that she thought she might have been merely unnerved by the oddness of Velandryn's actions and imagined it. He turned to face them. "It is done." With no more explanation, he gestured beyond. "It would seem that they heard us." A draugr in a great horned helm was lifting itself from its throne, bracing its weight on a hammer that seemed entirely too large to be carried by such desiccated arms. Once standing, it began ascending the arena steps, while its retinue fell in. Heat blossomed behind her, and she turned to see Velandryn's hands afire. His face was as still as ever, but those eyes…

She shivered, unused to seeing such bloodlust in the elf, and readied herself. The draugr were charging, and she had to admit that these were not only stronger and better-equipped than those they had faced before, but moved with a purpose and menace that the others had lacked. Their leader especially was a terrifying figure, and Serana was suddenly afraid to be any closer to that brute. Those heavy steps pounded up the stairs with shocking speed, and she steeled herself. *I am Serana of Volkihar!* With a snarl, she leapt forward. She was upon the first of the draugr, and delivered half a dozen cuts in less than a mortal's heartbeat. The first two removed one arm, the third and fourth the other, and the last two pierced its heart and half-severed its head. Still, it managed another step before collapsing to the ground, and in the next moment she realized that her charge had brought her fully into the charging pack of undead. With a hiss, she leapt upwards and back, just as a burst of fire set two of the monsters ablaze. *Or was the elf aiming for three?*

Once on the ground again, she took stock of the battle. She was far stronger than any mortal and had leapt without thinking, so she had easily cleared the foes and travelled a good ten feet before coming down again. If either of her companions had noticed, they were now otherwise engaged. Lydia was alternating between two draugr, using the gaps in each one's attacks to land blows on the other before parrying whatever came her way with sword or shield. It was an intricate dance in which either sword or shield could attack or defend, and Serana found herself grudgingly impressed with the other woman's skill.

As for Velandryn, if she had not known that he must be the same elf that had interrogated her back in the sealing room, she would never have believed it. He spat fire from both hands with unerring accuracy and kept the draugr at bay as Lydia dispatched them. He gestured towards the mass of draugr around the towering commander with the helm and the hammer, and two of them suddenly began laying about with their weapons, causing chaos among their ranks.
With a start, Serana realized that she had simply been standing there for several seconds, and reached out as Lydia snapped the neck of one of the draugr and pounded it to the ground. When the corpse rose jerkily to its feet, the armored woman moved to attack but stopped at Serana's shout of her name. They locked eyes briefly, and the moment ended when the raised draugr carved a chunk out of Lydia's other foe. She nodded curtly and waded into the melee that Velandryn's spellcasting had caused.

Soon enough, almost all of the draugr were burning, and more than a few were laying indiscriminately into their onetime allies. In the center of it all stood the commander, who had yet to take any action save killing those turned followers who attempted to slay it. Finally, as Lydia cut down another burning draugr and Velandryn gulped down a glowing blue potion, the helmed draugr stepped out. It raised the hammer one-handed, and reached out to snatch a burning sword from one of its dying allies. Looking closer, Serana could see that it was armored as well, and while it was aflame in a few places, it stood tall and strong. Whoever it had been in life, they must have been mighty indeed. Man or woman she could not tell, but it stood a head again taller than Lydia and Serana realized that what she had taken for weak and desiccated arms were in fact bolstered with some ancient magic and corded with muscle. Its eyes glowed blue and as it raised the great maul above its head, they burned. It pointed the warhammer at Velandryn, and shouted forth a battle cry.

"Bolog aaz, mal lirre!" The creature's voice was high-pitched and almost painful, and it punctuated its words with a contemptuous wave of the burning sword.

To her utter shock, Velandryn responded with a scornful laugh. "Hii kendav oblaan, Zaam!" His voice was deeper and harsher than she had ever heard it, and the unfamiliar cadence twisted her gut. With one hand he struck his chest, a grand gesture incongruous with his slight frame and battleworn armor. "Come to me, and I will end your suffering!"

He stepped forward, and the great draugr did the same. Step by slow step, they closed on each other, neither removing their eyes from the other. It looked almost pitiful; Serana and Velandryn were of a height, and the monstrous undead stood nearly two feet taller than either of them. It was holding a maul in one hand and a twisted chunk of burning, half-melted iron that had once been a sword in the other, and seemed fully able to wield them both at the same time. In all honesty, she could not see how Velandryn hoped to win this battle. Yes, he clearly had some skill with magic, but the other outweighed him and was heavily armed besides. She drew her sword and poised herself to intervene if she saw a chance. She owed the elf that much

Then, she noticed that the path to the gate was clear. *I could make it while the monster focuses on these two.* Lydia would never abandon Velandryn, that much was certain. For whatever reason, she followed him like a trained dog. She might rage against Serana, but three had no more hope against this monstrosity than two. Would it not be better for her to escape, to return home?

She was at the gate, one hand on the lever, when she heard the battle cry. Lydia had maneuvered herself to an elevated position to one side of the mighty draugr, and now she barreled down the stairs at a dead run, shield held out before her. *She's going to die.* She could see it now. The great draugr would turn and destroy her in a few blows, and then finish the elf.

She turned away, pressed down on the lever, and heard the gate give a squeal as it began to lift. She heard the deep echoing sound of the Thu'um, and knew that those two were dead. If the draugr could Shout, even their slim chance was gone. She couldn't look back, and so she stared at the slowly rising gate.

*I'm sorry.*
She froze as the thought took hold. She didn't have to be sorry. She could go back now, she could
tie her fate to theirs. She might die, against such a foe. It was foolishness. She was stuck, gripped
with indecision as the gate rumbled higher. Now, if she so chose, she could duck under it and be
free. She could smell the sunlight and taste the wind. She wanted that freedom, more than she had
wanted anything in a very long time.

And they had given it to her.

She cursed, and turned back. She bolted forward, not daring to peer into the black. The longer she
went without seeing the hopelessness of the situation, the longer she could continue back without
the idiocy of her actions hitting home. After a moment though, when she realized that she had to
look or else risk bowling headlong into whatever was going on, she lifted her eyes and let her
superior vision penetrate the darkness.

To her shock, she saw Velandryn and Lydia evenly locked with the draugr; somehow they had
managed to match it. The elf was hurling fireballs, and as she watched he downed another potion.
Lydia was countering the draugr's blows, though she was unable to attack in the face of such an
onslaught from two weapons. The other woman could counter the blows from the ruined iron
sword easily enough, but that maul sent her staggering every time it crashed home. Lydia was
slowly giving ground, though the draugr howled each time a fire bolt found a patch of exposed
skin.

Serana did not know whether the elf's attacks would allow Lydia an opening before the draugr's
dual-wielding madness brought the Nord to the ground. She angled her charge to bring her into
range just as the draugr raised its massive maul. Lydia was busy fending off blows from the sword,
but Serana had a clear shot at the creature's upraised arm. She knew that she did not look the part of
a fearsome warrior, but she had trained at the sword from a young age. Her father had thought it
essential that any member of the noble Clan Volkihar be skilled in combat, and she had always
loved the intricate footwork and elegant movements of the single-blade style of the Heiroc
Bretons. Her instructors had praised her form, but warned her that she would have to practice with
ferocious dedication if she wished to become a master, and she never did. However, in the
aftermath of her transformation, her slender arms concealed a strength that she knew surpassed
Lydia's and put her into the upper range of what any mortal could hope to achieve. Let it never be
said there were no gifts given by Molag Bal. So, when she drew her blade and sliced it into the
draugr's arm, she heard the crunch of bone and saw the elbow deform horribly as the maul's weight
suddenly unbalanced its wielder.

The draugr hissed, and Lydia launched a furious assault, though Serana could see her fatigue in
every movement. Had that been all that happened, the draugr might well have prevailed; by
dropping the sword and using two hands on the maul it managed to bring the weapon around and
drive Lydia to one knee with a blow that would have crushed her chest If not for her shield.
However, at that moment Velandryn redoubled his barrage and three bolts of flame splashed on the
undead creature. It took a clumsy swing at Serana, but she ducked under it easily and slashed at the
arm she had cut before. This time, the bone broke outright, and she followed it up with a
backhanded chop, delivered with all of her strength directly at the elbow, and watched the arm
come free, fingers twitching madly as the appendage fell away.

The draugr roared as its great maul crashed to the ground. The creature bent down to pick it up, but
Velandryn was there, though Serana had not seen him approach. He looked taller than he had
before, and in his outstretched left hand he held a blade, single-edged and looking at once rough-
hewn and exceptionally deadly. Even a moment in its presence was enough for Serana to know that
it was conjured from Daedric energies. The blade parted flesh and bone alike as it swept down, and
the draugr's head bounced down the steps and away into the gloom. The body crumpled to the
ground, and Velandryn opened his hand, letting the blade fade away. The body tried to lift itself from the ground again, but whatever energy has been sustaining it must have been insufficient in the face of the trauma it had undergone, and it finally laid still. Velandryn ignited his hand, and pulled the backplate of the armor away. His fingers made a dull squish as they dug into the dead meat, and flames flowed out along the body. In no time at all, the sickly smell of burning flesh filled the cavern.

The elf studied his worn gloves. The fingers of the leather looked to be charred as well as stained from the draugr flesh, and some discoloration marred the wrist of one of his bracers. Lydia rose and took up her position beside him. He looked down at the draugr. "The dead should burn." He said no more, seemingly lost in thought. Serana had no wish to intrude, not least because she had been on the verge of abandoning them to die and did not want to have to explain either her departure or her return.

He raised his eyes to meet hers. "I am surprised you are still here." She braced for one or both to attack her for leaving them, but he just shifted his gaze to the opened gate. "The night air is out there, and you have been away too long."

The moment she realized that he was right, that what she wanted was within her grasp, she was gone. She knew she must look a fool, but she no longer cared. She passed the gate and bolted up the tunnel, her lungs filling with air that got fresher with every breath. Magicka came into the world from the void, through Magnus the Sun and the Magne-Ge who were the stars, and she wanted to feel their blessing upon her skin. It has been so long, since I felt the stars. She could not look upon the sun without pain, but she wanted to at least see the open sky above her, endless forever. She did not remember being asleep, but she craved the open air and stars above. Mother, you liar, you said it would be as though I never left. She wanted to see it all, this new world. She saw the light ahead, and felt the subtle shift of magicka in the air. She stood, in the mouth of the cave, and gazed up at the stars. To the east the sky was slightly lighter, and she knew that soon the sun would rise, and with it would come the hiding, and the pain. But for now, there was only her and the sky. Her parents' schemes were far away, and the distrust of her companions was behind her, in the darkness. Now, for this moment, she was free.

Velandryn lifted the great hammer from the ground, and hefted it in both hands. "Lydia, you any good with a warhammer?"

His housecarl gave a short bark of laughter. "Figure out some way to let me use it with a shield, and I'll give it a try." With the vampire having bolted for the outside, Lydia seemed to have relaxed somewhat, and even allowed herself a long drink from the pouch at her hip.

"Come on, let's get going. I want to be gone from here nearly as much as Serana, I'd wager." He started for the exit, and Lydia followed. She had good senses, he had noticed. Without the benefit of either his night-eye or whatever magic Serana used to see in the darkness, Lydia had fared perfectly well fighting by only the light of burning draugr and fire bolts. Of course, she had made a horrifying racket trying to sneak, but he had been so engrossed by the Wall that he had not noticed. That was not smart of me. Of course, it hadn't been the smart part of him that was doing the thinking at that point. Dov had wanted the secret of that message, and had pulled Gaan from those words. He could not understand it or give it meaning, but he felt it tickling the edges of his mind. However, Mirmulnir's knowledge and experience had faded in recent days, and more and more he found himself with Dov and Joor in agreement. When that draugr had belted out its challenge, then Dov had come roaring to the front. He had no clue what he had said, and only half-remembered deciding to challenge the draugr, but he figured that Lydia didn't need to know that her thane, the Dragonborn, was picking fights with undead monsters and then not knowing why. It was the sort of
behavior that could erode support for the legendary hero with alarming speed. I do need to see about the Greybeards though. Action without thought was dangerous for any, and doubly so for someone with a power as unstable as the Thu'um. When he had used it against the draugr just now, after Serana had abandoned them for a bit, it had worked, but the backlash had sent him sprawling, something that had never happened before. Interestingly, it had sent him sprawling forward. He recalled its ability to push magicka, and resolved to examine its effects each time he used it. The potential implications were at once frightening and exciting.

"My thane, would you care to explain what you were thinking in agreeing to help the vampire?" Lydia had pulled even with him, and while he had known that he would have to have this conversation, he had hoped it could wait a little longer.

"Look at this hammer, Lydia. It is ebony! A shame you could not use it, but it will fetch a fine price if we sell, or make for a kingly gift." He held the hammer out for inspection and spoke loudly as he walked. **Vampires have good vision, they could well have excellent hearing to match.**

"My thane?" Lydia's confusion aside, Velandryn wished she would stop saying that. Pre-Alessian Skyrim had been characterized by vicious wars against whatever elves were convenient, and he didn't need the vampire learning that he was a thane. She didn't seem excessively bigoted, but he'd rather not have the issue come up at all.

He stopped at the tunnel, and channeled magicka as night-eye to check that they were alone. "Alright Lydia, now you may ask." Serana was far enough away that he was confident she could not overhear.

"Why are we helping her, my thane? I am sworn to follow, but if you insist on aiding these vampires in their attacks on the innocent—"

"Then you will do your duty, unless you stopped being my housecarl when I made a decision you did not understand!" He instantly regretted the harshness of his tone, and patted her shoulder in reassurance. **Why did I say that?** Deep within, Dov roared approval at how he brought his subordinate into line. "I've not lost my mind, nor am I enchanted by her. I am glad you are wary though."

"But—"

"You are a terrible liar, Lydia." At that, her mouth opened as if to protest, but she just stood there gaping. "If I had told you to welcome the vampire, to make her feel at ease, you would have done your best, but your distrust would have shown through." Vampires were masters of reading emotions, it was said. "She clearly has little to no knowledge of my people—"

"Why is that, my thane? Skyrim ruled over Morrowind while she lived. She should have recognized you."

"My people were the Chimer then. We did not receive this skin and these eyes," **there was no promise made, no foul murder committed,** "until after freeing ourselves from the chains of the Nords. But, it's good. No Dunmer of true heart would aid the vampire."

Relief blossomed on his housecarl's face. "It was an act, then."

"In part. I do have many questions, and I will gladly play games for her secrets until I have them all." He smiled at the thought of picking clean a brain that predated the Tribunal. "But for now, we have a clear goal."
"Which is?" By the look on her face she had already figured out where he was going with this. Either I am getting much better at reading humans, or I am so convinced of my own cleverness that I think all others must see it as well.

"These were not some ragged bloodsuckers holing up for the night. Lokil was acting on orders from Harkon, who is that one's" His head nodded towards the entrance, "father. That means organization and a powerful leadership. She was asleep for more than four millennia, and the magic used to seal her was potent, ancient, and Daedric. Whoever these vampires are, they have existed completely undetected in Skyrim for a very long time, and have unknown capabilities. The first step in defeating an enemy is identification."

"So we bring her to where she wants to go."

"Exactly. Continue to distrust her, I will probe for secrets while giving her a few of my own, and sooner or later we will have a location of this home of hers. Perhaps more, if we are lucky. Numbers, resources, plans. The Dawnguard will be interested, and I'd wager Solitude and the Empire would throw a few soldiers and battlemages at the problem if there's a coven on their doorstep."

"And then, my thane?"

He started up the tunnel, hoisting the warhammer onto his shoulder as he went. He would never choose it for battle, but the weight felt good as he walked. "Lydia, they're vampires." He turned to look back at her. "The dead should burn."

Chapter End Notes

So, we get to Serana. I recognize that there is no canonical date given for her sealing (and believe me, I combed the fucking desert looking for information I might have missed) but the timeframe I have chosen fits into the lore and lets me write a character who is more interesting than 'victim vampire princess.' As for language, I took a questionable canonical shortcut, and I regret nothing. I tried numerous avenues of language barrier, and short of a magic translation spell (which is stupid) or her only speaking ancient Nordic (which is cumbersome) this is the cleanest solution. Alessia used the slave tongue as the basis for Imperial Tamrielic, so Serna is fluent enough, and she's a smart lady who can pick up languages quickly. This chapter was long enough without a linguistic breakdown of their first meeting. (I wrote part of one, so give thanks that I wised up and spared you that)

Just as a heads-up, I am not going to be shying away from the very traumatic experiences in her past, and while I will try to put a label on the top of any chapter that has something I think warrants a CW, I am also not a person who is triggered by this sort of thing. If you have concerns or would like me to more assiduous in my labeling, please let me know and I will adjust my warnings accordingly.

Dovahzul (Dragon tongue) translations:

"Bolog aaz, mal lirre!" Beg for mercy, little worms!
"Hii kendav oblaan, Zaam!" Your warriors are ended, slave!

"Gaan" Stamina
Chapter 10 - Stories

Chapter Summary

A breath of fresh air after too long in the dark.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hear the words of the Ancestors, and heed the Sermons of Grace, for they are named seven times and seven ways—

VALOR—Thank you for your valor, honored ancestors. I shall not quail, nor turn away, but face my enemies and my fear.

DARING—Thank you for your daring, honored ancestors. I shall not shun risk, nor hide behind the mask of cautious counsel, for fortune favors the bold.

JUSTICE—Thank you for your justice, honored ancestors. I shall be neither cruel nor arbitrary, for fair dealing earns the love, trust and respect of our people.

COURTESY—Thank you for your courtesy, honored ancestors. I shall speak neither hurtful nor harsh word, but shall speak respectfully, even of my enemies, for temperate words may turn aside anger.

PRIDE—Thank you for your pride, honored ancestors. I shall not doubt myself, or my people, or my gods, and shall insist upon them, and my ancient rights.

GENEROSITY—Thank you for your generosity, honored ancestors. I shall neither hoard nor steal, nor encumber myself with profitless treasures, but shall share freely amongst house and hearth.

HUMILITY—Thank you for your humility, honored ancestors. I shall neither strut nor preen in vanity, but shall know and give thank for my place in the greater world.

[This segment of the Hierographe (priestly writings) was first compiled by Archcanon Tholer Saryoni of the Tribunal Temple, and enjoyed massive success as the most popular of the Tribunal Temple's texts. Focused on seven individual graces exemplified by Lord Vivec, it was equal parts moralization and Tribunal propaganda. In 4E 14, during the Reconciliation, the seven graces were recognized to be seven aspects of a singular unifying Grace that drives and elevates the Dunmer people. Revisions were performed with the blessing of the Council of Reconciliation, and also replaced the mention of Lord Vivec with reference to our honored ancestors. These changes reflect the evolving shape of the Dunmer faith, and the new editions of the Sermons have strengthened the unity of the Dunmer community.]

Scrawled in the margins: "Saryoni was a pretentious hack who could had his tongue so far up Vivec's bunghole he could barely speak, but the bastard could turn a phrase!"

Saryoni's Sermons, Revised (published by New Temple as Sermons of Grace) [Annotated text from archived Temple manuscript, scribe unknown]
Velandryn reached down, and the vampire took his hand. With a single movement, he pulled back and upwards, and she rose gracefully to her feet once more. Once there, she turned and stomped off down the slope. He followed, taking longer strides than normal to pull himself even with her.

"You know, there is a story you might be interested in." In spite of what he had told Lydia, he was enjoying himself. She was still a vampire and a menace, of course, and he would likely have to cut her down at the end of this, but there was no reason he couldn't have some fun along the way.

Serana did not turn her head, but her pace slowed slightly. "Oh?" In her position, he would have been desperate for any scrap of folklore or history, no matter how garbled, to glean the shape of this new world.

"A certain…scholar was out for a walk along…the city's wall, late one night. He had seen the stars a thousand times, of course, but every time he witnessed their beauty he was overcome anew. He walked, head back, reveling in the dance of the Lady and marveling at the Atronach menacing the Apprentice. He was so intent on the stars, however, that he soon…erm…fell of the wall and broke his neck." Velandryn had realized, halfway through the story, that there was no way he could end it satisfactorily without first giving Serana a thorough briefing on Dunmer religious belief. As it was, he had to finish the story on a lame note, before the Ordinators and the guarherd got involved.

Serana did turn around then, once he had stopped speaking. "That was a terrible story."

"I know."

"Could you not tell it correctly because it would have revealed information about your people, and given me the answer as to what kind of elf you are?"

"Perhaps, but it would also have made no sense to you."

She stopped walking for a second. Behind them and off to the side, Lydia continued trudging through the snow. "However, you think I should take away from that that looking at the stars is folly?"

"Look all you like, but know where your feet are, whether planted or moving. Or is that not why I had to help you up just then?"

Serana pushed her way onward through the snow, though at least now her eyes were fixed on the path before them, such as it was. They had been picking their way down the hillside for the better part of the past hour, and in the predawn light it could be difficult to tell the difference between shadows and treacherous patches of icy rock or earth. While it was not as treacherous as it had been when they first left the cave, it still required a goodly amount of focus to keep one's feet. A vampire, though, should not have that issue, given that they supposedly had excellent night vision. Unless, of course, they had been a little too focused on the stars.

Velandryn sighed. I suppose I cannot truly blame her. If this was his first time out of doors since the First Era, he would doubtless be just as entranced by every little thing. And it was a beautiful sky, full of stars and slowly changing from the black of the Void to a pale grey. The great moon Masser hung low to the north while pale Secunda was half-hidden by the mountains to their west. No clouds marred the scene, and the wind was blowing crisp and clean. Ordinarily he would be concerned about the cold, or in some other way too preoccupied to enjoy this time. He woke early out of habit, but aside from the dawn itself, he had not, during his time so far in Skyrim, taken in the early hours of the day. Holy hours, of the in-between. Now though, with dozens of potions downed over the last several hours, he was simultaneously feeling so many effects, aftereffects and withdrawals that he wasn't sure he would feel the cold until something actually froze and fell off.
So, he kept an eye on his surroundings and enjoyed the walk down the mountainside, a distant throbbing behind his eyes and a touch of lightheadedness the potions' lingering gifts to him.

He could hear Lydia a pace or so behind him, moving at a steady walk, seemingly unfazed by all of the weight she was carrying. The woman was a pack guar, to be sure, burdened by armor and weapons, both hers and not. When he had slipped and nearly lost his balance exiting the cave, unbalanced by the heavy ebony maul he had taken from the draugr commander, she had plucked it from his hands and tromped off, muttering something about being 'sworn to carry your burdens.' It felt strange having the fate of another put in his hands like this, but she seemed perfectly content with her role, and with following his orders. For all that she grumbled, he knew that if she truly had problems with him, she would make herself known.

Now, she nodded companionably when their eyes met, apparently thoroughly enjoying this moonlit stroll down a mountainside. *She doesn't even look tired.* He was coming to like the Nord woman more than he would ever have thought possible upon their first meeting, and was immensely glad that it was she that had ended up as his housecarl. *Dutiful, dangerous, and willing to get hit so that I don't. The ideal Nord.* There was no venom in the jab, however; it was more force of habit than anything now, at least when talking about his sworn sword. *Or to her.*

Ahead, he saw Serana on the lip of a ledge and was struck with an odd compulsion to join her. She was standing still, arms at her sides, staring out fixedly and chewing on her lip. As he approached, she flinched away. Puzzled, he moved closer. "Are you alright?" He felt a moment of genuine worry before he remembered who she was. *What she is.*

"I'm fine." Her tone was polite enough, but she was obviously upset. He recalled her face when he helped her up, the way her eyes would not meet his and the brusque movement with which she had brushed him off. It struck him suddenly how important this was for her, her first taste of freedom after so long beneath the earth. She had slipped and fallen, something no vampire should do. A small thing, but still... *Could it be shame?* He tried to imagine being in her was disturbingly easy, for he did not have to reach far to imagine being a stranger among uncomfortable allies.

As they stood there, side by side but far away, Velandryn pondered what to say, or if he should say anything at all. Were she man or mer, he would have tried to bridge the distance between them; were she a vampire under almost any other circumstances, they would doubtless be locked in a fight to the death. As it stood, he was at a loss. What did you say to someone who would be an enemy once your time together was done?

*And when I slay her, will it do me harm if I was kind?*

Courtesy was one of the Seven Virtues and an aspect of Grace. Even if he had to kill her on the morrow, there was no reason to be cruel today.

"My first morning out-of-doors in Skyrim, I woke up wrapped around a campfire." Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Serana turn slightly. "I was on the road with two soldiers, and we had to camp alongside a mountain path. All three of us were fairly certain the other two hated him, and we were all probably more than a little right. I got second watch, so I find myself sitting there in the dead of night, freezing alive, when I see some red berries poking through the snow, and remember half a lesson on alchemy I heard once upon a time."

"Oh no, you didn't." He had thought of the eyes of the Volkihar vampires as yellow, but in the half-light, hers seemed more akin to gold. "If they're the ones I'm thinking of, my mother called them... ah, how would it be... firebane."

"I found out later they are called snowberries. However, when I ate them and felt what little heat I
had suddenly denied me? I did not much care about the name. When my watch was done, the one who took over for me gave me his cloak out of pity, since I had...lost mine. Before setting up camp, of course, I was acting the perfect...mer...puffed up and self-assured so they would not figure out I had no clue what I was doing. I think they might have figured it out when I stuck my hands in the fire to get away from the cold. One of them later mentioned it was 'a fine evening.'"

As he glanced over to her, Serana worked her mouth, hiding what looked suspiciously like a smile. "Just so you know, you're a lousy storyteller."

"Am I? Was there something you didn't understand?"

"Other than the part where you almost told me what kind of elf you are? No, but you just...tell it. There's no flair, no joy in the tale. You need to draw me in, make me want to hear it be told. You had the advantage, that I know nothing of this period. You should have peppered it with tantalizing hints about the soldiers and who they serve. Make every description a sliver of hidden knowledge, and leave me hungry for the rest." She had leaned in towards him as she spoke, caught up in her reverie, but broke off suddenly and returned to studying the scenery. "I get what you were saying though, and I'm glad to know I'm not the only one."

"We rarely are." He was struck again by the oddity of sharing camaraderie with a vampire, but embraced it rather than shy away. It is a noble thing to show courtesy to one's enemies, for it is in fields tilled by strife that virtue thrives. He was fairly certain it was Prelate Gathran who had said it, in one of the meditations on Saryoni. The third? As he tried to remember which of the holy tracts had contained the passage he was thinking of, the sun finally showed itself to the east, peering over the mountains that framed the lightening sky. Light streamed over them, and just as quickly Serana had pulled a hood over her head and a scarf over her face.

He turned to regard in her new wrappings. "You said you could travel by day." He knew vampires shunned daylight, but if she could not have sunlight on her skin or some such nonsense, there would be conflict much sooner than he had anticipated.

"I can, it is just...unpleasant." She said no more, and Velandryn did not ask. Lydia had stopped a ways behind them, apparently giving them their privacy. But not out of crossbow range, I would wager. He had not missed the way that she kept a weapon close to hand at all times, and he was not about to fault her for it. While he doubted Serana would try to attack either one of them, she had been asleep for a very long time, and her hunger could well pose an issue. At the moment, though, there was nothing he could do short of making an ultimatum that could well turn her against him. So, he turned and watched the rising sun.

Azura's grace was encompassed in the rising and setting of the sun. Her power lay in the in-betweens, in the border between Things that were. Her homilies gloried in the uncertain future and ten thousand shades of grey, and her priests encouraged a healthy inquiry into all things. It had been Azura who had sent the Incarnate, Lord Nerevar reborn, to cleanse the lies of the False Tribunal and restore the Dunmer to the True Path. While some whispered that she had been greatly weakened by Vivec's treachery, all agreed that she was the guiding light of the Dunmer, and the most benevolent of the Triune gods. Boethiah might cherish the martial and uncompromising spirit of his people and Mephala surely took joy in the cunning and secret wisdom they displayed, but it was Azura alone who loved them for the beauty of their souls. While he acknowledged all three of the Triune equally in his meditations, at this moment more than any other, the instant of the broken dawn, he could feel the love of the Twilight Queen.

"You're Chimer, aren't you?" Her words caught him in the mid-thought, and he could only look at her dumbly, hoping his surprise was not too visible. She wasn't fully correct, of course; there had
been no Chimer for four thousand years, but she was as close as one could reasonably expect given her knowledge. He had to admit, he was grudgingly impressed.

After a heartbeat, he found his voice. "What exactly gave you that impression?" Of course, there was no need to make this easy, or show any more cards than he was sure she knew that he was holding. Whatever this was, it was a long way from friendship.

"It was simple, once I realized I had been approaching the problem wrong. I was trying to figure out what you were based on appearance, and conforming my guesses to that framework. Once I stopped factoring in your look, it all started to fit. You clearly expected me to be able to figure out what you were, meaning that your people and the Nords had some contact thousands of years ago. If you were some sort of strange elf from abroad, you would have responded differently. More importantly, you acted like a Chimer, once I let myself see it. Proud, determined, insistent on your right to pursue your goals. You are skilled at magic, but show signs of martial aptitude, and, most importantly, are extremely well versed in Daedric summoning. That blade you used against the draugr was superbly realized, which either indicates a high degree of mastery or an exceptionally adept connection to Oblivion. The Changed Elves worship Daedra. That's why your people left Aldmeris, right?" She had turned away from the dawn, and was talking slower now, ticking off points on her fingers. "Given the way you use spells, you are at best a skilled amateur at battle magic, but you have experience with spellcraft, meaning a culture that focuses on use of magic as part of life. Again, though, that could be many elven cultures, especially since it's been four thousand years. Then, then you said one word, and that did it." He had only to see someone's eyes to know if they were laughing; inside she must have been roaring with mirth. "You said you were acting the perfect… and then you stopped. You said self-assured was the watchword, the thing that would have been typical of your people." She paused, and then continued. "I once saw a Chimer brought before my father. She had been captured in some battle during the conquest of Morrowind, and somehow had made her way to us. We fed on her, of course, but I'll never forget how she raged. Not for the capture, or the feeding, but for worshipping Molag Bal. She invoked 'The Three;' I still remember that. A face, contorted with rage, screaming that we would be brought low by Azura and our plans would collapse, that we worshipped the weakness and would burn in the face of strength. You reminded me of her, in some way I cannot quite identify. Also, you use fire more than normal, both in magic and in your speech. Chimer are attracted to fire, everyone knows that."

Let the soul of the faithful be borne to the Far Realms, she who died shouting truth to the face of the sharmat. "A weak case; no arbiter would convict based on such evidence, though you are not wrong. You should know, your nameless Chimer was right. Molag Bal is to be respected as a cunning foe, but he should not be worshipped."

She leaned in. "Okay, I'll argue with that later. But you are, you're Chimer? What, what happened to you? Were you cursed? Were you born like that?"

Velandryn smiled, a human one, letting his lips curl up. No teeth, no intimidation, just smug pleasure. "Now that is a good story. I hope you have something to offer in return." He had an idea about what that could be, as he was growing more and more curious about that bundle on her back. For now, though, he left their perch and continued trudging down the slope. "Lydia, how far to Heljarchen?"

"Maybe three hours, maybe more, my—"

"Good, I look forward to a hot meal." He slightly regretted interrupting her so rudely, but he would prefer that Serana not learn he was a thane just yet. Truth be told, he did not care overmuch that it be kept secret, but she had figured out the essentials of his race from a few dropped words, and that stung. He would be damned if he gave any more of himself up so easily.
It turned out that Lydia's estimate of 'maybe three hours' to Heljarchen was wildly optimistic, and 'maybe more' was putting it mildly; Serana saw the shapes of the structures from afar around midday, and it was early afternoon before they entered the town proper. Well, as much as Heljarchen could be said to have a 'town proper.' An Atmoran totem-stone stood tall and solitary in the middle of an open space; Serana could discern Bear, Fox, and Dragon upon its weather beaten face. It was surrounded by a dozen or so buildings, only one with a second story, and that seemingly a barn of some sort, given the hay visible through the open door. Everything was made of stone and wood, and the roofs looked to be nothing more than packed earth and thatching; efficient building materials, no doubt, but dreadfully boring. A part of her had been hoping for something exotic, given how long had passed and the oddities of her companions. This town, though, would not have been out of place in her father's lands before she had left. And the people looked little different than she remembered, wearing rough, sturdy clothing and carrying well-made but simple tools. If Heljarchen was anything like her father's towns, there would be a smith responsible for those tools, while other trades were worked part-time by villagers who had inherited the responsibility or shown a particular aptitude. Everyone worked the earth, with the fields and resources belonging to all. As they had passed through the fields surrounding the buildings, she made note of the people: Nords to the last, barely unchanged from her day. And so things change a little, but mostly stay the same.

Velandryn made his way towards a building built more solidly than most; a squat drum of heavy stone was pressed up against an exterior wall, tools and mechanisms scattered around it. This had to be the forge, and though she could not see any fire, she could feel it even through the walls. Vampires were sensitive to heat, and the amount it radiated made Serana a bit queasy even at this distance. A man in heavy leathers was working metal on an anvil, but he looked up as the three made their approach.

"You return." The smith's words were short, and Serana got the feeling he was the sort of man who preferred spending his days working rather than talking. She had grown into the habit of noticing the necks of those she encountered, and this man had enough thick muscle cording his that she would have a devil of a time working her way to the blood.

"Yes. Our horses?" Clearly, Velandryn was not in the mood for conversation either. Or, she amended, he recognized his partner's desire to have this done with.

"Fed. Watered. Ready to ride. Only needs coin." He held out a huge hand expectantly.

Velandryn looked down at it. "I paid you, and well. We agreed upon payment for two days, and that comes this evening." He pulled out a handful of coins, and selected three. "This should be enough. I will come for them in the morning." He began to stride away

"Elf!" Velandryn turned at the Nord's shout, and Serana could see the blood pulsing in his neck. Clearly not his favorite way to be called. "You pay well, elf, but you talk too big. Have respect, or you might regret it." With that, the burly man returned to his work.

Serana drew even with Velandryn as he walked towards the one of the buildings around the totem-stone, a broad structure that might have been the common-house. He seemed all right, if not overjoyed at how the conversation had ended. "Not much changes, does it?" His voice was wry through its low tones and accent. "Would it have been the same in your time if an elf stood up for himself?"

"In my time?" She tried to imagine what would have happened to a free elf who had come through her father's lands and not shown the Nords deference. "You would not have gotten the warning."
The common-house was too warm, and the cold firepit in the center of the single room would doubtless fill the air with smoke when lit. However, there were a half-dozen beds arrayed around the edges, and everything seemed clean enough to spend the night. Clearly, that was what her companions had in mind, and she had no grounds to argue. By the sound of it, they had been travelling and fighting for the past two days, and even she would be fatigued after that. These mortals must be dead on their feet. She had no need for sleep, and would not spend her night indoors, but she would at least let the Nords of this place see her bed down before making her departure. There was no need to arouse suspicion.

With a groan, Velandryn eased himself onto one of the beds and stretched himself out. Lydia was unslinging her weapons and strange metal armor, arranging them by her bed with alarming speed and precision. The ebony warhammer stymied her for a moment, but she eventually propped it up behind Velandryn's bed, an action which caused the elf to blink and murmur tired acknowledgment. After that, the Nord woman, now clad only in a tunic, leggings, boots and a dagger in her belt, moved towards the door. After a moment's thought, Serana followed, pulling back on her hood and scarf before leaving the room.

She caught Lydia at the totem-stone. The Nord was looking up at the carvings, face still and thoughtful. "Your people still hold to the old gods of Atmora, I see."

Lydia shot her a look of pure surprise. "No, no, not our gods. Those there, they're," she gestured helplessly, "traditional. Hang a wreath on the stone at New Year's Turning and build a pyre beneath it on Ysgramor's Day, but worship? Maybe you ask Moth for her beauty or Dragon for his strength, but nobody really takes it seriously. Some might in the high hills, but Heljarchen isn't remote enough for that, I don't think." She looked around them with new suspicion. "At least, I don't think so. I hope not. Most Nords aren't like that. We hold to the Nord gods, or the Imperial ones, or maybe just Talos."

"Ah." In her day, the Nords had worshipped their own pantheon, though this Talos was unknown to her, as were these Imperial gods. She knew there was an Elven pantheon, but she could hardly imagine the Nords choosing to worship elven gods. The Empire again. She had to learn more. Perhaps Lydia would serve if Velandryn will not. By the look of things, she was not so guarded with her answers as he.

"So, Lydia, how do you feel about all of this?" If she was going to get the woman to open up to her, it was best to clear the air between them. "About helping me, even being what I am?" She could read body language very well, and Lydia's was very clear.

"I think it is dangerous. I think you are dangerous. If you wanted, you could do great harm, and I am not certain we can trust you."

Well, at least she is honest.

"And you couldn't do the same? I've seen you swing that sword. If you took it into your head, you could kill half the village, maybe more, before they could stop you." Not the best way to gain her trust, Serana.

The other woman blushed. "I would not—such a thing is unthinkable!"

"And you think I would just murder innocents? Do you think so little of me that you are worried I will slaughter these people?" Part of it was an act to put Lydia on the defensive, but it still hurt that this woman, whom she had never wronged, sincerely thought she would kill these people for no reason. After Velandryn's gesture when she had fallen, she had hoped for more from his...whatever Lydia was.

Lydia's eyes narrowed. "If you hungered, if you needed their blood, wouldn't you feed from one of
them? I know what you vampires call us. Cattle, you say. We are beasts to you." Her voice was low, but Serana still hurriedly checked their surroundings; her being revealed as a vampire would make their time here far more eventful than she wanted.

"Keep your voice down!" Lydia had the grace to look the tiniest bit abashed. "And no, I wouldn't. I won't die from lack of blood, but I will lose some of my good humor." She smiled wryly, a gesture Lydia did not return. "I'm not going to go hunting here, though. Believe me or not, but even if nothing else, consider how foolish I would be to sabotage myself like that. I'm not—" Suddenly, she lost all desire to speak with this woman any further, no matter what information she could get from her. She stalked away, wanting to find someplace quiet, somewhere she wouldn't have to deal with Lydia, with mortals.

In the mountains dusk came early, and the light manifested in magnificent hues as the sun fell. She stood beneath an ancient mountain pine in the sparse forest beyond the town, just…experiencing… the changing light and shadows. She didn't want the sun directly on her skin, of course, but she had always loved the play of sunlight, especially through trees. She had heard stories of the great forests of the south, and one day she wanted to walk through a forest, with trees all around, huge and green and beautiful. She wanted to swim in Lake Ilinalta like the Lady Erendis had when she had been forced to choose between love and duty. Her father's lands had never been green, and while she could appreciate the beauty of Castle Volkihar and the lands it had ruled, she had always dreamed—

No. She was a child no longer, she had an obligation to her family. She had to find out what had happened, to return home and help her family heal. And if they haven't? If her father and mother were still at odds, what then? She had not been certain of her mother's plan, nor even why it was so important that she be sealed away. Valerica had whispered fiercely of it being for her own good, and that her mother would come for her when the danger had passed. And if it hasn't? But what was the alternative? No, she had to return to her family, to her people. A vampire alone in her time had been doomed, and she doubted it was any different in this age. Certainly not if Lydia had her say. Once more she gave thanks for Velandryn's willingness to help her, though she could not help but wonder at that as well. The Chimer had never loved vampires. Maybe he is simply kind. There was no way to know. For now, she simply had to travel with them, and keep her eyes open. She stayed that way for a while, letting the sun and shade paint pictures just for her.

She began to make her way back to the town as the shadows lengthened further, leaving the forest as the light changed to gold and then slowly took on tones of pink. For a moment, she wanted to feel the sunlight on her skin, wanted to grit her teeth and bear the pain, to pull down the hood, unwrap the scarf, and be a part of the colors around her. She considered it, for all of an instant, before hurrying on. It would not do to arouse suspicion. She pushed through the evening wrapped in armor, safe beneath clothing and hood from the temptation around her.

As she drew even with the outermost buildings of the town, she saws someone out of the corner of her eye, a figure in an ashen tunic with grey skin that looked almost blue in the waning light and deep red hair pulled back and tied with a cord. As she turned and stared full-on at his back, she realized that it must be Velandryn Savani. A second look eliminated her surprise at not having recognized him sooner. This was her first time seeing him out of his armor, after all, and with his back turned, no part of him that she knew save his skin was visible to her. He was facing slightly away from her, gazing up at the mountains. A sunset, this time, instead of a sunrise. If he was some type of Chimer, then it was not surprising. They had worshipped Azura, after all, and these were her holy hours. Half of him was cast in shadow, and the overall effect was oddly chilling. As she approached him, she saw his face, and the way the light cast his strong elven features into relief. A grim face, but strong. The dying light caught his eyes and they seemed to glow. His hair and skin combined with those eyes to give him the look of some Daedra sent from Oblivion, of something
not entirely of this world. He looked, not angry, but as though he would command the world to
kneel, and cut it down if it would not. *He looks…*

She shook away the words that came to her and called out to him instead. He turned, and the spell
was broken. His hair and eyes were simply red, and his face just a dark-skinned elf’s. If anything,
he looked less alien than usual; clearly an afternoon of sleep had done him some good.

"Is this how the vampire behaves; to go out by day, and return by night?" From Lydia, those words
would have been the prelude to an attack, or filled with suspicion, but Velandryn sounded
genuinely curious. She recognized, though, a certain look about his eyes that made her think he
might be laughing at her. *At least he’s quieter than Lydia when he calls me a vampire.* His voice
carried surprisingly well when he wished it, but right now anyone who could overhear would have
to be within a few paces.

"My kind have to adapt. I can sleep at night and endure the day, if I must."

"Fascinating." She had the odd feeling that he wasn’t just saying that, but that he had actually
tucked that information away, to be used when needed. *Against me? "You are a Volkihar vampire,
though?"*

She nodded, as he was correct in more ways than he knew. *One of three, and all others sprang
from us.* She had never sired, leaving that to her father. He had selected the fiercest and hardest of
those who had come to them in the aftermath of the ritual. *"Was that in doubt?"

"I have seen several of your kind now, and an inconsistency bothers me." He gestured at her face,
mostly hidden until the sun vanished fully. *"Those we fought in Dimhollow had their faces
deformed, easily marked as different. You, aside from the eyes, appear human. Why?"*

She knew why, but had no desire to reveal the secrets of her clan. *"And what can you offer me in
exchange for such knowledge?"

He shifted. *"The story of my skin, and eyes, though if you are offering secrets in exchange I also
want to know what is in the bundle you keep on your back."

She didn’t want to give that up, but neither did she want to deny him the knowledge. He was the
closest thing she had to an ally in this place, after all. *"How about, I tell you what is on my back,
and then after you tell me your story, I will show it to you and answer your questions."

"A bad deal. For no more than a name, you would have my entire history?"

"I promise, once you know what it is, you will want to hear the rest. You are getting the better end
of this deal."

He gave her a long look. *"Done. Something has felt off around you for some time, though I did not
notice until recently. I think the answer lies in that bundle. Whatever it is, it has power."

"More than you know."

He clapped. *"Then we have a deal. But first, we will go back to the common-house. I have grown
more used to Skyrim’s…fine evenings, but I have no desire to spend time out-of-doors after
sundown."

As they headed back, he gave her a quizzical look. *"You might not know the answer to this, but
where do the people in this town gather? There is no tavern or inn here, no gathering place."
She laughed. "You've spent all your time in cities, I'd wager? This place is so small, everyone knows each other, knows their business. You drink at your friend's house, and the next night you return the favor. These people mind their business, leave well enough alone, and like it that way. When their lord comes by, they'll put him up in the common-house and feast him, but other than that they've no need for visitors. We're an odd group to them, I'd wager, so they'll leave us be. At least, that's how it was in my time."

"Hmm. Some things never change, and Nords will hold to tradition. An odd arrangement. So who controls the town?"

"They argue it out when a decision must be made. For major issues, they obey their lord. Who rules this town?"

Velandryn shrugged. "Whiterun, maybe, or Pale—Dawn—Star? Dawnport perhaps? No, The Pale is the hold, but the city of the jarl is Dawnport, I think. Or Dawnstar. Either way, Heljarchen is trivial. And since it is both remote and on the edge of a contested area, I'd wager the tax collector is the only evidence of a jarl that they see."

"Tax collector. She knew what it meant to collect, but she did not know the word tax. When she asked, he looked genuinely surprised. The trick was his eyes. He showed as much as any human, if you watched his eyes. "Taxes. Collection of money by the ruler or government, standard practice everywhere, as far as I am aware. How did lords collect from the people in your time?"

"Tribute, of course." She half-considered changing her demand to the Empire's story instead of his own. Only for a moment, as she could doubtless get that story from anyone, while Velandryn seemed to be a more special case. It had not escaped her notice, however, that the Nord smith clearly knew enough about Velandryn's race that he was not worth mentioning as more than an elf; he was not some anomaly then.

"Interesting. I would imagine that the word tax was not a necessary part of the slave language you learned. One of the empires likely introduced it as part of their financial reforms. Not my area of expertise, I am afraid." He paused for a moment. "I am impressed. That was the first word you have needed to ask for help on."

He was right, she realized, and it shouldn't have been that way. She was good at languages, always had been, but this was a degree beyond anything she had ever accomplished. She filled in context without thought, and had adapted to the patterns of what was a very different dialect with shocking speed. *Why?* She pushed the question away; she could afford to be distracted later.

They had reached the common-house, and Velandryn pushed open the door. Lydia was within, wiping down her weapons and armor with a scrap of cloth. She inclined her head slightly in their direction, and then returned to her work. One of the tables held a spread of food and three place settings; Velandryn slid onto one of the benches and motioned for Serana to do the same. He ripped off a chunk of bread and slathered it with butter. "Now, for our deal. What are you carrying?"

She took a deep breath. This was it. Her mother had given her the scroll for safekeeping, and warned her of its rarity and power. The moment these two learned of it, it would be out of her control. They could tell others, or try and take it for themselves. *Trust.* She needed to trust them. No, she needed to trust Velandryn, as he could likely keep Lydia in line. And his greed, his passion for knowledge, that she could rely upon. "It's—it's an Elder Scroll."

No turning back now.

She had expected incredulity, but Lydia's sudden burst of laughter shocked her. "I'd wondered when she'd begin lying to keep your interest, my thane!" *Thane? Velandryn is a thane? How did an elf—* She spun to see Velandryn staring at her, the intensity in his eyes making her skin crawl. He
remained motionless, and then his eyes flicked down, staring at a patch on the table. Or rather, staring through the table, to where the scroll had slipped, low-slung on her back.

"She speaks the truth, Lydia." His voice was perfectly measured, and in fact he appeared at first glance the very picture of serenity. However, his eyes were still boring through her, and the silence as Lydia's laughter died off left a void that felt terribly uncomfortable.

"I have told you, now you tell me. What are you, if you aren't Chimer? What is your story?" She had misjudged him, she realized. His passion meant he coveted secrets, but now she feared he might tear her apart to get at the scroll. If I can get him talking about himself, that's my advantage.

He nodded. "That was the deal." He spoke slowly, each words dragged from a mouth that barely moved. "I will tell you, though you must forgive me if I seem…distracted." He gave his subtle smile, an almost imperceptible twitch of the lips that did not change the look in his eyes. "So, where to begin?"

She wasn't sure if he was asking rhetorically or not. "At the beginning?"

Lydia groaned. "Now you've done it."

Velandryn smiled again, and she thought he might actually mean this one. "The beginning. It all began with Veloth, of course—"

"I know about Veloth. He led a group of renegade Aldmer. They practiced Daedra worship instead of traditional elven religion, and became the Chimer." She had learned that much in her studies, and wouldn't let him waste her time with the parts she already knew. This close to the secrets she had been wondering about all day, she wanted them now.

"Half true, but I will save the lecture on Padomaic deviations from Aldmeri doctrine for another time." He pushed the bench back, leaning his back against the wall of the common-house, and spoke in between swallows of meat, bread and water. "Veloth led his followers, who took to calling themselves the Chimer, Changed Elves in human tongue, east to Morrowind, where they encountered another group of dissidents from the Aldmer, the Dwemer. You are familiar with them, yes?"

"As much as any human." They had always been mysterious, but she had loved the idea of their hidden cities and knowledge, and longed to walk their halls and learn their secret crafts. Now, perhaps—

"The Dwemer were not well pleased to see the Chimer arrive. There were basic conflicts in worldview, and while the Chimer were not the most populous people, the Dwemer were even slower to reproduce. The Chimer spread into every corner of their new land, and within a thousand years had fractured into innumerable quarreling tribes and houses. Each chieftain was concerned only with his own prestige, each warlord with her own glory. They fought not only each other but the Dwemer as well, not to mention the numerous Nede and Orc war parties that came their way. We have some evidence of conflict with the Falmer of Skyrim, though their eventual extinction at the hands of your people put an end to that. We fought the Ayleids from time to time, the Akaviri and Atmorans when they bothered to land that far east, the Nords once you settled in Skyrim, and the Argonians when they left their swamps."

"Wait, Argonians?" She had never heard of these. She knew of all of the others, though she had never seen any of the legendary Akaviri, denizens of the mysterious continent to the east.

"The lizards of Black Marsh. You do not know them?"
"No, nor Black Marsh. Where—"

"South and east, the far corner of Tamriel. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised; they are a reclusive people for the most part, and had no reason to come this far north." He looked thoughtful for a moment, but continued. "Anyways, the Chimer were fractured and leaderless, so when the Nords united under whatever High King—"

"It was Harald who united us, and Vrage who conquered you." She recalled that much, the High Kings who had ruled from Windhelm.

"Yes, well, it was simple for a unified people to subdue a fractured one. The Chimer lords were made to bow, the Dwemer abandoned the majority of their surface holdings and fortified the entrances to their strongholds, and Nords poured into the country, claiming the choicest bits of land for themselves and demanding tribute where they pleased. A thousand petty lords sprang up, and many Chimer as well were happy to exploit their own people for their new masters. At the end of the chain, holding the leash, were the warlords, the Tongues of Skyrim, warriors and jarls gifted with Thu'um."

She knew of them. She had never actually seen a Tongue, but their stories were legendary. She had known that they ruled Morrowind, though she had never really given thought to the lives of the Chimer under them. "It didn't last."

"No. The Nord Empire suffered a succession crisis. A second son, or a brother, or something. I don't actually recall."

"Neither, actually." Lydia sat herself down at the table, and helped herself to a portion of the food. "The prospective High King was controversial, and the jarls could not agree on a successor."

"Right. Well, this did not go unnoticed by the Chimer, and one in particular took advantage. He was a war leader of the unremarkable House Indoril, a general by the name of Nerevar Mora."

Serana felt a shiver run down her spine at the tone in his voice. Reverence, bordering on worship. "He freed the Chimer?" She knew her question was hardly insightful, but this clearly had great significance to Velandryn, so she would let him tell the story as he wished, and ask the right questions. For now.

Velandryn sat forward and leaned his elbows on the table, hands clasped before him. "Eventually. His genius lay in the forging of alliances. He knew Morrowind stood no chance against the Nords, even distracted by matters in Skyrim, unless the entire province stood together. He married the Lady Almalexia, leader of House Indoril and inheritor of a bloodline that could be traced back to the days of Veloth, securing legitimacy in the eyes of the nobility. His shield-companions were Alandro Sul and Voryn Dagoth; each brought prestige and weight to his cause. Alandro Sul was called the Son of Azura, and was a hero of the nomadic Ashlanders, Chimer who had never fully submitted to Nord rule. Voryn was of the ruling family of House Dagoth, never numerous but renowned for their ferocity in battle. With those two came their armies, and the love of the warlike and restless among the Chimer. His other advisors were Vivec, a clever mer of unknown history, and Sotha Sil, who is said to have tutored Nerevar in his childhood. Finally, and most improbably, he reached out to Dumac Dwarf-Orc, King of the Dwemer."

"The Dwemer have city-states. There is no 'King of the Dwemer,' I know that much." Serana might not know this new world's history, but if Velandryn wanted to make grand claims, she would keep him honest.

He shrugged. "In Skyrim, in your time, perhaps not. In Vvardenfell, Dumac had control of enough
of the Dwemer that his alliance with Nerevar insured their participation in the uprising. Some doubtless refused, as did some among the Chimer, but they were a negligible part of the whole, and matter little to this story. Regardless, the Chimer and Dwemer rose, united for the first time, to free their homeland. Nerevar was named Hortator, supreme war leader of the Chimer, and threw the Nords into chaos, engaging the Tongues in a series of battles that ended at Red Mountain. The Nords were pushed back into Skyrim, and for a time Nerevar and Dumac ruled their peoples and kept the peace in their united nation of Resdayn. Until Kagrenac. Until the Heart of Lorkhan."

He spoke with solemn gravity, but his words were largely lost on her. "Very interesting, though I don't suppose any of this will actually explain why your skin is that color? Are you half-Dwemer?" She wondered how he would take that, but her interest in his people's history could not be sustained as he buried her under a slew of names that were completely unfamiliar to her. And the Heart of Lorkhan? Whatever relic he was referring to was surely unworthy of such an auspicious name. Lorkhan had created the universe; for good or ill, his was a legacy unrivaled.

"Very well. I will skip over the centuries of peace, and tell you of the Second Battle of Red Mountain. Are you familiar with Red Mountain?"

She was. It dominated the landscape of Morrowind, and rivaled the Throat of the World for height. When she said as much, Velandryn actually chuckled, a low laugh that might have been the friendliest sound he had yet made.

"A point of contention between our peoples, I think. Everybody wants to have the highest mountain. Well, once, at least..." he trailed off and she waited for him to continue. In spite of her earlier thoughts, she did not hate his story, and had learned much from it, about the fate of Skyrim as well as his people. "Kagrenac was Dwemer, and far cleverer than he had any right to be. He found something beneath Red Mountain, a massive heart without a body, beating with tonal resonance, and recognized it as the Heart of Lorkhan, the echoing beat of the Doom Drum that was torn from his chest after he tricked the gods and turned them into our world. Somehow Kagrenac had found it, and with it he devised the greatest heresy any mortal has ever conceived. I will speak no more of it here, save to say that his plan required tools, tools aligned to the tonal resonance of the heart. Do you understand the significance of Tonal Manipulation?"

"It is a Dwemer craft. They use Tonal Magic to shape their creations."

"Correct, or correct enough for our purposes." He looked as though he wanted to say more about it, but returned to his earlier point. "Kagrenac created three tools, a hammer, a sword, and a gauntlet. All were attuned to the heart, and with them he planned to create Numidium, the Walk-Brass God." He fell silent again, and Serana waited for him to continue. Finally, she decided to try and prompt him.

"And? What was it? What happened with it?"

He sighed, and closed his eyes. "We don't know, not fully." He opened them again. "Bits and pieces survive, and those are bad enough. We have accounts from four sides of the conflict, and half of them contradict the other half. More troubling is the substantial evidence that all of them are true. I am not going to go into details now, as it is irrelevant to my final conclusion, and, as importantly, touches on matters of divine metaphysics that I am uncomfortable discussing with a vampire."

He shook his head and took a sip from his mug before continuing. "We know the Nords invaded Morrowind at that time, and were driven back, and that the ghost of Wulfharth, the Ash-God-King, was scattered and destroyed. We know that prior to the battle, the Dwemer were a force to be reckoned with, but by its conclusion, every one of them had vanished from the Mundus, never to be
seen again. And, we know that Nerevar Indoril did not survive to see his people victorious."

"This was the story told by the survivors. Vivec, Almalexia, and Sotha Sil returned from the battle at Red Mountain wielding power such as none among the Chimer had ever seen. They spoke with words that echoed in dimensions beyond comprehension, and moved in ways that mortals could not. They told the Chimer that Lord Nerevar had, with the blessing of Azura, utterly destroyed the Dwemer and the heretic traitors of House Dagoth, though he himself did not survive. The three survivors, the Tribunal, had become gods, chosen by the Triune of Good Daedra to lead the Chimer into the future, as a reward for their strength and determination. As they spoke these words, our skin turned to grey and our eyes to burning red. The Tribunal told us it was a blessing to mark their apotheosis. And the people believed them. When they went forth, they were heralded and worshiped, and ruled undisputed for three and a half thousand years. We took the name of Dunmer, the Dark Elves, victorious in a far corner of Tamriel who had chosen our destiny and resolved to face it full on. So the Tribunal told us, and so we believed."

He had fallen silent, but it was the pregnant silence of thought, not of completion, and Serana was quiet as well. This was too much information for her to process all at once, but it made sense. Well, in a way. The fact that Velandryn was Chimer—no, Dunmer, she reminded herself—was unsurprising. As she had told him that morning, he acted like one of them any way you looked at it. The Dwemer being gone was…well, to be honest she didn't know how to feel about that. She would like to have met some Dwemer, but their disappearance did not affect her much for the present. As for the rest, well, it clearly held great significance for Velandryn, but it meant little enough to her.

Suddenly, Velandryn slammed his fist down on the table and burst out angrily. "We were lied to!" immediately he regained his composure, and continued. "The Tribunal stole their power, and killed Nerevar so that they could rule. Our change wasn't a blessing, it was a promise from Azura, who loved Nerevar and would not forgive the traitorous actions of the Tribunal. She swore to have her vengeance upon them, and we, the Dunmer people, were the bearers of that truth. As gods, the Tribunal tried to erase their guilt, but Alandro Sul witnessed their treachery, and brought the truth to the Ashlanders. For three and a half thousand years my people served false gods, unknowingly bearing the curse of Azura upon our flesh and in our eyes. She changed us so that we could serve as eternal reprimand to the Tribunal, a reminder that she would not forgive and could not forget. And when she made good on her promise, my people were broken three times as punishment and trial, passing through each by changing our ways. We renounced the sins of the past, and resolved to face the future once again. And so we are here." That last was delivered with the cadence of memorization, and he closed his eyes and held his hands over the table. "Zaan it'lar sayn Nerevar valok aln Dunmer, dremes'bal et nur'wahan ke Almsivi. Desh verges Azura, aln fi velen'to!"

Velandryn fell silent then, staring downwards, an expression Serana could not name upon his face. She had never learned Chimeris, and she recognized no more than the vaguest resemblance to Aldmeris, but it had the ring of a prayer. Or a curse. Lydia rose uncertainly, and looked at Serana with confusion writ plain on her face.

Serana felt as though she needed to say something to break the dark mood that had suddenly fallen on the elf. "Umm, I think I understand. We can discuss the Elder Scroll later, if you wish."

And, just like that, the spell was broken. He looked up, once more with an inscrutable face pierced by expressive red eyes. Then, he smiled. "Oh no, not on your life. I gave you a story, and now I want one in return." He extended, long arms reaching above his head and fingers interlocking as he straightened his elbows. He gave a languorous stretch and brought his hands down, pressing them briefly over his eyes before folding them on the table. She realized that she was staring at his almost liquid movement, and reached back to grab the bundle containing the scroll and place it on the table. Again, the elf's focus shifted to the bundle, and hunger flared to life in his eyes. Lydia
drew in her breath and shifted nervously.

Slowly, deliberately, Serana unwrapped her treasure. She remembered the last time she had seen it, her mother slipping it into her hands as they departed the castle at the height of the day. A glint of light as the cloth came away, Velandryn's sharp intake of breath, and, finally, the intricate outer case of an Elder Scroll lay bare on the table, power and myth exposed before the world.

"There is a saying in the Empire, 'to write an Elder Scroll.'" Velandryn's voice was unsteady, but he could not tear his eyes away. "It is the highest significance that can be attached to an action. Completely inaccurate, of course, ludicrously wrong in every particular, but...powerful in meaning." No doubt he could feel it as well, the distortion that took place in its presence. Nobody knew what the Elder Scrolls truly were, her mother had said, but their power was self-evident.

"I don't know where it came from originally, and I'm not entirely sure why it was put into my hands, but this is it."

Velandryn laughed suddenly, an explosion of mirth that made Lydia and Serana flinch at its unexpectedness. "So that's why you could do it! Language picked up in minutes from context, completely accurate recreation of tone, a mind as sharp as anything after sitting in the core in a magical ritual for four thousand years. An Elder Scroll! They rewrite the universe around them, so I suppose nothing should shock me any longer." He rose, still chuckling.

"In my time, they were considered one of the great mysteries of the universe. What have you learned since then?" Clearly, Velandryn had some experience with them, or at least a fair bit of knowledge. She wondered if he could be correct, if the Elder Scroll had somehow eased her awakening and transition. She wondered, suddenly, if her mother had taken it into account when designing her resting place. Since waking up, she had been wondering more and more about her mother's plans. Lydia, judging by her slow retreat from the ornate container, wanted nothing to do with the artifact.

"Little and less. The Moth Cult studied them in the Empire, but I heard that their library vanished one day. Every Scroll in White-Gold Tower, gone all at once. If they have any insights, they've kept them to themselves. They're secretive, the Moth Cult—and the scrolls are too, for that matter. My people never much bothered with them—we prefer our prophecies served Daedric—though some of the Telvanni are rumored to have a few stashed away." He shrugged. "Of course, with Telvanni, you can never be sure. I once heard that the Moth priests tried to record the number of scrolls in their possession, but the count changed each time they made it. The Elder Scrolls are strange, in ways I don't fully understand. I was fascinated by them as a child, like so many other before me. Such mysteries invite discovery. Of course, once you exhaust the basic books, you quickly realize that there is a very good reason those mysteries exist." Velandryn showed his teeth in a mirthless grin. "The Scrolls do not merely exist passively. I've never heard a serious claim made that they have intelligence, but action without an actor...it makes you them is not...conducive...to a long and happy life, I don't think. So, I remain ignorant of much. Seek out a Moth Cultist if you want to know more, I would think. For me, I will stick with admiration. From a distance."

"Moth Priest." That was Lydia, apparently having overcome her aversion and once more approaching the table. "They're Moth Priests, at least assuming we're talking about the same people," Serana had heard of them, though she had never known them to be connected to the Elder Scrolls. Perhaps they had started after her time.

"I defer to you on matters of the Empire. My knowledge comes from two old books and a conversation I had nearly thirty years ago."
Serana sensed an opening. "About the Emp—"

Velandryn cut her off before she could even finish the word. "I gave you the story of my race, and was promised the story of an Elder Scroll. If you want more from me, I'm going to need something more in return." He smiled. "Now, about strains of vampirism and why you are distinct from the other Volkihar we encountered, that I would be interested in learning."

"No." She wouldn't give up the secrets of her family so easily. Not to mention, Velandryn had a mind like a honed blade. He would quickly see the implications of her 'purer' strain and could attempt to discern the source. Those were questions she did not need him asking, and she had the feeling that he was already having thoughts in that direction as it was. However, she had learned enough about him to play him for her purposes. For instance, that he was far stronger on the attack than on defense. Besides which, he liked talking. "It occurs to me that what I want to know is common knowledge, while you seek out my secrets and those of my kind. If I were so inclined, I could obtain the history of the Empire and the events that occurred in Skyrim from anyone. I am certain that someone in this village, for instance, could answer all of my questions."

The elf gave a small smile. "I think if you are seeking accurate and detailed information, Heljarchen is not the place to be. Some of these people can read, I would guess. Not all, but some. Most have probably seen a book at some point in their lives. So, by all means, break ties with us and strike out on your own." He gestured at the door. "Skyrim awaits!"

She rose, and turned for the door. Two could play this game, and if he wanted to be dramatic, she was more than willing to up the stakes. "Fare thee well, elf, and when you lie awake at night consumed with questions, I hope you find some solace." She began wrapping the scroll again. "I know so much that you would never even think to ask. I know of kings and heroes, and the lessons of their lives. I am fluent in four tongues, and have stories from across Tamriel, firsthand accounts of what you call the First Age. I can tell you of your people before the Tribunal, and of knowledge that your false gods doubtless suppressed." A gamble, but knowledge is always lost with time. "But, if you are too proud to tell me what any child of this age knows, then it was simply not meant to be." She smiled, making sure they got a good look at her elongated teeth. "A shame, truly. I have enjoyed our time together, but I will not stay where I am not wanted. A pity," she sighed theatrically, "that your stubbornness prevented this. If only you had been willing to tell me about the Empire—"

"Oh, for St. Delyn's sake get back here!" Serana was relieved that Velandryn's eyes were smiling as she turned around. "You know I won't let you walk out that door, and you know you're more likely to wind up the target of vampire hunters than find a Nord willing to help you like I am. We each have something the other wants, and so, ask your questions." The elf—the Dunmer—sighed and pulled a journal from a bag. "I don't promise secrets, but I'll tell you what you want about the Empire, as far as I know. In return, I'll let you keep the secrets of your family, or clan, or whatever it is, but I do want to know about your time period. You say you have stories, I want them. I want to hear the legends of your past, about Atmora, about the Dragon Cult and the great Alduin. Besides that, I want to know every lie, every rumor, every salacious detail about who my people used to be!" He sobered then, and steepled his fingers. "Do you trust me?"

The question took her aback, and she had to consider for a moment. "To a point. I think our goals are aligned for the present, at least. And you, do you trust me?"

He nodded. "I trust you to act in your own best interest, and for now that interest aligns with mine." He removed a mortar and pestle and a number of alchemical ingredients from the bag at his feet. "I am glad we have established that. I would rather have a state of mutual understanding than some hollow pretense of intimacy."
She could live with that, Serana decided. She sat down across from him as he placed some withered flower in the bowl and began to grind it into powder. "So, the Empire of Cyrodiil. Broad strokes, paint me a picture of its history."

"Empires, actually. We are on the third distinct empire, and the fifth ruling dynasty."

"Fourth." That was Lydia, doing some sort of examination of her strange weapon, which she called a 'crossbow.' "The Potentate doesn't count, my thane." That word again. How is he a thane, and to which jarl?

"The fact they were Akaviri does not erase the fact that they ruled the Second Empire for four hundred years."

"In that case you should include the Tharn Dynasty, as they held the throne during the Interregnum, and Chancellor Ocato, who never sat the throne but ruled in all but name after the end of the Septim line. If we include every despot and schemer who ruled from White-Gold, this list would be infinite. None of the Potentates wore the Amulet of Kings, none of them were…" She trailed off, and Velandryn gave her a look Lydia couldn't identify.

"Dragonborn? No, I suppose they were not. In that case, what of our current Emperor? What of the Medes?"

Lydia looked troubled. "They rule well enough, and the Amulet is no longer needed."

"All right." Velandryn turned back to Serana. "Three distinct political entities and a number of dynasties have ruled from Cyrodiil, starting with the Slave Queen Alessia, who overthrew the Ayleids in the third century of the First Era…"

The smith was working early the next morning, when they visited him for the second time. He led them to their horses wordlessly, but when Velandryn slipped him an extra coin in thanks, he grunted and spoke.

"Dragons on the road last night. A dozen or more, heading south."

Velandryn's stomach dropped. A dozen dragons. One had been bad enough. Twelve could wipe out an army. Lydia's eyes opened wide in shock, while Serana just looked confused. Velandryn realized that the vampire was likely unaware of the reappearance of the mythical beasts. Were they even extinct in her time? He had mentioned the Dragon Cult to her, but given no thought to the possibility that she could also have insight into the dragons themselves. He wasted no time berating himself for not thinking of this sooner, but rather decided to interrogate her about whatever dragonlore she might possess at the earliest opportunity. If there were that many of the bastards around, they would have need of it.

Lydia stepped forward, looking on the edge between panic and fury. She confronted the smith, nearly seizing him by the front of his heavy apron. Velandryn noted with bleak amusement that they were roughly of a height; by the look on the smith's face he was not used to being accosted by women in armor. "A dozen dragons? You are certain?"

The big man nodded. "Hunting for bears, their leader said." He spat on the ground. "Not my business."

"Not…" Velandryn was at a loss for words. Dragons hunting bears?

Suddenly, Lydia started laughing, a full-throated guffaw that poured mirth and relief into the air
around her. "Dragons and bears! You mean the Empire and the Stormcloaks!" She patted the man reassuringly, still laughing, and turned to Velandryn. "Names for some of the guards are their sigils. Empire has the dragon banner, Stormcloaks wear the Bear of Windhelm. Whiterun we got called 'horses' when patrolling."

Velandryn had never had fear desert him so quickly. He regarded the smith, feeling the indescribable lightness of not being condemned to death. "Are the Imperials likely to give us any trouble?"

"Dragons don't care so long as you don't make trouble. Bears don't like elves." He grinned. "Show respect and they might let you be." This was more words then Velandryn had heard from the smith yet, maybe more than all of their previous conversations put together.

Lydia had calmed herself, it seemed. "Who do you favor? What is the feeling in this town?"

The smith spat again. "Not my business, I said. Dragon and bear can kill each other over their stupid fight."

"You don't care about the Concordat, or the Empire?" Serana had only learned about the conflict last night, but by the question she was eager to find out more. Velandryn listened closely as well; Lydia had to explain the roots of the Stormcloaks to Serana last night, as his own knowledge was sadly lacking.

"Elves never stopped me praying, so why should I care? I got a forge and family, that's enough for me." He was only paying half a mind to the conversation, and did not seem to care about Serana's hidden face.

"So, then shouldn't you support the Stormcloaks, so everyone can worship like you?" Serana's question seemed like innocent curiosity, but Velandryn wondered what game she was playing.

The blacksmith frowned. "May be you're right." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, attention now fully on the vampire.

Serana was not done, however. "But Talos created the Empire, didn't he?" Suddenly, their chat about the Empire's history last night didn't seem quite so innocent. "Wouldn't you be opposing the very thing your god created?"

The smith's eyes narrowed. "I don't like this game, girl. If you want to say something, say it plain."

Serana bowed, looking somewhat odd given her hood and scarf. "I meant no offense. I know little of the war, and was curious."

The smith looked at her for a long moment. Then, he gestured at the shed attached to his house. "Your horses. Take them." Seemingly done with the conversation, he trudged back to his work.

Velandryn turned to Serana. "Is there anything else you would like to do before we depart? Stir up some ethnic tensions or tell an Ashlander that the Tribunal was correct? Please, don't let me stop you."

"It's an ancient technique; challenge a statement with questions to learn an individual's true viewpoint. I wanted to know more about this civil war."

"Yes, I'm familiar with Drellen's Principles of Rhetoric. I do take exception, however, when you make Nords wonder whether they should be joining the movement that thinks my people are enemies to be killed on sight."
"I don't know who Drellen is, but it sounds like he stole his principles from Gaenic of Daggerall. Also, I thought it was an Altmer faction that was responsible for the banning of Talos worship. You Dunmer don't care, you said."

"And the average Nord in Heljarchen is very unlikely to appreciate that distinction!" He lowered his voice and glared at her, though there was no real fire behind it. "Just... just don't bring up the Stormcloaks when I'm around. Please. Most likely, nothing happens. But, if it does, that's a lot more trouble than I want." It was impressive, in a way, how easily she got under his skin. Innocent little pinpricks, until you felt the barbs beneath the skin. Serana was smart, and used that knowledge to prod the world and watch it dance. And now she's prodding me, I'd wager.

"All right." She seemed perfectly willing to acquiesce, but he got the feeling it was more to shut him up than anything. Damn vampire. He wished that Heljarchen had a horse to spare, so he could refuse to buy it for her.

They were making good time, even afoot, Lydia was pleased to note. Three people and two horses made for an uncomfortable situation, as she could not be on a horse with both her armor and another person, and letting her thane be on a horse with the vampire was a risk she would not take. So, they walked. The road was little more than a suggestion, with occasional posts or stones demarcating a border; clearly Heljarchen had never warranted having stone laid to show the way. The winding road circumvented hills rather than scaling them, which restricted lines of sight somewhat, and the foliage was too sparse to offer much cover. Neither the Empire nor the Stormcloaks should attack them, but Lydia had been on too many patrols gone suddenly wrong to relax just because they were probably safe.

However, all in all, she was fairly well pleased. The day was pleasant, she was well-rested, and they were finally moving again. From here on out, their immediate task was clear. Deliver Serana, learn all they could about Lord Harkon and his vampires, and then inform the Dawnguard and burn it all to the ground. She glanced over at Velandryn, who moved in closer, leading his horse. Serana, she noticed, was some ways off, peering down at a bush. 'A word, my thane?'

He made his way over to her, leading his horse. "Just so you know, she's asked about my title twice now. I've told her I am a thane of Whiterun, but have not elaborated on why." He gave her a significant look. "I do not want her learning why. That information is ours alone for now."

"Of course, and, I'm sorry, my thane." She should have been more careful, she knew, but it had simply slipped out.

He dismissed it with a wave of his hand. "It happens. I have been thinking, though, is there any other way that you would feel comfortable addressing me? As far as I know there are very few mer thanes in Skyrim." He paused. "Actually, I might be the only one." He gave her a questioning look.

"Elven thanes? I don't think there are very many at all. I can call you 'sir,' I suppose, though that sounds odd to my ears."

"Why not Velandryn? It is my name."

"The disrespect, my thane! I could not simply..." She trailed off, not quite able to put her feeling into words. Nords were not Imperials, to use titles for every office; nor were they Bretons, who gave themselves ridiculous airs and names to set themselves above their fellows. Nords respected deeds, and conferred titles of prestige only upon the deserving. As a result, those few titles that they did have were treated far more seriously. If Velandryn Savani was a thane of Whiterun, then he was due the honor of that distinction, no matter what he might think. For his housecarl to ignore..."
"Lydia, if you truly don't want to, I will not force you to call me by name." His face was as still as ever, but his eyes were soft, and she knew that he was making an effort, for all that he did not understand.

She bowed her head. In spite of it all, he was trying, and she should try as well. "Thank you… Velandryn." She grimaced, the name feeling wrong when she said it. "I understand the need to travel quietly, and I will do my best." She gave him a sheepish smile. "I make no promises, though." She wouldn't forget again, but she needed to find a good replacement for those two words. She was about to ask what he would want, when she heard Serana call out.

"Soldiers ahead!" The vampire's voice was sharp with alarm.

Lydia pushed her thane behind her, drawing her sword the moment her arm was clear. Serana was standing still, head cocked.

"You heard them?" Her thane seemed calm enough, though she noticed he had released the horse's rein and eased his hands free.

Serana paused for a moment. "Boots, more than one pair, heavy tread. I know what soldiers sound —"

At that moment, they came into view. Eight of them, moving at a fast pace down the road, with diamond shields and various weapons. Upon seeing Lydia and her companions, the newcomers abandoned their loose march and spread across the road, giving them the advantage should the three try to fight or flee. One of them, who wore ornate plate armor with a crested helm and crimson cloak, seemed to be in command; to his left was a smaller figure, Breton or Nibenese Imperial most likely, wearing mage's robes over steel armor. The rest were in leather and light mail. On shields and armor was the same symbol, a dragon in the general shape of a diamond, black on red. An Imperial war party.

"Travelers! Where are you headed?" The one in the crested helm seemed to be the leader, given that he was the one to call the challenge. Although his skin was dark enough that he was likely of Redguard blood, he spoke with the accent of central Cyrodiil.

"Solitude, via Mortal." Velandryn spoke quickly and easily, face animated with what Lydia knew to be practiced and what she suspected to be insincere good cheer. "Good to see some friendly faces on the road."

"Likewise, always good to encounter citizens, though you should be aware that there is a significant rebel presence in the area." The captain had removed his helm and was coming closer now, smiling broadly. Lydia could not help but notice that his party had not relaxed; every eye was on them and every weapon a hairsbreadth away from an attack. She counted four bows, and the mage besides. "Have you had any encounters with them?"

"None at all. We spent the night in Heljarchen, and heard that there were a few bands about. We're just travelers, though, and I don't think we have anything worth their time." Lydia knew that this could go bad very quickly, but Velandryn was doing everything right. The fact that he was a Dark Elf likely didn't hurt; the Imperials liked to imagine the Stormcloaks as terribly racist against elves. The reality was more complicated, of course, but hopefully this prejudice would work in their favor.

"I see." The commander seemed perfectly at ease, but Lydia would not be happy until this patrol
was gone. "And where were you coming from?"

Velandryn paused for the merest second, and Lydia tensed, knowing the issue they faced. Almost all traffic from Whiterun to Solitude travelled along the Silver Road to Rorikstead and then up through Dragon Bridge. Even if they had some reason to be going via Morthal, the Labyrinthian Way would have taken them over the mountains and into the marsh in three days rather than the two weeks it took to cross through the Pale. It was far safer besides, despite passing along the ruined city. No bandit was foolish enough to set up camp in Labyrinthian. Unless Velandryn planned to announce that they had come from Stormcloak lands, their presence here was not easily explained. One did not simply wander in the wilds of Skyrim in these troubled times.

"From Whiterun, though I confess we did not take the most direct route, and that's my fault. I had read about a species of ground moss endemic to the Stonehills region, and was eager to take samples." He grinned disarmingly. "Alas, I was unable to find any. Fortunately, I budgeted well enough that Lydia here is being well compensated for this wild guar chase!"

Lydia grunted, not wanting to trip over herself if she tried to lie. The Redguard nodded, and turned to Serana. "And you, erm, miss?" Clearly, he wasn't sure what to make of Serana, wrapped as she was against the sun.

Velandryn smiled. "My assistant. Brilliant mind, but very shy."

The captain leaned in close, examining her. "Miss, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, sir, and thank you." Serana's voice was prefect, with a hint of diffidence but conveying absolute sincerity. Not for the first time, Lydia was struck by this ability that her thane and this woman had, to conceal themselves and become who they needed to be. "Is there someplace nearby I could find another horse, by chance? I fell when mine broke a leg some days ago, and they had none to spare in Heljarchen. It is dreadfully cold up here, isn't it?"

"That it is miss, though we don't mind, so long as our duty is here. You should keep warm, though. I'm afraid there's nowhere to find a horse before Morthal." The commander grinned and turned away, seemingly satisfied. "Very well, then, let's be off!" He gestured, and his men relaxed. The two groups began moving then, some of the soldiers nodding in greeting as they approached.

Velandryn walked his horse to one side of the road, and Lydia did the same on the other. It was a maxim universally observed that when two groups passed on the road, the one who could more easily slaughter the other got the center. It only made sense that Velandryn wanted to concede that honor to the Imperials, as there was no benefit from doing otherwise. She looked at him, standing there with his horse, unarmed but for a dagger or two and the bow on his horse. Standing there, breathing easily, and possessing a voice that could shatter the earth beneath their feet. Serana stood beside him, her slim arms and slight frame belying a strength and speed that had helped lay waste to an army of the dead. Both were deadly spellcasters, and her thane especially seemed to have a knack for magical improvisation that gave him an unexpected edge. He was deadlier than he thought, she had learned, and for all that he protested that he was unskilled at combat he had shown marked improvement since she had gotten her hands on him.

She observed two of the soldiers as they passed by. The male was a Nord, wearing a chainmail hauberk and well-cut leathers. The female was Imperial Nibenese, small and dark with olive skin, armored in lighter fare. She watched how they moved, and considered the small arsenal she had available. *I could take two, maybe three of them, if it came down to it.*

She watched the commander as he moved off, secure in the superiority of his forces. With that battlemage backing them up, he might even be right. *Might.* She regarded her two companions
again. *Might not.* Once they had passed, the three continued on down the road, towards Morthal and Solitude, and Lydia continued to wonder.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: A character-based chapter, which I enjoy writing but doesn't progress things much. After this things will pick up, rest assured.

Note that when people in this story are talking about history, they are providing only their own interpretation. Velandryn is knowledgeable about New Temple doctrine, and knows the history of his people as he has been taught, the good and the bad. That does not give him omniscient insight into matters beyond his experience. Everyone has a bias, and everyone wants to look good.

Also, I am definitely not categorically stating that an Elder Scroll teaches you languages. What I am saying is that if you spend four millennia spooning a fragment of creation while in the center of a magical array designed to preserve and contain, you might wind up with some side effects. Or their speculation is wrong, and Serana is just that good at languages.

The excerpt from the beginning is taken largely from Saryoni’s Sermons, an in-game book in Morrowind. I have updated it but the original text is not mine.

"Zaan it'lar sayn Nerevar valok aln Dunmer, dremes'bal et nur'wahan ke Almsivi. Desh verges Azura, aln fi velen'to!" – Nerevar set the Dunmer free two times, breaking the chains of outlanders and Almsivi. By the grace of Azura, we have been remade!

A Dunmer prayer of the New Temple, praising Azura for sending the Nerevarine to save the Dunmer from the false forces that ruled over them. Generally associated with the Cult of Nerevar, and popular among Redoran and Sadras members of the Temple. Indoril factions discourage its use.
Morthal

Chapter Summary

Morthal isn't fun, but sometimes you wind up there.

Chapter Notes

AwesomeTeaPanda: Thanks for the kind words! The unrealized potential of Skyrim annoyed me more than in probably reasonable, so this is my poor attempt to do it justice. And rest assured, I will take all of the time I need for these relationships to develop. These are all individuals with goals and personalities that are not always in alignment, so some friction is to be expected. And considering all of the other shit I'm gonna throw at them...yeah. I'm having a ball writing this though, so I'm glad you're enjoying reading it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Have your people undergone a crisis of faith in light of the recent calamities that have befallen the Dunmer? Your Daedra worship seems not to protect you from misfortune.

You misunderstand. The Triune does not shield us. They are the Good Daedra because they have shown us the correct way. If, as you said, calamity befell us, it was no one's doing but our own.

So you are saying that the Dunmer are to blame for the Red Year and the Argonian Invasion?

Blame? Again, you do not understand. We disdain your Divines for the same reason your find our ways barbaric. How can your gods be praised if they coddle you? You beseech them to aid you, rather than asking for the strength to overcomes the challenges before you. We exist, and what is existence but strife? We seek the strength to overcome adversity, not the chance to avoid it. The tragedies of our past occurred, and we may mourn our dead and grieve. But, when all is done, we stand again, stronger for having overcome that trial.

So then, what is the difference between the 'Good Triune' and the four Daedra you classify as the 'House of Troubles'?

I could point to history, and the lessons that the Triune gave us, even as the House tried to destroy us, but there is only one difference, truly. All of the history, it can be tied back to their relationship to our people. The House of Troubles throws misfortune at us so that we will fail. The Triune tests us so that we may succeed.

Heron Antios, Interviews of Faith, Part 9: Dunmer and Daedra

The swamp stank. Serana's nose was covered by her wrapping, but she could make out the smell, and for once she regretted her heightened senses. The wind had been from the west for most of the
day, but this was the first time she had smelled the swamp. It smelled of rot and salt water, and a hint of something sickly sweet. They were still in the snowy forest, skirting the foothills of the mountains that Lydia called the Crest Range, though in her time they had been the Hjaaldruun. To Velandryn they were simply "those mountains," an approach that Serana had to admit possessed an elegant simplicity, though she imagined that he would be the first to tell them the name of every feature in his homeland. There was still a great deal about him that she did not understand, and one of the biggest mysteries was why he had come to Skyrim in the first place. There was also something going on with dragons, judging by his and Lydia's reactions when the smith in Heljarchen had mentioned them and the questions Velandryn had asked when they made camp for the evening. She had told him the truth, that there were dragons in the remote places of Skyrim, but they did not usually approach areas of habitation. She had certainly never seen one. In return, she had learned that dragons had long been thought extinct, but had recently been seen again. There was something else, something important that he wasn't telling her, but she could not get it out of him. He would simply ask pointedly about her home, family, and vampirism. Lydia knew as well, judging by the way the big woman spoke to her. Or, rather, how she didn't. She had clearly figured out that Serana was better at winnowing out information than Lydia was at concealing it, so she had gone for a policy of almost total silence, generally communicating with grunts and single words unless the elf was present. However, they maintained a pleasant enough peace, with all agreeing by unspoken consent not to breach those topics of conversation that they all knew would lead nowhere. She should have known it couldn't last.

They had encountered two more Imperial patrols in the five days since Heljarchen, and none had given them any real trouble. Velandryn had explained that the Empire had many Dunmer citizens, and in fact the entire province of Morrowind was an Imperial holding, though by the sound of it in name only. All had warned them to watch out for bandits or Stormcloaks. It seemed that the three of them were not the sort of folk who roused suspicions, something for which Serana felt duly grateful. Their only encounter with ruffians came later that same day, perhaps an hour after Serana first noticed the swamp's smell.

It was six or seven rough men and women, all Nords by the look of it, wearing a patchwork assortment of leather and the heavy metal armor that seemed to be common in this age, though it still seemed odd to Serana. They came charging out of the trees, apparently so overwhelmed by the sight of laden horses and travelers that they never stopped to consider if their method of attack was the wisest course of action. Lydia drew her crossbow so quickly that even Serana was unsure if she could have done it faster, and Velandryn had his own bow out only a second behind. The Nord woman's odd-looking projectile, which she called a 'bolt,' punched clean through one bandit's chestplate, sending the big man reeling back before he collapsed to the ground unmoving. Velandryn's shot only staggered his target, but he followed it up with three more that sent the bandit to the ground as well. For her part, Serana filled the air between her and the closest foe with frost and shards of ice, until he was huddled in on himself, half-frozen and bleeding from where the magic had impacted him. She kicked him onto his back and slashed through his throat with a single swipe of her blade. The hot blood gushed out, steaming and hissing as it cascaded over his icy chest and pooled on the ground.

The blood.

Serana couldn't look away, the blood, smelling so sweet, was right there. It was dripping into the snow, and the red haunted her, filling her eyes. She could see no other colors, and could not have turned and walked away even if she wanted to. Haltingly, longingly, she stepped forward. One more step, then down to her knees, then it would be hers, she could drink it, she could feel it on her lips, the wetness on her tongue, she could caress it and play with it, swallow the sweetness and let it slide down her throat, warm her and fill her Oh mine Lord how long has it been—
A scream sounded somewhere, far off, only to cut off abruptly. A rush of heat from behind her and the clash of metal served to interrupt her rapturous imaginings. Angrily, she forced herself away, almost weeping as the color leeched out into the snow, fading and crawling away. She wanted to snarl when she saw that it was nothing but Lydia beating down another of the thugs, while Velandryn raised a hand and wreathed a charging woman in flame. Serana could have thrown herself to the ground and cut more holes in the body to get at the sweet blood that must still remain inside, but as Lydia's sword cut deep, more blood gushed out from a fresh wound. *Fresh.* Without thought, she was running towards the falling body, eyes fixed on the crimson droplets dancing in the air. She could *taste* them already, she could—

Pain lanced through her chest, and she screamed, the pain raw and harsh. She spun and met the eyes of the archer who had shot her, and he knocked another arrow and drew it back to his ear, grinning. She raised her hand, and let the most ancient of the vampire spells, the draining of another's life, course through her. The magic left her hand, linking the two of them, and she gasped as the energy flowed into her. It could not abate her hunger, as even the most powerful of her kind could do little more than siphon a trickle of energy from an aware and vigorous target using this spell. However, it calmed her for an instant, focusing her mind and letting her overcome the desires within. She closed on the bandit, contemptuously dodging his hastily loosed arrow. She did not move fast, savoring the fear that rolled off of him, slowing her pace as the bow fell from his hands. He drew an axe, but it was too little to stand against the likes of her. His grip was weak, and she batted his weapon aside, sending it spinning far out of his grasp. Now unarmed, he stood before her, and the blood roiled within him. *Fear.* She had always felt sick after drinking the blood of one consumed with fear, but now it sang to her. *I want it.* She wanted to drain him dry, to take each drop of him, filled with his fear, and drink it, let it—

Suddenly, a flash came from the corner of her eye, and a bolt of fire tore through the bandit. He screamed as flame billowed out from the point of impact, and in seconds was at the center of a billowing ball of red-orange destruction. Serana flinched back, throwing her arms up by instinct to shield her face from the painful blast of heat and light. The conflagration quickly consumed the hapless outlaw, until his charred corpse was all that remained. Furious at being deprived of her blood, Serana spun, looking for whoever had done this. She knew who had done it, but she couldn't stop herself. She wanted to *see* them, to make them *pay* for depriving her of her desire.

The grey elf, the *clever* elf, was there, standing still, facing her with empty hands. She crouched, readying herself to spring. She could feel the residue of magicka around him, bleeding off like heat from the body at her feet. Off past the edge of the road, the armored Nord, the *hateful* Nord, was putting a blade in the belly of the last of those who had attacked them. *Us.* They had been travelling together, going somewhere, going *home.*

She *saw* home, saw the bodies lying on the tables, saw her father beckoning her to feed, felt the blood—

*The blood.*

She *wanted* the blood. There had been so much, but it had been *taken* from her. Her eyes locked on the elf, who was still watching her. *He took it!* He had burned the fearful one to cinders, boiled the blood that was *hers!* She raised her blade, and suddenly *felt* it as it washed over her, burning, beating, pulsing. Inundated with magicka as he was, his blood sang her a love song, and she wanted to *bathe* in it. She took a halting step forward, with none of her usual grace, *needing* the sensation his blood would give. Not the armored one, she was all wrapped in steel and dull besides. It was the blood of the grey one she craved. There was magic in it, and something more. Something *ancient* that excited her beyond all reason. Her second step was swifter, and her third was almost a leap—
"STOP!" She looked up, eyes wide as the sound rang out, harsh and tinged with something beyond mere sound, but it was not addressed to her. The grey one—the Dunmer—had his hand outstretched. The armored woman had a weapon—a crossbow—aimed straight at her. Both were still, and she suddenly realized that she had stopped moving as well. Some part of her, some shred of reason beneath the hunger had told her that she should stand still when she heard that word. So, they just stood there, all three of them. Serana's hunger, her longing warring with the part of her that was screaming, deep inside, to stop this, that she needed them and even more that they were allies, and that she was not the sort of person who would do this.

The elf took a step forward and her gaze snapped to him. He did not look frightened, and spread his arms as though asking for an embrace. She couldn't imagine how she must look, but she knew that there was a trick here. She wasn't a beast, to snap at bait. When she charged, doubtless he would surround her in fire, or Lydia would put a bolt through her heart. Lydia. The name came back to her, and with it the arguments, the anger.

You see us as cattle! Lydia's words, shouted in anger before a totem-stone. That was wrong though. She knew they weren't, she knew that they hoped and dreamed and loved, the same as her. She had been like them once, how could she not know them? It was only that their lives were so short, and all she needed was a little blood. Couldn't they give that? No, because they hate you. She knew it wasn't that simple, but right now, right now it hurt to think. She had the scent of it, his blood was overpowering, she wanted it, she wanted it—

"Is this what you are?" The elf's words—Velandryn's words, as the name returned to her—did not break through her wanting as much as coil around something in her core. "Is this you? Is this" his voice was heavy with something she could not name "Serana?"

Hearing her name froze her more effectively than any spell, tearing her apart as some vestige of Serana rose at the sound and tried to quiet the hunger. She remembered everything; from the moment she had been overcome she had pushed the memories away, but now she looked at the two before her, and she didn't want to feed on them. No, that wasn't right. She wanted to, and if she had been asked and been lucid enough to answer, she would have said that she wanted their blood—she wanted Velandryn's blood—more than she had ever wanted anything in her life. For her, this moment's desire was fiercer than any she had ever known. It could not truly be so, of course, and some part of her was proud for recognizing that. This hunger had been brought on by her time away, and it was not truly hers. This was the other side of her strength and speed and eternal life. This was the price, and it had to be paid.

She groaned out loud, desire warring with reason as the last few days pitted themselves against the indescribable feeling that was permeating her body. It had long since transcended hunger and was almost sexual in its writhing intensity. She could do it. The sun was hidden behind clouds, and was low in the sky besides. She could reveal her true form, the monstrous body of a Vampire Lord, and deal with them both. From there, she could doubtless make her way back home, where she would be among her own kind again.

But, they helped me. It was a tiny voice, an insignificant plea in the unstoppable maelstrom of the unfed vampire, but she latched onto it and used it to keep afloat, her head just barely out of the waters that lusted for blood. It was wrong to renege against a promise, and even worse to harm those who had given you aid. They had their own reasons, to be sure, but they had helped her, and that mattered. It had to.

Gingerly, painfully, she reclaimed herself, battening down the hunger, desperately suppressing the urge. It was torturous to an extent she could never have imagined, but she knew that the alternative was worse. She did not want to attack them, even as she wanted their blood. She clung to that
distinction, and that tiny difference, that sliver of incompatibility, was the string that could pull her from the pits of her depravity. With a cry of anguish, she curled in upon herself, and the darkness claimed her.

Serana opened her eyes, and Velandryn flinched, though he fully recognized that that was probably not the safest action when facing a vampire who may have gone mad from hunger. Of course, the safest action would have been to let Lydia put a dozen bolts in her and then finish the job with fire. However, Serana, now uncoiling from where she had collapsed, seemed cured of the madness that had infected her. Slowly, carefully, she stood, hands held away from her as she gained her feet with an unsteadiness that was incongruous given the lethal grace with which she usually moved. She would not meet his eyes as she rose.

Beside him, Lydia carefully took aim with the crossbow. "Just say the word, my thane."

Instead, he put out a hand and pushed the weapon downward. "You fought well, Serana." It was true; she had dealt with the first enemy swiftly, and even in her…altered state had incapacitated another. Velandryn had only intervened in the second case because he had seen her face after the blood had fountained up, and refused to be party to a vampire feeding, even on an enemy. He was helping her for now, but the thought of permitting a vampire to drink the blood of another made him almost physically ill. So, he had acted, and faced the consequence. *Whatever that ends up being.*

She looked shaken but sane, and pulled her hood and robe tightly around herself. "Thank you." Her words were rough, with uncharacteristic hoarseness marring her pronunciation. "We should go. I can" she swallowed, choking on the words "smell the swamp, we are probably close to Morthal." She swallowed again, pain writ large on her features.

"Still a day or two." Lydia might have lowered the crossbow, but his housecarl was a taut rope, and he did not want her snapping on Serana. She said nothing more, for which Velandryn was grateful. Her view of the vampire was no secret to any of them, and after Serana's break during the battle, Velandryn was unsure how to handle the situation. She had regained control when he challenged her, but how long would that last? Was the hunger, or whatever vampires felt, still there, just waiting for them to sleep? Not, he thought with a sidelong glance at Lydia, that anybody would be getting much sleep tonight. He and Lydia made a cursory check of the bodies, though he expected to find little. They had been ill-equipped and untrained, and, as it turned out, had only a few paltry coins on them.

Lydia made a disgusted sound. "Fools. Scrapwork leather and armor not worth the wear on the anvil used to make it. Weapons more rust than edge, and none could fight worth a damn." She turned over one of the bodies. "So eager to die."

"Why do it then?" That was the part he never understood. Perhaps they could eke out a few drakes, but this band had been completely inept at anything approaching banditry.

His housecarl shrugged. "Boredom? Farmhands and hunters drunk on tales of adventure. Or, they wanted to be heroes. If they were deserters they'd have better gear, and one or two might have known which end of a sword to use." She grabbed her horse's reins and started on down the road.

Serana simply stood there, looking at the bodies. Some small part of Velandryn feared a return to before, that she would lapse back into that state and attack them again. It was difficult to reconcile the intelligent and curious woman he had pulled from that tomb with what he had just seen. *Isn't that it, though? A vampire's hunger defines them.* He supposed, however, that the same could be said of any mortal needing the things that gave them life. He sighed as he began moving down the
road, taking his horse's reins in hand as he passed it by. *A well-trained beast indeed,* he thought. And they had been doing well, all things considered. An odd camaraderie, vampire and Dunmer, but they had learned how to live with one another. *I wonder if that's over now.*

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Serana following. He was still adamant that this was the best plan, and, truth be told, what had happened today hadn't shaken that certainty. These Volkihar vampires were an unknown, and far too dangerous to be left alone. Besides which, of late he had begun suspecting that Serana was...well, he did not know exactly what, but something other than purely monstrous. Lydia would scoff at him for it, but today had only heightened that sense. For all that she had lost control, he had seen her eyes as she came for his blood, and in that instant had told Lydia to stop. His housecarl could have shot her without killing, he knew. In fact, he was quite certain that a single bolt, no matter how well-placed, would not be enough to put down whatever type of ancient vampire she was.

No, he had not wanted to bring her down, because that battle would only end with death or incapacitation. And in that moment, when he made that choice, he had looked in her eyes. Dunmer were masters of reading emotions from eyes. He still sometimes needed to puzzle out human faces, and eyes were his finest clue. And when he saw the eyes of Serana, gold and beautiful in the face that was a mask of anguished hunger and rage, he recognized what he saw there. And when he had stared into the fear that dwelled deep in Serana's eyes, he had known he did not face a monster.

She got Velandryn alone as he was walking out from behind a tree, retying the laces on his pants absentmindedly. She waited until he noticed her, then closed to speak softly to him. "My thane, we need to talk."

Velandryn glanced back towards the road, where Serana was standing with the horses. Out of sight for certain, and out of earshot as well, Lydia hoped. He nodded into the sparse woods. When they had moved slightly further in, he turned back to face her. "I won't insult you by asking about what."

"We need to do something, and do it now. She's dangerous! Even if she were a paragon of morality by choice, she snapped and nearly killed us in the middle of a battle. What happens next time? What if we're facing something that could actually harm us?" It was unfair, but the obvious example might get through to him. "If she turned while we were fighting a dragon, do you think either of us would survive?"

"If it's just the three of us against a dragon, our odds are fairly bad from the start." He smiled, and ran a hand along his jaw. "If anything, the confusion might throw the dragon off, or make it leave in disgust at our faithlessness."

Lydia snorted. "You mean to continue travelling with her then?" She knew what the answer would be. He might not be as proud of it as some she had known, but her thane was, in his own way, as stubborn as any she had ever met. The fact that most of his ideas were good ones took away some of the aggravation, but the elf was convinced that his plans were the best way to go about things. *And when those plans involve leashing us to a mad vampire..."

"Why would I not? The plan remains unchanged. Do you think she is more dangerous now than she was yesterday?"

"Isn't she? How long can she go before she comes for our blood? You saw her lunge! She was gone!" Lydia forced herself to take a breath. Sometimes, a concession was needed. "Serana...is not an unfeeling monster, I don't think. But it doesn't matter, when she could lose control and attack us!"
He paused, and when he did speak, each word came reluctantly. "On the topic of losing control…" He trailed off, and looked at her thoughtfully. "Being Dragonborn…" He shook his head suddenly, and seemed to come to a decision. "Never mind that for now."

She wondered what he had been about to say, but if it had to do with being Dragonborn, she had her suspicions. His behavior was occasionally erratic, as when he had challenged the draugr in Dimhollow Crypt. The possibility that it could be the Dragon Blood influencing him...All the more reason to get him to the Greybeards as soon as possible. Still, it was a far cry from a vampire's blood-thirst. "She is dangerous, my thane! Not entirely of her own will, perhaps, but that only makes it worse! She could lose control, attack someone, and what happens then?"

"So, say she snaps a second time. Either she is alongside us, or she is alone. If not with us, where does it end? When she comes to her senses, will she be gorging herself on some wanderer? Maybe it will 'only' be a bandit, or maybe it's an Imperial scout. With us, less chance it ends that way." He wasn't wrong, but they had no way of knowing he would be right. Unfortunately, this had been a foregone conclusion from the moment he stopped her from putting a bolt in Serana back during the fight. Well, at least he had thought his position through.

Lydia nodded. "I see your point, my thane, but I'll be watching her."

He looked surprised. It was subtle, but his eyebrows gave it away. "I would hope so, since I'd hate to be the only one making sure she doesn't slaughter us while our backs are turned."

A wave of relief broke over Lydia, and she smiled at him, her first since the incident. "Forgive me, my thane, but I thought you would say something more about trusting her."

It was impressive how easily he conveyed disbelief with only his eyes. "I like Serana, but I'm not blind. Whatever else she is, she's a vampire, and so long as she travels with us, we contain her." He looked at her dead on now, nothing but honesty in his red eyes. "I got you into this, Lydia, and it could well get worse from here. I'm sorry."

She was touched. She didn't believe for a moment that he regretted his actions, but the fact that he was acknowledging her discomfort abated her worries somewhat. She had sworn to serve, and had never doubted that he was fundamentally a good person, but it was nice to be reminded of it every now and again. He could well be wrong, she knew, but she was his housecarl. To serve in that fashion meant not only following orders, but working proactively to make your thane's will a reality. She knew she had neither Velandryn's raw intelligence nor Serana's effortless grace and strength, but she had trained as a guard and warrior her entire life. She would offer her perspective as needed, and her skill when called upon.

With a grin, she clasped her thane by the shoulder. "My thanks, but there's no need. It's a good plan, even if it means we have to deal with her. I just wanted to make sure she hadn't seduced you into seeing things her way."

"Worried I'll go over to the vampires, housecarl?" His tone was light enough, but she wondered if she detected a hint of something else. She studied his face, wishing that she was better at reading him. She hoped it had just been a joke, a result of his dark humor. The moment passed, and he turned back towards the road. "We should head back. She might think we abandoned her and hunt down some food while she waits." He clicked his teeth together a couple of times, just in case she had overlooked such subtle wit.

Definitely humor, bad as it is. She fell into step a pace behind and slightly to one side. She was his housecarl, and if that meant tolerating Dunmer jokes, so be it. She would do her duty, and he...he was the Dragonborn, sent to save them all. Nine preserve us.
It looked a wretched town, Morthal. Since waking, Serana had passed nights in three insignificant towns, two roadside inns, and four farmhouses. She had also spent one night outside of a leather tent containing her traveling companions, watching the moons as she had no need to sleep. As much as she wanted to experience this new world, she wondered if there was a hedge somewhere they could crawl under rather than overnighting here. She couldn't put her finger on it, but she had a strong foreboding that something in this town was going to go wrong in a spectacular fashion. By way her companions were acting, they felt it too. Or perhaps that was just the smell.

They were descending the path down from the mountain road they had been on since leaving Heljarchen, and before them spread Morthal, terribly small against its ominous backdrop. The only city of any size in Hjølmar sat on the edge of the huge marsh that Lydia called the Drajkmyr. When Velandryn heard that, he had snorted and asked if someone had sneezed onto a map when naming it. Supposedly it ended far to the north, bleeding into the Sea of Ghosts and coming up to the edges of the frozen hold called The Pale as well as the foot of the great arch of Solitude. From Serana's vantage, the marsh simply seemed to stretch on forever. Thick mists shrouded trees and pools of water in various levels of darkness, as though anything beyond the range of Morthal's lamps belonged to some other realm. Here and there her eyes could make out shapes moving deep in the gloom, shapes that moved like beasts, though a few had gaits that were disturbingly similar to those of men.

Lydia caught her looking out into the darkness when the big Nord overtook her on the descent. "If you go into the marsh when the fog is rising," her voice was hard, her eyes serious, "you're like never to come back out." Her voice was pitched to carry, and Serana saw Velandryn also staring into the opaque murk, seemingly transfixed. The Dunmer gave his head a shake, caught Serana's eye, raised his eyebrows, and continued on down the path.

Serana wanted to say something, but she couldn't. It had been a day and a night since the incident with the outlaws, and there was still a deep tension in the air between them. To be fair, Lydia was much the same as always; perhaps a shade more watchful, and doubtless carrying some sort of satisfaction at being proven correct. Velandryn, however, watched her now where before he had been content to leave her be; more than once she had turned to see those red eyes regarding her steadily as they drew near on the road or sat around the campfire. She had spent last night huddled in front of their fire, thinking. While a part of her wanted to get away from them and spend the night alone, she didn't want to raise suspicions by sneaking off. Should they think she was out hunting, there was no telling what would happen. While they had never made any sort of deal that she wouldn't feed while with them, she felt it was fairly well implied, and Velandryn's incineration of the bodies showed that he wasn't letting her feed on their foes. So, she stuck close, kept her head down, and prayed for this mistrust to end.

They couldn't understand, those who had never known the hunger. Vampires disliked the word bloodlust, as it made their hunger sound like some bestial impulse, but it was a frighteningly apt label. It was easy to lose oneself when confronted with blood, especially if it had been a long time since the last feeding. And it had been a very long time for Serana. Daughters of Coldharbour did not become drawn and hideous if they failed to feed, but the ache within them was as strong as for any other vampire, and whatever protections her mother had laid on her while she was locked away were doing less and less good. With no small effort, she pushed thoughts of feeding and hunger away to focus on the town before her.

There was a wall around the central part of the town, though it seemed to have been overtaken by time, as large portions were in flagrant disrepair and in several places it had apparently been knocked down to make room for a house or had stones stolen for some other construction. The buildings around them were wood, but all rose from stone foundations, likely a necessity given the
marshy ground. The road they traveled was shaped stone, but many of the smaller streets leading off were no more than gravel or mud covered in wooden planks where it got too wet. It seemed at least one house in ten was vacant, and little traffic filled the streets. Ahead, she could make out a large open space, likely the main square or whatever passed for it in this miserable city.

As they drew closer, a hubbub that had been at the edge of her hearing resolved itself into voices, most shouting angrily or demanding something. She gestured at her companions, and they drew close, though Lydia angled her approach so that she had space to draw her blade. Serana supposed she couldn't really blame her. The real wonder is that Velandryn still trusts me, not that Lydia doesn't.

"Someone is making noise ahead. We should be careful."

Velandryn nodded, and moved on. Serana followed, and Lydia brought up the rear. The vampire shuddered as she passed more houses, both abandoned and inhabited, all of them suffused with an uneasy apprehension. This town made everything feel wrong. Even those few words she had spoken had felt like a heavy burden, and each step was like slogging through thick water. By the way they were moving, her companions were feeling it too, turning uneasily and watching every shadow out of the corner of their eyes. Serana didn't know if it was the mist, the sickly-sweet smell of death and Bal-only-knew what else in the swamp, or some other oppressive magic at work, but she would be glad to be gone from this place. The horses too seemed ill at ease, and Serana once more was seized by a desire to not linger here any longer than necessary, though her companions' aversion to nighttime travel made it unlikely she could avoid staying the night.

The source of the voices Serana had heard became clear the moment they entered the open space, which seemed to be some sort of muster square. A crowd of twenty or so townspeople crowded around a wooden hall, clamoring their demands to speak to the jarl. Four were facing them: two guards in heavy woolen coats over some sort of metal mesh, a warrior in scaled bronze armor, and an old man in finely cut clothing. The longhall was slightly more ornate than the buildings around it, and dominated the side of the square facing the mountains; Serana felt relatively confident in assigning this to be the jarl's dwelling. The banners adorning it were marked with the same emblem as the shields and coats of the guards before it, the three-pronged spiral that was doubtless the symbol of Hjaalmarch. The air around them was tense, and Serana was half-worried that the crowd would explode into violence. There were five or more people shouting at once, and while none of them were moving towards the four before the jarl's doors, if they did it would likely end in blood.

Then, as suddenly as the shouting started, it was done. Right, Nords. Those who had once been her people could be explosive with their anger, but once vented, most were content to live and let live. Some of the townspeople wandered off, others remained in the square, conversing quietly enough that Serana could not make out what they were saying. The two guards seemed to relax, and took up positions on either side of the doors. The man in the bronze armor turned and went back inside, but the old one was coming their way, his steps strong and sure despite his age. He bowed deeply before them.

"Welcome to Morthal." He straightened, and Serana noted his keen eyes and the precise manner of his speech. Clearly this was someone of importance. "Jarl Idgrod has anticipated your arrival, and waits in her hall. If you would follow me?"

Velandryn opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He blinked, closed it, and then, after a moment in which Serana had to imagine he was trying to process such an odd event, asked, "The jarl was expecting us?" There was just enough stress on the fourth word to convey his incredulity.

The old man smiled. "All will be made clear if you would follow me, honored guests." He turned
and, without checking to see if they would follow, made his way toward the double doors, carved with that swirling sigil, that led into what was undoubtedly the jarl's hall. With a sidelong glance at Serana and Lydia, Velandryn followed him. The Dunmer, for all that he clearly had reservations, walked straight and proud across the great yard, drawing the notice of more than a few of the Nords standing around. Once more, Serana wondered who he really was, this apparent thane who delved into tombs to hunt vampires and responded to summons from jarls with as much composure as he did teasing from his traveling companions.

The guards pushed the doors, slightly more impressive now that Serana stood in their shade, open silently as the old man reached them. One of the guards took their reins, handing them off to a boy who had come running from stables attached to the building. Serana supposed that while it lacked grandeur to have horse-stalls attached to the jarl's hall, these were undoubtedly the safest stables in the city. As the three entered into the hall, the doors slammed shut behind them, and Serana could not help a nervous tremor as she considered all of the ways this could be a trap. If Lydia felt similar reservations, the big woman hid it well. Velandryn, for his part, was already halfway up the hall, presumably eager to learn what the jarl was playing at, or perhaps attempting to bury his nerves under action.

The hall was simple, but Serana found it a pleasant change of venue from the gloom outside. Braziers burned merrily behind the smooth wooden columns that ran the length of the hall, giving the entire room a soft warmth and light. Numerous doors studded the walls, and four stairways gave access to galleries that ran nearly the entirety of the long room. A few spectators watched from the railings, none of them visibly armed. Evidently, this building was the center of activity in Morthal. And all of it was centered on the woman they had come to meet.

Clearly, this Jarl Idgrod understood the importance of commanding a space. Her high-backed throne dominated the far end of her hall, situated on a raised platform and flanked by two statues, each half again as tall as Lydia. They were carved of a light stone, though Serana was no mason and could tell no more than that. One was a warrior in bulky armor holding a pair of axes and menacing some unseen foe, while the other depicted a robed figure with arms raised above its head. Both were intricately detailed but for the faces; the warrior's was simply a smooth expanse beneath helm and hair, while the robed figure's cowl covered an empty void. They were beautiful, but slightly unnerving to look upon. Between them, sitting easily on the throne, was an aged woman wearing a circlet studded with gems, tall like most of the Nords of this age but made small by the scale of her surroundings. She sat slumped in the throne, eyes closed. As their little party approached, one of the guards slammed the butt of his spear on the stone beneath his feet, and the old woman jerked awake. She looked down at the approaching party, and then reached out to grasp a carved walking stick. She pointed towards a doorway before rising to her feet, almost seeming to climb out of her throne. She made her way, ever so slowly, towards the door she had indicated, leaning on the bronze-clad warrior with one arm, and her stick with the other. At the door, she turned and looked back, and the old man who had shown them in bowed at Serana and her companions and proffered his hand in the jarl's direction. With a start, Serana realized that they were being invited to meet the jarl privately, as opposed to before her throne, and wondered at the strangeness of all this. This seemed an extraordinary gesture for the jarl, unless travelers were even rarer than Serana had thought. Behind them, she could make out several of the spectators whispering among themselves. Evidently this was not business as usual in Morthal.

The room they entered was small but richly furnished, and empty save for one other person, a young woman reading a book who looked up startled when they entered. She began to rise. "Mother, what—"

"It's quite all right, daughter." The jarl of Morthal leaned over to pat the girl on the shoulder and nearly toppled over herself. "We have guests, is all. I have seen them." At those words, the younger
woman sank back into her seat and began scrutinizing the newcomers with open curiosity. The old man came into the room behind them, shutting the door as he did so. The warrior in bronze had never left the jarl's side, and stood silently as she took a seat behind a large desk, empty but for a few neat stacks of paper.

"I am Idgrod, called the Ravenscrone by some, and I am jarl of Morthal and the hold of Hjaalmarch." She spoke with a pleasant voice, but one that quavered slightly on certain sounds, revealing the truth of her age. Her gaze wandered slightly, and tip of her walking stick trembled slightly as she pointed it in their direction. "I saw that you three would arrive, and I would greet you. From here, I have seen no more."

"You saw us, you said." If Velandryn had any feelings about her infirmity or odd decision to hold a private audience, he hid it well. "How?"

The old woman smiled. "I see more than most, by the grace of the Eight. Things that will be, or that must be. I saw the three of you coming to us as the discontented raged outside. And so it was."

She smiled again, with the tremulous intimacy of a doting grandmother. "I am glad you have come now, as I think I need your help."

Velandryn's expression had changed. Where before Serana would have said that his manner was that of one reluctantly humoring another who was playing some game, now he grew serious. "Very well. How can we assist?"

Serana was more than a little shocked. She never would have figured Velandryn for one to blindly march to another's pace. She would have politely declined and went on her way. Which, if he intends to take up some insane task…

The old woman smiled broadly and leaned forward. "It is so good of you to ask…"

"So, care to explain why we're investigating a house fire, or are you just going to go silent and agree to some other absurd request?" Serana's words were not unexpected, but the fact that Lydia gave the slightest of nods caught Velandryn somewhat off-guard. Not that he had expected his housecarl to be overjoyed about this, but her displaying agreement with the vampire was unusual.

"Lydia, you also disapprove?" If he was going to override the objections of two-thirds of their group, he might as well well it all.

The big woman sighed. "Morthal has an unenviable reputation, and Jarl Idgrod is…no Jarl Balgruuf, from all that I have heard."

"Meaning that she is what? Weak? Mad? Attempting to use a holy gift as best she can?" He almost regretted those words as Lydia glared at him fiercely.

"She rules based on visions! What can you expect from someone like that? It's no wonder the people don't trust her! She claims she's seen us, and then tells us to look into somebody's house burning down! She's the jarl, she should have more important matters to deal with! Leave arson for the guards; it's no wonder her people are upset!" Lydia was incensed; he had never seen her like this before. Ordinarily, she was reserved to the point of rudeness when around other people. Aside from the three of them, the street was deserted, but she must have come to some decision about Serana to trust her so. Of course, she could also simply have decided that the other woman's opinion was irrelevant. The vampire, for her part, had looked straight at him, eyes shining, the moment the words holy gift had left his mouth.

For Velandryn, however, the issue was slightly different. "You distrust visions? Have your people no seers?" It was true that the Nords did not like magic, but if they were really foolish enough to
deny themselves the gifts of Azura…Oh. He was some kind of fool as well, it seemed. Of course they wouldn't seek out abilities granted by a Daedra. Even if she claimed it came from the Aedra.

"Not really. Nords don't like the idea that our future is written for us. People like Jarl Idgrod…"

She shook her head. "We should be on our way. Solitude is close enough by ship."

Velandryn shrugged. "The day is more than half-gone already. Any captain fool enough to brave the swamp by night is nobody I want to trust my fate to. At sundown, everyone will probably gather in the taverns, correct?" At Lydia's affirmation, he continued. "We find a place near the docks, make a deal with a good captain, and charter passage for the morrow. In the meantime, I'd just as soon do as the jarl wants. This isn't some piss-stained farmer who lost a pig. Morthal might not be your favorite hold, but Idgrod is one of the nine rulers of Skyrim. There are worse people with whom to curry favor." The sliver of Serana that he could see did not appear entirely convinced, but Lydia was nodding, seemingly mollified for now.

The big woman sighed. "She's kind enough, I suppose, but I feel as though she isn't really up to the task…" She trailed off, but Velandryn couldn't help but agree with her half-spoken sentiment. Whether her visions had taken a toll or merely hastened an inevitable process, the jarl had come across as overwhelmed by the job; she had too often been unfocused and only sporadically effective in conveying what she needed. Welcoming us in such a manner and then putting us to work like this is odd, to say the least. The old man, who had turned out to be her steward and husband, had handled most of the details, leaving the jarl to nod along.

Looking away, his housecarl pointed. "Looks like that's it, my—" She snapped her jaw shut, doubtless swallowing the final word. Velandryn clasped her by the shoulder as he passed.

Jarl Idgrod had told them of the unexplained fire three days past that had taken Hroggar's family and reduced the house before them to its pitiable state, and the suspicion that surrounded the events. Of Alva, and how Hroggar had been in the young woman's arms almost before the ashes were cold. Velandryn had to agree that it sounded suspiciously like murder, done in the name of lust. He did not fully believe the jarl's explanation that her guards were 'too close' to the issue to investigate, but as long as it was for a good reason, he could live with being kept partially in the dark. No doubt Lydia would have been shocked as his being so accepting of the deception, but he was willing to give the old woman the benefit of the doubt. Jarl Idgrod might not be an Ashlander Wise-Woman or Azurite mystic, but her gift was doubtless a blessing of the Twilight Queen. Those so blessed were often faced with suspicion and hostility by the ignorant, and Velandryn knew that it could not be easy to rule over Nords when so empowered. Another reason for doing this, one he had not felt the need to share, was simpler than the other: He simply wanted to help the odd jarl stuck in a miserable swamp. He rather liked this Jarl Idgrod, and the fact that a great many Nords disagreed with the old woman's methods only strengthened his feelings. With a sidelong glance at Serana, he had the stray thought that she too had embraced a way shunned by the Nord community at large, and could therefore merit similar respect. Tamping that idea down before it could go anywhere troublesome, he stooped to examine the hearth, where Hroggar claimed the fire had started, caused by his wife's cooking.

The house was little more than a skeleton, with the foundation supporting a few waist-high chunks of charred wall and the odd beam that had not been consumed. Velandryn had never studied fire patterning, but he knew that there were ways to tell where one had started. Unfortunately, if this Hroggar was smart, he would likely have simply spilled the bear fat himself and blamed it on his wife. Velandryn would have preferred to lock Hroggar and Alva in separate rooms and interrogate them exhaustively about their relationship and the events surrounding the fire, but that would probably have violated Jarl Idgrod's request not to draw attention to themselves. She wanted a conclusion, so she could show her people that justice had been done, one way or another. The
people want Hroggar to pay, though. If the man was truly innocent, would that satisfy the people of Morthal? Or were they meant to find his guilt, regardless of the facts? "See if there's anything worth knowing, and come tell me if you find it." Jarl Idgrod had been clear with her instructions, if not her motivations.

There was little to find, here in this shell of a home. Lydia had gathered a few twisted pieces of metal that might once have been cookware, and Velandryn had found a burned little box containing cheap gems and a singed scrap of ribbon, along with what looked to once have been letters of some sort, though they were now completely illegible. Serana kept glancing at the charred remains of a child's bed, but when Velandryn asked, she was unable to identify anything more than a feeling that something was there. She poked through the remains for a time, while Velandryn took to inspecting the foundation. If there was a cubby or niche in the stone, some evidence could have survived in there. The shadows were lengthening, and it occurred to Velandryn that soon it would be a good time to go about finding a boat to take them to Solitude. Just then, he heard a voice from where he had last seen Serana. It was higher than hers, however, and he could have sworn it he heard the words 'hide and seek.'

He turned, but a huge black chunk of twisted timbers blocked his view of whoever was talking. He heard Serana respond; her tones were soothing in a way Velandryn had not yet heard from her. As he peered around the obstruction, he saw a shimmering figure twirling and dancing around Serana, speaking in that high, childish voice. With a start, he realized what it was.

Just then, the transparent little girl saw him and waved. "Have you come to play too?" With a smile, Velandryn stepped out and approached.

"I have, although I was wondering if I could ask you a question or two." He wasn't good at talking to children. Dunmer children were manageable at least, but human young made him vaguely uncomfortable. Those of his people of more than ten years or so he could generally handle, and those too young to hold a sensible conversation could be safely ignored. They were a valuable resource for the future of a nation, of course, but he had never felt the need to be the one interacting with them. Others were far better suited for such tasks, and it made no sense for him to waste his time. Unless, of course, it is the ghost of a dead girl, who may have information we require.

Ghosts of children were rare, as their emotions were generally too unfocused to resonate with the strength necessary to create the echo of living magicka that was a ghost. If the girl had been a sorcerous prodigy, perhaps...but then would she really have died in a house fire? Something odd was at work here. With a chill, he realized the proximity of the vast, fog-shrouded expanse just beyond the town. Serana had felt it too, he would wager, and even Lydia had been on edge. There was power out there, among the waters and in the earth. Suddenly, he was seized with the fervent hope that this was nothing more than a simple lust-filled murder, or a tragic accident. Whatever was out there, beyond the light, he wanted no part of it.

Unaware of his dark thoughts, the little ghost stopped, offering a tiny curtsy. "I'm Helgi. Everyone's gone, but will you play with me? I want to play hide and seek. With you, and her, and we can hide from the other one."

"The other one?" Velandryn was wondering if she meant Lydia when the woman herself appeared, stopping to stare dumbly when confronted with the situation.

Serana smiled, and went to one knee beside the girl. "Is that the other one? Her name is Lydia, and she's very nice." Velandryn wondered if anyone had ever used those words to refer to his housecarl before. The vampire, for her part, was using the gentle tone he had heard earlier, and she had also removed her wrappings, showing a face that, in comparison to her usual guarded expression,
positively glowed with kindness towards the little one.

The ghost laughed, seemingly at ease thanks to Serana's manner. "No, silly!" Then she shivered and the laughter vanished from her spectral face. The house was mostly in shadow now, and Velandryn realized that night was falling. *Ghosts don't feel cold, do they?* "She's coming for me, where I am. She said we'd be together forever, but I'm scared." She tried to cling to Serana, but her hands passed through the vampire. "I want mommy! Don't let her take me!"

*Her body.* "Is she buried somewhere?" Some power was clearly being worked on the girl's body, and the ghost could feel the connection. He did not know if this was an intentional part of the ritual or the result of a shoddy spell, but the body was the key. "Where were you buried?" He wanted to impress upon the once-child the urgency of this, but how could he make her understand?

Serana, once again, managed to engage with the girl. "Your name is Helgi, right?" Velandryn vaguely recalled the jarl's steward mentioning that while giving them background on the fire. Serana continued, "Do you know where the other one is? Where you are?"

Helgi sniffed. "It's cold and dark. She has to dig down to get me, I can hear her digging." She tried to cling to Serana again, and when she failed clasped her pale arms around herself. "Don't let her take me! Please!" She began sobbing now, and Serana tried once more to put her arms around the trembling figure.

*We need that location.* Whatever mischief this 'other one' was up to clearly needed her body, so that was the lead. "How do Nords handle their dead, Lydia?" He didn't want to make an issue of it, but this wouldn't be happening if they had the sense to burn their bodies like civilized folk.

His housecarl looked thoughtful. "Most places, a Hall of the Dead for the honored fallen. Family catacombs, or the outer tomb." She studied the little ghost. "Not for common children though, and not in Morthal. They follow the Old Ways here." She suddenly pointed at the little ghost. "A graveyard! Are you in a graveyard?" The guard in her seemed to have won out over any reluctance to talk to an undead. There was trouble happening, and it needed to be stopped.

The girl nodded. "Maybe? It's dark and scary…" She trailed off, and looked as though she wanted to cry again.

Serana leaned in closer, and put a hand on the child's cheek. There could be no tactile sensation, of course, but Helgi seemed happy for the gesture. "Can you show us the graveyard, Helgi? It will let us help you."

The girl nodded, and started moving. "It's this way." After a step, she paused. "I can feel it! I'm over there!" She took off running, a glowing figure in the darkness.

"After her!" Velandryn wasn't sure if he had spoken or one of the others had echoed his thoughts, but within a heartbeat all three of them were running. Helgi had apparently forgotten that she was supposed to be leading other people, and was barreling down the street away from her house at full speed. Fortunately, she lacked the presence of mind to fully overcome the physical limitations that a child possessed, so her speed was merely impressive rather than impossible. She also seemed content to stick to the streets, which made everyone's lives easier. He didn't want to have to deal with a ghost child running through people's walls. Lydia, for all of her heavy armor, moved as fast as he did, years of conditioning proving their worth. Serana gave a mighty leap and landed gracefully on one of the houses nearby, continuing their pursuit from above. For Velandryn, he just tried to focus on catching up with the ghost that called itself Helgi. She might think herself a little girl, but she passed through stones and glided over uneven ground where her pursuers did not. The darkness did not help, and Velandryn soon decided that sprinting was not an ideal condition for
casting night-eye. He managed it eventually, however, and was running beside the girl steadily if not easily.

"What can you tell me about the other one, Helgi? Who...is it?" His breath was harsh in his ears, his blood pounded, and a knot of pain had settled in his side. He wondered if Lydia knew of a way to improve one's skill at running. It would doubtless be unpleasant, but if the alternative was this...

"She was supposed to burn down the house, to...kill...mommy and me, but she wanted to keep me with her." Helgi, by contrast, had no lungs to speak of, and spoke easily, if not happily. "She said we'd be together forever, but—"

They had reached the looming shape that had once been Morthal's wall, and Helgi pointed. "It's her! She put her mouth on my neck, and it hurt!"

It made sense, Velandryn knew, for a town that was half-swamp to put a graveyard on as solid of ground as possible. The graveyard had been placed well for that, upon a grassy slope rising to the south of town. The mountains loomed to the south, and the moons cast the scene in pale beauty. When first chosen, it must have been fully outside of the town, though now a few buildings rose around the edges of the field of graves. However, what drew their eyes was the figure amidst the graves, pulling a coffin from the earth. Even with his night-eye, Velandryn couldn't make out any details, but Helgi's description had not been ambiguous.

"Vampire! Stand down at once!" Lydia's shout wasn't how Velandryn would have approached the undead, but the big woman was advancing, crossbow raised. The vampire's cowled head turned to regard her, then it moved, faster than any human, as Serana had when consumed by hunger. The vampire covered ground at an alarming rate, and Velandryn frantically gathered magicka in his hands. It was moving damn fast, and there was none of the hesitancy that had slowed Serana during her episode. Indeed, this one was almost on them, dodging Lydia's crossbow shot, and Velandryn only had time to thrust out a hand, hoping that the magicka would be sufficient to ignite—

Serana appeared out of nowhere, catching the vampire in the side and sending it spinning to the ground. It rose, trembling and spitting curses in a harsh voice, and the two faced off, circling slowly. Serana's ornate sword was in her hand, while the vampire, face still hidden, had empty hands curled into claws. Its fingers gave a spasm and it lunged, almost too fast for Velandryn to see. There was a blur of motion and the vampire reeled back, one of its arms hanging at an improbable angle. Serana's blade was alive in her hands, darting in to deliver another punishing blow that sent the vampire reeling to the ground.

The vampire rose, and its face was made visible. Her face, as it seemed the vampire had once been a Nord woman, though the red eyes and sharp teeth left no doubt as to what she was now. The two vampires squared off, each poised to strike. The enemy vampire—and Velandryn had never thought he would need to make that distinction—opened her mouth and gave a light laugh. The airy sound was so incongruous that Velandryn took a second to process it, as though his mind needed to be convinced that such a thing had happened. It wasn't until he snapped back and realized that several seconds had passed with him unmoving that he understood it had been a vampiric art of some sort.

Fortunately, the vampire was unable to take advantage of his distraction. Lydia had not, apparently, been enthralled by the laugh and her second bolt did not miss. The short haft sprouted from the other vampire's chest, and she staggered, eyes wide in shock. The sound that left her mouth now was no laugh, but an artless keening of pain and rage that sent shivers down his spine. Before Velandryn could register movement, Serana was on her, and in mere seconds the other vampire lay still on the ground. Velandryn closed, magicka primed and the burning sword ready to be called
forth, but there was no need. Either Serana's swordwork or Lydia's bolt looked to have pierced its heart, and its head was nearly hacked off besides. Velandryn sighed.

"No questioning her now, I suppose." He turned to Helgi, who had watched the brief fight silently. "Do you know who that was? Was she the one who killed you?"

"Laelette!" The shout came from the darkness, and Velandryn turned, raising his hand and readying his magicka once more. However, it was only a Nord, dressed in common clothing and with panic splashed across his face. "Laelette! Oh gods, no!" He fell to his knees beside the vampire, cradling her head and weeping into her robes. Velandryn stepped forward, but a hand on his shoulder drew him up short.

"The man lost someone dear to him, my thane. Let him grieve for a moment." Lydia's face was grim. "Go, help the girl. I'll watch him, talk to him when he comes around. Behind her, Serana was already kneeling to talk with Helgi again. Smart thinking. The ghost might be able to tell them more. If one vampire was involved, there could well be others about.

The little girl was looking down at her coffin as she spoke. "She was supposed to kill us, she said, but she wanted me to play with her forever. I woke up and she said we could be together, but I was all burned up. It hurt so much! She said she would come back and fix me, but I was like this!"

The girl's account was only partly comprehensible, and Velandryn didn't know enough about vampiric techniques to analyze all of the implication. He looked to Serana. "What happened here? What can be done for her?"

The woman sighed. "This Lælette tried to raise her, but the body was ruined, by fire, no less. Fire it...isn't great for us." She looked at him. "Vampires...our souls are the same as when...as before, but altered by the ritual. Helgi's soul couldn't be reunited with her body. Either the damage was too great, or she had been dead too long, or Lælette simply botched it. Helgi is dead, truly, and her soul departed. This is the echo, the resonance that stays behind."

Velandryn nodded. The precise mechanism was not dissimilar to other cases of external factors causing the formation of a ghost, and it wasn't inconceivable that a vampiric ritual could have that effect. He had some knowledge of soul magic, but the craft to which Serana was referring fell outside of the Temple's teachings. He would have to trust her. Reluctantly, he nodded. "Helgi, is there anything else at all you can tell us that would help? We want to find the people who hurt you."

"What can you tell me about Hroggar—about your father?"

The girl thought, chewing on her lower lip. Finally, she looked up. "Daddy was acting like he was mad. He was always gone, even when it was night. He and mommy were fighting at dinner, and he left. He slammed the door." She looked back down. "Mommy didn't like him being friends with Alva."

Alva. The woman Hroggar was now bedding, unless Velandryn was even worse with Nord names than he thought. Nothing conclusive, but it confirmed that it wasn't simply consolation the man was seeking. However, Helgi was now shivering, and the lines of her form looked to be losing some of their definition. He glanced at Serana. "What happens when the one who tried to raise her dies?"

Her eyes were as guileless as he had yet seen them. "This is all new to me, but nothing good, I'd wager." She looked to Helgi. "You don't have to be afraid, we'll help you." The little girl sniffed and nodded, and Velandryn looked over to where Lydia was comforting the man now hunched over the vampire's corpse, talking to him in a low voice. Hopefully she would be able to get something out of him.
He turned back to Serana and Helgi. "I can offer...aid, of a sort, I suppose." He pulled Serana aside. "No doubt the Nords have already performed the rites of Arkay or whatever they use here, but I might be able to help. The girl's body is doubtless providing a tether for the resonant form. If I incinerate the body, reduce it to ash and dispel the form, any lingering enchantment should be eradicated. The ghost would dispel."

Serana had an odd look in her eyes. "Wouldn't that hurt her?"

"Nothing I've read has ever suggested ghosts can feel pain, though I'm the first to admit this isn't a standard situation." He looked at the coffin and the ghost, and sighed. "We could attempt to remove the spell, or curse, or whatever, from the body itself without destroying it. I'd need your input though, and that would require you to give me secrets of vampire spellcraft."

Serana looked away. Velandryn could only begin to guess at the mental contortions she was going through, but he dearly wanted her to assent. He had no desire to harm the child more than necessary, and her presence here clearly triggered an emotional response in Serana, which gave him the edge. If Serana accepted, he stood to gain some part of vampire knowledge, something no mortal would ordinarily have any chance at, and he would prefer to give the child a clean departure besides. She should not suffer for her father's sins. A surprisingly controversial

Finally she looked back at him, and where he had expected to see some conflict, there was only determination. "Pay close attention." She easily pulled the top off of the coffin, and leaned down to study the body. Velandryn joined her, and Helgi stooped beside him, gazing down at the burned ruin of her body.

The little ghost began to sniff. "It hurt. It hurt so bad." She crouched again, hugging her knees. "I just want my mommy..." She devolved into sobs.

Serana looked as though she was affected as well, but she swallowed a couple of times and pointed to the corpse's neck. The burns were horrific, and only the vaguest suggestion of some other trauma could be made out where Serana was pointing. "She would have bitten there. I'm not familiar with the clan she belongs to, but the power is emanating from that spot."

Velandryn extended his hand, letting magicka probe the wound. Immediately, a force of some sort pressed back against him, though it felt muted, as though it was generated from a great distance. Remote magical source? From the fragments of knowledge he recalled, that could mean there was another vampire in play, one that had a direct bloodline through Laelette. That was a worry for after, though.

He focused on analysis, letting his magicka map the extent of the foreign power in the little girl's remains. When he felt it, saw what had happened, he felt bile rise somewhere deep within him. The magic had inundated the flesh, but the body's systems had failed, leaving the power with nowhere to go. The ghost had been an outpouring, a tangential effect of an attempt by an untrained used to force magicka into a body that gave it no exit. Frankly, they were lucky that it hadn't simply turned the girl into a zombie or some other kind of fleshwalker. However, now that he studied the spell—or curse, considering the source—he realized that wouldn't have happened. There was intent behind this. It was designed to isolate the soul, and had created a facsimile when no soul could be found. A shudder ran through him as he realized that he was experiencing the manifest power of vampirism, and he had to restrain himself from simply incinerating the body and the coffin to unmake this tainted spell as quickly as possible.

He looked at the little ghost. Hers had not been a holy Recollection—she had been created to fill the void of a departed soul by foul magic—but her nature was not evil. He could not even begin to comprehend the ramifications of her continued existence, and silently gave thanks that there was no
way she would outlast the night. A small part of him wondered how often tiny madnesses like
these occurred, and how the faithful were supposed to deal with them. I am trying, Blessed Three,
but you do not make it easy.

The Temple's strictures on the undead were absolute. Any body or spirit from outside of the
Waiting Doors as set forth in the Canticles of Service was heretical, an abomination to be unmade.
Putting Serana and the unique issue she presented aside, he thought he could do the right thing
here. By disrupting the spell that was still active on Helgi's body he could unmake the ghost, give
whatever shade of consciousness inhabited this world some measure of peace, and learn a bit more
about how best to combat vampires. Niggling theological implications could be set aside to be
mulled over later, preferably with the assistance of a good strong drink.

Resolved, he dove back into the array. Serana guided him to several key confluences where the
magic would have manipulated the body and soul, binding both into a new whole. Her knowledge
was impressive, though she claimed several times not to have seen this particular style before. That
was interesting, as Velandryn had briefly studied the 'vampire's disease,' or porphyric hemophilia,
and could confidently state that this magic was the final stage of that affliction. That Serana was
unfamiliar with it had worrisome implications, as her bloodline could well be distinct from the
more common clans, and therefore possessing powers that set them well outside of vampiric
norms. There was no need to share those thoughts with her right now, however.

In a matter of minutes, they had unraveled most of the array. The body was even more of a ruin, as
several of the nodes had required physical manipulation, but the power was ebbing away into the
air, and Helgi was losing more of her shape. She ran to them then, and smiled. "I feel better now. I
think I can hear mommy! Thank you for everything!" Velandryn sent a pulse of magicka through
the corpse and overrode any remaining vestiges of the spell, Helgi glowed blindingly bright for an
instant, and then the ghost was gone, leaving no trace save a mangled corpse in a moonlit
graveyard.

Velandryn sat back against a gravestone and exhaled heavily. "Well, it's done." He had performed
a feat he never even considered, thwarted a vampire, and learned quite a bit about how vampirism
affected the body. He wondered if he could dissect this Laellette to study how her physiology had
been altered, but the male Nord would probably object. Also Serana, and likely Lydia as well.
Another sigh. Vampires and Nords.

"Do you think she really did? See her mother, I mean?" Serana sat on the gravestone to his right,
peering at him with serious eyes.

He shook his head. "It was— she—It wasn't actually her…" He sighed. "I have no idea. I'm going
to need to give this one some consideration, I think." He looked up at the moons. "Whatever was
there, whatever spoke to us, thought Helgi's mother was there." He looked back down, at the small
body. "The soul was gone. That's without question. You saw the empty wells in the spell array. If
there had been a soul, it would have been bound. What we got could only happen in the absence of
such." He sighed. "So, Helgi was dead, her soul gone to…wherever Nord children go, and
something that thought it was her was built in its place. And it thought it saw its mother." He
chuckled, overcome by the bleak humor of it all. "What're you thinking?"

She watched him as he rose to his feet. "I hope she did. I hope…I hope she's happy. Helgi, or
whatever she was." The vampire had a look on her face he had not yet seen, and it unnerved him.
He was having a hard enough time keeping everything about Serana in context without her going
and mourning lost little girls.

"I hope so too." Most likely, the entity had simply dissipated once free of the strictures of the
curse. Background magicka, ready to be called forth when needed. That wasn't a particularly cheerful thought, though, and he felt no need to share it. He glanced over at Lydia. "Shall we see what our next step is?"

His housecarl gave them a look as they approached. The man beside her was still there, staring down at the corpse silently. Lydia stood, and spoke to them quietly. "His name is Thonnir, and Laelette was his wife. She disappeared about two weeks ago without a word to anyone. She had been spending a great deal of time with Alva, who said she ran off to join the Stormcloaks."

"Evidently, Alva was mistaken." Her name kept coming up, and Velandryn decided these revelations merited at least informing the jarl of what they had found. Either Alva was involved in some way, or she simply had horrifically bad luck.

Thonnir gave no sign of noticing as they left the graveyard, and Velandryn felt a momentary stab of pity for whatever poor bastard had to deal with this mess in the morning. Laelette's disposal would be made easier with sunrise, but Helgi's remains would be...unpleasant. As he passed the coffin, he stopped, considering. Then, he placed the lid back over the body, hiding it from view. He turned to find Serana's eyes boring holes in him. He shrugged. "The dead should be respected. Not left out for all to ogle." He strode away before she had a chance to respond.

Where the flight to the graveyard had been exhilarating, the return to the jarl carried an air of somber purpose. In truth, Serana had probably enjoyed the chase a bit too much, but she had kept her head and gotten an enjoyable, if a bit too brief, fight out of it so she would call it all to the good. Now, as they were ushered into the same room as before, though this time via back hallways so as not to draw so much attention, she wondered how all of this would end. She had no particular loyalty to whatever clan of vampires happened to be working in Morthal, and would gladly see them exterminated for what they had done to Helgi. However, she also knew that a town hunting vampires was likely to be unsafe for her. She couldn't hide her eyes, after all. A few comments Velandryn had let slip revealed that the Volkihar were not common in this age, but when people's minds turned to vampires, it was only a matter of time until the woman with the yellow eyes who wrapped up in the sun got accused.

"A vampire?" Jarl Idgrod's voice was as strong as Serana had yet heard it, shock snapping her back to her full senses. "And you suspect Alva is involved?"

Velandryn bowed slightly. "It is possible, Jarl Idgrod. We have heard Alva identified from two independent sources. She was with Hroggar prior to the murders, as testified by his daughter. She was seen with Laelette shortly before the other woman's disappearance, and fed misleading information to Thonnir. At the very least, she has knowledge, and should be brought in for questioning."

The warrior in the bronze armor stirred. "You say that, but what if she is innocent? We can't go dragging women off the street to accuse them without evidence!"

The jarl nodded. "Gorm makes a valid point. Without evidence, which the words of a ghost and a dead vampire are not," she looked at them severely "my hands are tied." She rose, the walking stick trembling.

Lydia stepped forward. "Jarl Idgrod, with all due respect, the vampire Laelette was likely of Clan Cyrodiil, whose members are masters of deception." She drew herself up. "I have participated in actions against members of this clan, and can offer—"

"No, no no, it's quite alright." The jarl waived her hand airily in dismissal. "The guard will act
when I tell them, and not before." She stared at them all in turn. "Is that understood? If so, then thank you and good day."

_Perhaps she is mad._ Velandryn, however, once more accepted the jarl's eccentric mood shift and abrupt dismissal with an equanimity that bordered on impassiveness. He bowed slightly, turned, and departed. Serana hurried to catch up with him, and Lydia did the same. The steward showed them to small outer door and departed without a word. Lydia opened her mouth but Velandryn held up a hand.

"Not here. Lydia, the maul is still on your horse?" She nodded, face registering her confusion. Suddenly, Serana realized what was going to happen, and felt a thrill of anticipation.

Alva's house had not been hard to find, though it looked no different from those around it. Morthal was small enough that every guard knew the general region where people lived, and once they were close, it was only a matter of locating a sufficiently drunken local. Half a minute of rambling about what a fine woman she was later, and they had the location. Lydia hefted the maul in her hands, and looked at the front door. "My thane, is this wise?"

It was Serana who answered, the vampire's words doubtless echoing the thoughts of her thane, as they were wont to do. "The jarl as much as said that she wanted us to gather evidence. How else are we supposed to procure it?"

"But like this?" Were she still in Whiterun, she would have had the backing of the jarl and the rest of the guard in bringing the truth to light. As it was, the fact that Jarl Idgrod might have hinted at something did not give them the right to do this. However, if she was ordered…

"Lydia," her thane's voice was layered with the patronizing tone that meant he honestly could not understand why anyone would object to his logic. "Alva knows something. Three people are dead, and who knows how many more will follow? Tell me true, if Jarl Balgruuf had given this order, would you hesitate?"

That did it. "Not for an instant. Apologies, my thane."

He smiled. "Not a problem." He turned to Serana. "Be ready, the both of you. If she is a vampire, she'll show her true colors when she sees us coming." Then, with a smile, he turned back. "Lydia?"

She hefted the hammer. "I await your command, my thane."

"Open that door."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Been a while. Considered doing all of Morthal in one fell swoop, but decided to space it out a bit. Pretty straightforward chapter, vampires and mistrust and everybody with ulterior motives. Nothing I feel a burning need to clarify here.

As always, ask and I shall answer.
"I came to learn that Movarth Piquine could see in the dark almost as well as the light — an excellent talent, considering his interests were exclusively nocturnal."

…

"'Vampirism,' he said, and then paused at my quizzical look. 'I was told that you were someone I should seek out for help understanding it.'"

…

"He wanted to know about the vampires of eastern Skyrim. I told him about the most powerful tribe, the Volkihar, paranoid and cruel, whose very breath could freeze their victims' blood in the veins. I explained to him how they lived beneath the ice of remote and haunted lakes, never venturing into the world of men except to feed."

…

"I don't believe in luck. I believe in knowledge and training. Your information helped me, and my skill at melee combat sealed the bloodsucker's fate. I've never believed in weaponry of any kind. Too many unknowns. Even the best swordsmithe has created a flawed blade, but you know what your body is capable of. I know I can land a thousand blows without losing my balance, provided I get the first strike.'

'The first strike?' I murmured. 'So you must never be surprised.'
'That is why I came to you,' said Movarth. 'You know more than anyone alive about these monsters, in all their cursed varieties across the land.'

... 

"'Now, tell me,' he said. 'Of the vampires of Cyrodiil.'

I told him what I could. There was but one tribe in Cyrodiil, a powerful clan who had ousted all other competitors, much like the Imperials themselves had done. Their true name was unknown, lost in history, but they were experts at concealment. If they kept themselves well-fed, they were indistinguishable from living persons. They were cultured, more civilized than the vampires of the provinces, preferring to feed on victims while they were asleep, unaware.

'They will be difficult to surprise,' Movarth frowned. 'But I will seek one out, and tell you what I learn. And then you will tell me of the vampires of High Rock, and Hammerfell, and Elsweyr, and Black Marsh, and Morrowind, and the Sumurset Isles, yes?'

I nodded, knowing then that this was a man on an eternal quest. He wouldn't be satisfied with but the barest hint of how things were. He needed to know it all.

He did not return for a month, and on the night that he did, I could see his frustration and despair, though there were no lights burning in my chapel.

'I failed,' he said, as I lit a candle. 'You were right. I could not find a single one.'

I brought the light up to my face and smiled. He was surprised, even stunned by the pallor of my flesh, the dark hunger in my ageless eyes, and the teeth. Oh, yes, I think the teeth definitely surprised the man who could not afford to be surprised.

'I haven't fed in seventy-two hours,' I explained, as I fell on him. He did not land the first blow or the last."

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Lydia's blow did not, if one wanted to be pedantic, open the door. That implied that the door had previously existed in the state of closed, and was now open. Rather, Velandryn mused, the door had only moments before been intact and was now undergoing a transformation into a cloud of splinters.

He had heard stories about legendary weapons forged from ebony, of course, and Sudra's essay on its link to Lorkhan was considered required reading for those seeking any sort of background in Dunmer cosmology. The Chimer had called it Godsblood, and their work with it had predated any other race's use of the enigmatic ore. It possessed properties that set it apart from any known metal or stone; its closest analog was the rare volcanic glass called malachite from which his people spun both armor and ornamentation, and working with either required a lifetime of study. Whatever long-ago smith had made the maul Lydia now carried had clearly been skilled, though just as clearly unused to working with such a material. The head was rough and misshapen, with marks showing where the smith had labored to force it into shape and inelegant hide wrappings and steel nails binding the head to the haft. Still, as crude as it was, it pulverized its intended target, and revealed the dark interior of the room beyond.

Lydia was the first in, dropping the hammer at her feet and stepping over the threshold while
drawing her favored sword and shield. Velandryn was only a step behind, channeling magicka into night-eye and glancing around the deserted room. It looked as though only a single person was living there, if the single place set at the table was anything to go by. Notably, the bed looked unused, and a second door, corded with steel, was set into the rear wall. From behind it came the thud of footsteps; clearly their entry had not gone unnoticed.

The door was knocked open, and a man emerged from the blackness beyond. He was clad in roughspun pants and nothing else, bleeding from the neck. He brandished some sort of workman's hatchet, and the look in his eyes put Velandryn in mind of the thralls in Dimhollow Crypt.

Lydia approached him, shield raised. "Are you Hroggar? We are here on behalf of the jarl. Put the weapon down and come quietly."

Velandryn didn't need to hear Serana's sigh from behind him to know that it wouldn't work. Of course, no doubt Lydia knew just as well that the man was under Alva's spell. The wounds on his neck and the dullness of his eyes gave it away, and no man so ensorcelled would abandon his master.

From behind the man who was likely Hroggar, a soft voice came from the darkness. "My love, they are here to harm us." The man twitched, and brought his axe up before him. The voice sounded again. "Only you can defend me, my love."

With a snarl, the Nord dropped into a fighting stance. "Stay back, fiends!"

Out of nowhere, an idea came to Velandryn, and he decided to give it a try. Not killing Nords wasn't a habit he necessarily wanted to get into, but Hroggar would potentially be much more useful alive than dead. "Hroggar, we spoke with Helgi. Alva had her and your wife killed, Hroggar. It was not an accident." A name was a powerful thing in the unbinding of illusions. It recalled the self, and gave the soul a tether upon which to cling.

The man's eyes widened. "Lies! There was a fire…"

Serana took half a step forward. "Think, Hroggar. What did Alva say? Did she whisper to you, and make the pain go away? She was there when you were fighting with your wife, and there when your family died, wasn't she?"

Hroggar swayed, axe still in hand. "She…she…"

A woman stepped out from the doorway, baring herself to their eyes. A pale face with red eyes was framed by long black hair that fell in a great stream down past her hips. Pale lips curled up into a smile, and the tip of her tongue slipped out to wick away a thin trickle of blood escaping one corner of her mouth. Like Hroggar, she was naked above the waist, though the similarity ended there. Her bare breasts swung obscenely as she swept towards them, pink nipples erect against the milky-white skin. Her dress, which had been pulled down to her waist, pooled around her feet as she performed a twist of her hips and let it fall to the floor. She was wearing a scrap of white cloth about her loins that was perhaps, on the thinnest of technicalities, preserving her modesty; the firelight played with her body, running light and shadow over the taut skin of her stomach and the long slender outline of her legs. Some dark part of Velandryn wondered for a fleeting moment what it would be like, bedding her. Would a vampire—

he cut off that line of thought and focused on the fight to come. We will fight. She is a hostile vampire, and there can be no other outcome.

Alva might be a vampire, but she was still gorgeous in every particular, and Velandryn felt a twinge of absurd and shameful jealousy as the woman twined her arms around Hroggar's bare chest. The vampire is the servant of Molag Bal, and its hunger is the curse of the Lord of Rape. Let
there be no quarter for those who prey upon the innocent to sate their own dark desires. The Canticle of Absolution had guided the Ordinators in thousands of hunts, and its words restored his world to its proper way. She was an abomination, and a fair face only made fouler the twisted appetites that lurked within.

"Hroggar, my love, what lies are they telling you?" Her voice was soft and melodious, and judging by how the Nord relaxed the moment he heard it, he was too far gone to be saved. Could we kill her first and break the spell? Serana might know, but this was not the opportune time to formulate a strategy.

The vampire in question was glaring at the other. "Hiding behind a mortal?" The contempt in her voice was the harshest he had ever heard from Serana.

Alva laughed, and Velandryn braced himself, remembering Laelette. However, either his preparedness was sufficient or she was merely amused, since he felt nothing. "My dear, you have not lived until you've taken a mortal. A whisper," the word was murmured into Hroggar's ear, and he fell to his knees, "in the perfect moment, and they are yours. When he" her hand traced the marks her teeth had made on his neck "learned that his family had died, when he wept" she drove her fingers into the wound, twisting, and Hroggar gasped, "in that moment I had only to speak" she pulled her fingers from his neck, the digits dripping red with blood where they had been inside him, and brought them to her lips, "and he was mine." She raised her hand to her mouth and began to clean her fingers, inserting them one at a time and sucking with obscene and obvious delight. Velandryn wanted to attack her, to destroy her in this moment, but he couldn't yet. She might let something slip.

Only one thing left to slip away. Is that what you're waiting for? Was he? Was it mere lust? Or was she enchanting him? Clan Cyrodiil were subtle, it was said and perhaps—

A familiar metallic twang came from behind, and he flinched involuntarily. Alva must have seen the bolt coming, twisting at a speed Velandryn knew he could not hope to match, and so Lydia's shot merely passed through her hair, sending the ends of a few cut strands fluttering away from the vampire. His housecarl stepped forward, and raised the weapon again. On his other side, Serana had bolted forward, blade in hand. Their grotesque parley was over, it would seem.

Alva reached out and knocked Serana's blade aside with her hand, sending the weapon wide but opening a thin slice across the seductress's palm. Meanwhile, Hroggar, unheed of his wound, snatched his axe from the ground and barreled at Velandryn snarling. Lydia raised her crossbow, but an idea struck Velandryn and he stepped in front of her.

"My thane—"

"Hold!" He had only a moment to pull this off, and it would require two spells with which he had little expertise. Hroggar would be on him in half a second, and the Nord was winding up with his axe. Perfect.

Velandryn stepped in and reached out, catching the human's arm over his head. The Nord would doubtless be able to overpower him in a few moments, but Velandryn only needed a heartbeat. He sent a pulse of magicka through the man, one laced with the most powerful spells of calming he could muster. The effect did not come as easily to him as anger, but the meditations he used for spiritual and emotional cleansing promoted certain paths of thinking and reflection, and facsimiles of those could be transmitted. It lacked any of the subtle elegance of his spells of fury; this was nothing more than a bare-bones emotional transference framework layered with interlocking patterns of illusory calmness and self-reflective meditations. It seemed to do the trick, however; Hroggar let the axe fall to the ground and stood still, swaying slightly in place. Unfortunately,
Velandryn knew it could only last a moment, as Alva was doubtless far and away his superior in the domination of lesser minds. He might give Hroggar a moment’s pause, but the vampire had been working on him for far longer, and her foul lessons would be written far too deep to be so easily affected. That was where the second spell came in.

One of the Missions of the New Temple was the preservation of the body Dunmeri, which meant that every Anointed was required to have at least a basic understanding of healing magic. The School of Restoration was not Velandryn's forte, but he could heal wounds, and simple punctures and trauma of the flesh such as Hroggar's were trivial. However, the power had to come from somewhere, and in situations of crisis, a healer could not afford to deplete their magicka too quickly. So, some simple spells of restoration contained a component that utilized the vitality and magicka of the wounded, essentially exhausting them to heal their wounds. Velandryn had only ever had to resort to it the once, but he had once heard an account of a healer who had subdued an unruly patient by sapping their strength as the wounds were knit, and Hroggar was nothing if not unruly…

The wound at his neck began to glow, skin crept over the raw muscles and bloody flesh, and Hroggar swayed. Velandryn placed one hand on the Nord's neck, and with the other gently took the axe from his hands. Hroggar stood still for a second, and Velandryn wondered if it had been enough. Then, the widower crumpled to the ground, unconscious. Velandryn shook his head. *Now I'm sparing enemy Nords.* He shuddered slightly. *Best not to make a habit of it.* He needed whatever information the man had, of course, but still. *It's the principle of the thing.*

He glanced up to see the vampires were trading blows with their fists, Serana's sword lying some distance away. Serana had shown her skill with a blade, but Alva was fighting with a gleeful grace that was fully a match for Serana's methodical blows. Each time the Volkihar woman moved towards her sword, Alva would intersperse herself with a giggle and resume the fight. Neither was tiring, and his best course of action—

**THUNK!**

Lydia, unseen by Velandryn or, apparently, the battling undead, had managed to line up a shot on Alva. It did no more than graze the woman, but in that moment of broken focus, Serana grabbed a handful of hair and pulled the other woman to the floor. With a blow that Velandryn thought should have set the house to shaking, Serana slammed her fist into Alva's gut, and she doubled over retching. Velandryn left Hroggar where he had fallen and moved over, ready to assist as needed. However, the Volkihar vampire needed no help, and dragged Alva off of the ground. She slammed her into a table viciously, and the battered vampire collapsed to her knees. She raised her hands, palms towards Serana, who merely took the opportunity to grab Alva by the hair once more and drive her knee into the kneeling woman's belly. Alva retched again, and vomited out a great gout of blood. Velandryn jumped back as the repulsive mess splashed off of the floor.

"Serana, enough!" She turned at his words, and he froze at the look in her eyes. He had expected bloodlust or the wild abandon of her earlier episode, but her golden eyes were cold. Furious, yes, but he could see that she was in control. "We need to interrogate her, and we can't do that if she dies."

Serana gave a derisive laugh. "She's a vampire, and she's been feeding well. A few taps won't break her." Alva tried to regain her feet, but Serana raised a hand. "Stay, or I put you back down as many times as it takes."

Velandryn drew her aside, though they both kept one eye on the vampire. Lydia was binding the unconscious Hroggar with a bedsheet, though her crossbow was still close to hand. He looked at
Serana's eyes blazed. "You saw what she was doing to him. What she did to him? How can you not? She's evil!"

Velandryn considered her words. Of course, what Alva had done was horrific. She had, it seemed, seduced Hroggar, destroyed his family, and then taken advantage of his grief to turn him into little more than a mindless slave. He just hadn't expected Serana to be so...violent in her displeasure. As a vampire she would likely have seen such behaviors before. Ah, of course. He looked over at her, at the set of her jaw, at the slightly narrowed eyes, shining so bright amidst her pale skin and bold features. He wondered what she had seen. Or done. "There might be more vampires in Morthal. We need to know."

Serana nodded, then strode over to Alva and stomped on her hand. There was a crunch of bone beneath her boot, and the vampire screamed. "Talk! Are there others in Morthal?"

Alva gasped out her words while cradling her shattered hand. "Laelette! I turned her when she found out about me! No others, I swear!"

Velandryn felt his own hand twinge in sympathetic memory. For a moment, he was in the stink of a different swamp, and heard rough laughter from a lizard's mouth. He stepped forward, putting a hand on Serana's shoulder. "We have Laelette. The jarl is questioning her now." He forced himself to smile at the whimpering vampire. "How do you think we knew what you were?"

His story wouldn't hold up to scrutiny, but hopefully Alva lacked the presence of mind to poke holes in his narrative. They needed to get this done quickly, at least until they could determine for certain how many of the bloodsuckers they were liable to encounter. He looked up at Lydia and gestured towards the open doorway and the step leading into the blackness behind it. His housecarl nodded, and moved to investigate. She paused at the doorway, looked into the blackness, and shrugged. "It looks to be a basement, my thane. Kill the vampire and we can investigate."

Alva crawled towards him, apparently having decided that he was her best chance at survival. The sad thing is, she might actually be right. Not that she would live out the night in any case, but Lydia would just kill her now, and Serana's fury looked to have Alva screaming until sunrise. "Please, I've told you what I can. I turned Laelette—"

"On whose orders?" Priests should speak quietly, taught the Temple, trusting their words and position rather than crass volume to command respect. This was a slightly different situation, but he was one step away from this entire thing spiraling horrifically out of control, and there was no harm in trying a familiar trick.

Something changed in Alva's eyes. Velandryn was no master at reading vampires, but he would hazard a guess that he had just given her something. It only flicked across her eyes for a moment, and was gone so quickly he wondered if he had imagined it. "Nobody's, I swear it! I only...Laelette discovered me, and she would have gone to the Jarl! We fought, and I...I..." She began weeping, great wracking sobs that shook her body. She reached out for his feet, and he stepped back slowly, not wanting to accidentally tread on the regurgitated blood that stained the floor.

Velandryn nodded at Lydia, and gestured at the dark doorway. Lydia pointed her sword at the vampire. Velandryn simply gestured slightly towards Serana. He wasn't entirely certain how Lydia would take that, but if she had been watching the same events he had, she should also have come to the conclusion that, in this case at least, he was not the one in danger from the Volkihar. With a glare, Lydia stepped into the blackness, and was soon lost from view. Alva, he hoped, would have noticed none of this, though Serana looked at him with amusement dancing amidst the gold of her
eyes.

She bent down and gripped a handful of Alva's hair, then brought the vampire's head up while keeping one knee on her back. "And who turned you, hmm?" He voice was soft and sweet, and made Velandryn's skin crawl. This was a new side of Serana, and he had to face the reality that despite the good qualities she had shown so far, and how easy she was to talk to, she was fundamentally an unknown, and these events only reinforced that. He still planned to attack the Volkihar den she was leading them to, of course, but he had come to enjoy her company thus far. Lydia was still suspicious, however, and if tonight had proven anything, it was that his housecarl might well be wiser than he was. *Lydia will never let me hear the end of it.*

"You think I can't smell a lie, you wretched little mongrel? Speak!" That last word was punctuated by Alva's face slamming into the floor as Serana drove her hand, still gripping the vampire's hair, downward. She pulled Alva's head up again, and leaned in close. "Speak, or I will make you beg for an ending to your miserable existence. Who turned you? Tell me!" She had started speaking softly, but ended up screaming into the other vampire's bloodstained face.

Velandryn reached out gently, barely brushing her shoulder, but she spun, wrenching Alva bodily across the floor. "What? More mercy for this one? Want to ask her nicely about how she raped a man and slaughtered his wife and child?"

Velandryn raised a hand. "Physical pain, while crudely effective, is rarely the surest way to unveil the truth. My people spent a very long time policing their own, and the interrogation techniques of the Ordinators, while officially renounced by the New Temple, remain effective." He squatted down, looking full in Alva's eyes. "We may lack time for the more…elegant…of their ministrations, however, so why don't you make it easier? Tell us everything, tell us the truth, and I swear by the name of Nerevar that I shall command Serana to let you go free. If you don't, well… these are crude facilities, but they should suffice." In truth, while he probably hadn't explicitly lied, he also had no idea how the Ordinators under the Tribunal had carried out their questioning of dissidents and heretics. Those records were either sealed or destroyed, and not even the Ordinators-Defiant would dare risk the wrath of the Great Council by allowing those pieces of the past to once more see the light of day. So, Velandryn was left with horror stories and fragments of histories. Fortunately, so were the Nords.

Alva's eyes had opened wide, and she tried to break free of Serana's grip once again. "Wait, wait! I can tell you what you want to know—"

"No need, my thane." Lydia had returned, her heavy footfalls and voice preceding her return to the room above. "She kept a journal." She waved the small book in front of their faces. "She was turned by someone named Movarth. He's planning on attacking the town, and she was to turn guardsmen in preparation. Hroggar was just to protect her, and she gave the order for Laelette to kill his family."

Velandryn turned back to Alva, wondering if there was anything more he could get out of her, when pain lanced through him. Something slammed into his leg, and the ground rushed up to meet him. He got an arm out, but a cold grip was already around his wrist, and when Alva pulled, he collapsed. Serana had been thrown halfway across the room, a bloody chunk of Alva's hair still in her hand. Alva, bleeding from where she had torn free, bolted at his housecarl. Lydia yelled an alarm and reached for her weapons, but Alva's superhuman speed gave her an edge the housecarl
could not hope to match.

Velandryn's fireball was quick and sloppy, but it did the job. The burn blossomed immediately across her naked back, and her run turned into an awkward sprawl in Lydia's direction. The Whiterun Nord was armed only with the diary, but her blow sent Alva spinning to the floor once again. She rose, spitting blood and curses, but this time Velandryn was on her, one hand gripping her by the throat, the other grabbing what was left of her hair to keep her head still.

"Thank you, Alva." Once more he spoke quietly, and he could see the confusion blossom in her eyes. "You made this easy."

Flame, like anger, was never far for Velandryn Savani. In times of great turmoil, both might rage freely within him, but usually he kept them as valued tools to be pulled forth at their master's command. He exhaled, and the smoking, screaming thing that had once been Alva collapsed to the ground. It twitched once, feebly, and moved no more.

Velandryn had been aware of some noise from outside, and when he looked through the windows he was confronted by a small crowd of townsfolk, milling about uncertainly. None had approached the door, though if the shouted commands from somewhere off in the darkness were anything to go by, that was liable to change with the somewhat late arrival of the Morthal Guard, or whatever they called themselves.

In fact, it was two separate groups who broke through. There were four in Morthal colors, but from the other direction came twice that number in Imperial reds and leathers. They both began shouting commands and inquiries, and managed to achieve a cascade of speech that was completely impossible to understand, let alone answer.

Velandryn decided to take charge; this could all get out of hand, and somebody needed to direct this mob to constructive action. "We need to speak with the jarl immediately." He pointed to the Morthal contingent. "See us there at once." He stepped forward and gestured at the Imperial commander, an Orc in the intricately layered steel plates that marked rank in the Legion. She looked at him suspiciously from beneath her crested helm. "I need you to contain that house."

She looked down at him. "And why would I want to do that?"

He sighed. Imperials loved their ranks; anybody not in the Legion would have a damn hard time ordering them around. Fortunately for him, he had a trump card. Lowering his voice, he leaned in close to the Orc. "There was a vampire in there." He pointed at Lydia. "She took a journal from the body, detailing an imminent attack on Morthal. The jarl and your superiors need to know about this, now." The bit about her superiors came to him only as he spoke the words; it might help sway her. "For now, though, we don't know who we can trust. I don't want word getting out or to even hear the word 'vampire' until we have half a legion smoking out their lair."

The commander nodded slowly. "I'm sending two of mine with you, make sure nothing happens. This is above my level, and if what you're saying is true we need to hammer them fast. I'll hold the house, contingent on orders otherwise." She began barking commands to her troop, and two peeled off to flank Velandryn. He gestured at his companions, and together with the waiting Morthal Guard, they headed off into the night.

"Movarth?" The old woman's voice was thick with emotion, and she nearly flung herself from her chair. They were in the small chamber again, though each time they came it seemed to grow more
crowded. Now, a dark-skinned and mustachioed Imperial in ornate Legion armor was leaning over a map of the region spread on a nearby table and frowning. A one-armed Nord with a bristly beard leaned against a wall; his tabard slashed with the colors of Morthal and military bearing likely meant he was the captain of the Morthal Guard. He grimaced at the jarl's words, and rubbed his beard thoughtfully. The old steward and the jarl's housecarl completed the little crowd, though neither had reacted to the name.

"Do you know who that is?" Her thane's voice conveyed little more emotion that it usually did, but Lydia could tell he was tired. She had been looking forward to a warm bed and a good meal before setting out for Solitude. And instead we get this. She glanced over at Serana. Of course, maybe not all of us wanted exactly the same thing.

"A vampire thought killed over a hundred years ago." Gone was any of the old jarl's distance or grandmotherly affection. Lydia hoped that this news had shaken her out of the odd disinterest that had plagued their first meetings. "But this..." She paged through the journal, and her brow wrinkled. "Disgusting. I know where he was found the first time, and can point the way. I would see him dead, and his threat ended once and for all."

The Imperial saluted, fist on his chest. "Jarl Idgrod, I have only a few units detached from duties at the moment, but I can have two centuries ready within three days, if you give the word." He glanced down at the map. "Give me a week and I can pull another from Dragon Bridge and maybe two from the Pale, though Tituleius'll howl like a stuck pig if I grab so many of his."

Velandryn turned to look at the soldier. "There are less than two hundred soldiers guarding one of the holds of Skyrim?"

The legate laughed. "We're at war, Dunmer, in case you hadn't noticed. Tullius can harp on about Ulfric's 'little rebellion' all he'd like, but the Stormcloaks are fielding a damned army. There's likely half a legion of ours in Hjaalmarch alone—border hold, you know—but they're strung out along the passes, making sure Galmar Stone-Fist or Sindra Shield-Biter doesn't sneak a few hundred of those blue-cloaked bastards past the mountains and hit us in the ass." He snorted. "Best way to protect Morthal, after all. The mountains are covered in our camps, and nobody's fool enough to bring forces through the swamp. Control the choke points, and the town's safe." He glanced down at the map again. "Except for, well, vampires. We didn't account for the gods-damned vampires." He gave one final laugh. "Add in another Legion's worth of bodies bogged down holding what they can in the Pale, and you're damned lucky I can get you as many as that." He glanced at the jarl and the guard captain. "In any case, the guard exists for a reason."

Serana's voice took Lydia by surprise. She would not have thought the vampire would want to call attention to herself. "You have to strike tonight."

The one-armed man growled through his beard and stomped towards her. "Attack vampires at night? You addled, girl?"

Serana held her ground, despite being overtopped by a good span or more and outweighed by what was likely several stone. "If this Movarth has sent an agent to turn people, you can wager he has other watchers as well. By now, everyone who cares to will know something happened at Alva's home. Thanks to him," she nodded at Velandryn, "they won't know exactly what, but if Movarth has any wits, he'll have suspicions. Right now he could well be learning about it, and that means our window of opportunity is closing."

Lydia glanced around. The guard captain still looked skeptical, but the Imperial legate was nodding. She looked at the two commanders. "How many can you have ready to attack now?" She might not trust Serana, but after her brutal fight with Alva, Lydia didn't believe for a second that the
other woman would make common cause with these vampires. A monster, but a principled one.
For her part, Lydia had exulted with each blow Serana had landed on that wretched creature's flesh,
and when her thane had finally turned that smug face to smoking ruin, she had felt kinship with the
Dragonborn like never before. He was a good man, she knew, but sometimes he skirted the
boundaries of what she considered proper. That ending, though…she smiled to herself. Killing
vampires was a good night's work.

The guard captain looked thoughtful. "I can have the town well-ringed, nearly two hundred if I
bring up the volunteers. To go after them, in their own lair, though…” He glanced at the jarl.
"Forgive me, my jarl, but no more than ten or so who I would trust."

The legate laughed. "Ten? I've got a bare-bones garrison, and I can give you fifty who'll charge into
those crypts or caves or whatever, no questions, no fear. Just say the word, Jarl Idgrod, and the
Legion stands ready!" Lydia wondered if Velandryn's jibe earlier had kindled this enthusiasm
within the man.

"And when the vampires block out their minds and turn them on each other, what then? When each
man could be a liability if his mind holds secret doubts or fears, how many brave soldiers do you
have in that case?" Serana's tone was so pleasant, Lydia wasn't entirely sure if she was mocking the
man or if she might actually be genuinely concerned.

The Imperial sputtered out a few words, but Lydia had approached the jarl, who had simply been
watching the proceedings. This is getting nowhere. "Jarl Idgrod, my name is Lydia of Whiterun,
formerly of the Hold Guard." She spoke softly, not needing the room to hear her words.

The old woman smiled. "It is a pleasure to speak at last, Lydia of Whiterun. I suspect you have
some wisdom of your own to offer?" She waved around the room. "Everyone else has done so,
why should you not take your turn?"

Lydia bowed slightly. A jarl was deserving of respect, true, but she was housecarl to the
Dragonborn, and thane of Whiterun besides, so she would offer a warrior's respect rather than a
subordinate's. "Jarl Idgrod, against vampires you would be better served with five true warriors
than fifty common guards. They must be skilled, but also driven, and understand full well what it
is they face." A thought occurred to her. "Are there any in Morthal who call themselves
Dawnguard?" however, she saw the jarl shaking her head before she had even finished her
sentence.

"I have heard of this new Dawnguard and its mission, but there are none of that order here so far as
I know." She smiled, and stood. Instantly, all discussion in the room ceased. An odd one she might
be, but Idgrod Ravenscrone was, by the grace of Morihaus Breath-of-Kyne, Jarl of Morthal and the
Hjaalmar, Keeper of the Pale Way and Warder of Labyrinthian. While she stood, none spoke.

"I have made my decision." She smiled at Lydia and bowed in her direction. "Ready your forces to
march at once. And I thank these brave adventurers for their courage in joining the attack!"

Lydia had known that it was coming, but even the most dedicated part of her quailed a bit at the
thought of a direct assault on a vampire stronghold. However, she would rather die than show such
fears to any present, so she merely turned to Velandryn and awaited his word. She had long since
given up any hope that they would be quit of Morthal before seeing this through to the end, and it
would have felt wrong besides to abandon this town to Movarth and his vile schemes.

Velandryn stepped forward, and offered a bow nearly identical to Lydia's. It would seem he
remembered her lessons from Whiterun. "Jarl Idgrod, we would of course be delighted to assist."
When he smiled, it was indistinguishable from a natural one, perhaps the best she had ever seen
Serana could not for the life of her recall the name of the vast marsh through which she now traveled, and it was Velandryn's fault. Lydia had used the proper name once, but Velandryn had called it the Hjaal Marsh, and that admittedly terrible pun had stuck like a burr in her mind. Now, tromping through it, she glared at the back of the Dark Elf's head, willing him to feel shame for forcing her to endure such mind-numbing idiocy. When the column slowly ground to a stop, however, she found her attention arrested by what lay before her.

To Serana's eyes, the cave was a poor abode for a master vampire, but the documents Jarl Idgrod had sent for were clear. This path into the side of a hillock jutting up from the damp earth was the only known aboveground entrance to a series of caverns beneath the swamp, the onetime lair of the master vampire called Movarth. One hundred and fourteen years ago, according to Jarl Idgrod, three full centuries of the Imperial Legion and a mob of townsfolk had descended on Movarth and his fledgling army, purging these caves and putting an end to the threat.

Or so they had thought. Serana could smell blood wafting up from the tunnel, and it was fresh. Around her, twenty or so members of the Imperial Legion and as many of Morthal's guard readied themselves, all of them nervously checking armor and weapons. Behind them, a small clump of townsfolk watched nervously. Four of the legionaries wore blue-slashed robes over heavy armor and hummed with latent magicka; presumably they were the Imperial Battlemages Lydia had mentioned once or twice. That woman, as well as the Dunmer she served, were off to one side, conferring in quiet voices. Serana tuned out the other sounds from all about her, and listened for their words.

"—on our way." Lydia's voice sounded weary, as though she had said much the same thing before.

"I'm not abandoning a town to vampires, and neither are you. I don't like Nords either, but that's a bit excessive, don't you think?" Once she had thought the elf's voice merely a monotone growl, but enough time listening to it had clued her in to the depths of emotion swimming in those deep tones. Right now, amusement warred with exasperation. "For shame, Lydia, shirking your duty to the people of Skyrim."

"It's not Morthal I'm talking about. Once we reach Solitude—"

Just then, Velandryn turned and caught Serana's eyes in his. He held up a finger, and Lydia fell silent. He held her gaze for a long moment, and more out of reflex than any actual desire, she began maneuvering her magicka in the patterns that would open a mortal mind to her whims. Instantly she realized what she was doing, but in the heartbeat where her power reached out for him, something stirred. For the briefest of instants, in his eyes, there was something else. Something old, and angry, and she smelled for the merest of moments the tantalizing scent of his blood. She pushed it away, lest she relapse into a state she preferred not to think about, but the memory remained. Velandryn's eyes were back to normal, and he kept looking at her, as though nothing had happened. Or did it? Could she have imagined it, her hunger projecting something onto the Dark Elf? He had been in her thoughts too often of late, and even when she could not smell his blood, the memory lingered.

To drown out such troublesome thoughts, she listened to the talk around her, as the commanders planned their incursion and the troops traded gossip and rumors. A word caught her ear, dragon, and she focused on that.

"—near Rorikstead, they're saying. Flew over the town, heading north."
"Some of Duro's lads saw on out in the Pale. Didn't attack or nothing, but must have been a hundred feet at least!"

"Whiterun could kill one, so can we. Let the battlemages off the leash, bring in a few of those siege engineers from the Sixteenth Legion down in Falkreath, and the lizard wouldn't know what hit it."

"Hah, you Imperials always think you know what's best? The Dragonborn will stop them, just you wait!"

"You believe that rubbish? Hasn't been a Dragonborn since the Septims. We'll deal with those dragons the Imperial way, with tactical superiority!"

Dragons again? Come to think of it, Velandryn and Lydia had mentioned them as well. Was something going on with dragons in Skyrim? She had heard muttered whispers at some of the places they had passed, but she had never paid the mumblings of passers-by much mind. And this talk about a Dragonborn was…worrying. She had heard the stories, of course, and rumors would occasionally reach her family of this Tongue or that jarl claiming the title. Generally, it had ended in blood. If there was a Dragonborn running around…

A movement from the front diverted her away from that line of thinking. The Imperial commander, the Orc from Alva's home, was standing in front of all of them. "Listen up, you lot! I'm Garzog, decanus of the Morthal garrison, and I'm taking point here. You'll all listen, or you'll wind up dead!" She pointed to the man beside her, fully armored in Morthal colors. "Captain Franding's my second in command for this purge! We're working as one unit, so forget about rivalry. You can all argue over how many bloodsuckers you killed over drinks when we're done!"

The armored Franding stepped up, and held aloft a piece of parchment. "This is a map of the caves. We're going to go through slowly, and clear each passage. We're maintaining line-of-sight for this entire operation, so don't go running off to play hero. If you think you see something, shout it out. We brought enough torches and arrows to kill a whole city of the monsters!"

That was ill-done. Franding had chosen his words poorly. The mere notion of a city of vampires beneath the ground was unnerving many of the soldiers, Serana could tell. All had volunteered, but here, at the threshold of the vampire's lair, many found their courage lacking.

Velandryn moved forward, Lydia a less-than-silent shadow at his side. He walked right up to the entrance of the cave and peered in, then looked back at the assembled host. "It's your town, your families, your honor on the line. I already killed a vampire tonight." He shrugged with exaggerated nonchalance. "If you lot want to go home, and wonder who's next to be turned…"

The orc strode towards him. "Legionaries, form front! The elf has the right of it; we won't be outdone by some adventurers! Into the cave, and cleanse it for the Empire!"

Barely a step behind was Franding. "Morthal Guard, for the jarl and for honor!" His soldiers' cheer was less than hearty, but it was something, at least.

Velandryn watched as the two groups filed into the cave, and then gave her a small nod. "Shall we go kill more of your kin?"

That irked her. It might be a joke to him, but she was nothing like Alva or Laelette, or this beast Movarth who would make them his playthings! Stiffly, she nodded. "Let's go."
Velandryn had to give credit where credit was due, the Imperial forces were doing a fine job of sweeping the cave. They might be only a shadow of the Red Legions that had conquered most of Tamriel under Tiber Septim, but these soldiers knew discipline and skill at arms. At every branching, the Orc would consult the map and dispatch a number of troops down one of the tunnels. There were at least two of the battlemages with every group, and at no point did any soldier not have at least one other in sight. A line of communication ran back to the commanders at all times, and even surprise attacks were quickly cut off and eliminated. There were thralls, of course, and a few vampires, but superior numbers and the occasional burst of magic brought them down in short order. If vampires thrived of shadow and unease, the purging of this cave brought light and solid certainty, and seemed to be prevailing.

Once Garzog saw Velandryn's fireballs cut down a scrawny vampire who had tried to sneak behind them, the commander had decided she had an additional battlemage, and from then on the bark of "Dark Elf!" was commonly heard echoing through the halls. The Orc knew how to run an operation, he had to give her that. That little show at the entrance had been her idea; both Morthal guards and Imperial Legionaries seemed united in their desire not to be shown up by the strange Dunmer. Use their prejudice to drive them. He had entertained the idea before, but never been able to put it into action until now. A cunning one, for an Orc.

With each chamber cleared and tunnel investigated, Velandryn's unease grew. These vampires were paltry things. Even Laelette had been more dangerous, to say nothing of Alva. Serana confirmed it, when he spoke with her.

"This Movarth is a weak leader, if these are what he commands." She was kneeling over the body of a thrall, checking for something. "He would never be able to threaten Morthal with a force like this." She looked over to where one of the Morthal guards was side by side with a Legionary, talking amiably over the remains of a vampire. "The soldiers are getting complacent, and that's the kind of mindset that gets you killed."

When they brought their concerns to Garzog, however, the decanus wasn't particularly receptive to their worries. "We caught him with his pants down, is all. He's probably got some tougher ones around him, but we'll get them too, don't you worry."

Serana was not mollified. "Or, he's making you careless! Your soldiers are less alert, easier to ambush. I saw some of them digging through chests for trophies, never mind that there was an unsecured room not twenty feet away. If he strikes, how many of your will die?"

Grudgingly, the decanus allowed that they could stand to tighten up their front lines, though Velandryn didn't need to draw too deeply on his skill reading expressions to see how little it pleased her.

Of course, when Movarth's counterstrike came, Velandryn realized it wouldn't have mattered a whit if they had been on their guard or not.

They were in one of the tunnels, acting as a relay to the force clearing the gallery before them, when a gust of wind flapped at Velandryn's cloak and set Serana's hood to flutter. It took a moment for Velandryn to realize how impossible it was for wind like that to manifest underground, and in that instant it returned, this time as a gale. Ahead and behind, the torchlight vanished, and the lantern in Lydia's hand was wrenched from her grasp and shattered against the wall. Velandryn was thrown to the ground, the wind nearly a physical thing in its strength. He looked up, but the darkness around him was absolute.

For a moment, a terribly long moment, he was terrified. He could hear Lydia shouting out for him, and Serana yelling an incoherent warning, but panic overwhelmed him and his breath would not
come. He would die down here, in the dark, unable—

Oh, of course. The magicka that activated his night-eye must be tinged with his embarrassment at his taking so long to recall that he was a mage. Pitch blackness unnerved him, one of the reasons he had mastered the spell in the first place, but that was no reason to be so unmade.

At once the tunnel was lit by the grey tones of his magically enhanced eyes, and he met Serana's steady gaze. She seemed perfectly at home in the darkness, of course, and if anything there might have been a hint of amusement in those golden orbs. Upon noticing him, she smiled. "I told you, you know."

Lydia was crouched with her back against one wall, shield raised and sword at the ready. Velandryn began preparing a ball of light that he could have hover above her in lieu of a torch, but it was an unfamiliar configuration, and he needed to give some thought to how best to anchor it without using her magicka as a tether. She didn't have much, and the last thing he wanted was to inadvertently put his housecarl on the ground by sapping her energy.

As he focused on the magicka, he heard Serana's sharp intake of breath, and the incongruity of a vampire doing that made him look up. He froze. A figure was creeping along the hall, blade in hand, and most definitely not of the Legion or Guard. He moved surely in the dark, eyes fixed on Lydia.

Serana was in motion before Velandryn had time to process what he was seeing. Her blade left a shimmering trail in his magically-enhanced vision as it tore a gash through their assailant's chest, parting the thin hide and leathers like so much cloth. The speed with which their foe spun confirmed it was no mortal and its counterstrike was lightning-fast, though Serana parried it and launched a blinding riposte of her own. The two of them were moving so fast that Velandryn dared not interfere lest he miss and hit Serana. He could do nothing but watch, and hope for an opening.

They clashed in darkness, and Velandryn felt a moment's pity for Lydia, who had to be completely helpless without her sight. Indeed, she was staring into nothingness, mouth set into a grim line. The enemy vampire took note, and darted towards her. Velandryn began to shout a warning, but he was too late. The vampire had closed, and—

Now!

Her shield lashed out, catching her unseen attacker and eliciting a cry of shock. Doubtless they had thought her helpless.

Lydia had first fought blindfolded at the age of ten, when her father led her into the barracks training yard and beaten her twelve shades of bloody with a wooden sword. That had happened for three days. On the fourth, she had listened for his footsteps, and by the end of the first week she was giving the old man a bruise for every one that rose on her.

Velandryn's voice sounded from her left. "Lydia! Watch out for..." His voice trailed off, as he doubtless realized she was far from disarmed without her eyes. She smiled grimly. It was good to know he cared.

She gave them no time to react, smashing her shield again and again into the unknown enemy and driving it to the ground. She drove her fist down, causing a pained grunt from below, and called out to Velandryn. "My thane, I await your command."
It was Serana who responded. "A vampire, one of Movarth's. Kill him."

Lydia did nothing. "My thane?" Beneath her, the undead stirred. She delivered another blow and heard the crunch of bone. An armored gauntlet would do that to a chest. Or a face.

A sigh. "We have no time. Kill him and let's be on. We need to know the extent of this attack." He sounded frustrated, as though Movarth was personally inconveniencing him with this ambush. Wordlessly, Lydia drew her blade, felt for the neck, and pressed down.

The Imperial who had been their forward contact was dead. Velandryn had summoned an orb of light to hover above Lydia's head, and the pale golden glow gave the blood running from the man's throat a strange sheen.

Serana shook her head. "I was right. They're isolated, and doubtless confused. Movarth's attack will destroy them."

A noise came from ahead. The clash of metal, and a war cry. Wordlessly, Velandryn took off down the hall, with Lydia on his heels.

Serana passed them both easily, and by the time they gained the room ahead, she had already engaged their enemies. The vampire looked to have been Imperial once, judging by his stature and the cut of his rusty armor, but death had lightened his skin and Serana was quickly adding broad strokes of red to the palette. The thrall was a bearded Nord, growling incoherently as he clashed with one of the Morthal guard. Lydia felled the already-engaged thrall easily, and her thane reached out, igniting the vampire's cloak with a wave of his hand. The creature spun, its cry of alarm ending abruptly as Serana removed its head with a single smooth stroke.

The guard gave a great heaving sigh and lowered his heavy mace, which dripped with unidentifiable bits of some foe. A corpse on the ground nearby looked to have donated the necessary materials, though another body in Legion armor argued with mute insistence that the battle was not without cost.

"Thank you, friends." The guard had no helm, and his armor was scaled bronze. Interestingly, Lydia could see no wounds on him. Judging by his nonstandard armor he carried some rank in the guard, and his survival suggested he had the skill at arms to go with it. "I was in a bad place there. I'm Valdimar." He didn't seem particularly curious about their names, but he did stoop to close the eyes of the fallen Legionary. "Go swiftly to Sovngarde, brother."

Velandryn was kneeling over each body, placing a hand on their chest and summoning flames to consume the corpses. Serana looked on with something like faint disapproval.

"Let me raise one. We could use the extra help."

"And when our own side attacks us upon seeing us command the walking dead? There's a time and place for reanimation, but I don't think this is it." Her thane pulled a purse from the vampire and peered inside before placing it into one of the pouches on his belt.

The guard nodded. "Leave the dead be. We should go and find the others." Lydia agreed with both of those statements, and in fact felt that this Valdimar might well be a kindred spirit. A good sensible warrior who didn't need to try out new magic or reason through every little thing. For tasks like clearing a vampire's den, you wanted men like Valdimar at your back.

He paused at the edge of the light cast by Velandryn's spell. She expected him to plunge ahead into the darkness or produce a torch of his own, but he simply stood there muttering to himself. "Let's
see now…” With a gesture of his free hand, he conjured a humming ball of light that floated down the hall. Of course, I could be wrong about him. There was nothing wrong with using magic, as her thane had proven time and again, but still…

Back home, she had known where magic stood. It was a useful tool for priests and the like, but it was not a popular field of study for Nords save the odd ones like Farengar. Here in Morthal, however, it seemed that warriors used magic without shame or reservation.

For some time now, Lydia had been attempting to crush a growing and uncomfortable suspicion that her dislike of magic might be more akin to prejudice than something backed up by sound thinking. However, that line of thought was wholly unsuitable for their current situation, and so she did not humor it with further consideration. Maybe later.

She followed the magic-users—all three of them—out of the cavern, feeling very far from home.

Movarth's counterstroke, if this had indeed been such, had been executed masterfully. The organized purge of the den had devolved into a dozen individual battles where one or two guards or Legionaries fought off vampires and thralls striking from hidden alcoves and tunnels that had been cast back into shadow. Wherever they went, they helped turn the tide, and soon there were more than a dozen of them making their way towards the sounds of combat up ahead.

Velandryn could feel that the momentum had gone out of the offensive, however. Each group wanted nothing more than to find the others and get out of there, and the shaming of a Dunmer wasn't going to be enough this time. Valdimar began speaking of leaving the cave and getting reinforcements, but Serana disagreed.

"If we leave now, Movarth wins. He can flee and regroup as well, and I guarantee he's been at this longer than any of you." She looked out over their little group, none of whom seemed too eager to go on and beard a vampire in its lair. Velandryn noted with some amusement how carefully she had excluded herself from those who were younger than Movarth, and wondered how old she considered herself.

Valdimar had, by what was apparently silent and unanimous consent, become the spokesman for both the Morthal and Imperial contingents. Decanus Garzog and Captain Franding were still missing, and he had been the first to join Velandryn and his companions after the attack. So, when he spoke, it carried some weight despite that ridiculous accent.

"They are tired, and need to rest. We should find as many of the others as we can, and send some back for reinforcements." The Nord wasn't wrong, however much his hesitation clearly aggrieved Serana.

Velandryn looked at Lydia, who shrugged. "It's generally a bad idea to leave vampires to their own devices if they know you're coming." She glanced over the ragged band resting and binding wounds, and Velandryn could guess her thoughts. They had found only one of the battlemages, and of the Morthal contingent Valdimar alone had any magical skill. Everyone looked tired; these were clearly garrison troops unused to pitched battle.

Lydia stepped close to Velandryn and lowered her voice. "This lot mostly deals with petty thievery and drunken brawls. Valdimar's not useless, but I'm not sure many of the others would fare well. Send them for reinforcements, let us hold the entrance with those who want to stay behind."

Serana had come up behind them, her enchanted ears likely having heard every word. "Send them back, but we can't give Movarth time. I can feel power, my kind of power, from a tunnel we passed not long ago. The three of us head that way, we find Movarth, and end him."
He looked at her, trying to figure out why she would suggest this, but Lydia spoke first. "Three? Against the Nine-only-know how many vampires down there? Have you lost your mind?"

Serana ignored her and looked at Velandryn. "How adept are you with invisibility?"

He could feel the potion resting in his hip pouch. "Not at all. You want to use the retreat to cover our advance?"

She nodded. "They fall back, clearing as much as they can, and making a huge racket all the while. Movarth will doubtless assign his underlings to monitor and harass them. I can feel the old blood from below, and know where we need to go. Get me close enough, and we can take him down." Not for the first time, Velandryn wanted to understand her true nature. He had yet to see her afraid, as evidently the prospect of killing a potentially centuries-old vampire fazed her not at all.

"You're risking a lot on him not noticing us." If they were seen, or if Movarth called his followers back, they would be overwhelmed.

Serana gave him a measuring look. "Feel free to join the others in their retreat. I am going to end this threat once and for all."

There had never been any doubt as to what he was going to do, Velandryn knew, and he and Serana had too much in common for her not to have known that as well. It was a good plan, barring all of the ways they could die horribly, and he did trust Serana's assessment of these vampires' capabilities. She claimed not to know Clan Cyrodiil, but she had yet to be wrong when combating their abilities.

Only one obstacle remained, but when he turned towards Lydia, her features were already set in that grim line of resignation. "Lead the way."

Velandryn nodded, and beckoned Valdimar over. The Nord did not like the plan, but agreed to do his part, ordering the troops to fall back. They took a route that led them past the tunnel which Serana claimed led to Movarth, and the three detached themselves from the column as it passed.

They soon found themselves scuttling through abandoned galleries and hallways lined with crates of weapons and food. Velandryn had cast a spell allowing him to detect the living, and Serana could smell the blood of any vampire; between the two of them and Serana's well-crafted illusions they managed to conceal themselves from the infrequent thralls and vampires that hurried past. From behind, they could occasionally make out the sounds of battle.

Finally, they found themselves in a narrow passage that had branched off from the larger hallway seemingly at random. Serana was adamant, however, that this led to Movarth, and Velandryn could see no reason to stop trusting her now. Lydia was forced to crouch and scuttle along like some variety of armored crab in the narrow confines, and Velandryn could only make out the faintest emanations of life through the rock walls. Still, Serana urged them onward.

Finally, they emerged into a larger room, and Velandryn noticed three things at once. First, there were two other paths leading out of the room, one in each direction. Second, the exit from their narrow tunnel had clearly been unused for some time, judging by the amount of junk piled in front of it. And third, that the pair of thralls who were just entering the room had most definitely noticed the crash as their exit brought everything piled before them tumbling to the floor.

Immediately, both thralls began running, one down each of the main corridors, all the while shouting alarms. With a curse, Lydia brought her crossbow to bear, but the bolt missed her target and the man vanished down one of the tunnels. The other was making in the opposite direction, but
Serana was hot on her heels. Velandryn took off after the one who had fled Lydia's shot, his housecarl just behind.

They sprinted down the tunnel, the thrall vanishing around a corner and raising an unholy racket all the while. As Velandryn rounded the same corner, he thrust out his hand and pointed a fireball at the indistinct blur of life force that was the thrall. He was rewarded with a curse and the sound of a crash from up ahead. He hadn't hit the thrall, but the eruption of flame had sent the man stumbling, and Lydia was able to fire off another shot that took the man in the back. Breathing heavily, Velandryn closed with the thrall, now trying to crawl away, planted a foot squarely on his back, and drew the dagger he had taken from Lokil. He was exhausted and likely to be facing still more foes, and while he was no vampire, this blade's enchantment meant the thrall would give his life for a good cause. He grabbed the thrall by the hair and wrenched his head back.

The moment the dagger's tip pierced the flesh of the thrall's neck, Velandryn felt energy pour into him. As the thrall's desperate thrashings subsided, Velandryn rose, feeling as fresh as though he had been resting for hours rather than performing this mad vampire chase. Life for life. He wiped the dagger on the thrall's fur armor and slid it back into its sheath at the small of his back. A cruel weapon, but well-made. Fitting it should serve my cause rather than the foul machinations of vampires.

Lydia, unaware of his newfound energy and its somewhat morbid source, came up to stand beside him. "Do you think anyone heard, my thane?"

Doubtless if she knew of the blade's properties she would raise a great fuss about foul magic, something he had no interest in enduring. "I hope not." He glanced around. A great wooden door stood some ways down the hall, but there was no sign of any further foes roused by the ruckus they had caused. "We should go and find Serana, and then be on our way to hunt down Movarth and kill him."

Just then, the doors ahead swung open with the creak of wood and dull screech of old hinges. "Wouldn't it be easier to simply come in?" The voice was pleasant, speaking Imperial Common with rich tones flavored by a hint of a Nibenese accent. Of their own accord, Velandryn's feet obeyed, leading him to the threshold. Beyond, the room was deserted save for an Imperial in dark clothing inlaid with silver scrollwork who sat at the head of an empty table. He was very pale. "Please, enter."

Velandryn's body stumbled forward before he could even think to do otherwise, and Lydia followed. Deep within, Dov screamed in rage at this violation. Behind them, the doors slammed shut.

Movarth smiled.

This thrall had legs, Serana was soon forced to admit. The ensorcelled woman had already alerted one other, though that one made the mistake of trying to engage Serana rather than fleeing as well. He had received a spike of ice that crushed most of his skull for his efforts, and she had hacked off his head for good measure, not having time to check whether he was vampire or thrall.

Every moment she pursued this one pulled her farther away from Movarth. And Velandryn. Why that should matter was beyond her, but it felt wrong to leave him alone down here. Lydia, as effective as she was at being a blunt instrument, would pose no help against one of Movarth's stature. She needed to get back to him, but first she needed to kill this one. This one, with the hot
blood running through her veins, now breathing heavily, blood pumping—oh, Lord, not again!

The thrill of the chase and her foolishness in invoking Molag Bal to aid her created a cocktail of lust within her. When she closed on the thrall, she did not stab with the sword in her hand, but gripped the woman by the arm, pulling her close. Blood thrummed beneath the skin, and each pulse ignited a spasm of ecstasy within her.

At this moment, Velandryn and Lydia could well be in trouble. Perhaps they had found Movarth, or lost their way. Perhaps—

She was drinking before she even noticed biting down, and the bliss of blood cascading down her throat filled her agonizing joy. The thrall had gone still; some part of Serana recognized that this response had been imbued into the enchantments that held her, so she could be easily be used as feeding stock by the members of the coven. It should have repulsed Serana, but she could not deny the call of the blood, the irresistible \textit{wanting} that was even now exulting in her victory over circumstance. Velandryn Savani was not here to condemn her, nor Lydia to look upon her with hate and disgust. This was how she had to be, the inevitable consequence of the choice she had made when she spread herself upon the altar and accepted her new Lord's blessing.

\textit{Oh Lord you have blessed me such sweet succor such release as I have never known I praise your name Lord Molag Bal for this gift of blood within me. She drank, and hated how much she had needed this.}

All at once, she felt the sweetness lessen in the rich liquid that poured into her throat. She raised her eyes, and saw the face of the thrall glazed over. The blood came only feebly, and the woman's stillness had nothing to do with the enchantment that held her. \textit{She's dying.} Serana had drunk too deeply, and the body in her arms was as good as a corpse. Unless she gave of her own blood and raised the body in her own image, Serana had slain this thrall. Death's blood was never so sweet as that taken from the living, but in her thirst Serana did not care. Some part of her whispered that it would do no good, the thrall would die anyways, and that all she could do now was drink deep, that there was no evil here. She listened, and loved that voice for letting her drink without remorse. She bit deeper, and her magic pulsed through the unfortunate mortal, forcing out the blood, all of the blood, all for her.

However, as she raised her eyes one final time and watched the thrall take her terminal breath, so insubstantial that mortal senses might well have missed it, she saw something unwelcome. She saw Helgi and Hroggar, victims of the vampires. She saw Laelette, maddened in undeath, turned into a minion and leaving a grieving husband behind. She looked down at the body in her arms, deathly pale and cooling fast. \textit{Did she have a family? A lover who waits for her return, a mother or daughter who sets a place at the table in case she comes back through the door?}

In the void left by her hunger, conscience and reason returned in a rush, and she flung the body to the floor in her haste to be free of it. It was intolerable to hold, a grotesque reminder of what she was. She had never regretted her choice, not truly, but in moments like this, after a feeding that went too far, she was repulsed by the reality of her existence. That she had to feed, either constantly on one who was no more than a slave to her hunger, or like this, taking the blood of another forcibly even unto death, a crime in the eyes of every nation that had ever been.

It was an affirmation, she knew, of why it was imperative that she return home. She had enjoyed this time spent among the world, probably more than she should have in truth. However, these were not her people. She left the body where it lay, and began retracing her steps.

\textit{Why am I doing this?}
The thought came to her unwelcome and unbidden. Why kill Movarth if these were not her people? Why had she been filled with such hatred for Alva, why had she been overcome with helpless grief when trying to comfort Helgi? *Now is not the time.* Regardless of reasons, she needed to end Movarth. She could analyze the why later, but this was a time for action.

She ran down the hall, trying to reach the place she had left Velandryn. It was a long way, though, and she had only the omnipresent pulse of Movarth's blood to guide her. The contrast between them was fascinating, in its own paradoxical way. Her bloodline ensured she was all but certainly the more powerful vampire, but Movarth had made himself the spider in the center of a secret web, commanding lesser vampires and thralls for decades, possibly centuries on end. His power was realized in an army of loyal followers, where hers was largely potential, known but not bought forth.

She had never needed to be mighty, and before waking in this time, she would have scoffed at the notion of depending entirely on her own strength. She was of the royal bloodline Volkihar. When human, it had meant that there was a nation of loyal servants eager to leap to her bidding, and in the wake of her transformation it meant that she stood only a small step below her father and mother, who commanded the full power of their clan. Now, save for the reluctant and calculating aid of mortals, she had none to rely on but herself.

She reached the room where they had first encountered the thralls, but there was no sign of Velandryn or his housecarl. She could feel Movarth down the path her companions must have taken, and knew it was likely they were already falling into a trap of some sort. Velandryn might be clever for a mortal, but he had shown only the shallowest understanding of the subtle snares of which her kind was capable. She did not know this Movarth, but he clearly had the power to dominate lesser minds with ease, and she had no desire to fight either one of her allies. *Well, maybe Lydia, just to prove to that self-righteous bitch where she stands in the world.*

As she took the first step, however, something *else* intruded into her mind. The pulse of Movarth's arrogant power flickered, and she felt her legs lose strength as a chasm of boundless age opened within her. *Impossible!* Whatever was happening was far removed from her, but she felt the thundering roar of...of something. She recalled the conversation she had overheard outside the cave, and in a brief, idiotic flash wondered if there could be a dragon down here.

It was over in a moment, her world righting itself and strength flowing back into her limbs. Her first step was shaky, her second hesitant, but by the third she had found her balance once more. *What was that?* She still felt the reverberations, but there had been neither sound nor physical movement. Whatever had happened had been carried solely through some other mechanism.

She reached a corner, and turned, checking briefly to see if there was anyone in the hallway. It was clear, and she headed further down. Ahead, she could feel Movarth's presence, a subtle resonance in her blood. There was something else, however. The roar had faded, but in its place remained a constant echo, an almost-sound that hinted at untold age and impossible power. She shivered as she proceeded, and looked around, almost hoping for some foe to take her mind off of this unnerving sensation of standing on the edge of the abyss.

There was nothing there, however, save her, her thoughts, and a sensation she could not place. Shivering, she ran on.

From the first word out of the vampire's mouth, Lydia's body had refused to obey her. She could, with great effort, keep herself from moving, but she could no more take an action unbidden than
she could have tunneled her way through the rock with her bare hands. She had deflected Alva's seduction by focusing on the monster she truly was, but it seemed a master vampire needed no subtle infiltration to dominate a mortal. Fortunately, Movarth's attention seemed entirely focused on her thane.

"You are the one who killed Alva, aren't you? My agents mentioned a Dark Elf giving orders at her home." The vampire was sitting in his high-backed chair, fingers crossed in his lap, looking perfectly at ease.

"She needed to die." Likewise, her thane appeared relatively calm, though Lydia knew that could well be nothing more than an attempt to trick the vampire into lowering his guard or weakening the spell he had laid on them. They were standing not five paces in front of the door through which they had entered, but it might as well be ten thousand leagues for the chance she had of reaching it.

"If you are angry that I killed her—"

"Oh, not in the slightest!" Movarth gave an airy wave. "I merely wanted to make sure you were the same person. You have done very well, for a mortal. Come closer to disrupting my plans than any in, oh, a hundred years or more. You and your associates, that is." He nodded respectfully to Lydia.

"Well done, the both of you!" He clapped with apparently genuine good cheer.

"Is this a game to you, then?" Velandryn's voice was harsh. "Destroying the lives of so many for what, your own amusement?"

Movarth rose, hands clasped behind his back. "Something like that." He began to walk towards them, slowly traversing the length of the table. "Tell me, as an elf, what do you think of human lifespans?"

Velandryn shook his head. "They deny you true mastery of the more subtle skills, and cause rashness in your leaders."

Movarth looked pained. "Please, them. I have not been human for some time." He stopped and poured a dark liquid from a silver carafe to a stone mug, drank, and smacked his lips. "But where are my manners? Would you care for some refreshment? From my personal collection, no less. Killing vampires is thirsty work." He smiled, and his long incisors caught the light.

He was turned so Lydia could see only half of his face, but she doubted even in perfect light that she would have been able to make out much movement on her thane's face. "Let me guess. The blood of virgins?"

The vampire roared with laughter, and poured another glass. "Half wrong, I'm afraid. The only blood in here is that of the grape. A Skingrad vintage, from the high vales in the western country. Pre-War, of course, as the Nineteen Days quite devastated that region."

"Unbind me, and I'll gladly drink." Her thane seemed calm; he was good at that.

"Oh, I think not. Not that I doubt your word, of course, but I get the feeling you'd try to kill me first, and I'm enjoying our little parlay. It's rare to have a chance to talk with someone who isn't bound by blood to be your eternal servant, you know." Movarth sat at one of the many places laid out on the table, and sipped his wine. "You've made a very good show, and I'm feeling magnanimous, so ask, and I'll tell you what you want to know. You do have questions, I hope."

Lydia, for one, did not. Her thane, however, spoke immediately. "Why this plan? Even if you succeeded, Morthal would be liberated as soon as word reached anywhere else in Skyrim." He paused. "Are you trying to weaken the Empire, give the Stormcloaks an edge?"
Movarth waved his hand. "Oh, don't talk to me about the Empire! A thin reflection of a worthier predecessor, trying desperately to hold onto a vestige of their former glory. No, I don't have any love for them, but I certainly wasn't thinking politically when I tried this." He smiled. "Keep in mind I've been doing this for over a hundred years."

"Why then?"

A shrug. "Why not? The town has never been well-warded, and there is power out in the mists if you know where to look." He rose. "Besides, what else was I going to do with my time?"

"You did it because you were bored?" Velandryn's voice mirrored Lydia's incredulity.

With quick strides, Movarth closed on him. "And what would you know of boredom? How many years have you? A hundred? Less? Come to me when you have lived for five centuries, and tell me how you fill your days." He turned away. "While I was human, I was convinced that I had a purpose, a calling that must be fulfilled. I was wrong, and given an eternity to ponder my mistakes." He turned back. "Well, I have pondered, and found nothing. Life, whether as mortal or vampire, is what we make of it. And, I have an infinite number of lifetimes to experience all that the world has to offer!" Another smile. "I am enjoying the life of a warlord, I think."

"You've lost." Her thane's words were flat, no hint of mockery or gloating to be found. "Morthal knows you're out here, and whatever you think of the Empire, they'll flood these caves with so many soldiers that your army will be reduced to nothing."

"And you think that matters?" Movarth was pacing now, emphasizing his words with gestured hands. "They flood the tunnels, and I have a dozen back paths out of here. I cannot die, Dunmer. Perhaps I'll go somewhere else, and try again. Or maybe I'll go live among humans for a while. Grow rich, wed some beautiful young thing with delusions of splendor, and make her mine. I can begin feeding on the populace, and see how long it takes until they find out." He smiled. "Usually they catch on within a few years, but once it took almost twenty."

"So it is a game. All of it. That's how you see us."

"Can you blame me? I discovered after a frankly disgusting amount of moping over my new condition that I could either agonize over what I had become, or…not." He pointed straight at Velandryn. "You'd come to the same conclusion, given enough time. The gift of blood outranks any sensation a mortal can experience, and these meager lives are meaningless compared to mine. Besides, it's so much more fun!" He laughed again, long and loud. Then, he sobered, and looked at them with something that Lydia half-suspected was pity. "You probably think me a monster, and I think you hopelessly naïve. We are simply too far apart to understand one another, and that pains me." He stood between them now, close enough to touch either her or her thane.

Lydia tried to do something, anything to break this spell upon her, but it was to no avail. Movarth had her completely at his mercy. The vampire's eyes were on her, and Lydia felt her hand begin to move towards her blade. It took every drop of willpower she had to keep herself from obeying his foul command.

Movarth blinked, and the pressure in her hand was gone. "You are strong." He glanced at Velandryn. "Both of you are. Most beings would be mine by now. First the mind, then the body, and finally the soul." He stepped back, and clasped his hands behind him. "It would be a shame to break that, make of you no more than a trifling slave. So, I think I shall try something…different."

He strode to stand in front of her thane, and clasped him on the shoulder. "There is something I have always lacked, something necessary for this grand adventure of mine to become truly…"
mythic, and that is a worthy foe. Someone who will hunt me, not because of whatever incidental scheme I have concocted for that decade, but because they have the burning desire to see me ended. If I kill them, it is a victory all the sweeter for its resonance, and if they foil my plans or, gods forfend, kill me, then I have the satisfaction of knowing that I was undone at the hands of someone who took the time to hunt and hate me on a personal level." He stepped back. "So, what do you think?"

"I think you've read too many bad romances, Movarth." Velandryn's smile was ghastly, far too many teeth. Lydia was so used to his half-successful attempts that it took her a moment to realize that he had done exactly what he wanted to, and bared his teeth at his foe.

"Probably, probably!" Movarth waved a hand. "Tell me, Dunmer, do you care for that woman?" It took Lydia a moment to realize that he was talking about her.

"Something like that." Lydia wasn't sure what to make of that answer, though it did not seem to phase Movarth.

"Good! You're smart enough to see where I'm going with this, aren't you?" Lydia had to confess that she was not, or else the twisted reasoning of elves and vampires was closer to each other than it was to the thoughts of Nords. "I simply wanted to make sure that her death would leave a gaping wound in your soul, one that leads you to hunt me down." Lydia felt something else settle on her, a cold so intense that she could barely feel her body, let alone move it. She understood now, what he had meant by making himself a nemesis. If by her death Velandryn could live, however, then it was her duty as a housecarl to lay down her life.

"Dunmer, this is my final command, one I lay upon you with the full strength of eight hundred years. Kill her." He smiled, and turned away.

"No. No it couldn't be. He would command Velandryn to kill her himself? It was a perversion of the bond between thane and housecarl, a wretched crime. Movarth couldn't know, of course, but it hardly mattered. Once more she strained against the bonds that held her, but still she was as helpless as a newborn before this magic.

She looked at her thane, terrified of what she might see. However, he was standing stock still, eyes fixed on Movarth's back. "No."

The vampire spun back, lips twisted in a smile beneath cold eyes. "That's not the answer I was looking for. Kill her!"

Velandryn laughed then, and the harsh and grating sound was music to Lydia's ears. "Command me again, vampire." He shivered as he stepped forward, and raised a hand to point at Movarth's face. "You speak of mahfaeraak, of immortality, but you are nothing more than joor that has been stretched beyond its time."

The room seemed to tremble. Movarth's eyes blazed red, and he raised his own hand in furious command. "Be silent and obey! You are nothing before me!"

"Such arrogance. You challenge me, unheeding of the folly into which you have stumbled. The forest does not command the storm, and joor does not command Dovah!" That last word was spoken in a guttural roar from deep within her thane's throat, and Velandryn's hands burst into flame.

"Impossible!" Movarth stepped forward and drove a fist at Velandryn, who stumbled backwards. He brought his fire-wreathed hands up, and Movarth danced back, nimbly dodging the haphazard
blow. "Fine." He turned to Lydia. "Kill the Dunmer. Do it!"

"No!" Her thane's shout came as Velandryn was already moving towards her, and Lydia managed to reduce the speed with which her body obeyed Movarth's command. She shuffled on each step, and her hand inched incrementally towards her blade. Velandryn, upon reaching her, reached up and placed his hand on her shoulder. Magicka pulsed through her, and her arms and legs locked in place. Stunned, she nearly fell, but Velandryn held her upright with a grip far stronger than she expected from the elf. "She is mine, vampire. None but I command her!" He released her, and her limbs suddenly worked again. She still could not move, but neither was she being commanded. The elf stepped away, and that unnerving Daedric blade was suddenly in his left hand, while his right arm burst into flame. "Kill me yourself, coward."

Lydia felt an unexpected and ill-timed rush of affection for Velandryn. He had paralyzed most of her body and claimed ownership over her, to be true, but she was fairly certain that was merely a combination of whatever dragon nonsense was going on in his head and his own natural sense of superiority. She would taunt him mercilessly for it later, but his actions were well-intentioned. The fact remained, however, that he had stepped forward and stood between his housecarl and a master vampire. It was nice to know he cared.

The vampire clapped his hands. "Very good! Though I must say, you are armored entirely wrong for a battlemage."

Velandryn twitched the fingers on his right hand; the fire around them danced through the air. "I'll take it under advisement. Maybe the reward for killing you can get me some good bonemold spell-plate."

Movarth opened his mouth, but paused before saying anything. Suddenly, he spun again, this time towards the shut door through which the two of them had entered so long ago. "So, that is what I was feeling." He looked at the two of them, and Lydia was suddenly free. "You brought a Volkihar with you, and a powerful one at that. Was it deliberate, a counter for my power? Like can sense like, you know, and no other breed feels quite so…cold."

With a crash, the doors slammed open, and there stood Serana. She had a sword in one hand and her other glowed icy blue and radiated frost. She looked ragged and half-feral, and Lydia had never been happier to see her.

Movarth looked at the three of them, and smiled. "What an interesting group. A Volkihar vampire of exceptional bloodline, a Nord of uncommon willpower, and a," he paused, "well, I'm going to need to figure that one out." He stepped back, and began ascending the stairs that led to a balcony overlooking the room. "Consider this round yours, my friends. We shall meet again, sooner or later, of that I am sure. After all, don't you want to kill—"

Lydia had had enough. One major advantage of the crossbow was that it could be stored with the bolt nocked in place. There was actually a clip that held the bolt so that the bow could be turned any which way and it wouldn't fall out. Truly, a marvel of engineering. So, when she drew it, there was no need to load. Only to raise it, take aim, and send a few inches of wood and steel into Movarth's chest.

"Yes." It came out a growl, and she began to reload. She was going to put him down for good. Her body still ached from the stress it had undergone, and she still felt the chill of not being in control of her own motions. Never again!

Velandryn pointed with his burning hand, and tiny drops of fire fanned out, filling the air between him and the vampire with a burning sideways rain. Serana gestured as well, and great shards of ice
lanced across the room towards Movarth. The vampire, however, placed his hand on a pillar, and a shimmering blue barrier enclosed the balcony. The projectiles impacted harmlessly against it.

"I was not expecting that." His laugh was more a pained exhalation than anything else, and each word was punctuated by a gasp of air. "A good weapon. I'll have to get my hands on one." He stood tall and gestured. "Maybe you should bring me that one. Nord!" Once more Lydia felt the coldness settle over her, but she was ready. She raised the crossbow to point straight at him, and as her hand began to take on the familiar sensation of an attempt to dominate, she pulled one finger back.

The bolt careened off of the shield Movarth had raised, but it was enough. It raised a cascade of sparks, and the vampire flinched. She felt the weakness recede from her limbs, and she reloaded with grim satisfaction. She might not be the Dragonborn or an ancient vampire, but she could throw off this bastard's attempts to control her at least!

Movarth hissed some curse, but Lydia's focus was on Serana. She had begun laughing, and it was laughter that set the housecarl's teeth on edge. On the road, the vampire had been reserved but not unfriendly, and once or twice Lydia had heard her laughing softly at some joke or observation Velandryn had made.

This was different. It was a cruel laugh, bleak and mirthless, hinting at unwelcome and sleepless knowledge. "Nice shield. Where did you steal it?"

Lydia couldn't make out Movarth's face, but if he was unnerved by Serana's behavior his words hid it well. "From a vampire with more knowledge than wisdom. I wrested the knowledge out of his hands, then killed him."

Velandryn caught Lydia's eye and pantomimed aiming a crossbow at Movarth. She did so, wondering what Serana was going on about.

The golden-eyed vampire looked at once healthier from the last time Lydia had seen her and more haggard. "One of my people?" She was speaking with less than her usual eloquence, short sentences that were uncharacteristic for the intelligent immortal. "That spell is ancient, created by the founders of my line. Unfortunately, it is not without...drawbacks when used by one of lesser blood." Of course, not necessarily. In the instant it took Lydia to have that thought, Serana raised her hand and bit into her wrist. The shield above shattered, shards of glimmering light and what was likely raw magicka spinning through the air and vanishing. Into the space where it had been, her thane sent another barrage of fire, thought this one was made of great fireballs, each the size of her head or larger. Serana sent a cascade of lightning forward as she ran towards Movarth, and Lydia aimed her crossbow at what she thought was his outline amidst the magical cacophony and pulled the trigger once more.

Watching Serana, Lydia was half-certain she would outstrip the crossbow shot. The vampire nearly flew up the steps, taking them three or four at a time. Behind her, Velandryn was charging, and Lydia was doing her best to keep up. Her body was sore and parts of it were unnaturally cold, but she would not let mere discomfort keep her from her duty.

When she and her thane achieved the balcony to which Movarth had fled, it was to find Serana and Movarth locked in an odd dance. The Clan Cyrodiil vampire was fighting unarmed against Serana and her single blade, and by the look of things was getting the better of her. While Serana had demonstrated that she was a fairly skilled duelist, Movarth was clearly a master of his style. Every one of his blows either landed solidly on Serana's body or deflected one of her slashes. Besides which, he was retreating towards a tunnel set into the far wall. All the while, he was talking, an endless stream of taunts and nonsense.
"I killed a Volkihar, back when I was still human. A friend of yours, do you think? He reached through the ice, didn't even break it. Nearly got me, but I saw the shadow and moved just in time." He struck her wrist in a clear attempt to disarm her, but Serana held onto her sword and brought her other hand around in a broad and sloppy blow that he ducked under with ease. "Like that. Your kind is fast, and strong, but that means you don't think. You assume that you can overpower your enemies, and when you can't you're at a loss."

With a hiss, Serana caught one of his wrists and head-butted him square in the face. "Shut up." She spoke softly, as though she were very tired.

Movarth staggered back, clutching his face, and Lydia had her chance. She fired one final time, and Velandryn sent a great stream of fire out of his hands, surrounding the vampire. After a moment, her thane stopped, and slumped against a pillar, but waved her off when she began to move towards him. In the midst of the fire, Movarth was cursing and tearing at his burning clothes as he ran for a tunnel in the far wall. Lydia began to reload. He was clearly a very dangerous combatant, and only the twin surprises of facing a Dragonborn and whatever kind of special Volkihar Serana was had gotten him to this point. They were so close to victory, and she would not let him escape.

She needn't have bothered, however. Serana ran and lunged forward with impossible grace, and this time her blade was not turned aside. Apparently there was nothing she wanted from Movarth save his death, as she didn't worry about interrogation or even the small restraint she had shown against Alva. Instead, while Velandryn and Lydia watched mutely, she methodically disemboweled the other vampire. By the time she was done, the ruin of what had been the ancient master vampire Movarth could scarcely even be termed a corpse.

Serana turned to Velandryn. "Burn it." She hoisted Movarth's head in her hand. "The jarl might want this." She made her way down the stairs, sure-footed but with an air of great distraction.

Velandryn moved towards the body and ignited his hands. "Whatever he may have had in his pockets, I'm in no hurry to find it. Lydia, would you like to do the honors?"

She wasn't sure if that was a joke or a command. "Are you going to burn it for her? I thought you didn't take commands from vampires, my thane."

He looked down at the body. "The problem with that is, I'm not sure she knows." He waved, and what remained of Movarth the master vampire erupted into flames, and the sickly sweet smell of roasting flesh filled the cavern. He sighed. "She saved us, you know."

There was no point in asking who he meant. "I know, my thane." There was nothing else to say. They owed their lives to a vampire.

Serana came back to herself as the battle receded into the past. She had fought like an animal, still raw from the feeding, but now she had the presence of mind to think on how best to behave. Velandryn had noticed for certain, and Lydia was never one to miss the vampire acting oddly. She could explain it away, if they even asked. If she was lucky, it would become just another thing that was never remarked upon, an unspoken casualty in their attempt to keep this odd companionship free from overt hostility.

In that vein, Serana had an idea, and now was as good a time as any to put it into play. She found Lydia rooting through one of the chests that lined the walls of the room in which they had found Movarth. The vampire had amassed quite a collection of odds and ends, it would seem. She was
inspecting a silvered armband inscribed in the shape of a serpent. "That one's Shor, I think."

The Nord looked up, startled, but quickly regained her composure. "Aye. A strong piece, worthy of a crafty master." She held it out to Serana.

_A peace offering?_ She took the trinket and turned it over in her hands. "You resisted Movarth. That's impressive." She honestly did not know how to talk to this woman. Warriors were generally commanded; she had never needed to play diplomat with one.

Lydia replied with a snort. "Apparently he wasn't as great as he thought. You should have heard him talk." She had resumed her rummaging, this time surfacing with a bolt of what looked like silk and a small stone knife. She whistled. "I know a few merchants who would sell their firstborn to get at what's stashed here." She looked over the treasure again. "Well, maybe second-born. Certainly a niece or nephew."

Serana was tempted to accept the implicit offer and talk about nothing of consequence, but first she wanted to offer the damned complement. "No, he was very strong, but you resisted. That's rare, and you should be proud."

Lydia turned slowly. "Look, I'm grateful that you helped, but..." she paused, and Serana waited for it. The inevitable barb, the half-hearted thanks that would somehow cast her as manipulator or villain.

Then, the other woman shook her head. "No, you came and saved us. Whatever we did, you turned the balance. Thank you." She held out an arm, and Serana reached out tentatively. When Lydia did not retract it, she clasped the other woman's forearm stiffly. They held like that for a moment, until Lydia released. Without a word, both turned away.

_Was that progress?_ Serana thought it might be, tense as it was. She would likely never be close with Lydia, but she was sick of feeling on edge all the time. _It doesn't matter anyway. My time with them is all but done_. Still, she was glad she had tried.

Velandryn was similarly engaged, though his interest was more focused on Movarth's library and what appeared to be a rack lined with enchanted clothing and armor. _"Anything interesting?"

The Dunmer did not jump up as she approached. Rather, he carefully closed the book he was perusing and slipped it back onto its shelf. "Only insofar as Movarth has some horrifically poor taste in literature. His collection on magical theory, while rudimentary, is at least fairly complete, and I wouldn't have a problem directing a neophyte in its direction." His eyes met hers, and he held the gaze for a long moment. "I do not think you sought me out to discover that Movarth was an aficionado of Nibenese bodice-rippers, however."

He was right. "You got lucky, you know, bringing down Movarth that easily." She still didn't know how the two of them had resisted his control for so long. Strong minds were one thing, but...

"Lucky? We brought you, so I'd call that good planning. How did you break that shield of his?"

She had broken through Movarth's shield because her mother had designed it, and Valerica's magic had always been attuned to the blood of Volkihar royalty so that it could never be turned against them. In fact, she would doubtless be overjoyed that her forethought had given her daughter such a dramatic victory. _She always did stress our superiority over lesser vampires._ "Vampire magic. Secrets I won't reveal." She tried for a mysterious smile, but had no idea if she succeeded.

"Fair enough." He gave her a look that she felt was unnecessarily piercing. "Something else you
"This is going to sound strange, but…" She had to ask, even as she knew what the answer would be. Whatever she had experienced in the tunnels had been some sort of vampiric feedback. Her fancies about a dragon were just that. "When you were facing Movarth, was there a moment where something interrupted his power? Something strange, like…" Gods, she did not want to say it. The mere thought of him laughing at her caused her a strange pain in her chest.

"Like what?" His eyes were serious now, at least, and she could see worry in there. She made up her mind.

"Anything like a dragon?" The moment she spoke, something flashed through his eyes.

He adopted a look of mild puzzlement. "I don't think so. What was it you felt exactly?"

She shook her head. "It's not important." She was on the verge of turning away when something occurred to her. He has to think about facial expressions. It was a trait she had noticed, but it was rarely relevant. Here, however…He wasn't surprised. He wanted me to think he was. Why would he lie about that? More interestingly, making a false facial expression wasn't the kind of slip he made often. He doubtless was hiding almost as many things as she was, and both of them were reasonably skilled at it. For him to have played it so clumsily…

He returned to his perusal of Movarth's things, and she noticed it then. A knife in a sheath nestled in the small his back. He had several, but this one looked oddly familiar. She looked closer, noticing subtle details. It was slightly curved, and looked to be made of orichalc and corundum, but could be mistaken for ebony with its dark and mournful sheen. The handle was wrapped in soft leather, harvested from a newborn calf. She knew that if it were drawn, the blade would have a wickedly sharp edge, and any wound it inflicted would sap the victim and revitalize the one who held it.

Serana realized that she was too close just as he backed up, bumping into her. Instantly she was standing, trying very hard to look nonchalant. His red eyes were quizzical. "Is there something I can do for you?"

Answer my questions truly and in full. "Where did you get that dagger?" She supposed it wasn't inconceivable that in the millennia since her sealing someone else had crafted a weapon similar to —

"You recognize it then?" Well, apparently not. "Did it belong to a friend of yours?" From Lydia, that would have been mocking, but Velandryn sounded almost grave, as though he was sorry if that were the case.

"Doubtful. My father gave—gives— them out as tokens of esteem, or trust." Some of those who had received them—no, she did want to remember those faces. Better to let such as them lie undisturbed.

"Such as to the one he sent to retrieve you?" His eyes were intense.

She nodded. "I don't know who it was—"

"Would you like to? He wasn't shy about shouting his name."

She froze. Did she want to know that? If Velandryn and Lydia had killed someone she knew, was that something she needed to face?
Yes. She was returning home anyways, and would doubtless be interrogated about what had transpired. She might as well have the truth of it. "Who was he?"

"Lokil, or so he said."

She had never heard that name before. Her relief must have shown on her face, because he nodded gravely. "Good. I am glad I did not kill some beloved friend."

*Clearly he doesn't know Clan Volkihar very well, if he thinks there are many of those.* Something else was bothering her, though. "How did you get the dagger? I mean no offense, but any who carried it should have been able to slay you with ease."

The red eyes were laughing again. "I won through unfair means, of course."

That told her nothing. "Meaning?"

He arched a single eyebrow, something she had not known his face was capable of doing. "You wish me to reveal my secrets?"

Yes. "No, of course not."

Velandryn's true smiles, the good ones, only came when he was amused or deeply content. It was subtle, but the change in his eyes transformed the whole of his face. "Liar."

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They encountered their reinforcements as they left Movarth's chamber. A veritable tide of soldiers, dozens or more, pouring through the hallways. Garzog, sporting a rather nasty gash down her cheek that looked to have also taken off the end of one tusk, snorted when she heard about Movarth. "Guess we could have stayed home, huh?"

Valdimar, who had apparently taken control of Morthal's contingent of the combined force after Franding's death, drew Velandryn aside. "Jarl Idgrod would speak with you upon your return." He spoke quietly, and the Dunmer nodded.

"What about?"

The warrior gave him an odd look. "She did not tell me, friend. I got the message from her housecarl, who insisted that it be relayed to you and you alone." He looked around. "We can handle cleanup down here, so I'd like for you to get back as soon as possible."

Velandryn looked around at the caves, so recently the home of a vampire army. There were doubtless more treasures secreted away down here, but just as certainly a few more vampires who had not yet heard that they were defeated. Besides, he had already secured from the jarl a promise of five percent of any treasure recovered to split among his band of three. It didn't matter who found it. "I'll be going then." He clasped the Nord on the shoulder. "Hunt well, and don't get bitten."

Lydia was as happy to be gone as he had expected, though Serana's eagerness to be out of the tunnels surprised him somewhat. When pressed, however, she simply replied that she had spent more than her share of time in caves. He wondered, though, about what exactly had happened to her before their fight with Movarth. She had been different upon her return, and he suspected he knew why. She had fed down there, and now was feeling...something. He couldn't say what, but she had been carrying an air of almost remorse, and that unnerved him. Serana was many things,
but he had yet to see her apologetic. If she had fed on a thrall and now regretted it, however, that could perhaps be termed progress.

Morthal had, in the time they had been gone, awoken with a roar. Guards patrolled the predawn streets, and hundreds of torches had been lit. Scouts and hunters were penetrating into the swamp, and the lifting of the heavy fog meant that the three of them had been accosted long before reaching the town proper. Upon seeing who it was, however, they were escorted with more than a little deference to the jarl's hall and ushered into the old woman's presence.

Jarl Idgrod had seemingly regained her air of genial detachment, and her court had something of a restive atmosphere. The people milling around the throne's dais parted quickly enough, however, and fell silent respectfully when the old woman opened her mouth.

"You have not only my thanks, brave adventurers, but the thanks of all who live in the Hjaalmarch. I name the three of you friends of Morthal, and offer each of you the choice of one weapon from my personal armory." She smiled down from her throne. "The *Long Wind's Laugh* is leaving for Solitude two hours after sunrise, and you shall continue on your journey with all of the aid Morthal can give. Once more I say to you, well done, and our thanks!"

The hall applauded, albeit somewhat dutifully, and Velandryn could not help but wonder at the effusive praise and reward they had been granted. What the old woman had said seemed fair enough, but on top of the five percent he had already secured, it became almost excessive generosity.

One of the guards tapped him on the shoulder, drawing him out of his thoughts. "Follow me." Startled, he glanced up and did as he was bidden. They went to a familiar door on the side of the hall, and the guard opened it. "Only him." This last was said to Lydia, who looked none too happy about being left outside. At Velandryn's nod, however, she crossed her arms and leaned against a pillar, eyes hard and every line of her stance screaming out the havoc she would wreak should anything happen to him. Smiling to himself, Velandryn passed through.

Jarl Idgrod had gotten there before him, and he could not help but notice her lack of housecarl or steward. In fact, once the guard shut the door behind Velandryn, the two of them were alone. In the sudden silence, a thought that had been itching at Velandryn's brain rose again and clamored for attention. *Did we ever tell her we were headed for Solitude?*

The old woman rested her elbows on her desk and gave him a broad smile. "So tell me, Dragonborn, how fares Whiterun and that young man Balgruuf?"

Velandryn could only stare at her, trying desperately to figure out how he had been so easily uncovered.

Still smiling, the old woman rose, neglecting her stick, and produced a letter from somewhere in her fur-lined clothing. "I've been jarl of Morthal for forty-nine years, you know, and for more than half of those, Balgruuf has been taking care of things down in Whiterun. We write, from time to time." She waved the letter. "I would have thought you were on your way to High Hrothgar, though."

"I got sidetracked." His mind was racing. "So you've known who I was—"

"I had my suspicions since you walked through the doors to my longhall. There are few Dark Elves of consequence in Skyrim, and fewer still who travel accompanied by a warrior of Lydia's stature." She chuckled. "Balgruuf was quite put out at losing her, so I hope she has served you well."
Velandryn was still trying to figure out the events of the past day and night. "Your visions, then, they were false?"

The old woman smiled. "My visions are very real, but it never hurts to have some help from this world as well." She moved toward a side table, empty but for a silver flagon and a pair of chalices. "I knew the Dragonborn would come to Morthal, though I did not know why. And thanks to the jarl of Whiterun, I knew more or less what to expect." She poured a measure into each of the chalices; the honey-sweet smell and deep golden color of the liquid put Velandryn uncomfortably in mind of mead. He still had not acquired a taste for the wretched drink.

"So if you knew who I was, why did you have us investigate the fire?" He thought back to her strange behavior and requests. "I thought you half-mad at the time."

She smiled again. "You and much of the town. I like it that way, though. Life is hard in the Hjaalmarch, and Nords are wont to complain. I do as I can, lead as my visions and wisdom tell me, for I can do no more. The people are forgiving when misfortune befalls us, for all that they grumble, and more than one boasts in his cups of 'Idgrod the Long-Sighted.'" The smile left her face. "Or so my husband tells me. Perhaps they do think me mad." She shrugged. "Ah, I am old, and rambling."

Velandryn suspected that however old this woman might be, she knew exactly what she was saying. "So, why did we look into a house fire?"

"It was supposed to be simple! Look into the incident, find whatever evidence was there, bring Hroaggar in for questioning, and determine his guilt. Or innocence, though I'm not sure there's anyone in Morthal stupid enough to think it was actually an accident." She offered him one of the chalices, and he took it reluctantly, already dreading the mead within. "You do a good deed for the town, and the both of us benefit by having the Dragonborn establish himself as a friend to Morthal."

"Until it turned out to be vampires?" It wasn't necessarily how he would have gone about it, but…

"When it was just Alva, I thought that was even better, to be honest." She took a sip of her drink and smacked her lips. "Have the Dragonborn bring a vampire to justice and solve the murder as well? A true-blooded hero in our midst. Of course, things spiraled out of control somewhat once we learned about Movarth, but it did give me an opportunity to see if you were worth all of the trouble I was going through."

"And?" Trying to appear nonchalant, he took a sip of the mead. To his relief, it was far lighter than anything he had been subjected to thus far. Merely an inoffensive beverage he had no liking for rather than a viscous tide of honey and sickly sweetness.

"Valdimar spoke to one of my runners, and he speaks well enough of you. Our fine Imperial friends also do you credit."

Something in her tone there… "You do not support the Empire? I thought Morthal—"

"Bah! Morthal stands with the Empire because it would be suicidal to do otherwise! Our border to the east is defensible, and it would be difficult to bring an army up through Labyrinthian or the Hjaal Passes, but the forces stationed in Solitude could crush us inside of a week, and that's with time to march factored in." She shook her head. "Besides, Tullius knows what's he's about. He and that pet queen of his ask little of Morthal, which is just how I like it. The Thalmor get too noisy, someone tips them off to a Talos shrine deep in the swamps." She grinned with wicked glee. "They don't come back from that."
"So why is Balgruuf staying neutral, if the Empire asks so little of you?"

"Jarl Balgruuf." She chuckled. "They'd ask more of him, you can be sure! Money, trade deals, allowing the Thalmor access and letting the Legion tramp all over his fields." She spat on the ground. "Also, Balgruuf is more sympathetic to that wretched upstart Ulfric than I am. Not to mention, he can be neutral because Whiterun has more trade than it knows what to do with and a hundred miles of tundra any invader would have to cross before laying siege. I doubt Ulfric's Thu'um is enough to bring down Whiterun's walls, and would you want to drag your catapults and ladders along for days on end through hostile territory? The Empire has the same problem, plus either one invading would have the other side coming down on them before the first stone is thrown. Not to mention Whiterun's breeders are doubtless training up war mammoths and fitting them for saddles. It's been thirty years since mammoth riders broke the Dominion lines at Red Ring Road, and I bet many a young buck is itching to try his hand at the craft."

Velandryn had heard of the Nords' mammoth cavalry, of course, but had not considered that Whiterun must have some of its own. "I spoke with the jarl, and he seemed less than secure in his position."

"Eh, he's standing in the thick of it, so the bad looms large. Besides, I'd wager he was asking you for help at the time."

Velandryn couldn't deny that. "Are you saying Balgruuf lied to me?"

"Jarl Balgruuf, please. You may be Dragonborn, but a lack of respect will win you nothing but scorn. And does it surprise you?"

It didn't, not really. It did, however, increase his respect for the man. "Or, you're lying to me now."

She clucked reproachfully. "You are not very good at this, are you?" A brief smile. "You don't tell someone to their face that they might be lying. You find out through other sources, and if so, use the discrepancy in what you know and what they think you know to leverage yourself a more advantageous position." She took a drink. "Another useful tactic is to serve someone a beverage they dislike, so that any time they take a sip you know it was calculated."

Velandryn carefully placed his chalice on the table. "This has been a very informative meeting, if nothing else."

The old woman chuckled again. "I like you, Dragonborn. What else did you want to know?"

Something occurred to him. "How did you know we would be headed to Solitude?"

She blinked. "You are? I had assumed you were headed to High Hrothgar. Why in the name of the Eight would you be going to Solitude?"

"Wait, why would you charter us a ship to Solitude if you thought we were going to High Hrothgar?" They stared at each other in mutual incomprehension. Finally, Velandryn sighed. "Like I said, we were sidetracked. I need to route through Solitude before returning south. But explain the ship, and why we would be in Morthal otherwise."

The Ravenscrone nodded slowly. "I had assumed you had journeyed to Labyrinthian. It sits on one of the most significant strongholds of the old Dragon Cult, and I've been told there are ruins that date back to before the Dragon War."

*Well, that's certainly worth knowing. You still haven't answered. Why the ship?*
"Misdirection," the jarl stated simply. "If a letter was enough to clue me in, others could have the same or better resources. Thalmor, Imperial, Stormcloak, it only takes one to spread word. I thought I'd have them looking for you in the wrong hold entirely. It seems I outsmarted myself."

"Well, you made our road swifter, so thank you."

The old woman shrugged. "The ship is waiting for you, though they have orders to watch your cabin and act as though you are aboard regardless. I trust you are doing what needs to be done, so I won't stop you, though I must add my voice to what I am sure is a chorus insisting that you speak with the Greybeards as soon as you can. My scouts have reported seeing three dragons in the last week, and similar reports are coming in from the other holds." She stood. "Skyrim needs the Dragonborn now more than ever!"

Velandryn put up his hands in an attempt to mollify her. "I agree. After my business in Solitude is completed, the Greybeards are the next on my list." It wasn't a lie, so long as 'business in Solitude' was interpreted very broadly. He had no idea where Serana's family might be located, but he got the feeling it would not be in the city proper. The Volkihar didn't seem the type. "I take my duties as Dragonborn seriously."

"Good. I have been exceptionally generous with you, even going so far as to promise you a percentage of a vampire's treasure, and I plan to see my investment repaid." She rose. "Speaking of," she opened a hinged box and slid it across the table. "Five thousand septims until we have a chance to appraise the whole of Movarth's possessions?"

Once more, Velandryn tried his hardest not to let his shock show. He had never actually seen that much money in raw coinage before, and even broken down as it was into hundred-septim Imperial Crowns, it still made a pretty sight. "You are very generous," he managed at last.

The jarl frowned. "I do hope not. I told you, I plan to recoup my investment in you."

"How?"

"The moment you take that money, I am yours and you are mine. This is enough to purchase a plot of land in Morthal, or perhaps even a home—well, a small home—in the lower districts of Whiterun. You can do much with this, and I can already tell you are the sort who remembers his friends."

"So this is all to ensure a good relationship with the Dragonborn?" What exactly did she have in mind, that she felt the need to secure so much allegiance? "I'd rather avoid making enemies if I can, but this kind of help may be richer than I can allow."

She smiled. "Suspicion is the beginning of wisdom, but there is no need to worry. I stand in Morthal, as I always have, a big fish in a little pond. In the wider world, my person matters not at all, and my people are at best an afterthought for those on their way to somewhere else. I have seen the chance to, for once in my life, stand not just in the shadow of the mighty, but to aid a hero in his rise. When you bestride the world, I ask only that my people be ever in the back of your mind."

He did not know how to take that. On some level he understood the larger significance of the Dragonborn, but the idea that he could…well, that he could influence larger events had not sunk in on any level that mattered. "What have you seen?" He still did not know how much of her apparent foresight was visions and how much carefully crafted subterfuge, but he had no intention of underestimating this woman again.

She laughed. "Visions are not so clear as that, my dear! I see much, but little that is obvious to a
simple woman like me." She closed the box and pushed it in his direction. "Perhaps you come to nothing or turn away in our time of need, and my daughter inherits a Morthal that is all the poorer for my folly." She gave him a keen look, one eyebrow raised. "Or perhaps, when the Dragonborn hears of Stormcloaks, or a dragon, or the very mountains themselves falling on Morthal, he rushes to the aid of an old woman who took a chance on him long ago."

He understood then. Trust. It was carefully couched and ringed in gold and half-joking lies, but that was what she wanted. He put one hand on the box. "Azura has not blessed me with vision as she has you, but I swear to you that I shall hold your kindness and faith close to me through whatever trials may come."

She stood. "Velandryn Savani, you who are Dragonborn, I offer you once more the friendship of Morthal. May the trials ahead temper your courage with wisdom, and give you the strength our people so desperately need." Then unexpectedly, she laughed long and loud. "So noble, standing there! If I had a year with you, I would train you so you could hold your own in every court from Daggerfall to Necrom. And if I were twenty years younger…" She gave a throaty chuckle. "Well, no sense in mourning what-ifs, is there? I wonder if my daughter…" She broke off with a laugh and then gave him another of her piercing looks. "One more thing I must mention. You do know you travel with a vampire, don't you?"

He couldn't help the laughter that he was sure had made its way into his eyes. "She's the one that ended Mavarth, and I'd not trade her for a hundred common soldiers." A bit of an exaggeration, perhaps, but Serana was tremendously useful when her impulses could be kept in check.

With another smile, the jarl bowed to him. "Then I have no more to say. Go in peace, Dragonborn."

He bowed back. "May the Triune keep you, and the Four Corners turn away."

When he reentered the main hall, it was to find his companions waiting for him. Lydia looked as though she had been considering tearing through the door, and the two guards flanking it, with her bare hands. Serana, by contrast, was smiling slightly at nothing, ignoring the Morthal guard vainly trying to engage her in conversation. Velandryn nodded slightly to both of them, and then began making his way to the main doors. They had a ship to catch.

The Long Wind's Laugh was an odd name, but Serana had to admit it seemed an able enough vessel. She had little knowledge of seafaring, but the captain was obviously proud of his vessel, and the crew was making ready to cast off with what appeared to be true competence. Most were Nords like the captain, though a few of the smaller humans seemed to be of Manmer or Cyrodilic descent. There were two Bosmer as well, and one of the green-skinned Orcs like the Imperial commander from before.

There was also one human unlike anything she had ever seen, with skin as dark as Velandryn's, though this woman's was an earthy brown rather than grey. When she asked Velandryn, he called her a 'Redguard,' though he also mentioned that Serana likely knew the race as Yokudans. It was true that Serana had heard stories in her time of the mysterious continent to the west, and the fierce sea-faring warriors who hailed from its shores, but she had never seen one. The woman was, except for her skin, disappointingly mundane, however, and Serana soon found her attention drawn by one of the small Bosmer, who was speaking excitedly to a blue-tattooed Nord, naked but for a strip of cloth around his loins, stacking crates.

"It's true, you know! I was talking to a merchant up from Whiterun!" At the mention of the city her
interest was caught. She knew that Lydia hailed from there, and Velandryn seemed to have something to do with it as well.

"So? Dragonborn or not, we got to work." He pointed. "Go get that rope. We need to have these lashed down of Yonnuk'll have our hides."

"Not just a Dragonborn," the lithe little worker insisted. "An elf!"

Instantly, the Nord spun on the Bosmer, sending the crate crashing to the deck and looming over the elf with cold fury in his eyes. "No! Shor wouldn't do that! The Dragonborn's a Nord!" He noticed her watching them then. "What're you looking at?"

Serana murmured an apology and moved away, mind racing. An elven Dragonborn? There was no reason it couldn't happen, she supposed, though she had certainly never heard of one. She wondered how Velandryn would feel about that. He'd probably be thrilled. The Dunmer had a tendency to cast himself as the lone enlightened elf in a province filled with ignorant Nords, and the idea of an elf as Dragonborn would fit right in with that.

What would it be like, though, a true Dragonborn? They were said to have the very blood and soul of a dragon. Would it be obvious, talking to them, that they were different? How did a dragon wear mortal skin? Would—

Would it be only sometimes, like a tide come upon you? Would they change, and a hint of their true nature reveal itself? She was back in the tunnels, the roaring all around her and the abyss beneath her feet.

Would they resist the domination of a vampire, and offer no explanation as to how? She saw his eyes, different for the merest of instants as she tried to exert power over him.

Would they defy an ancient vampire, breaking his power and creating an opening to exploit? She recalled Movarth saying that he would have to 'find out' what Velandryn was.

Would he be named thane of Whiterun for killing a dragon? Lydia followed him with impeccable loyalty, and she had heard the soldiers speaking of a dragon slain in Whiterun.

Would he fear a vampire newly-awakened, or would he react unlike any the poor girl had ever met, making her wonder and filling her with turmoil? Gripped by sudden resolve, she opened the door to the cabins, needing an answer now.

"We can get the horses when return to Morthal." Velandryn's voice was a constant in this strange new world. It had the harsh accent she assumed was native to his homeland, but underneath the richness of tone and subtle humor that marked him. If she was right, if he was the Dragonborn, surely he would shake Skyrim to its core.

"Those are Whiterun mares, my thane." Lydia, ever the stolid Nord. Serana still did not truly like her, but she thought she could respect the woman for what she was. "Fine horseflesh, and worth a princely sum."

"If the jarl of Morthal cannot vouch for the security of two horses in her personal stables, then Skyrim is in worse shape than I thought."

A sigh. "Very well, my thane. I'm going to go above, get some air."

"You do realize we are still in Morthal? If you want to breathe deep the swamp air, be my guest."
A thumping echoed along the corridor, and Serana realized Lydia was coming, as her heavy boots meant she went nowhere silently. The vampire stepped into a doorway, and pressed herself against the rough wood. She closed her eyes for a moment, gathering magicka.

From a few talks with Velandryn, she was coming to understand the idea of 'Schools' of magic. It made sense, in a way, that someone had codified them for easier study. She had not had that luxury, however, and so viewed each spell for what it could do, not as a member of some arbitrary category. The magicka now swirling around her not only bent the light so she would appear to be invisible, but it entered the mind of any passing by and encouraged them to overlook her hiding place. It could backfire against a powerful spellcaster, but for most purposes it was an exceptional way to hide.

Lydia tramped past silently, not even slowing to look in her direction, and Serana continued on towards the cabins. The jarl had given them two, and while she may have intended for the women to bunk together, Lydia had wasted no time in consigning Serana to bunk alone. In truth, however, she couldn't begrudge the Nord that. A housecarl would do nothing less to protect their charge. And if he is the Dragonborn…She pushed open the door to Velandryn's room.

The elf who might be Dragonborn was looking through the window, watching the morning light trickle in. A book lay open on the desk before him, and his armor was piled on one of the cots. He turned as she entered, and the morning light cast the angles of his face in sharp relief, as the setting sun once had, back in some tiny town whose name she could not even remember. Now, though, she saw more. She saw the fatigue in his eyes, but she also saw the fire there. She saw—

"Did you need something, Serana?" She jumped as he spoke, but had regained her composure by the time he turned to look at her.

"I wanted to ask you something, actually." Until that moment she had been prepared to—well, she actually wasn't sure. Ask if he was the Dragonborn, or demand that he tell her. Try to get him to reveal it perhaps.

He rose and slid the wooden shade down over the window. His shirt and pants were of simple cut, greys and blacks with his red hand on the breast. "Then ask. And there's no need to hide your face in here."

"Thank you." It was strange. Had he always been so conscientious? "I wanted to know…" She started the question, but it wouldn't come out. Why? Why was she so afraid of asking?

"Why did you help me?" It wasn't what she wanted, but it came out, and it was something.

Confusion did not so much blossom on his face as it did tinge his words. "Help you when? I would say we've been aiding each other for some time now."

"No, not them. The first one. In the chamber, when you knew what I was. You've said your people have all but wiped out your vampires, and Molag Bal is one of your hated enemies! Why did you help me? You should have killed me, but you didn't! Why? Did you want something from me?" It was coming out, and she couldn't stop it. The questions the secrets, the frustration, she couldn't hold it back. On some level she knew she should be proud that he hadn't spoken her whole mind, but even this little bit emptied a sliver of the tension in her stomach.

"Why? At the time, I didn't know." Velandryn, however, seemed not to have noticed her near-loss of composure, so consumed was he in his own thoughts. "There's plenty of reasons I'm helping you, but in that first moment it was a mad impulse. I am not a very good priest, you know."
"What?" That last line had been so strange that the word simply slipped out.

Those red eyes were fixed on the book before him. "I'm not a good priest." His lips twitched. "I have always been, on some level, convinced that I know what the Triune really wants. Common enough among the acolytes, but it has lived as a niggling voice in the back of my head for decades now. It whispers that the Sermons are fine for placating the masses, but that in the moment, I am the only arbiter of my choices. The pernicious idea that the Triune must respect rebellion, for did the Chimer not rebel against the Aldmer, and so become enlightened?" He looked up at her. "I wax and wane in my orthodoxy, but in the moment I allowed you to wake, to speak with you and satisfy my curiosity rather than destroying you, I did so because I wanted to. I chose, that's all."

"And do you regret your choice?" Once again, the words slipped out before she could take them back, and the moment was gone.

His face regained its usual composure; the odd vulnerability he had displayed vanished as though it had never been. He leaned back, eyes glimmering brightly. "If I did, do you think I'd tell you about it? I'm no expert at dealing with vampires, but I'm pretty sure telling them you wish you'd murdered them in their crypt isn't how you get along."

"You might want to let Lydia know that."

"I think for Lydia, your issue is less about knowing, and more about caring." He slumped down into the chair. "Your actions with Movarth helped, though." He turned back to his book. "The captain said we'll reach Solitude around nightfall, so I plan to at least try to stay awake until then." He tapped the page gently. "I picked up this book on my second day in Skyrim, and I'm still on the first chapter. I'm going to read it, I'm going to enjoy it, and while you are welcome to stay, I won't have much to say."

"What's it about?" She wondered how the novels of this age were written. Had styles changed since her time?

There's so much I need to learn.

"It's called The Refugees, and concerns a historical figure called the Camoran Usurper, following the majority of his rise and fall through the eyes of those around him."

"Who was he?" She had heard of the Camorans, of course, as their royal line had been famous across Tamriel even in her time. They had ruled since the Year Zero, it was said, before even she had been born. This Usurper, though, was unknown to her.

He placed a thin strip of paper in the book, marking his place, and closed it. "His name was Haymon Camoran and, going by what I have read so far, he was a lesser son of the dynasty, one whose lust for power and feeling of inadequacy spelled doom for his family."

"Is the book well-written?" She had nothing of her own to read, and if he was willing to talk…

He smiled thinly. "I have not yet read enough to know. Would you like me to update you every time I finish a chapter?"

She realized he was annoyed at her, something she had never seen from him. It wasn't anger, though righteous fury seemed to be one of his principle motivations. This was different.

He was being taken away from a promising book, and wanted nothing more than to shut the world away for a bit. She knew the feeling well, and hastily, she left the room. Wrapping herself up again, Serana made for the deck, leaving the Dunmer below.

They had cast off, and the swamps of the Hjaal Marsh swept by on either side. Lydia was leaning
over one of the rails, watching as a farmhouse perched on the edge of the water swept by.

"Glad to be leaving?" The Nord glanced up, and Serana was relieved to see her nod.

"Aye. This town makes me uneasy. I'll come back for the horses, but after that I've no wish to see this place ever again." She looked sidelong at Serana. "Almost home, aren't you? How's it feel?"

Was Lydia inquiring after her mood? This was too strange. "I don't know what I'll find."

Lydia nodded. "More like you, if nothing else. Be among your own kind again."

Was that it? Was Lydia merely cheered by the thought of Serana soon being gone?

They spoke no more, watching Morthal recede behind them. Serana watched the water, and the land, and even chanced a glimpse at the sky before her eyes began to burn. Everything was strange, in this new age. She should have been overjoyed at the thought of her home waiting for her. But her thoughts kept turning to a cabin beneath the deck, where an elf who might be the Dragonborn was reading a book in peace.

Serana watched the swamp pass by, beautiful in its own way, and thought of dragons.

Chapter End Notes

So, we leave Morthal, and the rather interesting Movarth Piquine the onetime vampire hunter, behind.
Parting of Ways

Chapter Summary

Sooner or later, everybody winds up on the docks of Solitude.

Chapter Notes

It turns out I am bad at figuring out site formatting, so I'll be responding to reviews where I'm supposed to be from now on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At first, Serana thought it was a cloud. She could make out a smudge on the horizon, far to the north, and she wondered if the weather would turn. The day was clear but chill, not that the cold held any terror for her. She could have walked naked through a blizzard and felt not the slightest hint of discomfort. However, as the distant something grew, so too did her worries. It was dark, almost looking like a mountain rising from across the waters. Finally, when the light hit the crest just right and the jagged line atop it resolved into spires and towers, she realized what she was looking at. She gaped for a moment, words failing her. Mother, your stories never did it justice.

They weren't even out of the swamp, but Solitude already dominated the northern skyline. She could see the sky under the great arch, whose height she could not even begin to guess. It had to be miles long at least. She knew it was a great spar of the Druadach Mountains that bridged the mouth of the river in its entirety and plunged down to end at the edge of the Morthal swamps. Atop the arch, buildings were becoming clear, chief among them the mighty windmill that had been famous even in her time. Breath caught in her throat as she remembered paging through a well-loved book, Sojourns in Solitude, and wishing more than anything else in the world to see the wonders described, as she looked upon the distant city, she figured a mote of something must have flown into her eye. She rubbed it away fiercely, hoping nobody had seen.

The Long Wind's Laugh had made good time, cutting through the swamp waters with great speed. The wind whipped at the cloth around her face, and a part of her wanted to tear it off and let the breeze play in her hair and face. Only a small part, though. A Volkihar might not burn away in the sun, but it was far from pleasant. She fingered the second blade at her side, the finely made dirk she had taken at Jarl Idgrod's behest. A weapon given for aiding mortals. It felt strange on her hip, but not unwelcome.

Footsteps from behind, and Velandryn joined her at the rail. He had thrown a heavy fur cloak over his slender frame and had thick gloves on his long-fingered hands, but had not put his leather armor back on. His clothing was simple but well-made, and she was struck by a thought she had entertained before; whether in armor or rags, Velandryn Savani would always have a striking look about him.

"So that's Solitude." The Dunmer sounded almost bored with the view, though it was entirely possible he simply didn't like the idea of giving a city in Skyrim too much credit.
"So it is, my thane." Lydia too, who had apparently joined her despite the lack of invitation, sounded unimpressed, though doubtless it was only because she did not want the Dunmer to outdo her. She had never known a housecarl to act quite as Lydia did, though she figured that the woman was fairly new to the job. The Dragonborn had only just been discovered, after all.

Serana glanced at Velandryn out of the corner of her eye. After giving it more thought, she was still mostly convinced he was the Dragonborn. It answered many of the mysteries that surrounded him, and might explain how he had managed to bring down so many foes who should have slain him easily. **Whatever knowledge or powers he has clearly catch his enemies by surprise.**

"Weren't you going to go read that Camoran book?" If he was going to be so self-righteous when she asked about his stupid book, she would give him all the grief she could muster if he put it down.

"Reading became sleeping, and I prefer to do that at night." His words were spoken offhandedly, his eyes still fixed on the distant stone arch. His tone might be dismissive, but he couldn't tear his gaze away.

Just then, a greeting sounded from behind, and the captain joined them. Jorik had not spoken to her since welcoming them aboard his ship, but it seemed to be merely because he enjoyed being up to elbows in rope and sail rather than any reluctance to engage his guests in conversation. "First time seeing Solitude, then?"

All three of them indicated assent, and the captain chuckled. "No place like it in Skyrim. Puts the rest to shame!" At that, Lydia mad a scoffing sound, prompting the captain to laugh. "Where you from, then?"

"Whiterun."

"A fine city, to be sure, but not much for the sea, that one. Plenty of horses, but no ships, and the Shores under Solitude can hold a hundred at a time!"

"The Shores?" That was Velandryn.

"Aye, the Solitude docks." From the captain's tone, you might have thought he had built them himself.

"Interesting. They are distinct from the rest of the city?" Once again, Velandryn had found something to pique his curiosity, and now he was picking at it to learn everything he could.

More or less, I s'pose." The captain shrugged broadly. "The city's got five, eh, districts, you could call them." He chuckled. "None like the others even a bit, truth be told." He began counting them off on his fingers. "You got the Shores, what's all about the sea and trade, the Climb, all up the roads to the old city walls." He grinned. "Where the working-folk live, the Climb, and the best ale in Skyrim, at the Frosted Top! Inside the great walls, you got the Gold, where's all the fancy merchants and dressmakers and whatnot. Then there's the Castle, that'd be Castle Dour as General Tullius and the Empire's taken over, and all the smiths and those what does the work for the Imperials, and then you got the Blue. That's everything between Dour and the old Palace where Jarl Elisif, may the Eight defend her, sits and rules." He knuckled his forehead in a gesture of respect. "Truth be told, the likes of me don't go inside the walls much. Only been past the Castle into the Blue the one time, when Jarl Elisif and good King Torygg was married." He knuckled his forehead again. "May he find joy in Sovngarde."

**Interesting.** Serana had picked up enough to know that Torygg's murder at the hands of Ulfric
Stormcloak was the spark that had ignited this whole war, but it sounded a fascinating story, and she was interested in hearing more. The bereaved widow leading her people against her husband's assassin? The ballad practically wrote itself. Now, if Elisif and Ulfric had a secret love... That would be a song worth hearing. Unfortunately, the real world rarely lent itself to such heightened romance.

Velandryn, the potential romances of Jarl Elisif clearly lost on him, leaned forward, eyes still fixed on the approaching city. "You hail from there, Jorik." He didn't bother making it a question.

"Damn straight, friend elf! Born in the Climb, grew up hauling for the fishers on the Shores until I was old enough to go out on the water. Now, I sail up the Karth to Dragon Bridge and the Imperial camps, and along the Hjaal down old Morthal way, and even—if the winds are calm—to the ports around Dawnstar in the Pale, but Solitude's where I lay my hat, and where my family's waiting. Got a good mooring at the Shores and a fine house in the Climb, and couldn't want more. Never a finer city there was!" He beamed at them.

"Someday you should sail to Blacklight, and then I will hear you admit your error."

Serana wasn't sure it was wise to antagonize the captain like that, but the man only laughed. "Your city, is it?" Velandryn nodded, a half-smile still on his face. "Well then, I'll forgive you that one. I've heard of that city. All Dark Elves, isn't it?"

Velandryn shrugged. "Less so than it was, though most foreigners keep to the Outland Quarter and Cauldron Hold."

"More's the pity, for I'd love to see it," the captain murmured thoughtfully, "but my Laugh" he patted the rail affectionately, "she's a shore-skimmer, and autumn is upon us. I'd rarely brave the Sea of Ghosts even in a calm summer, and this season's been no kind one." He shook his head sadly. "Nay, it's the rivers for me, though I ought not to complain."

"Out of curiosity, in what do you deal?" If Velandryn was merely feigning interest, he did it well.

"Everything you can think of, and a few things you'd never guess. I've had the Laugh for years now, and most every port on the rivers knows me. Not too many ships around here made for running the streams, you know. With the war and that business in the Reach, everyone wants my Laugh to haul their goods."

"What's been happening in the Reach?" At her master's words, Lydia gave Velandryn a disbelieving look. Serana didn't know for certain, but if she had to guess, she would lay the blame at the feet of the Reachmen. They were a fractious and warlike folk, and the Nord Empire of her time had had a wretched time trying to keep them under control.

"The Reachmen are revolting again." Silently, Serana congratulated herself. For every thing that changes, another stays the same. "The roads were safe until the damn rebellion, but from what I heard one caravan in three gets wiped out these days, and the others get attacked as well, now that the Empire's bogged down dealing with these traitors." He shrugged. "Damn shame, but I've never had more work."

As they spoke, the great arch loomed higher and higher, and the structures in the great mountain's began to resolve out of the haze above the water. Docks emerged, as well as the boats that inhabited them. One in particular seemed to excite Velandryn, a strange-looking thing with ribbed sails and a hull that was not only differently shaped than any of the Nord styles she had ever seen, but adorned with strange symbols and hung with banners of every shape and size.
The captain pointed to it. "That's one of you Dark Elf's ships, isn't it?"

Velandryn nodded. "For foreign trade. Hung with holy words and symbols, and crewed by the faithful."

"Even your merchants are priests?" Serana wasn't entirely sure how the Dunmer worked, but that didn't seem right.

"Hardly, but there are two kinds of Dunmer who spend much time abroad. The first is changed by exposure to the wide world, and if they return to Morrowind, they bring the world with them. The second sees the world in all of its vastness, and wraps the traditions and faith of home about them, so that they need not walk alone." He pointed at the ship. "That is the latter. They proclaim their heritage, so any who encounter them know with whom they speak." He nodded. "There is honor in devotion."

Serana was considering whether or not to make a comment about that when something else caught her eye. This new ship was huge, wide and flat, and crossing the water in front of them to the beat of drums. The Imperial dragon stood out on its sails and banners, but what caught her eyes were the soldiers. They were packed on, and many bore wounds ranging from the trivial to the serious. As they drew closer, she could also make out the looks of exhaustion on the faces of even the unwounded.

Jorik sighed. "Back from the Pale, most like. The healers do good work, but..." he shook his head again. "I hate that the blasted elves took Talos, but war isn't the way. Not among ourselves. We should be driving out the damn Thalmor!" He glanced at Velandryn. "Erm, begging your pardon, master elf."

Velandryn was picking distractedly at a spot on the railing. "No pardon needs be begged. I've no more time for the Thalmor than you do. They're fanatics and reactionaries, and they'll fall like the rest of those Aldmeri throwbacks always have."

Serana was confused. "You think it's futile for them to try and reclaim their lost glory?" As near as she could tell, that was the goal of this new Aldmeri Dominion; they wanted to be an elven counterbalance to the Empire. She didn't think it was a good thing for Skyrim, and she would not be surprised if she found herself in conflict with them at some point, but from an elven perspective it seemed to make sense.

"They're fools is all." Velandryn, at least, seemed interested enough in discussing the Thalmor, even if the captain had pointedly turned away and started shouting at his crew. *Doesn't want say something stupid to the Jarl's passenger?*

Well, she had no such compunctions. "How so?"

"How not? Aldmeris is long-vanished, our people scattered to the six winds. The very earliest records we have show divisions tearing the Aldmer apart. Veloth was not the first to abandon the Old Ways, though I would argue he left in the most dramatic fashion. In fact, the Aldmer of old seemed to split every time two people so much as disagreed over which way to slice bread; our only shared legacy is one of fractious infighting!" Velandryn smiled grimly and looked out over the waters. "Mer share a common heritage, and that is enough. We have a past that has shaped us, why should we be forced to share a future we do not want?" A pause, while he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Of course, maybe I'm just sour on the idea because they think my people are blasphemous heretics, even worse than humans." He shot them a smile. "And they *despise* you."

"A source of great pride for us, my thane." Lydia sounded supremely self-satisfied, and Serana
envied her that easy kinship. It must be nice, to have so many others like you. The humans might think Serana was one of them, but she walked alone.

What was it Velandryn said, to wrap oneself in traditions? She hadn't done that though. In fact, she'd opposed the vampires who were preying on the mortals, something her father would likely chide as the height of foolishness. They were more than mortals could ever hope to be, the hunters that ruled over the sheep. She glanced over at Lydia. Of course, some of the sheep have a bit of steel to them.

Velandryn seemed to have made up his mind about something. He pushed himself back from the rail. "Gather anything you have on board, we'd do well to be out of the way by the time they start unloading." Apparently, the list of subjects on which Velandryn considered himself knowledgeable extended to dockside etiquette. No, she reflected, that's unfair. If anything, the annoyingly exhaustive list was subjects where he was knowledgeable. The elf had a prodigious appetite for new information and a talent for putting it to use; she would wager that he was already mulling over this situation in the Reach and how it would impact any plans he might have. She didn't know what those plans would be, but if he was the Dragonborn, there was far too much about Velandryn Savani that had been kept from her.

She reached down and stroked the case containing the Elder Scroll. Can I say any different about myself? She might not be fully informed of what her father had been planning, but Lord Harkon of Volkihar could be patient. If he had needed the scroll, he would wait to have it. Undoubtedly, when she returned whatever her parents had been putting into motion would resume. Whatever that might be. Once more, she thought of Valerica, and her mother's sudden dissent. What happened to you, mother?

Moments after stepping back onto solid ground, Velandryn had to duck to one side as a pair of Nords wrestled a cart stacked high with lumber along the waterfront, shouting warnings ahead of their passage. An urchin darted through the gap left by their passing, singing some sort of off-key shanty. In moments, sailors, merchants, workmen, dockhands, hangers-on, thieves, whores, and all the assorted mass of mortality that oiled the great gears of trade had filled the space once more.

The docks of Solitude, what Jorik had called the Shores, teemed with activity. The majority of it seemed to be based around Nord trade and the like, though the Empire clearly had a strong presence too. Soldiers patrolled the wharves and inspected all incoming ships and cargo; they gave the Long Wind's Laugh only the most cursory of glances. Clearly Jorik had not been lying about being a familiar face on these docks. Everywhere banners hung, many with the diamond dragon of the Empire, though by far the most prevalent displayed a black wolf on a field of red; he assumed it was the standard of Solitude.

Less common, though still clearly in evidence, were the Breton traders out of Heiroc. High Rock, the humans call it. Two words, because the elven name isn't good enough for their precious human maps. From what he understood each of these merchants would be looking out for themselves and their guild rather than their province or the Empire to which they belonged. A strange people, with strange ways. He also saw a pair of what he assumed to be Redguard vessels, judging by the crews and the strange devices on their banners, though they looked more like simple trade ships than the infamous corsairs of the stories.

Of the Dominion, he saw evidence of no ships at all. If the Thalmor had overseas trade with Solitude, it was quiet. He was slightly disappointed, as he had heard stories of the Altmeri sunships, spun of crystal and sunlight, adorned with shimmering wings and long banners that listed the ancestry of every soul aboard. Of course, there was no reason for the Dominion to send such
glories to a place like this. There were a few Thalmor soldiers patrolling the quays in pairs, peering into barrels and rifling through bundles as though they expected them to be filled with pamphlets of Talos. For every crate checked or workman harassed, a hundred went by unmolested. Velandryn suspected that duty on the docks was more about maintaining the visibility of the Thalmor rather than any real hope of ferreting out whatever violations of their treaty with the Empire they might theoretically find.

He had only seen the one ship of his people, though that was hardly surprising. There was little that Morrowind required of Skyrim these days, and less that needed to be brought by sea. The Great Council likely frowned on any shellship or storm-skimmer leaving Dunmer waters, so only the most inconspicuous of vessels were used for what nautical trade his people required. Rumors that House Dres or the disgraced Hlaalu were exploring potential trade deals with Akavir had been tantalizing nonsense for decades now and no Dunmer of any integrity would deal with the Argonians, so Skyrim remained the easiest province for nautical trade. He wondered what sort of mer the captain and crew were. It would be good to speak with some of his own kind again. Not to mention, they could be very useful for helping him with an idea that had been rattling around in his head for a while now. *That can wait, but if I see them...*

First, however, came lodging. Jorik had told them that no ships would be leaving with the evening, as weather, time of day, and tides were all unfavorable. The best they could hope for was an early departure on the morrow. To that end, the Nord had directed Velandryn to the Court of the Seas, a cluster of stone and wood buildings that stood above most of the Shores on one of the slopes comprising the foot of the Solitude arch. This hodgepodge of inns and eateries was where all of the captains stayed, Jorik assured them, and while the river-trawler had only the vaguest notion of their final destination, he was certain that there would be traders traveling to Jehanna and Northpoint who could drop them along the way.

While not on the water proper, this area was apparently still considered the Shores. Jorik had told him, in response to few casual questions, that the Climb did not begin until farther south along the coast. There began the Wolf Stairs, the network of paved roads that led from the Shores up to what he called the "great walls of Solitude" atop the arch. As far as Velandryn could tell, that was the only path up to the city proper. The docks—*The Shores* — were a vast center of trade, to be sure, but one that could be isolated and defended against in case of invasion from the sea. *Clever.*

Their destination soon came into view. It rose from the wood-and-stone shops and homes, a cluster of two and three-story buildings painted in a riot of colors, mostly with patterns and scenes meant to evoke the waves. It lay, as did everything in the Shores at this time of day, in the shadow of the monumental bulk of Solitude's arch. Velandryn guessed that a day down in the Shores was dark and somewhat short. The buildings themselves looked pleasant enough, set along the slope of the rocky hill. Velandryn picked one at random and headed inside. Behind him, Lydia—and he presumed Serana, though her tread was lighter—followed.

The big room was busy but not packed, with various nautical types spread around doing all of the things that Velandryn expected of sailors on shore. The noise rose and fell with the throw of dice, or knives, or, in one case, a mug that was apparently being used as a crude instrument of emphasis by a drunken Redguard with an impressive collection of tattoos. In one corner, three Bosmer were playing cards. One gave a whoop of victory, and another began cursing loudly.

A raised portion of the room was more sedate, and seemed to host the captains and merchants. Tables set for two or four, rather than long benches, predominated here, and the conversations often involved leather-bound books and ledgers embossed with intricate sigils and markings that Velandryn guessed represented merchant guilds or families.
The innkeep was a Nord woman of advanced years, a fact Velandryn was only a little proud of himself for noticing. Humans showed their age easily, after all, with posture and skin and even hair shifting dramatically in the course of little more than a decade. The same changes happened to Dunmer as well, of course, but the process was far more gradual, and the mark of a hard life besides. Those skilled with magic did not wither in such a way, however, making the entire concern moot as far as Velandryn personally was concerned. *It must be a dreadful thing, having such a meager life.*

"We would like rooms for the evening. Two, I would think. And if you could point me to a reputable banker, I would be much obliged." He would need coin to pay whatever captain they dealt with, but he felt off-balance carrying so much coin. Better to lock it behind stone and steel and know it was safe rather than risking some nasty tumble or malicious thief taking his newfound wealth.

"Aye, I can do that. Twenty for the rooms, and ten more for each of ya will earn you a hot meal for the evening." In Skyrim, prices could fluctuate based on the time of day. Or, more likely, how meric the customer looked. Lydia could probably have gotten the rooms for half the price. *Or, I should have agreed on a rate before announcing I need to see a banker.* The woman might be merely mercenary, rather than prejudiced.

He handed over a pair of sovereigns—two of the heavy twenty-five drake coins he had received from Lucan so long ago—without complaint. Serana could eat food, at the very least, and ten septims was a small price to pay to avoid questions about why she wasn't joining in for dinner.

Lodgings for the evening taken care of, the three of them marched upstairs, depositing the majority of their goods in the rooms. Somehow, Velandryn always seemed to be acquiring more and more *things.* Even when he lost something, such as the blade that had been shattered in Dimhollow, it came back in some way. He now had a most singular weapon from the Morthal armory, an orichalum longsword forged in the Third Era by a master smith of the second Orsinium. Apparently, an Orcish adventurer who had perished fighting Movarth a century ago had carried it, and it had been in the Morthal longhall ever since. Jarl Idgrod had gifted it to him personally, saying that it could do more good in his hand than in her trophy room. Now, it was a reassuring but unfamiliar weight on his hip. He had no specific quarrel with any Orcs, and their craftsmanship was far superior to most in Tamriel. However, it marked him even more as an outsider, and he had to wonder if this was another game Jarl Idgrod was playing.

Consumed by his thoughts, as well as the sliver of sea he could see out the window, he didn't even register Serana's presence until she was beside him. Lydia had gone downstairs, likely to figure out which of the patrons were most likely to be threats, and he had simply assumed Serana had done the same. Blinking once, he tried to conceal his surprise. Fortunately, the vampire seemed even more distracted than he.

She leaned against the wall and looked at him, not speaking. She had shed most of her heavy wrappings, leaving only her crimson leather armor and the short cloak around her neck, fastened with a silver brooch in the shape of a circle pierced by rays of light. He had never noticed it before, and wondered why that was.

He nodded to the brooch. "Is that your family's crest?"

She glanced down. "Oh, ah, yes." She smiled slightly. "It was. Supposed to represent the sun, actually. Ironic, isn't it?"

He hadn't mentioned her sudden outburst back on the ship, where she had demanded to know why he had refrained from slaying her, but he was still curious as to what had brought it on. "About
what happened on the Laugh…?"

She cut him off gently. "I was…there's been a lot going on these past few days. A lot of things aren't as I expected, and I…I was having a moment of doubt."

"About what?"

"Everything." She shrugged. "We're supposed to be superior, but I was helping the mortals against my own kind. The questions, the tension, it's been building, and I threw a little of that onto you. I'm sorry."

"Nothing to apologize for." Truly, there wasn't. Velandryn had a bit of experience keeping things from her, and he was coming to the conclusion that, for all of her cleverness, Serana was not a woman to whom subterfuge came naturally. Like him, she wanted to learn everything she could, and keeping herself at arm's length, or at least failing to do so, had put her more than a little on edge. It was a shame really, that she was a vampire. But if she weren't a vampire, she would be a completely different person, and doubtless I would find her that much less fascinating—

With a start, he pulled himself away from that path, casting around for something else to discuss.

However, it was Serana who saved him. "I did some asking downstairs, and it might be a little harder to get to my home than we thought."

It wasn't good news exactly, but it didn't really surprise him. "A bit more remote than Jorik posited?"

She nodded. "It was never on the beaten path, and my family…values their privacy." He could just imagine what that meant. "Plus, it seems like the area has gotten a…bad reputation since I left."

*Better and better.* "How difficult will it be to find transport there?"

She produced a sheet of parchment from her sleeve. "I made this map. I've only shown it to a couple of captains, but by the sound of things it won't be cheap." She smiled. "Consider the cost my share of our reward from Movarth."

He felt his mouth go dry. *That's it.* That map was the first piece of information he needed to destroy the vampires. In the hands of the Dawnguard, it would ensure that no matter how much information they could get from actual reconnaissance, this Volkihar clan's days were numbered. *Hopefully.* He needed to get his hands on it.

"Any chance you can make more copies?" He tried to keep his voice carefully nonchalant. "There's a lot of ground to cover, and if we're going to be robbed on price I'd at least like to know we got the best deal possible." He had decided to play the part of the mercenary in Morthal, as it provided a convenient cover for his movements and Lydia's presence. With any luck, Serana would have picked up on the clues and now consider this entirely in-character for him. Of course, if she took into account—

"Oh, of course." *Oh, well then.* The vampire looked completely guileless as she put the parchment away. "I'll grab some more ink and paper downstairs." She paused as she reached the door, and looked back over her shoulder. "Velandryn?"

He was startled. "Hmm?"

"Thank you." And with that, she was gone.
He collapsed backwards, winding up sitting on the bed, his back against the wall. Serana, you fool. It should have been triumphant. It wasn't.

Rising, he gathered his cloak and gloves. The day's work was far from done, and this new information only made it more imperative that he find the Dunmer captain immediately. He was going to have to seize the initiative, it would seem. He just wondered how Lydia would take it.

Serana painstakingly copied the lines of her map onto the sheet of parchment. It was possible to do with magic, of course, but that would have drawn attention, not to mention she found the exacting work quite enjoyable. She had always had a good eye, and had loved reading the maps and atlases in her parents' libraries. After her transformation, when time was no longer a limiting factor, she had begun drawing her own. At first, it had merely been a means of escape. Her father would never let her actually visit Solitude or distant Windhelm, but if she traced the maps, learned the ways, it was in some small way better than doing nothing. So now, consulting an actual map of the Haafingar coast she had borrowed from a drunken ship's mate, she was able to produce something that was, if not perfectly accurate, at least a good representation of distance and time.

And, there! She finished the third map with a little flourish as she marked the last dot on the compass. Velandryn hadn't specified, but she would guess Lydia was getting one as well. Of the three of them, she was the only one who could be considered a "normal" Nord, so she might have more luck with the denizens of the Shores. For all that Solitude was a major port city and a stronghold of the Empire, two out of every three people she saw were Nords. Velandryn was clearly an outsider, and Serana began feeling uncomfortable if she had to deal with unknown people for too long.

Case in point, a pair of what appeared to be heavily inebriated sailors were making their way towards her. Not wanting to have to put up with whatever crudities they had in mind, she rose and made her way through the patrons towards the stairs. She might as well give Velandryn his copy, and if she saw Lydia, the big Nord could take hers as well.

Unfortunately, neither of her traveling companions were in their room. She left their copies of her map on the table with a hastily scrawled note and returned downstairs, feeling slightly at loose ends. She was so close to returning home, but she had no idea of what to do from here. Seek out more captains? Wander the docks hoping to find a ship? She might be able to sneak a few glimpses of Solitude, of the world she had always longed for. She was here, why not take the opportunity?

That could work…It took a moment before she realized that she didn't have to justify herself to anyone. If she wanted to go and see Solitude, she should.

She was heading for the door almost before she had finished the thought. How long had she dreamed of this, growing up? How many times had she imagined herself walking the streets of some distant city, where nobody knew her and she could simply…be?

The Shores were actually brighter than they had been earlier in the day, as the sun was now fully below the arch. The building they were in commanded an impressive view, and the hillside meant that she could see both the rooftops of the town spread out below her and the tall masts of the ships that bristled at the water's edge. Banners and sails fluttered gently in the wind, and her keen eyes made out folk hurrying here and there in the Shores below, weaving their way along the narrow alleys or moving more quickly along the wide straight streets that seemed to radiate outward from the distant point where the Climb began, leading up to Solitude's great walls far above.

Across the water, where the far foot of Solitude's arch plunged into the water as a great sheer drop, a bell sounded, and she noticed for the first time great doors of wood set into the cliff. As they
swung open, and a latticed portcullis was hauled up from behind them, her superior vision showed her a massive cave, set into the stone of Solitude itself. It looked to be a warehouse, though on a scale she had never imagined. She wondered briefly how they got into the city from there; before she caught sight of the reason those gates had swung wide. A great barge festooned with Imperial banners was working its way under the arch from the north, deck laden with shaggy cows and great bales of hay and huge crates labeled with "East Empire Company" and the same picture of a ship that was emblazoned on the huge gates. She could scarcely imagine the scale of this organization, to command a port such as that. Now that she was looking over across the water, she noticed more docks and warehouses, tiny in comparison to the sprawl of the Shores but still easily having room for a dozen ships or more.

Tears welled up in her eyes. *I want it all. I want to see every ship and learn the stories of each man and woman. I want to know what secrets are stored in every hold.* But she couldn't. She was Serana of Volkihar, and she had to return to her family. A vampire was nothing alone, even one such as she.

The entire scene was cast in reds and golds, and there was an otherworldly beauty about it all. Velandryn had spoken of dawn and dusk as holy times, and she could see that, even if she had to turn away her eyes.

It was with some reluctance that she turned to go into a tavern; she could have watched daylight fade from the shores for…well, forever, most likely. However, she needed to return to Castle Volkihar, and for that she needed a ship.

The first captain she spoke with was no help, and the second leered at her when she asked about price. Time after time she was presented with stories about that area, or an itinerary that led to the east, to do trade with the ports of Dawnstar and Windhelm.

Many also mentioned trading in Morrowind, though always with an undertone that made it sound either a perilous journey or a shameful one. It piqued her interest, and she asked why the Dunmer homeland was spoken of with such reluctance.

One sailor, a Redguard woman who had introduced herself as Talanda and was wreathed in a riot of bright silks, explained it to her. "Folks'll trade there, but it always feels just the slightest bit off. Like if you go somewhere you shouldn't you might just disappear." She paused, thinking. "The Dunmer are strange. Oh, some are fine, the ones who aren't born there, or get out early. But most?" She clicked her tongue. "Always on about their gods, looking at you like you're so much less than them because you weren't born in a volcanic wasteland. I've seen their shores, and you couldn't pay me enough to live there!" She chuckled, and eyed Serana. "Why you asking about the east anyways? Heading over there?"

With a flush, Serana realized how far afield she had wandered from her original inquiries. She produced the map she had drawn and showed the other her destination.

Tracing the coastline with her finger, Talanda looked thoughtful. "Won't be easy to find a captain, I can tell you that. Most every merchant from the west swings wide before Northwatch Keep, or at the second lighthouse if you're coming from Solitude. Too much ice in the sea close to shore, and shallow water with wicked fog besides. No sane captain would brave it. It's all wilderness there anyways. Not a town to be seen north of the mountains until you get over into High Rock." She gave Serana an odd look. "You Thalmor?"

"What?" She let her surprise register on her face.

The Redguard laughed. "Didn't have you figured for it, but you never know. I only ask because I
heard Northwatch got taken over by that lot, and there's not much more than that up there. Won't pry into your business there though." She shook her head. "That Empire signed away their soul with the Concordat, I'll tell you what." She spat. "And left us out to dry too, so fuck the lot of 'em!" She glanced around and lowered her voice. "Ah, maybe not the wisest place to say that."

Honestly, Serana thought, she needn't have worried. This was hardly the sort of place where you could hear other people's conversations, much less eavesdrop on them. It seemed sailors on shore, no matter where or when they were, were rowdy drunks. "So, what, should I look for a horse instead, travel overland?"

The other woman shook her head. "Nah, you'd be frozen stiff and eaten alive within a week, with the mountains and all that lives in the wilds. My advice? Look for old Nords, the sort who go fishing for days on end. Might be some of them are headed that way, and can take you with."

"Thank you, truly." Serana wondered how Talanda knew so much about the area, but the Redguard only laughed when she asked.

"I should. Been living here for eight years!" She smiled, and showed her hand, which had a thin silver band set with a blue stone. "Married a local boy, told my old captain and crew goodbye, signed on with my boy's vessel, a longship that runs food up to the Pale. Decent pay, steady work, and something to come home to at the end of the voyage." She shrugged. "Never much liked sand or rock or jungle. First time I saw snow, knew that was the life for me." She waved an arm and the bracelets on her wrist clanked together. "Still dress like this though. I'll never be a Nord, no need to pretend, huh?"

Her husband and some friends arrived shortly after, and Serana made her goodbyes despite invitations to stay and eat with them. She liked Talanda from her brief interaction, but her mission took precedence.

The sun had set fully by the time she left; greys and blues replacing the red and gold of before. Talanda had pointed her in the direction of quieter local alehouses where she might find some fishermen of the type she wanted, so she made her way down the street in the general direction of the water. The wind had died down, and so where before the smells of salt and sea had wafted in on the wind, now she could smell the town, and countless dinners cooking. From above, the faint sounds of music drifted down; it seemed they were singing up in Solitude.

*Singing.* She wouldn't know the songs, of course, but she wanted to learn them. There would be so many, so much that had happened that the bards would have recorded. Without thought, she pivoted to face the south, and the path up to atop the arch.

If she did it, headed south to the Climb and just went up, she would be at the gates. Even if there was a guard, or the city was closed for the evening, she could easily slip over the walls under cover of night. She could be inside the city before anyone knew she was gone.

A laugh rose in her throat. *I wouldn't even need to hide from them.* Doubtless Velandryn and Lydia would be overjoyed to know that they didn't have to go out to Castle Volkihar. She could renounce it all, leave her father to his plotting and her mother to her experiments. Leave Volkihar behind and —

*And what?* Rely on those two, on a Nord who hated her and an elf who might be the Dragonborn? Be forever alone in this new world? *Impossible.* For better or for worse, she had the name of Volkihar. She was not free to do as she wished. She had no one, save her family, and she owed them her loyalty. Steps a little heavier, she continued on alone, to find a way home.
The part of Lydia that had served Whiterun for a decade and a half had little liking for regions like the Shores. It reminded her of the Outer Market of Whiterun, vital to the smooth function of the city as a whole, but entirely too unruly for any sort of reasonable governance. Violations of the law that would merit a fine in more civilized quarters were often missed or deliberately overlooked in regions such as these, leading to an atmosphere that verged on lawlessness. There simply were not enough guards to catch all the offenders, not to mention that many who broke the law were travelling merchants or itinerant adventurers. That last group especially tended to be well-armed and eager for fights, a combination that featured prominently in many a guard's nightmares.

In Whiterun, it had been easiest to mostly let the Outer Markets be. If something happened under a guard's nose, it could be taken care of, but nobody was fool enough to think that even began to make a dent in the actual level of crime. It seemed to be much the same for the Shores, though perhaps even slightly worse, as it seemed that the guard here was stretched thinner than it had ever been at Whiterun. She had to imagine that the war was pulling forces from Solitude, but she couldn't help but feel that there was a better way to go about things.

She wasn't going anywhere in particular, and truth be told she should probably be at her thane's side, but Velandryn was still in their rooms, and she could see the stairs from where she sat. Across the room, Serana was writing something; despite her partial reassessment of the woman in Morthal, Lydia had no real desire to spend any time with the vampire. That was the final push the Nord needed; her thane wouldn't die if she took a bit of time to walk the streets of the Solitude Shores.

The Shores was famous throughout Skyrim as the greatest port in the province. The Whiterun markets might be the crossroads of four provinces, but Solitude put them to shame for the sheer volume of trade it handled. More food alone passed beneath the Arch in a day, it was said, than a single man could eat in a year. Of course, that had been before the rebellion.

She couldn't say how Ulfric's war had affected trade, though she did notice an Imperial presence at the waterfront, in contrast to the almost nonexistent presence of true Solitude guards throughout most of the Shores. They appeared nonchalant, but no less than four times she was approached and questioned very politely about what she was up to. It made sense, she supposed, as a heavily armored Nord without any clear allegiant colors would likely arouse suspicions. She also noticed others being questioned, which dulled the shame of being taken for a threat by the law.

Her shield had borne the crest of Whiterun not too long ago, but the battles it had seen had rendered the proud stallion all but invisible. *I should get it repainted when we return this way.* Doubtless they would be leaving very soon to finish up this business with Serana, but hopefully they could spend some time in Solitude on the way back.

*No, of course we can't.* They had to get to High Hrothgar. The Greybeards were waiting, and part of her responsibility to the Dragonborn was to keep him on the correct path. With a sigh, she turned around and began to retrace her steps. Her duty awaited. When Skyrim was safe from dragons, she could take a day for herself.

When she returned to the inn, she found neither her thane nor the vampire in the common room. More worryingly, when she went upstairs Velandryn was nowhere to be found. The room held their gear, but no clue or note to indicate where he might be. Now taken with a bit of true concern, she returned downstairs, only to be greeted by her thane and a Dark Elf woman she had never seen. They had apparently just entered, and Velandryn wasted no time in steering the three of them to a table in the quieter portion of the room.
Lydia studied the woman, trying not to be too obvious. The Dunmer was dressed more fully than most of the sailors Lydia had seen today, though whether that was because of her race or the fact that Dark Elves had no resistance to the cold Lydia couldn't say. She wore a vest of some scaly hide over a tight shirt with long flowing sleeves and a skirt sewn with beads of a hundred colors that rattled when she moved. A winding tattoo of a snake, picked out in white, wound up one cheek and across her forehead to end below her eye. Her skin was slightly lighter than Velandryn's, though her face had much of the same angular shape. Her hair was ebon black, and shaped into a single strip running back along the top of her head, with the sides shaved. It was a distinctive look, if not one Lydia herself found particularly attractive. Her eyes, of course, were red.

Velandryn made introductions as they sat themselves. "Captain Milara, this is Lydia of Whiterun, my ko'thil. Lydia, this is Captain Milara Andaram, master of the Amar’balak out of Blacklight."

Lydia nodded awkwardly, wondering both what it meant for her to be "ko’thil" and what exactly this was all about. Doubtless this was the captain of the ship that Velandryn had noticed earlier, but she wasn't sure what it had to do with her. Maybe he simply wanted her to meet another of his kind?

The captain, however, seemed perfectly at ease, at least in the grave way the Dunmer were. "Wealth beyond measure, Sera." She bowed slightly in her seat. "Truly the Three have blessed you to tie your service to one such as the eminent Velandryn Savani." Milara Andaram's face remained almost entirely still, with only a familiar glimmer in her eyes reassuring Lydia that she meant the words sincerely.

Well, I can see why my thane likes her. Then, the import of the woman's words hit her. Does she know? Could Velandryn have been foolish enough to tell this random Dunmer that he was the Dragonborn?

She was thinking how best to ask Velandryn without cluing in the captain if she did not know, when her thane interjected. "Apparently, Solitude does not have even so much as a shrine to the Triune, so the presence of an Anointed of the Temple is of great relief to the faithful on board the Amar’balak." He met her eyes significantly, and the barest hint of a smile played over his lips.

Bastard. The tension bled out of Lydia. Okay. This other one's esteem was just because Velandryn was a priest of their temple. Dark Elf matters. She knew where she stood on those. She smiled at the elf. "A pleasure to meet you as well, Captain Milara."

The captain turned and said something to Velandryn in a tongue Lydia did not recognize, though she recognized it as Dunmeris, as her thane would occasionally pepper his speech with phrases from that language.

Velandryn responded with a terse phrase in that same language. The captain then turned to Lydia. "My apologies. I should of course speak Imperial, so you can understand." She looked at Velandryn, who nodded. "My Amar’balak has been at port here in Solitude for the better part of a week. We have taken on pelts, lumber, and all of the other goods we had hoped to obtain. From here, our next port will be Blacklight. We are leaving tomorrow, with the breaking of dawn"

Velandryn looked at Lydia, eyes grave. "When the Amar’balak returns to Blacklight, I mean for you to be on it."

No. It was not going to happen. "May I have a moment to speak with you alone, my thane?" Clearly he was misunderstanding something; there was no other reason he could have just said those words. Perhaps the fight with Movarth had addled his wits somehow.
"You may not, housecarl." She could only stare at him in shock. This was not like in Whiterun, when he had burst out in anger. He seemed cool and collected, as in control as ever. "We can speak on this later. I apologize for not informing you beforehand, but our window of opportunity is short, and I needed to set matters in order as is." He nodded to the captain. "Lydia will be at your ship before you depart."

Milara Andaram rose. "Zekken dol, tsukhan." With another bow, she turned and left the inn, her skirt clacking with every step.

Lydia was still in shock. "My thane, explain this at once!" She kept her voice low, but her anger cut through despite it. "Have I offended you in some way?" What shame could have warranted this? He was sending her to Morrowind? Impossible!

He raised his hands. "Not at all. If anything, I'm asking you because you're the only one I can trust with this. I should have explained earlier, but this has all come together very quickly. I met the captain for the first time less than an hour ago, and if she was just a touch less devout, this would not have worked at all. As is, she has been extremely agreeable, and I think we might be able to down a whole flock of cliff racers with a single arrow."

She sat back, waiting to hear his next words. The Dunmer was clever in ways that she was not, and it was possible that there was a good reason for all of this.

Velandryn sighed. "I should be quick, since I don't know how long we have until Serana returns."

Lydia glanced over the room, but Velandryn waved his hand dismissively. "I'm watching the door, we'll know when she gets back."

Her thane continued, eyes sober. "First, I am not sending you to Blacklight so much as I am sending you through Blacklight. The Morrowind route will get you to Fort Dawnguard in less than a week, assuming that the location of the fort I was given is accurate."

"How can that be, my thane?" Blacklight was hundreds of miles out of the way, after all.

"Sea is faster than land, and my people have modes of transit that put the horse and carriage to shame. I will send you with instructions." He produced a piece of paper and handed it her. On it was a map of the northern coast of Haafingar; a small area in the middle of nowhere was circled.

Lydia's breath caught in her throat. "Is this—"

"The location of Serana's family, and whatever power resides with them." Velandryn looked extremely pleased with himself. "In the hands of the Dawnguard, it means those bloodsuckers' days are numbered." He bared his teeth in a fierce grin. "For this, I expect them to drown Jarl Balgruuf in crossbows. Just in case, though, bring your weapon with you to Morrowind. I'm curious to see what my people can do with it."

Lydia blinked. "What all do you plan for me to do?" If she was going to go through with this—not that she was conceding that point yet—she would do it right.

"All you should need to do is go to Great Fane, the primary complex of the Temple in Blacklight. I will give you letters of introduction and passage, which should provide you all the resources and direction that you need." He smiled. "The Temple has enormous power in Morrowind; their aid will give you freedom no outlander normally enjoys. Truth be told, I wish I was going with you; I would like to see my home again."

That brought her to her second concern. "I assume you will be travelling with Serana then?"
He nodded. "I plan to see her as far as I am able. The map gives us a location, but we still lack any knowledge about the site itself. Serana has mentioned that it's hidden and isolated, but nothing more. She has also mentioned a reward. I'm assuming that will at least get me through the outer gates." He sighed. "If the rest of her coven is even half as formidable as she is, we'll need every last advantage we can get, and knowledge now could save a lot of lives later."

Something had just occurred to her. "My thane, what if the vampire's reward is—"

"An offer to make me like them?" He smiled, though it did not touch his eyes. "I've considered that, and also that they might not take it exceptionally well if I refuse." He shrugged. "I have… planned for that eventuality, and though hopefully it won't be necessary, I am reasonably confident in my ability to escape should it be needed."

She gave the Dunmer a hard look. "You are asking me to abandon you to go into a vampire's lair alone. I want your plan, and if I'm not satisfied, you're not leaving my sight until we've dropped Serana off in whatever hellhole she calls home."

"All right." How easily he gave in took her somewhat by surprise. "How much do you know about teleportation?" That would explain it. Velandryn might love his secret knowledge, but he would never pass up a chance to lecture some unfortunate soul, generally her, on magic.

"I know what it is." That much was true, at least. "I know it doesn't work anymore." That one she had only heard.

Velandryn tilted his head. "Partially true, though that's mostly due to external factors rather than anything inherent to the art itself." He rubbed his jawline thoughtfully. "At its most basic, teleportation convinces the Earth Bones that someone or something is somewhere that it was not. Of course, the moment the Earth Bones believe it, it becomes so." He paused. "Well, 'belief' is a tricky concept when dealing with dead gods, but it works for our purposes. Anyways, the biggest issue is convincing the laws of nature to look the other way while you tamper with reality. A shorter distance, either through space or time, decreases the amount of disbelief you need to bypass for the teleportation to work, which is important. A fully successful or failed teleportation, and you either rejoice or try again. If something goes half-right…" he shrugged, "You hope that you wind up fifty miles away from where you planned. The alternatives are…messier."

Lydia had understood some of that, and knew where her thane's rambling was going, though not why he was telling her this if he was trying to convince her that it was a good idea. "Let me guess. Your plan to escape from the Volkihar is—"

"Mark and recall." He produced a book, no larger than the palm of his hand. Daedric runes were stamped on the cover.

"What?" She knew the words, of course, but the way he said them made the term sound specific and important.

"A pair of matched spells, usually neatly bound together like this one. Mark creates an…echo…of the caster at its current location. It…well, 'primes,' I suppose, the Aurbis to accept the return of the caster to that spot. It is heavily affected by distance and time. After more than a day or a few dozen miles of distance, it's essentially useless. I picked this one up in Movarth's belongings, and I'm counting myself fortunate to have recognized it for what it was. I figure I mark a spot a fair distance away from whatever this place turns out to be, and then, if things go bad, I recall back to it, and have an hour's head start if they decide to give chase."

Lydia immediately saw the uses of the spell. "Why haven't I heard of this before?"
Her thane shrugged. "We use it in Morrowind, on occasion, though it's less useful than you might think. The spells are finicky in some very specific ways, so you either need an expert enchanter to scribe them or an even better mage to cast them. This little book could probably fetch me near a thousand drakes if I found the right buyer."

"So its limitation is in the casting, but couldn't you study the spells specifically, and then mark other people to travel with you?" She might not know too much about magic, but a good means of teleportation, well, she almost salivated at all of the potential applications. If it meant returning to Whiterun in a heartbeat rather than a day's ride, she'd put up with chaperoning a mage.

Velandryn smiled. "Good! Thinking sideways is the best way to get the most out of magic." He sobered. "Sadly, it's not that simple. Mass recall is possible, though precision is still difficult. It's difficult enough etching the memory of a single caster on a place. Trying to keep two or three straight can lead to not everyone winding up with all of the same parts they started with." His face took on a look of faint disgust. "If you're lucky, it's just arms and legs. There's a story about a mage who tried it with a Nord mercenary in tow. They switched childhood memories. In full." He shrugged. "As for learning it, I know the forms. I checked the work in here to make sure everything was where it should be. The problem is concentration."

Lydia was fascinated in spite of herself. "So in situations where you need it, you're better off having it prepared instead of trying to cast it?"

"Exactly! Teleportation, and I cannot emphasize this enough, is where anything going wrong is unacceptable. Magic backfiring is never a good thing, but the worst case scenario with a fireball is it fizzles out, or maybe gives you a light roasting. When you're trying to pull the wool over the eyes of the laws of reality, you can't afford be devoting any thought to worrying about if that Orc is going to cleave your skull in two before you finish the final incantation." He shrugged once more, a favorite gesture of his. "At least, I can't. Divayth Fyr can probably pull half an army around the world while sleeping."

"Who?"

He waved his hand. "The greatest mage alive. Or not, as the case may be. He hasn't been seen for two hundred years."

Lydia was struck once again by how odd Dunmer society must be. "I'd think even elves would stop waiting after that long."

Velandryn smiled. "He's older than Serana, and he never went to sleep. He's lived through the rise and fall of the Tribunal, remembers being Chimer, and kept the last living Dwemer in his tower for a few millennia because he liked having him around. He's visited more planes of Oblivion than the Empire officially acknowledges exist, and rumor has it that when a detachment of An-Xileel Argonians attacked his living tower during the Black Tide, none of that army were ever seen again. The tower vanished too, of course, but that's nothing unusual." Velandryn leaned back. "He might be dead now, but 'alive' is a technicality for a great many Telvanni magisters. I doubt Divayth Fyr would let anything as trivial as death slow him down." He smiled. "He's the hero of many a mage."

Velandryn, for one, obviously worshipped the man, and even Lydia had to admit he sounded a fascinating character. However, she wouldn't let herself get any more sidetracked. "So, assuming this spell works perfectly, you still wind up in the middle of nowhere, likely with angry vampires out for blood."

Her thane spread his hands. "No plan is perfect, Lydia."
"In that case, you will have to make your apologies to the captain, because I'm not getting on that ship."

"So you admit that if my plan is good enough, you'll go?" Before she had time to protest, he continued. "We're getting there by sea. That means either we'll be catching a ride on a merchant bound for Northpoint or somewhich port and pay them to delay for half a day, or we charter a ship of our own. Either way, I mark the point near where the boat is waiting, and I'm in the wind. Worst case scenario, I have to travel back from Heiroc, and I've always wanted to see that province." He fell silent and waited.

As far as dangerous plans went, it wasn't bad. She herself had launched many a mission with less planning than this. However, this was her thane, and the Dragonborn besides. "I don't like this, my thane."

He gave her a long look. "Truth be told, Lydia, neither do I. You are a stalwart companion, and… well…I," he said, his words eventually trailing off in what she half-suspected was embarrassment. It couldn't be easy for the Dunmer to admit affection for a Nord, but she enjoyed watching him try. "Regardless, we need to inform the Dawnguard as soon as possible, and you are the only person I trust to do so."

She was, once again, touched by his sincerity. She had grown quite fond of him as well, odd as he was. Still, she wouldn't give in so easily. "We have a courier service in Skyrim, my thane."

Velandryn nodded. "I'm aware, but we can't just send the map with a note. I need you to explain the chain of events, and impress upon them the gravity of the situation and how many unknowns we're dealing with. In short, Lydia, I need you to be my advocate." He smiled. "Were I of noble birth in a Great House, the position would be more prestigious, but I do hope you'll accept."

She felt like smiling at his self-deprecating words, but a part of her was worried that he was just telling her what she wanted to hear. Velandryn was more than smart enough to know that what he was saying was exactly what would most motivate her.

She sighed. "I don't like this. It can make all the sense in the world, but you're asking me to send you into certain danger alone. As your housecarl, that goes directly against my duty to you."

"When the duty to obey me and the duty to protect me come into conflict, which wins out?" His face was grave, though, as she reflected with bleak humor, it often was, even when he was happy. His harsh features did not naturally lend themselves to levity. "I do not know how Nords reckon such things, but I would hope that I'm not sending you away against your will. All cleverness and wordplay aside, I want you to understand why I am doing this, even if you do not enthusiastically agree."

Divines help her, she did. She thought it was the wrong decision, but she could see where he was coming from. "My thane, I should be by your side." She knew she was repeating herself, but it had to be said, to be drilled onto him that this was her duty. "You would be walking alone into mortal peril."

He smiled, but his eyes were as sad as she had ever seen them. "Lydia, if things go wrong to the point where a second sword is needed, do you think it would matter one whit if you were there or not? I am going into the vampire's den. My fate is not going to be determined by strength of arms." He reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. "And, if the worst comes to pass, I hereby charge you with murdering every last one of those bastards." His eyes brightened. "After all, you know where they live!"
He laughed, and she found herself smiling. *I suppose I've lost then.* It should have bothered her more, but she had the odd feeling that if anyone could deliver a lost vampire to her family and emerge to tell the tale, it was her thane. Not to mention, she had the feeling that Serana would be at the very least reluctant to see any harm come to Velandryn. Lydia wasn't sure if Velandryn was still only playing a role in his relationship with Serana, but the vampire, for her part, seemed to genuinely like the Dark Elf.

When she brought Serana's recent behavior up, her thane leaned back in his chair. "Agreed. I'm not sure if it's because we're both outsiders, or for some other reason, but I don't see her turning on me and delivering me as a sacrifice." He pulled out a sheaf of papers. "Now, while we have time, let's get to writing."

"Writing, my thane?"

"Writing, my housecarl. I'm going to update Jarl Balgruuf of the current situation—I can trust *that* to a courier, at least—and start drafting letters for you to bring to Blacklight."

She sighed. "You are decided upon this madness, then?" In truth, little as she might like it, the terms of her bond were absolute. A housecarl was duty-sworn to obey their master, and so she would. He wanted her to go on this voyage to Blacklight, he had laid plans with that in mind, and she had nothing but vague misgivings and a sense of unease to combat his arguments.

"Most definitely. Signal the service and get us some dinner. I'm going to be at this a while."

She rose. This might be the last meal she had with her thane for some time—or ever—and she would make sure it did the Dragonborn justice. As she was leaving the table, she turned, remembering something.

"My thane?"

"Hmm?"

"What does it mean, to be *ko'thil*?"

His eyes brightened slightly. "It means, roughly, 'retainer of the body.' An archaic term for a warrior sworn to an individual rather than a house or cause. There is no equivalent to a housecarl in Morrowind, and the terms for our typical retainers carry connotations that would make other misunderstand your position. *Ko'thil* is an ancient word, one that will generate interest among those who hear it." He bowed his head slightly. "It will lead to questions, but also respect that would not otherwise be afforded a retainer of a non-noble." A smile, just a small one. "I wouldn't want your time in my homeland to be boring, after all."

"Thank you." *I think.*

Another laugh. "I wonder what I should tell Serana?"

"Hopefully not the truth."

"Three preserve me, I should hope not."

With a smile, she left him sitting there. A bad plan it might be, but it was her thane's command, and she could vaguely see the logic of making contact with whatever resources Velandryn had in Morrowind while on her way to the Dawnguard. She didn't know what plans he was making, but Velandryn Savani was not a fool, and she almost didn't feel mortal dread at the idea.
Almost.

Vampires could get drunk, but Serana had never much cared for alcohol. She found some wines tolerable, but not the sort that could be found in places like this. If this dingy haunt had a name, it was nowhere to be seen, and Talanda had only given her directions, and the name of the owner. That wasn't a problem, she supposed, as she had found it, and every patron save her looked as though they had been coming here for decades without fail. She wasn't even sure what to call it. It seemed more meeting-place than tavern, and old Herro behind the bar, a magnificently wizened man who could have been Breton, Imperial, or even a tiny Nord, greeted each and every one of his customers—save her—by name.

Just now, she was talking to a man named Jolf, who had, by his own claim, "been fishin' the waters up there since afore I got my first whisker!" He had many of those now, an impressive beard that remained deep black despite his wrinkled skin. He could have had anywhere from forty years to sixty; life in Skyrim could age people in strange ways.

He looked at her map, a frown on his face. "Aye, I know the place. Stories of a ruined castle, what can only be seen when the cold winds blow from the north, and voices that whisper when the moons are dark." He gave her a keen stare. "Why does a pretty young thing like you want to go out to there, eh? There's evil things in that land."

*You have no idea, boatman.* She had him, she knew; her initial offer had set greed blazing in his eyes, and all of this was merely haggling. Her golden eyes had gone unremarked, though she had uncovered her face as soon as she entered; she doubted any of these crude men and women would even associate golden eyes with vampirism. If Dunmer could get away with eyes that looked to burn like fire, she could pass with gold.

Jolf was not too terribly unpleasant, as far as his sort went. They had not changed much since her time, the simple folk who lived off the water. Every one of her father's villages had had those like Jolf, and they cared for little beyond the tides and what sort of catch they could expect for the time of year. Most were at best slightly literate, but could detect the weather changing days in advance, or tell you exactly how to distinguish between a hundred varieties of fish. Her father had called them 'the commonly gifted' and made good use of their knowledge. This one might be just what she needed, provided the price was right.

She had a few drakes, as Velandryn called the coins of this age, on her, enough to buy drinks and food, but the vast majority of the coin she would need was with the Dunmer, who had mentioned something about making use of a banker without so much as consulting either of his companions. She supposed that was to be expected with Lydia, but Serana had no intention of letting the mer keep all the coin. She didn't need the money; once she got home she would have more than she could ever spend, but there was a principle to the thing. As a result, she might not be haggling quite as hard as she could. She would rather Velandryn walk away a few coins lighter than run the risk of losing her ride home through excessive thrift.

"I'm paying you well, and it isn't for your questions." Well, she might pay a bit more for her rudeness, but she had no time for inquiries like this. Either the boatman was trying for information or he wanted her to add her body to the price; she was unwilling to entertain either notion. She was hiring him for a service, and she had no need of anything other than a ship and the skill to sail it. A shame father slaughtered all of our people, they knew how to obey. The sudden thought shamed her, but she couldn't help remembering how quickly their subjects had performed at whatever was demanded of them. *Except dying.* That had taken a while. By day the court had feasted in the castle, and by night they had hunted until every last village was bare.
She had gotten lost in memory, but Jolf's words snapped her back. "For five hundred, I can take all three of you. That's my final offer, and by Shor's name I swear it."

She nodded. "Done." Velandryn could pay that easily, and it was far less than her share of the reward besides. "When can you be ready, and how long will it take to get there?"

The Nord's lips moved as he thought. "I was plannin' on takin two weeks near the Fangs o' Nakk, so my boat's all loaded up..." He gave her what he doubtless thought was a charming smile. "I could be ready to leave afore midday on the morrow for another hundred septims."

"No, you could be ready to leave before midday regardless, but you think you can milk me for a few drakes more." She honestly didn't care if the proper term was drake or septim, but since she liked Velandryn more than Jolf or Lydia, she called the coins as the Dunmer did. "I am already paying you an absurd amount to perform a trivial task, so either you accept it or I will find another who will! Not the money, but the principle. She wouldn't be taken for a fool by this insignificant little commoner!

He blanched. "Ah, I didn't mean to...no, five hundred is fine. Three of you, wasn't it?"

"Indeed." Whether her companions would bother to make the final leg of the trip remained to be seen, however, though she could hardly fault them if they preferred to remain in Solitude rather than brave the Sea of Ghosts for nothing but an unknown reward from a vampire. "Perhaps less, but no more."

Jolf rubbed his head. "Aye. I'll want to see the coin before you set foot on my boat, o' course." He rose, and gave her another look, though this one had little warmth. "Your companions, they like you?"

Not especially, though I think they're warming to me. "And what do you mean by that?"

"You're some sort of elf-blood or whatever, huh? Those eyes aren't human, I know that much." Well, so much for her passing undetected. Apparently it was the apathy of the common folk she should have depended on rather than their lack of awareness.

"My...companions are decent folk, but our business is our own." She was tired of this. In hindsight, she should have let Velandryn handle the negotiations; he seemed to find a perverse joy in dealing with the great many Nords who couldn't stand him on account of his race.

He would make a fine vampire. The thought had made occasional appearances in the past few days, but she had been reluctant to give it voice. The Dunmer would likely explode with righteous indignation if she brought it up, but it was true nonetheless. Those who had a spark of their own could handle the burden of immortality; her father would have called it being worthy of the gift, but she had seen too many go mad with power to think that there was no danger in the transformation. Even those like Movarth, strong as they might be, were inconsequential to the larger world, as they had no vision beyond their own desires. Even if he had once had purpose, he had lost it, and with that the ability to write his own fate. And so he fell. Velandryn would be different. For a moment, she imagined what it would be like, having him as there was no time for such thoughts now, and so she pushed them away.

Jolf seemed to have come around, doubtless won over by base greed. He was mumbling to himself about winds and provisions. Serana placed a few coins on the table, more than enough to cover Jolf's meal and whatever drinks he might want. Rising, she listened once again to his description of how to find him along the shore in the morning, and made her farewells.
It was full dark, and the Shores smelled of smoke and rang with laughter and song. Up and down the street sailors and those who profited off of them made merry. Every door was open, and enough light flooded out of the buildings that she had no need of her exceptional vision to pick her way through the crowd. All around her, Nords, Bretons, Imperials, and even a few Redguards and elves jostled and drank and sang, hawking their wares and arguing in a dozen dialects that she could almost understand.

She felt something cup her backside, roughly pushing its way against her cloak and armor, and her hand snapped around faster than any mortal could hope to match. She caught the wrist of the offender without bothering to look behind her, then squeezed and twisted with a dark satisfaction. Scum. Over her shoulder, whatever fool had thought to amuse himself on her gave a guttural cry of pain. With one final clench of her grip that, by the sound and feel of it, snapped several of the unlucky bastard's bones, she released the limb and walked on. Behind her, she heard the sound of something collapse to the ground and gasping, sobbing, groans followed her down the street.

Coarse, common, unworthy. She didn't feel any guilt about what she had done; the lecher had brought it on himself. This was the character of the great morass of mortality, the teeming crowd from which the blessing of her Lord had plucked her, and she should never forget that. She might at times regret her hunger, but her transformation had offered gifts she could never had hoped to attain otherwise. Father was wise to seek this blessing. It was time to return home.

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Chapter End Notes

A first look at Solitude. The city will feature prominently, given that it is the de facto Imperial headquarters in Skyrim as well as the seat of Jarl Elisif, and I felt it needed something a little more than the game gave it. This Solitude is one part game-city, one part what I needed to be there for my story, and one part what I felt would be necessary infrastructure from a world-building standpoint. It's a big city, is my point.

This is a short chapter, but I am currently about 75-80% done with the next one, which is of similar or slightly longer length. It was originally to be one huge chapter, but the idea of going much more than a month without an update seemed self-indulgent, so you get this. Expect 14 in a week or so, maybe less if I buckle down well. You can probably figure out about wherein the story the next chapter ends, since everything is kind of building to it.
Truth on the Cold North Sea

Chapter Summary

Homecomings, even those a long time in the making, aren't always what we expect.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To my beloved cousin Alottiana Insward,

As you know, in my last letter I made mention of my intent to travel to Solitude by way of Markarth via the Druadach passes. Unfortunately, it seems the Reachmen are once more rearing their ugly heads, so I found a sea captain bound for Solitude, one willing to offer me a spare bunking in exchange for a truly absurd sum of gold. So, now rather than regaling you with tales of mountain travel, I have instead a tale of the sea!

Nowhere is the Sea of Ghosts more aptly named than in western Haafingar. I have travelled from Necrom to Daggerfall, and always some sign of civilization, brutish or primitive as it might be, makes itself known to the astute eye. So, when I tell you, dear cousin, that between the last watchtower of Jehanna and the furthest of the Solitude Lighthouses there is nothing but wilderness to be found, I pray you take my meaning in the spirit with which it is intended, and not merely the fancy of an old writer.

Five days I spent on the good ship Breath of Kyne, bound for Solitude out of Farrun, and for three of them we passed only virgin coastline, all but unmarred by the hand of man or elf. The history books tell me there were once kingdoms here, but I could find no trace of them save for a few crumbling ruins that could be mistaken for hillocks or landslides by the unwary observer. I searched in vain for giants or mammoths, but the captain said they would not come this far north, as food was far too scarce. Of the mythical dragons and sky-whales, of course, there was no sign, though I admit I passed more than a few idle moments hoping to spy one dancing amidst some distant clouds.

I would have counted the entire thing a great waste of time and lamented my fate in being denied the Druadach ranges, were it not for a most perplexing affliction which befell me on the third day out of port, right after we passed the ruined keep the Nords call Northpoint (An exception to my description of the region, I confess, as Northwatch has stood the test of time somewhat well. Do forgive my earlier statement, Lottie, but that turn of phrase was simply too good to pass up). As you know, dear cousin, I am only a neophyte in matters of magic, and so I was unable to pinpoint exactly what sorcery was at work, but I feel confident in stating that my malady was not of merely mundane origin. It struck me suddenly, sending me into my hammock for the better part of the day, before leaving just as quickly not twenty-four hours after it had first struck. I was able to spy only fog about our ship, and the wind itself seemed to blow strangely, though whether these derive from the same cause or were sheer and unfortunate coincidence, I can only speculate. I find myself unable to recall large portions of the night, though I am confident I did not sleep, if my fatigue the next day was any indication.

Many among the sailors seemed similarly afflicted, and one fellow even fell overboard! At least, that is what the captain says happened. Some of the more superstitious of the crew, crude Nords
from Solitude and the surrounding villages, made signs to ward off evil and whispered of the Volkihar, the frozen vampires of the North Sea, who can turn themselves into fog and ride the cold winds from dusk to dawn. I am unqualified to offer statement on these rumors, but I will say that I did not happily venture above decks again until the lights of Solitude were visible and a cutter from the selfsame city was guiding us in.

I shall not trouble you further with the details of my illness or the remainder of the voyage—which was uneventful, I hasten to add—and shall only note the strangeness of it all. However, dear Lottie, I would not, were I you, travel that stretch of coastline when the cold winds are blowing. Let the Ghosts have their Sea, my dear, and stick to your orchards.

I shall write you again when I reach Whiterun, hopefully with a story or two about ancient Labyrinthian to tell!

Best Always,

Jamas Aldwyr, Explorer and Author

Penned in Solitude, Year of Akatosh 3E 332

Letter 141, Collected Works of the Aldwyr Correspondences

The boatman had been polite until the moment Velandryn handed over the coins. He had scurried off somewhere to stow the purse away, and upon his return the comments had started. "She didn't say you'd be an elf!" "Should've asked your business, more fool me." As they cast off, he abandoned comments for suspicious looks, and Velandryn soon found himself wondering how long it would have taken to simply learn to sail instead. *I could have gotten a boat for less than I've paid this fool.*

This Nord Jolf that Serana had found was not quite the travelling companion for which Velandryn would have liked to trade Lydia. Serana, for her part, had obviously been surprised to learn that his housecarl wouldn't be joining them but had not, as of yet, inquired into it.

It had not been an altogether pleasant parting. Lydia had been heaping advice on him until the moment the door closed behind her, and now he felt oddly naked without the big Nord at his side. Still, he knew it was the right decision. He was putting himself in a slightly more vulnerable position for the immediate future, but sending Lydia to meet him at the base of the Throat of the World by routing her through Morrowind and Castle Dawnguard allowed him to set necessary plans in motion. Anonymity would not shield him forever, and an elf in Skyrim needed powerful allies, even—or perhaps especially—if that elf was Dragonborn. However, even if he could secure allies—and whether those were allies of conviction or convenience was another concern entirely—among the mighty of Skyrim, his troubles would not end there. Whether it was the Empire, Stormcloaks, or the jarls, all would doubtless seek to use the Dragonborn to advance their own goals. He would need to balance their desires and weaknesses, playing them off one another long enough to do...something. He didn't know what it was he needed, or how this whole thing would end, but he risked living forever in this state of off-balance servitude. He could all too easily become a pawn in larger games, dancing to the songs of others, if he failed to take hold of his destiny now. So, he had sent Lydia away, and with luck he had not made a terrible mistake.

For now, however, Velandryn was alone with Serana and this Jolf character. Their little boat had left the dock some minutes before, and now they were passing beneath Solitude; the bulk of the enormous arch above them was grand on a scale that Velandryn was having more than a little difficulty comprehending. This close to midday, the sun was hidden from view, the ancient city
casting a strange twilight on this shadowed patch of sea. Even he had to admit that the scene was
magnificent, and the breath caught in his throat as the arch fell away and they sailed into the frigid,
bright air of the Sea of Ghosts.

Jolf was manning the sails on his little boat well enough without any help, so Velandryn had plenty
of time to watch the passing scenery. North of Solitude, the distant eastern shore was icy marsh and
desolate expanse, while the western along which they sailed was mountainous forest dotted with
isolated farms and stone ruins. It seemed that the same great mountains that had shaped the arch of
Solitude gave the northern coast of the Haafingar region its character. As Velandryn watched the
outskirts of the great city dwindle away, he glanced over at Serana, but the vampire was sitting
quietly and watching the passing shore as well, so he let her be.

Some hours later, the ship had swung west, and now that same mountainous expanse was to their
left. They passed mile upon mile of rugged forest and snow-lined beaches, seemingly two of the
few things Haafingar Hold had to offer other than its single great city. Here and there clusters of
houses squatted on the water's edge, fishing villages likely too small even to be listed on maps of
the region. In Morrowind, the only record of their existence would have been on census forms,
where they would have been marked with miniscule dots and vague estimations of population.

To the south, a stone lighthouse stood high atop sheer cliffs rising from the water. Across the boat,
Serana's hooded head swung to look at it, and then she rose and moved to sit beside him. "That's the
Light of Solitude. It's been there for—" she broke off and glanced at Jolf, sitting with his hand
on the till, or whatever it was called, then continued, slightly more quietly, "a very long time."

In that case, it truly was old. The name amused him, though. "At least the naming here is
consistent. The Light of Solitude, to the northwest of the city of Solitude."

Under her hood, Serana's smile held just a hint of mockery. "And do you know why that is? I can
tell you, you know."

He wondered if her story was still known in this day and age. "Nothing would give me more joy,
especially if nobody else in this age knows."

She smiled. "I make no promises." She glanced over at Jolf, and waved a hand. The sounds around
them grew muted, and Velandryn found himself wondering at the spell. Fields of silence were
difficult, and she had cast it without apparent thought or effort. They could talk without being
heard now, though, and clearly that mattered to the vampire.

She settled herself into her seat, adjusting her cloak about her shoulders and pulling the cowl of her
hood further over her face. Beneath it, her pale skin stood out against the darkness and her golden
eyes shone brightly. "Solitude was settled early; back in the Merethic Age. Before Skyrim existed
as more than the vaguest idea of a region, Solitude was up there on its rock. Story has it that the
first Atmoran ship to spy the arch landed there, and the warlord made his camp upon the spine." She
shrugged. " Took it from the Reachmen, it was said, but nobody's shedding any tears on their
behalf. Anyways, Solitude got its name because of how remote it was. Lands like my father's were
more so, of course, but we never tried to wield political power. The jarls of Solitude wanted to be
important, but their stronghold was too isolated to compete with the other cities. Completely
impregnable, of course, but with Ysgramor's line in Windhelm, Solitude was, at best, a second-rate
power. Frankly, I'm surprised it's grown so much. I can only assume it had something to do with
the Empire?"

Velandryn nodded. "As best I understand it, the Septims had connections there, and the Heiroc
trade guilds wanted a sea route into western Skyrim. Not my area of expertise, however."
Serana looked out over the water, to where the lighthouse was receding behind them. "I always preferred the name Haafingar, truth be told. Old Atmoran, but the jarls insisted on Solitude, in the Nedic tongue."

"I'd have thought the Nords would prefer the Atmoran word."

"In the east, maybe, but we in the west were never quite as enamored with the homeland across the water. Probably because of the Falmer, truth be told."

The distinctions between eastern and western Skyrim had never mattered much to him, but he figured it wasn't bad information to have. Temple records indicated that the Falmer had almost certainly existed in Skyrim prior to the genocide undertaken by the Atmorans, but information on them was sparse, and he knew scholarly consensus had once believed them a complete fabrication used to justify Atmoran colonization of Skyrim. "How so?"

"Ysgramor chased the Falmer down, slaughtered them where he could, after Saarthal. He and his kin landed in the east, so the clashes were all there. The Snow Elves were already in full retreat by the time Haafingar was settled. We never had much trouble with them, so there was no need for a common Nord identity. The Reachmen were trouble, but manageable, and there were always three Nedes for every Atmoran in the west. Over time, the Nords became our own people, and Skyrim, not Atmora, our home." She smiled crookedly, and Velandryn caught a glimpse of one sharp tooth. "Of course, those easterners never bought it. Each one convinced he's eight feet tall and Ysgramor come again. When Harald named himself High King and decided that Skyrim should belong under a single banner, well, then it became everyone's business." She shook her head. "A bloody war, I heard. Of course, by then my father was…we had other concerns."

*Interesting.* He had heard of the Old Holds in the east, where Old Nordic culture was the strongest, but had never made the connection to Ysgramor and the Atmoran invasion. "Thank you. I'd never heard that bit of history." Then, he remembered why they had started talking about this in the first place. "The lighthouse?"

Her laugh was a sudden ripple of mirth. "Of course! I'd forgotten!" She grinned at him. "It's not that interesting, in the end. The jarls of Solitude named everything they could after their city, trying to make it seem important. They were losing ships on the rocks at that spur of land, so they raised a warning-pyre, and named it, naturally, the Light of Solitude." She spread her hands. "It could be worse. They might have gone with the sigil of their city and named everything after wolves!"

Velandryn couldn't help but chuckle at that. "True. Of course, they could just use whatever 'wolf' is in Nordic and I'd never know the difference."

Serana's smile should have been unnerving, with those sharp teeth and the knowledge of what she was. However, her obvious happiness robbed the expression of any ill nature. "Maybe they did, and we're all just keeping the joke from you." She gave a little sigh, and sobered slightly. "I'd been reading and hearing about Solitude and the Great Arch all my life, but yesterday was my first time seeing them. It was…nice."

For once, Velandryn had no reply. He took a drink from one of the jugs, filling his mouth with cold water while he searched for some response. "You…aren't what I was expecting when we pulled you from that tomb. I don't know what we'll find when we reach your home, but…well, I've enjoyed travelling with you." He wasn't lying now. He knew what had to be done with her family, but he finally had an answer to Lydia's question. He *liked* Serana. She was, at her core, a decent person, and beyond even that, an interesting and intelligent woman. The Temple's strictures on vampirism might be absolute, but he had fallen into the trap of getting to know one, and he was slowly becoming convinced that she was not a monster. He didn't know the circumstances of her
transformation, but clearly the actions of her family had played a key role. He looked over at her, pondering the scraps of her past he had gotten from their conversations. He wanted to ask, but there was so much he was keeping from her—

When Serana finally spoke, the words were soft, as if said in passing or from deep within a dream. Her eyes were on him, but seeing past him, and at first he almost thought her speaking to herself. "You're the Dragonborn, aren't you?"

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*I said it.* She hadn't thought about the question before she spoke, only the fact that she would be home soon. Her mind had been consumed with the idea of returning to her old life, but the Dark Elf had intruded. She'd heard his words, about how he enjoyed being at her side, and fanciful thoughts had taken hold. She'd imagined him, with her, at Castle Volkihar. He would be welcomed, of course; her father would be glad to have one like Velandryn in their ranks. Not as a common vampire though, no, she would insist, as his reward, that he be given the honor of undergoing the ritual and becoming a pure-blooded Volkihar like her. The gift had never been given to one not of her family, but she would insist, and Father would grant her that, since she was at last returned. Then, then Velandryn would understand how she saw the world.

Even as she had the thought, however, she had known it was impossible. Velandryn would never accept such an offer, even as a reward. Not only because of his obvious feelings about vampirism, but because—

*He might be Dragonborn.* She had to know. She looked at him, imagining all of the futures that could come from this moment. Dragonborn, vampire, Dunmer, thane, the things he could be or not as he so chose. *Mage, mercenary, warrior... Hero.* It wasn't until she heard the question leave her lips that she realized she was asking it.

So, she waited. At the other end of the boat, Jolf worked studiously, and Serana wondered if he'd realized yet that she'd cut him out of their conversation.

A movement at her side caught her eye. Velandryn shifted in his seat and removed his leather helm and gloves, but said nothing as he ran a grey long-fingered hand through his stringy copper hair. Finally, he looked back at her and inclined his head by the merest degree. "When did you realize?"

The words were calm, free from panic or accusation.

*I knew it!* "After Morthal, actually." She tried not to let her excitement show. *I figured it out, and a Dragonborn is sitting across from me!* She had so many questions, she didn't know where to begin.

He tilted his head to one side slightly. "That's what you wanted to ask me on the ship, when you came to my cabin." With his helmet in his lap, his dark red hair was unbound and free, and moved about his pointed ears when he shook his head. "It makes sense now, at least."

She was silent for a moment. Not only had he remembered that, but he'd put the pieces together instantly. "How did it happen? No offense, but an elf—"

"Isn't the most likely to be given the mantle of a Nord hero figure?" He glanced over at Jolf, who appeared to be ignoring them as he worked. Likely the Nord had figured out that they had done something, and was either unnerved by the magic or offended by his exclusion. *So long as he leaves us alone.* "I'd agree." He did not smile, but his eyes lightened slightly. "I'm still figuring this whole thing out, but I don't think there are many in Skyrim who would have me as their first choice." He looked thoughtful. "Perhaps none."

"Not even you?"
He blinked slowly. "Had I been given the choice at the time? No." He fell silent then, looking out to the north, where fog was rolling in as the sun fell. He pulled his hood up over his head, and clamped his gloved hands in his armpits. With a muttered string of words, magicka flowed out of him, and Serana could feel a shield of some sort settle on him. He caught her eye and half-grinned. "Anything that makes me this cold will never be at the top of my list, and it is poor form for the Dragonborn to get chased away by the weather, I think."

She shifted on her seat, suddenly uneasy. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He raised a single eyebrow; she wondered if he had developed that expression specifically to make someone feel like a fool. "Do you really have to ask? I didn't trust you."

It hurt. Part of her wanted to flare up at him, but she knew that would accomplish nothing, and besides, he wasn't wrong. *But I have a good reason for keeping my secrets from you. If you knew what I was, really was, what I'd done...*

She had questions, more than she could think of all at once, but she knew this wasn't the time. Jolf was steering them towards shore, and so with another wave she dispelled their ward of privacy. Velandryn bestirred himself from his seat, and she clamped down on her tongue lest she betray his secret.

Dinner that evening was a simple affair. Jolf had pulled a few fish from the water during the day's voyage, and the Nord wasted no time in cooking them over a low fire. His claim to know this coastline better even than his own left hand might well be true, as he had found a good place to overnight easily enough. It was a shallow cave along a boulder-strewn and icy stretch of shore, and a well-placed spur of rock made Serana figure no light from their fire should be visible, so long as they kept it small. The tiny villages on the shoreline had grown sparse as the day progressed, and Jolf had shown no inclination to overnight at any of them. Velandryn was looking about them as the fish cooked. "You chose this place well. Do you use it often?"

Jolf shrugged. "Now'n again. Safe and secret, and too small for pirates."

"Are there many of them on these waters?" Once again, Velandryn was asking seemingly innocuous questions, and once again Serana got the feeling that he truly wanted to know the answers. *And the moment he does, he'll lock each one away in that head of his until he can find some use for them.* She suddenly wondered where Lydia had gotten to. Any way you looked at it, she should have been here to protect Velandryn. If she had left, there was only one person who could have ordered it. *What are you planning, Velandryn Savani?* For most people, that would have been something of an idle question. For the Dragonborn, Serana wasn't so sure.

Jolf was nodding. "A few. Pirates don't much like the cold, but they like the merchants fine. Lots of ships to and from High Rock, though not so many this time of year. Autumn storms make the Sea of Ghosts somethin' wicked round about now."

Serana broke in then. "Will we have to worry about the weather on our trip?"

Jolf grinned. "Nah, not likely. Calm skies for a week or more, judgin' by how my knee feels."

"An impressive method of divination. I salute you." Velandryn's face was perfectly somber as he spoke, and a moment later he turned to meet Serana's eyes. The combination of the Dunmer's solemn mien and the absurdity of his compliment were too much for Serana, and she had to bite down on her lip to keep from laughing. He held the gaze for a moment longer before his eyes
shifted ever so slightly, and suddenly she could see the laughter he had been hiding. He looked back at his meal as though nothing had happened, and Serana was left with a new appreciation for the strange elf's humor.

After the meal, Jolf wasted no time in checking on the ship and curling up to go to sleep, grunting something about starting early. For Serana, the point was moot, as she neither needed nor wanted to sleep. Velandryn, however, was generally consistent about getting as much sleep as possible, so she was surprised to see him sitting before what remained of the fire, staring into the embers.

She sat across from him, and he looked up. "If you do that silence trick of yours again, I might give you a few answers before I go to sleep." His lips twitched. "Show me how to do it, and my answers might even be true."

She cast it, letting the magicka swirl around her so he could feel something of its shape. "I can try to show you, but the woman who developed it was using vampiric magic as the catalyst." Her mother had designed many such spells, elegant and intricate, fueled by the potent magicka in their altered bodies. She wasn't even sure if one who was not a pureblood could cast it.

He blinked. "I hadn't considered that. Thank you, but I think I'll pass." He was silent for a bit, clearly thinking. "How does vampirism actually affect your ability to cast magic? I had always assumed you simply had more magicka upon which to pull."

"We do, but it's more than that." It was hard to explain, but she wanted to try. "Our blood, it's not... it's alive, we can communicate with blood in a way mortals can't. The mages among us can tap into it, and find precision that would take a mortal decades to achieve." She smiled to herself, remembering her mother's lessons. "Besides, the gifts of Molag Bal let us use magicka in ways mortals cannot even begin to experience. I would have to give you the gift to explain in a way you could understand, and I would not do that." She would never turn another against their will. Though if he asked...

She had looked away and spoken quickly at the finish, not wanting him to dwell too long on that image, but he was staring straight at her when she looked back. "You really wouldn't, would you? Turn me against my will." He bowed his head slightly. "May you walk always in grace."

"I...what?" The words had the sound of a ritual, or a prayer.

He sighed. "You walk with grace, something I never thought I'd tell a vampire. It's a compliment among my people, means you live a worthy life. Now, ask your questions." He eased himself back against the rock. "I have a potion to counteract a lack of sleep, but I'd rather not use it."

"So why are you willing to talk at all then?"

His lips twitched again, and she wondered if that tic of amusement was natural or an affectation. "You don't sleep, so you'd have the whole night to wonder. I'm cruel, but not that cruel."

"And what do you want in return?" If this was some ploy of his...

"Nothing." He pulled off his gloves, reached into the embers and plucked out a chunk of smoldering wood, cupping it in his hands. The nonchalance with which he approached fire still both amazed and alarmed Serana. If I tried that, I'd be short a hand. Even her keen nose could detect no hint of burning flesh; it seemed he truly was as attuned to fire as Nords were to the cold. "We're going our separate ways soon enough, and were I in your position, the curiosity would be eating me alive." He closed his eyes and pressed the coal between his palms. "We still have our secrets, but I'm not going to lie to your face, or tell you to go chew bones when you figured it out
for yourself."

She wasn't entirely sure she believed him, but she also wasn't foolish enough to pass up this opportunity. "How did you…become, I suppose, a Dragonborn?"

"They all say the Dragonborn, actually." He blinked, looking thoughtful. "Don't think there's many others to claim the title these days. I heard from Lydia that Tiber Septim was the last one before me, and he's been dead for six hundred years."

"So the Dragonborn have vanished?" In her time, they might not be common, but there had always been whispers. Rumors of those who hunted down dragons and devoured their power had reached even to Castle Volkihar.

"In Morrowind, dragon-born means Imperial. If you have Thu'um, you're a Tongue." He chuckled. "And if you're a Tongue, well, best not to advertise that fact. My people remember the best ways to kill Tongues." He rubbed the coal between his fingers, leaving soot and ash on his hands. "The Septims were called the Dragonborn Emperors, and I thought it was just because of the Covenant of Akatosh. I never thought it meant…" he trailed off and gestured at himself, "…this."

She felt a moment's pity for the elf. He is in so far over his head. She considered her next words carefully. "The Dragonborn of my time were renowned dragonslayers. It was said they could duel a dragon, one to one, and win."

"If so, they're better men than I. Or mer, or…oh, forget, it, you know what I mean." Velandryn blew gently on the coal, holding it close to his face. As he did so, Serana felt subtle strains of magicka flow into the air. A moment later, the ember flared into new life and he sighed. "Blessed warmth. I don't suppose you know what signifies a Dragonborn?"

"A dragon's blood, according to the songs. Supposedly it flows in your veins, and the Thu'um comes as easily to you as breathing. You can conquer dragons and take their power."

"It's not quite as easy as you made it sound, I'm afraid. I've killed all of one dragon, a great bastard named Mirmulnir who was assaulting a watchtower near Whiterun." He laughed. "I say killed, but there were nearly sixty of us there, and my greatest achievement was surviving." He looked momentarily thoughtful. "Well, and saving the life of a Nord woman. A good decision, in hindsight."

Something became clear to her then, the final piece of a puzzle she had been working on for some time. Why his housecarl behaved as she did, and the bond they seemed to share. "It was Lydia. The one you saved."

"Yes." He looked as though the memory was not entirely pleasant to him.

"And you killed the dragon? How did you accomplish that?"

"Ask how we accomplished it. I might have done my part, but like I said, Lydia and I were far from the only ones on the field. I'm not looking forward to the next dragon I have to slay, unless there's an army at my back."

"So dragons have really returned? Why?" They had been in decline even in her time, tales of their appearance becoming less and less frequent with each passing year.

He made a clicking with his mouth. "A good question. Perhaps the Greybeards know."

"Who?" She had never heard of them, whoever they were.
"You've don't know the Greybeards? I thought they were sacred to Nords. They study the Thu'um atop the Throat of the World."

She shrugged. "If they do, I've never heard about it."

"Perhaps they're from after your time. What else do you want to know?"

"What's it like?" She could scarcely imagine it, taking the strength of a dragon.

His eyes went distant for a moment, but immediately snapped back. "The feasts and honors are nice. The expectation that I will save the world, somewhat overwhelming."

"That's not what I meant." She managed to keep the exasperation out of her voice.

He blew air out through his nose in something that was almost a laugh. "I know." He licked his lips, looking distracted. "I'm afraid I'll have to give you your own answer about vampires back, and say you'd have to be one to understand. There's no way to describe it that would make sense. I could try to explain how I sometimes feel a dragon's instincts, but I've yet to find words that are anything more than the weakest of shadows. Dovah do not experience...anything...as we do. There are modes of thought that actively combat each other in my head. One of the most persistent among them is the urge to...to, oh, I don't know, to...dominate, I suppose, though that word hardly does it justice."

Sudden panic rose within her, but she managed to keep it from her face. "I see." She knew she probably should have had a better response, but she couldn't help her dismay. Dominance, the desire to be more and better than all of the others, was what had driven her father to make many of the choices he had. The idea of the Dunmer doing anything like Lord Harkon was repulsive to her. She served her father, of course, and knew that he was the rightful patriarch of their clan, but she would never...she didn't want to think of Velandryn like that.

He must have noticed her disquiet. "Serana, what's wrong?" His voice was strangely gentle.

She didn't answer, not directly. She didn't want to talk about that, about her family, right now. "So, how do you know it's the dragon that wants it, and not you?"

He chuckled mirthlessly. "Maybe I misspoke there. Like I said, a dragon's thoughts are different—you would never mistake them for a mortal's—but they're both mine. I gave them names, the impulses. Dov is the Dragon, Joor the mortal. I don't know if Dov came from Mirmulnir, or if taking in his memories, his instincts, just taught my own mind how to think that way. At first, the voice acted as though it had the identity of Mirmulnir, but it has been a long time since it gave voice to any self but mine. Perhaps I should have gone to the Greybeards first, learned more about what I am before trying to do anything else." He looked at her with a slight smile on his thin, dark lips. "Although, in that case you'd still be sleeping."

"Well, in that case thank you for not saving the world." She was truly grateful for what he had done, but she had already shown him enough vulnerability. They weren't allies, not really. Dry humor would have to be an adequate reward.

"Any time." It seemed he felt the same.

Something occurred to her. "With Movarth, I felt something, down in the caves..."

He chewed a lip thoughtfully, and spoke after a moment's pause. "Movarth tried to control me. Dov did not approve, and gave voice in kind."
She shuddered. Even at a distance, she had been all but knocked from her feet. How much worse must it have affected Movarth, who had experienced the full force of the backlash? Vampiric control could be thwarted by a strong mind, and a dragon's soul would have been unlike anything the vampire, unless he predated even her father, could have experienced. *No wonder he fell so quickly.* She almost felt sorry for him.

Velandryn, oblivious to her realizations, continued in the same line of thought. "It happens sometimes. The differences can be disorienting, but the power is real. Hopefully with knowledge comes more access to it." He opened and closed one gloved hand, clenching it tightly. "It's as if there's a voice, but my ears are ringing, and I cannot quite make out the words. They *know* things, Serana, know them in their bones, and I think I could as well."

"Have you learned why they've returned? The dragons, I mean." Everyone was talking about it, and from what Velandryn had said, he could well hold the key to the mystery.

Unfortunately for her curiosity, Velandryn was already shaking his head. "The instincts don't come with a history lesson. Whatever knowledge is hidden from me, it's more cosmology than chronology." He looked puzzled at the words he had spoken, but then nodded and continued. "I have a hint of Mirmulnir's past, but I get the feeling he was only ever hiding from mortals. Physically, I mean, old ruins and distant mountain valleys. Whatever brought the dragons back in force, he learned of it later." He looked away, and his brow furrowed. The lines around his eyes deepened in concentration, while the red of his irises darkened nearly to black. "He…heard of something, of Helgen…"

"Helgen? What's that?" The scent of his blood, always stronger than a normal human's was growing. Ordinarily she could push it away, not think about the fact that her companion would be delicious to feed upon, but in his reverie Velandryn seemed to be accessing whatever power it was that made his blood sing to her. Quietly, she focused on breathing, on soothing rhythms. It wouldn't do to embarrass herself.

Velandryn paid her no mind, still speaking as if to himself. His eyes were dark, turned inward without seeing, and his voice, always sounding as though he were on the verge of growling, grew even deeper. "When the village burned, when he heard about it, he rejoiced. He had been hidden for so long, holed up in lost valleys where no Joor could reach, hiding for centuries. He smelled Yol on the air, a wundunven that made him remember when they ruled. He needed to go forth, to *relnir*, to prove…" Velandryn looked up and saw her again, *noticing* her this time. By the look of it, he hadn't noticed the words in that strange other tongue, the ones he had growled instead of spoken. "...to prove something, though it escapes me. Memories are iffy things, and a mortal sifting through the memories of a dragon is like trying to pick up the ashes of a fire with spread fingers. You can clasp fragments, but they'll fall away, and the whole eludes you. That's all that's left of Mirmulnir now. Thousands of years of life turned to ashes, being pushed about by…" He trailed off, but then he jerked his head slightly, and the moment was gone. "I don't think there's much more I can get out of it right now."

She thought she realized then, why he had turned aside from going to these Greybeards so easily, though she had never heard him speak of it. *It frightens him.* For people like Velandryn, understanding was everything. She was much the same, where comprehension made a thing seem manageable. And, from how he sounded when he talked about it, the Dragonborn couldn't even begin to make sense of it all. *I must have come as a welcome distraction, something to let him put dragons from his mind.* Maybe he hadn't done it consciously, but it made sense to her. She cleared her throat. "You might want to see about visiting these Greybeards, if you think they can help you."
His eyes were their normal red again, mere fire rather than the dark and ominous things they had temporarily become. "So I've heard." His voice was dry again, but he didn't seem upset. "Just helping you acclimate to this new world first. No deed like charity, hmm?"

"Indeed." She didn't know what she was feeling anymore. The thought of going home had been her driving goal. It wasn't so much a wanting, but she had to do it. Suddenly, she didn't feel like talking. "You should get some sleep."

"You're not wrong." He sounded the slightest bit confused; likely he didn't understand why she was giving up a chance to interrogate him so easily. He rose from the fire, dropping the ember in his hand back to rest with its fellows. "Cold night." He was wearing his leather armor and heavy furs over it, and pulled his gloves back on over his hands. With a shiver, he passed a hand over the dying fire, and it blazed into new life. He wrapped his cloak tightly around his slender frame, and stretched out around the conflagration. He lay there for a moment, then spoke, his face still turned in towards the roaring flame. "I know you have more questions. Talk in the morning?"

"Count on it." With quick strides, Serana retreated into the darkness. She could see by night as easily as in brightest day, and nothing would bother them while she kept watch.

Why had she stopped asking him questions? His discomfort shouldn't have mattered; he was clearly willing to keep talking. She bent and grabbed a rock from the shore, hefting it in her hand. After a moment's thought, she hurled it with all of her strength, out over the water. It whistled through the air for a long second, before vanishing into the black waves. The exertion felt good, and she began to hunt for another. The moons were slivers, but the stars gave enough light for her to see.

She didn't like it, this indecisive streak. She was so close to home, she must just be feeling the pressure. She didn't know what she would find, that was the only reason for this. And being confronted with a Dragonborn, well, that would be enough to throw anybody off-balance. He would make a magnificent gift for father. Lord Harkon would be overjoyed to not only get his daughter back, but a vampire with the potential of Velandryn Savani.

But, she knew she couldn't do that. Turning another against their will was a line she had never crossed. You wouldn't have to do it, father would oblige. He had always enjoyed turning others; he liked the power it gave him. And Velandryn would forgive her, would understand. When the hunger came, when he had to feed, he would be just like her.

May you walk always in grace. She shook her head. He knew nothing about her. When he reached her home—

It wasn't a noble thought, but it intrigued her. She could do it. She had that capability. A word to her father, or even a look. Lord Harkon had always been perceptive. Perhaps she could even convince Velandryn to accept willingly. If he submitted without conflict, he could have great power, and an entire host of allies at his back.

She sat on the shore, throwing stones out to sea, and considered the future. The Dragonborn, at her side, and her family's. An ally such as the Volkihar had never known. And perhaps Velandryn had anticipated this. He had sent Lydia away, and to do such a thing to one's housecarl was an extraordinary circumstance. Perhaps he already plans to do something he knows she would never accept.

In the darkness, with no one to see, Serana smiled. She liked him, and wanted only the best for Velandryn Savani.
And that was why it would be in his best interest to become a vampire. He would see that. He *had* to see that.

Velandryn did not sleep well. It was cold, for one, the coldest night since he had come to Skyrim. If the little cave-like place they were sleeping did anything to cut the winds coming off of the water, it was not much, and the fire around which he had huddled offered only the merest warmth. He had developed some techniques to cope with Skyrim's frigid climate, but this was on a completely different level. Circulating his magicka through a heating ritual might work in Whiterun or Morthal, but the Sea of Ghosts in autumn laughed at his paltry attempts to defy it. So, he slept fitfully, and dreamed of home.

The sounds of movement woke him from a dream in which he watched the entirety of Skyrim burning, and relaxed among the ashes as dragons roared overhead. No Nords, and warm besides. He almost would have preferred to stay asleep. However, Jolf was busy preparing the ship to sail, and it would be unworthy of Velandryn not to help. Besides, the fire had died and it was god-damned cold. There was a chance that moving around would warm him up. Grumbling to himself, he made his way over to the Nord sailor and offered what help he could.

Serana too was assisting, though she kept her prodigious strength from the boatman, and soon enough they were ready to leave. The day was much as the one before, clear and bright but bitter cold.

As they cut through the water, shore once more to their left and sun rising behind them, he studied the vampire. She hadn't spoken yet today beyond the few words needed for breaking the camp, and her entire air was one of distraction. He could see little of her other than her golden eyes framed between scarf and hood. As the morning dragged on, and they sat in silence, he felt his eyes drawn to her hunched form over and over again.

"She looks miserable."

He remembered how strangely she had started acting last night. She had cut off her questioning abruptly, despite clearly wanting to know more, while he was trying to make sense of a dragon's thoughts. He wondered if something he had said could have unnerved her, but truth be told, he was having some trouble remembering what exactly had been spoken. If he had given offense, he would apologize, but something told him that she didn't want that. He knew what Serana looked like when she was upset with another; Lydia had sometimes been less than perfectly diplomatic around the vampire and Serana had made her displeasure known, but this was different. If anything, he would say she seemed focused inward, upset but on a personal level. He knew enough about conflicts where both sides were in your own head to know that uninvited help from another was worse than useless, so he admired the clouds, the ice floes—he was fairly certain that was what the floating chunks of ice were called—to the north, and the rugged, sparsely wooded shoreline to the south.

Around midday, he accepted a piece of what Jolf called horker jerky. He had seen horkers in the water and playing on the ice, and it turned out their meat was only almost as bad as he'd feared. It was rank with musky flavor and it had the consistency of uncooked trama root, but he was willing to concede that his harsh assessment might only have been his own jealousy. Lydia would be eating fresh guar ribs with creamy beetle scuttle and grilled kwama egg and wickwheat mopate, while he was out here forced to consume the dried flesh of a sea cow. *Why would anyone eat something that comes out of the water and isn't a crab or fish?* The Nords had many offensive ways, but he would still fight to defend them. *Even if they feed me horker jerky.*

He kept stealing glances at Serana, hoping to catch her gaze and figure out what was going on behind those golden eyes. He wouldn't bother her verbally, but he had never been good at leaving
mysteries well enough alone. He didn't consider it a flaw in his personality, though he knew some among his peers at the Temple who would disagree. Now, it led him to add the Volkihar vampire to the list of things he investigated over the course of their journey, along with sky, water, ice, and shore.

Serana did not speak for the entire day, and was silent all through dinner and the pitching of their camp. Jolf had set them ashore on a stony island across the water from a second lighthouse, this one rising from the shore rather than any cliffs. This lighthouse was abandoned and unlit, discernable only by its dark bulk against the reddening evening sky.

Jolf was explaining to him that once the light had warned shipping away from the treacherous rocks in the area, but most ships swung far to the north to avoid the entire region now, and any attempt to man the lighthouse was generally met with pirate attacks. "Empire won't spend the men and money to hold it, plus nobody much cares these days."

Velandryn considered the Nord's words. It made sense; the Mede Dynasty was not the equal of the Septims, and this Empire could hardly hope to match its predecessor's achievements. However, if they couldn't protect shipping between two of their core provinces—and Jorik's news of Reachmen attacks suggested that overland routes were similarly impacted—then the Empire was coming apart at the seams even more thoroughly than he had believed. My people did well to divorce ourselves when we did, else we too would be dragged down with it. Morrowind might be part of the Empire on paper, but his people recognized only the authority of the Great Council. If Serana had an opinion, she was keeping it to herself.

If Jolf was bothered by the vampire's silence, he hid it well. She ate the fresh fish and withered vegetables without complaint or comment, but watched them both with her singular eyes.

After eating, he was struck with a desire to see the island, small as it was. He set off down the shore, stopping every now and then to inspect and take sketches or samples of the sparse plant life or interesting shells that had washed ashore. He found an outcropping of rock that jutted out over the water to the north, and sat himself on it. Off in the distance the shoreline swept north in a great broad cape, and beyond that a fogbank was rolling in. The sun was descending into that fog, and red was swiftly being overtaken by violet and deep dark blue. It was serene, and a fine place to watch the day turn to night.

Azura Lady of Twilight, I honor your name and face unshaking the veils that hide my future. Boethiah God-Eater, I shall walk in burning courage through this night, and all the nights to come. Mephala Blade Unknowable, mine are the silent words that weave the web of lies and truth. Blessed Three, Triune of my people, I walk in the shadow of the uncertain and unknown, but I am not alone. I have the lessons of my people and the tests of my gods, and for these I thank you.

He took a deep breath, tasting the salt of the ocean and the ice on the wind. Thank you for my suffering, Blessed Three, for it has made me strong. Thank you for your hatred, House of Troubles, for it has given me resolve. Thank you for your sacrifice, Nerevar Twice-Holy, for it has shown me righteousness.

It had been too long since last he taken time to pray. He opened his eyes, though he did not remember closing them, and beheld the night around him. The silence was thunderous, but he was not cowed. "I am the fire eternal, the light of my people in the darkness of the infinite trial."

Prayers were not offered to the Triune with the expectation that they would be answered or even heard. The gifts of the gods were faith and courage; the Blessed Triune did not deny their worshippers the chance to overcome their own struggles.

Behind him, he heard the scuff of leather on stone, and Serana sat beside him, seemingly
He realized he had been speaking Dunmeris. "A prayer," he said shortly, not wanting to get into the theology of the Test of Lorkhan. He was glad to hear her voice though. A silent vampire was dangerous, and though he did not think she would attack him, he much preferred her speaking to brooding.

She nodded. "I hope it helped." Before he had a chance to wonder what she meant by that, she peeked at him, golden eyes intent. "You need to shave, unless you're trying to grow a beard."

Startled, he brought his hand to his chin, and indeed, he could feel stubble beneath his fingers. "Hmm, you're right." He ran his thumb down the line of his jaw experimentally, trying to remember when last he'd taken care of that. Not since Whiterun, he thought, so possibly a month or more. He recalled Lydia asking about beards on his kind, and smiled. "Have you ever seen a bearded elf, Serana?"

She shook her head. "I didn't even know your kind could grow them."

"It takes a very long time, truth be told. If I run a blade over my face once every couple of weeks, I never see so much as an errant hair. However, in all of the excitement, it seems I quite forgot." He stroked the stubble again, unable to leave it be now that he knew it was there. "He sighed and gave her a reproachful look. "I suppose I should be thanking you, but now you'll have no more than four parts in five of my attention. No one to blame but yourself." He spoke almost without thinking, annoyed that he had let the hair on his face progress this far.

"Better than than you with a beard. I don't think I could take the shock." If the idea actually shocked the vampire, her tone hid it well.

Time to get to the heart of things. He briefly considered trying some subtle tactic, but could think of none. "Would you like to talk about it, Serana?"

"About what?" She sounded genuinely confused.

"Whatever the reason that you barely said ten words all day. If you want to talk, I'm listening."

"And you think I'd want to tell you about it because of what, precisely?" That might have been insulting, but he knew Serana well enough by now to sense the amusement in the question. She wanted to talk about it, but didn't want to have to bring it up. Well, he could accommodate that. He was curious, after all.

"Because there are three of us on this island, and I don't think Jolf has the…breadth of experience necessary to comprehend the kind of problems you face." Truth be told, I'm not sure I do either.

However, the answer seemed to satisfy her, and she settled back against the rock before continuing. "It's not a problem, really. I was just deep in thought, and…I didn't want to be distracted."

Velandryn wondered what could have consumed her so. "You lost a day to thinking? I once spent four months in a library, but even I'd be hard-pressed not to let out a stray sound every now and then, if only to make sure I still had my voice."

She laughed lightly. "Where would you be without it, hmm?" She placed her hands behind her, legs outstretched in front, and threw her head back to the sky. "I was thinking about the future, and what it means for you to be…" She looked around, and waved a hand. The sounds of waves from along the shore were muted, and the rolling moan of distant ice was suddenly absent. "You're Dragonborn! That's the kind of thing, it's…it's like something out of a story!"
"Yes," he knew his voice was heavy with sarcasm, but couldn't help it, "the kind of story where the elf gets a choice between freezing solid from the weather or roasting in a dragon's gut. Good for all the little Nordlings."

She laughed again, but it lacked any mirth. "If you die, make it glorious, and the bards will sing of your heroism for centuries to come!" He turned to look at her, but she was staring resolutely upward.

He wanted to say something, to remark on how oddly she was behaving, but the effect of her sitting enraptured beneath the shimmering sky overwhelmed him, and he found that words had fled. Instead, he just watched the vampire as she gazed up, eyes glistening. Her hood was around her shoulders, and the scarf that ordinarily hid her face now hung free. The aurora spun and flickered overhead, as vibrant as he had ever seen it. This far north, framed by the ocean to the north and the mountains to the south the lights in the sky had no competition. They outshone the moons and stars alike, they were—

"Magnificent." The word was half a whisper, and Serana looked unaware that she had even spoken. Her eyes were wide and her lips slightly parted as she gazed upward. The aurora's colors played over her pale skin, and in its light she took on an otherworldly beauty.

Not that she needs the light, he was forced to admit. He'd been shying away from such thoughts for a while now, but he could no longer deny that Serana was a beautiful woman. Her skin shone in the moonlight, snow to his ash, and her eyes were drops of honey—

She glanced over, and Velandryn had to resist the impulse to look away guiltily. Internally, he flushed at the direction his thoughts had been taking. The seduction of the vampire is subtle, and a fair form may hide a foul soul. Somehow, he doubted this was the case with Serana, but he wasn't planning on taking any chances. Instead, he carefully raised a single eyebrow. "A drake for your thoughts?"

"You really want to know what it was that had me thinking all day, don't you?" She reclined even further until she lay prone upon her back, hands behind her head and eyes staring upward. "I've been away from home for a long time. I don't know what I'll find when I get back."

Neither do I. Anything was possible, and Velandryn was brought back to reality with a nasty jolt. He was headed into the vampire's lair, and he had to be prepared. "Can you tell me about them? Your family?"

She was silent. He waited for long moments, looking out over the water but she made no move to answer. Finally, curiosity got the better of him, and he turned his head slightly to see what she was up to. Serana was staring at him, golden eyes inscrutable. They sat like that for long moments more, until she sighed. "I…I can't. They're…they value their privacy, and I don't…they'd come for you if you knew too much."

So much for gratitude and reward. She was a vampire, he must not forget. He put a small smile on his face. "I understand completely." Well, soon enough he would have his answers. One way or another.

Conversation ceased after that, though the two of them remained sitting on the ledge in companionable silence. Serana didn't mind the quiet and dispelled the ward of privacy, as she actually liked the sound of waves and wind, and there was nothing to worry Jolf's delicate Nord sensibilities anymore. She was interested to note that Velandryn dozed off not half an hour later, seemingly unable, for all that he was Dragonborn, to stay awake through the night. He had downed a potion against the cold, but apparently that comfort had been too much for the tired elf. His
features relaxed into something approaching peace when he was asleep, and she wondered where he would be at this moment were he truly no more than a simple priest.

*I once spent four months in a library,* he had said. *Would he be back in his beloved Morrowind, among his people and his culture? She tried to imagine it, him sitting silently for days on end, but the image wouldn't come. He was not a typical warrior, but he had a fire within him that demanded attention, and should he live, she knew that this Dragonborn would shake the world to its core. To her, he was in his element, a lanky grey outsider who nonetheless belonged in Skyrim as surely as the snow. Were he to seal himself away from the world, all of his potential would be wasted. *As I was, for far too long. Mother, you have much to answer for.*

For all of Velandryn's complaining, he thrived here, and she wondered if he would ever see it as clearly as she. *Is this what Lydia understood when she swore her life to his? The thought of the other woman, however, brought back the reality of her situation. Lydia had departed to parts unknown, and Serana was more than half-certain that the Nord's absence was a countermeasure against her and her family. Even my allies keep secrets from me, and I from them.* She was alone, for better or for worse, until she made it home. For now, however, she could enjoy this moment. *That much, at least, is fine.*

As the night dragged on, she felt no need to leave their ledge. The aurora overhead was as brilliant as she remembered; it was on clear nights like this that the charged magicka of Aetherius, entering their world, displayed its glory for all below to see. Her mother had only seen it as a potential source of power, and her father had scorned it as a far-off distraction unworthy of his attentions, but Serana had loved nothing more than reading by its light, trying to capture it in paint or song, or simply marveling as the incandescent ribbons danced. So she sat, and watched, kept company by the unknowing elf beside her.

He would not willingly accept her family's gift, this much she knew. She had spent a night and a day and half a night again trying to think like he did, to find some way to convince him, but again and again she came up with nothing. She didn't know him or his people well enough to argue past his culture and religion, and she knew too little of the current state of her family to make many assurances on their capabilities. In short, she had too large a problem to overcome, and too few tools to do it.

She had made up her mind, she knew. *He will go to my family unknowing, and likely reject their offer.* With a sigh, she looked down at Velandryn. She wanted him to succeed, and the gift Lord Harkon would offer could very well make the difference for the Dragonborn. *I must let him choose.* As much as it pained her, he had to face this himself. *As I did.*

Slowly, the sky to the east began to brighten, and Velandryn slowly roused himself from the curled position in which he had been sleeping. With a raspy wordless grumble, he pulled himself upright and blinked at her, confused. A moment later he seemed to remember where he was, and gave his head a shake before settling himself cross-legged facing east.

*Serana couldn't help but ask the question that rose in her mind, though she would wager she already knew the answer. "A morning prayer?"

The look he gave her was, for lack of a better word, measuring, piercing eyes bright in his still face. "No. I've missed many dawns of late, and as it is my favorite time of day, I am going to watch this one. Would you care to join me?"

She nodded and settled herself next to him. As the sky lightened, she found her hood and scarf, and wrapped them about her face once again. She would watch the dawn, but she wouldn't burn for it.
"If you're going to bring up turning me into a vampire, you had best do it before the sun rises." His words sent tremors through her. *He knows.* Nothing he had said or done—

*But you can't read him, can you? Not really.* Sometimes his moods came through, but her guesswork was less than perfect. So now she was left sitting on a rock staring dumbly at the Dragonborn as all of her plans crumbled away. Desperately she tried to keep her composure. "Is there something special about the sun that would change your answer?"

Velandryn gave no answer, but pointed east. Far past his outstretched hand, the first rays of sunlight slowly crested the horizon, and the world changed. The greys of predawn receded, and red and gold consumed the sky and set the clouds ablaze. In an instant she understood Velandryn's mute argument, but she couldn't tear her eyes away. As the sun itself drew up over the sea, pain lanced through her and the skin of her face began to ache; vampires, no matter how powerful, would never be suited for the light of day.

"It hurts you, doesn't it?" Velandryn's words were soft, spoken without malice or mockery. The dawn light drew out the blue undertones in his skin and set him in sharp repose. More and more she found herself noticing the subtle movements of his face and body, and the way that they changed to accentuate the fierce will that drove him. "The sun."

She did not try to deny it. "Vampires are creatures of the night."

He rose, and raised his hands above his head. "And there you have my answer. I love the dawn far too much to ever let it go. Look!" The sun was before him, and his hair set alight in a hundred shades of crimson. She couldn't look directly at the sun without pain so blinding it made thinking impossible, so she made do with studying his face and the colors of light playing over his skin.

"So, you would reject the gift of the Volkihar because you like watching sunrises?" When she phrased it like that, hopefully he would see how trivial his objections were. "Against all the power of an immortal life, that is your counter?"

He answered with slow speech, still basking in the morning light. If he was cold, he gave no sign. "Tamriel. In the old Aldmeris, it means 'Dawn's Beauty.' The Arena, the Starry Heart of the Aurbis and all that ever was or will be. Where Lorkhan created the world, and where his holy task is given form." He dropped his hands to his sides, and folded them behind his back. "What you ask of me is to forsake the Psijic Endeavor, that for which my people believe this world was made. To remove myself from the world as it is, to abandon the Dunmer, and to relinquish forever any claim on Lorkhan's legacy. That, I cannot do."

She didn't understand. Clearly the words held great meaning to him, but to her they were little more than nonsense. She'd never been much of one for theology before her transformation, and afterwards there was only one god who concerned her. "What is the Psijic Endeavor? What is Lorkhan's legacy?"

He turned to her then, eyes a complement to the sky behind him. "Mortality, and through that, divinity. Lorkhan created the world so that the et'Ada would become mortal, and in doing so understand life through modes they had never before possessed. The Aldmer believed that Creation was a curse, something inflicted upon a superior spirit. They longed to be as they were, and cursed Lorkhan for his trickery. The great boon of the Blessed Triune was to expose the hollowness of the Aldmeri worldview and the lies of their gods, and give my people a chance to be more, to take full advantage of this holy gift. My people rejoice at the world that has been given us, the universe that that we have made for ourselves. We are here, and given the chance to become more than we were. Do you understand why we despise the vampire so, beyond even the danger you pose to life and limb?"
She did, in a strange way. "You think we're denying you your destiny."

The Dunmer nodded gravely. "Through the trials of a life well lived, we take our rightful place in
the world. Every soul that is born mortal is allowed an opportunity which the gods themselves
warred to afford us, and you would pervert that with the taint of Molag Bal. The Triune test us
always with trials, and the Four Corners seek to tempt us from the right ways of being. Your Lord,
the King of Rape, is the most insidious of the Four, and his finest work is the vampire, sent to
seduce mortals from the right-thinking way. By offering a twisted vision of immortality, Bal would
deny us the true purpose of our being." He smiled, a brief flash of white teeth that she knew could
only be for her benefit. "Also, I very much like the dawn."

Truth be told, she had no answer to that. She had never been especially religious, and Velandryn's
clear devotion made all of her slapdash planning futile. She would never turn him. With a sigh, she
turned to face westward, away from the rising sun, and peered out into the distant fog, trying to see
some hint of her home. However, the morning had blinded her, and all she saw was light.

Serana was looking west, and Velandryn wondered if perhaps he'd said too much. As he was
wondering how to follow up his passionate declaration of faith, she turned, her expression neutral.
"I guess we've agreed to disagree."

That was about as good an answer as he could expect, he supposed. Releasing his magicka, he let
the frigid air of Skyrim invade his body once more, though this time he found it much less
disagreeable. *Much that is intolerable by night becomes mere inconvenience in the light of day.* He
half-suspected he'd just made up that saying, but it was very appropriate, and contained a nice
amount of religious symbolism. *It would need to be tweaked, of course, but I can see using it to
illustrate some point about faith to a batch of neonates.*

Returning his focus to Serana, he nodded. "Out of curiosity, what was it that convinced you to
accept the curse?" Once, he had thought that perhaps she had been turned against her will, but her
disdain for the behavior of others of her kind and certain comments about what it meant to be a
vampire had led him to the conclusion that she had chosen this for herself.

However, she shook her head. "I can't…I don't think…it doesn't matter, not for you." She peered
off to the west again, "We should get there today, I think."

Velandryn nodded, knowing how it felt not to want to share every part of yourself. *We aren't
friends, after all. Only travelling companions, and just for a bit more.* More and more, that thought
was accompanied by a feeling that he was helping her harm herself, that she belonged out in the
world, not with this family that had locked her away beneath the earth. That, however, was not his
decision to make. "How does it feel, knowing that you'll see home again after so much time?"

Serana looked a little sad. "I know, on some level, how long it's been, but it still doesn't feel real. I
think I should walk back in the front gate, and it will be as though I never left." She sighed. "That's
impossible, of course. Things will be different, but I don't know how."

Admittedly, Velandryn had no frame of reference for such an event. He had been away from
Morrowind for just over a year now, but there was no risk of anything major having changed. A
few Prelates might have changed offices, or some unlucky Anointed shuffled off to Necrom for a
decade or two of corpse preparation, but the world as he knew it would be intact. Serana knew
nothing at all of what would be waiting for her at her home.

He tried to find the right words to put her at ease while maintaining a good amount of emotional
distance, but he couldn't. Finally, he settled for the truth. "Neither do I, but whatever happens,
you'll make it through." He tried to put the feeling he had about her into words. "I might not know
your story, Serana, but I can see your strength is real. You woke up without any clue of what had
happened, and then drove a path through draugr, a master vampire, and an unknown world to reach
your goal." He knew his eyes would be lightening with humor as the memory of their verbal
sparring during those first few days returned to him. "You stood with mortals against a monster of
your own kind, and delayed your own quest to help a town in need." He paused for a moment as he
considered Serana as a whole being. "I make no claim to love vampires, and I won't pretend that
we always agree, but I don't think you'll be defeated by so small a thing as the passage of time."

Serana smiled at him. "Thank you." Her eyes truly were unlike any he had ever seen. The Promise
of Azura had altered the eyes of his people, to be sure, but Dunmer eyes were shades of red, and
emotion was conveyed through light and dark, and subtle changes in overall tone. Outlanders might
find his people's eyes unnerving or exotic, but to him they were so commonplace as to merit no
consideration. The eyes of humans and other mer, for all that they came in a dizzying array of
colors, lacked the subtlety of his people's, and it was impossible to read anything more than the
crudest of emotional cues from their depths. Serana's eyes, on the other hand, were almost
kaleidoscopic in their complexity. He had thought of them as gold many times, but the truth was
that they had flecks within that caught the light in odd ways and could harbor flashes of color of
which were all the more beautiful for their transience. They weren't tied to her mood in any way,
but he found the environmental nature of their change oddly fitting for a vampire. Perhaps
paradoxically, they were most striking when the sun hit them just right, though that doubtless
cause Serana no small discomfort. He would never admit it to another, but he had come to the
conclusion that he quite liked her eyes.

With a start, he realized that he was staring. Her eyes had shifted, and now she seemed guarded,
doubtless unnerved by his staring into her face. Quickly, he jerked away and looked in the
direction of Jolf, hidden by the bend of the shore. "We should be going. Best not to let anything
more happen in your absence, hmm?"

She barely acknowledged his attempt at levity, giving him a sober and searching look as she
passed. With a shake of his head, he followed her along the beach. What in the holy name of
Nerevar is possessing me? It wasn't sorcery, unless Serana had gained some magic in the last few
days that could penetrate the dragon's defense as though it were not there. Besides, that would be
an odd use of her ability to control me. No, whatever had happened had been him and him alone.

It didn't matter, though. Their journey was almost at an end, and Serana would be reunited with her
family. And then we will tear them out, root and stem. We must. However he felt about Serana, a
coven of vampires beholden to none but their own desires was too dangerous to be left alone. Even
if it means I sign her writ of execution myself.

He didn't like the thought of it, but duty was not always pleasant. So long as Serana stood with her
family, she was his enemy. But if she renounced them? The idea was intriguing, but it would be
beyond foolish to even begin to incorporate it into his plans. No, despite any personal misgivings
he might have, she had to be considered an enemy. The dead should burn, remember?

If he repeated it to himself enough, he could almost believe it.

Serana tried to keep her mind on the prospect of home, but that moment on the rock ledge kept
swimming to the front of her thoughts. Velandryn's little speech, his cryptic comments about
mortality and vampires, and then the expression on his face as he looked at her; she had to admit
that she didn't have a clue as to how the Dunmer actually felt. He had seemed sincere enough, but
his declarations about how her very existence was wrong still rang in her ears. He confused and
agitated her, and she needed to put him from her mind. He had helped her, true, but their time together was almost at an end, and if Velandryn would not join her, then there was no point in her dwelling on the Dark Elf. Yes, I am almost home. There, he's nothing but a memory. She wouldn't turn him, but she wouldn't let him dominate her thoughts either.

She reached Jolf's camp and took her place on the boat, letting the Nord move about packing his gear. Once she returned home she would have to readjust to life in the castle; her father brooked no disagreement from any member of his court, even if it was his own daughter. Doubtless he would want the Elder Scroll, and although Serana had grown quietly attached to the bundle on her back she would part with it if that was what was commanded of her. We aren't so different, Velandryn and I. He has his Temple, and I have my family.

That thought lasted until the Dunmer took up his place on the boat as well. The sight of his lean form in the morning light reminded her of their conversation in Morthal, where he had confessed that he had gone against the strictures of his faith by helping her. Could she have done that, directly defied her father? It was one thing to strike against another clan, but the thought of raising her hand against a Volkihar conjured ice in her gut. Which of us is the better follower?

She tried to figure out what she was feeling, what this tense companionship meant to her, and got so lost in thought that by the time she became aware of her surroundings again, it was the better part of the way to noon. Angrily, she realized that she had again spent hours trapped in thoughts of Velandryn Savani, the morning after a heart-to-heart brought on by this exact behavior.

She thought that might be ironic, but then again she'd always had a bad habit of attributing much as irony that was not. Her logic and rhetoric tutor had despaired more than once of her, as she preferred a lyrical or romantic turn of phrase over one that was strictly true. So, for her purposes, it was ironic.

She looked up, but Velandryn was gazing out over the water, face turned away from her. His cloak was draped over the armor her wore, and his leather helmet hid the lines of his face and concealed his red hair and true-ashen skin. From this angle, he could be anyone, nothing more than an anonymous sailor in the far north. Until he turned back, meeting her eyes. In that instant, all doubt fled. I was a fool to doubt that he was the Dragonborn. The fire in his eyes shamed common men, and his every movement was filled with purpose.

The Dunmer looked over at her, his ordinary inscrutability making way for a flicker of light in his eyes, setting her to wonder all over again. The moment passed, however, and he placed his hands in front of him, conjuring a small flame. He held it before his face and sighed. The sight of Velandryn trying valiantly to keep himself warm was so incongruous with the thoughts Serana had been having about him that it made her laugh out loud, drawing Jolf's attention.

The Nord shouted in alarm, storming back towards them while waving his hands. "Put it out! Are you mad? Fire on a boat, you'll send us to the bottom of the sea!"

Velandryn looked unconcerned. "I have control, boatman. Focus on bringing us to our destination." He wiggled his fingers, flame dancing in the air above his hand.

As Jolf raised his voice in protest once more, Serana sighed and looked away from the Dunmer and the Nord. A moment was rapidly approaching where she would have to make a choice. Letting Velandryn go put her family, her entire race, at risk. However, the thought of forcing him…it was repugnant. Once more she was going in circles. Sighing again, she watched the two of them quarrel.

Velandryn was easy enough to read, if you knew the way of it, and he was loving this. The fire was
an extension of his body, and as he made it dance and Jolf panicked further, the Dunmer's eyes gleamed brighter and brighter, until Serana suspected the boatman too must realize that he was the butt of a joke that needed no audience but the elf playing it.

Finally, Velandryn snapped his hand shut, snuffing out the fire. "You win, boatman, I'll sit here and freeze to death in silence. Unstick my corpse when we get there, and you can use it to prop open the door." He glanced over at Serana. "You do have a door, I hope. I'd hate to think that I froze solid for nothing."

Jolf had returned to steering the ship, but she wasn't taking any chances. She cast her spell of silence once more. It might be the cold that was giving him this wry humor, but she would take it over the bizarre intensity of this morning. She'd answer him honestly. And maybe have a bit of fun in the process. "We do, but it's a big door. I'm not sure a little elf like you would be able to hold it open."

He shrugged, red eyes alight in his dark skin. "A shame. It has always been such a dream of mine." He reached looked out over the side of the boat and stretched an arm out as though he were going to reach into the water, but snatched his hand back at the last second. "And clearly I'm going mad, since I just tried to reach into this frigid water." Shaking his head, he chuckled. "No matter how interesting the fish, it's not worth it."

Serana laughed aloud. She could say with certainty that she liked this Velandryn far more than the grave one from last night. "Well, you know, become like me, and you never have to worry about the cold again!"

She'd been joking; she knew someone like Velandryn Savani would never take her up on the offer for a prize as trivial as comfort. However, as the words left her mouth she realized how easily they could be misconstrued, or be taken as aggressive. She hadn't yet made up her mind about what would happen when the elf stood in her father's hall, but she knew that she couldn't breathe a word of her thoughts to Velandryn. If she went through with it, if she had him turned regardless of his wishes, he must suspect nothing until the moment it was done. She snapped her mouth shut and waited for his response.

He did not explode with rage or accuse her of trying to coerce him into vampirism, though she hadn't expected anything so overt in the first place. He simply looked at her, his levity gone. "A question. Was there something in my behavior that led you to think I would be amenable to becoming a vampire, or—"

She broke in, as there was no need for him to finish the thought. "It was…" A moment ago she had known how to respond, but the words failed her as she tried to say them. "I think… I think you would be an excellent…addition to our clan. You are intelligent, driven, and—"

"Dragonborn?" Something flickered in his eyes, but Serana could not say what. Velandryn didn't appear to be enraged or disdainful of her reasoning, at least. However, neither was he on one knee pledging allegiance to Molag Bal. "I believe I understand." He leaned back, onto his cloak, arms spread slightly and elbows protruding out over the water. The hood of his cloak streamed out behind him, a scrap of black and grey fur at the mercy of the wind. "Even if there is little chance I'll accept, the Dragonborn is too tempting an opportunity not to try."

He wasn't wrong, not entirely, but there was more to it than that. She was thinking of how best to say it, to try to clarify what it was that made her think he would be a magnificent Volkihar, but something on the wind caught her notice, and she spun to peer off to the north. Velandryn sat forward intently, apparently having picked up on her new focus, though she barely noticed the Dunmer's action. Off to the north, she could feel it. Power, the shape of winter made flesh. The
power to shape the earth and freeze the skies. *Father.* She shivered.

Velandryn was watching her. "Are we getting close?" He too was keeping one eye on the water, but clearly he could feel no hint of what she did. It wasn't surprising, she supposed; her family had gone to great lengths to ensure that their stronghold could not be found either by accident or malicious design. Still, she had wondered if perhaps the Dragonborn would fare differently. If he had been able to bypass her family's protections, it would have told her…what, exactly?

Whatever he would or would not have been able to do, it didn't matter. They were close and getting closer, and she still had no idea what would happen when they walked through those doors. *He sent Lydia away, but why would he do that if he had no intention of joining me?* She could always ask, she supposed. If he was planning on opposing a coven of vampires, abandoning a skilled warrior was not the play she would have expected.

When she asked about Lydia, however, he only blinked at her. "She left. She saw me growing a beard, and couldn't stand the thought of an elf with more facial hair than her, a Nord. She is travelling Skyrim, trying desperately to find someone capable of—"

"If you didn't want to answer, you could have just said so." Of course, that little bit of nonsense had been slightly more amusing than a flat rejection.

"Very well. I won't tell you because it isn't any of your concern, even leaving aside the fact that I don't trust you enough to give you that information."

That shouldn't have stung, but it did. Of course, she was holding back things as well, but those were just stories of the past, things he didn't need to know. *You aren't allies, remember?*

Jolf was swinging the ship around southward, and she looked to where they were headed. The shore ahead was barren and devoid of structures or life of any sort, save for a single forlorn dock with a small rowboat pushed up on the shore nearby. *I know this place.* One, it had been a village of moderate size, one of many that bowed to her family. Now, there was no trace of the simple people who had lived here. Wood and packed earth could not weather the years alone, after all. It was sad, in a way. *But why are we here? This isn't—*

She dispelled her ward of silence and turned to face the Nord. "This isn't where you were supposed to be taking us." With some effort, she kept her voice calm. Perhaps they were only stopping over for a moment.

He pointed out to the north, into the fog. "You want to get out there. Well, I'm no fool. I know what's out in that sea." He pointed to the abandoned rowboat. "That can take you where you need to go."

Irritation flashed through Serana. After all that she had paid him, *this* was the service she had procured? For this miserable man to have the audacity to stop and leave them to…to row their way back to her home took her breath away.

However, before she had a chance to give the Nord a piece of her mind, Velandryn had swept in, seeming to overtop Jolf despite his lesser height. Where she had kept her annoyance with the man internal, Velandryn was letting it show clearly. *No,* she amended. *He's displaying it.* It was easy to forget that the vast majority of his emotional cues were for the benefit of others. "You are altering our arrangement, Nord?" His voice was harsh and whip-thin, cracking in the cold air.

"Said I'd take you to here. Never said nothing about going to a haunted island." Jolf folded his arms over his chest and waited.
Velandryn's lips slowly curled into a mirthless smile, showing a great many teeth. "Very well. You will wait here, and upon my return, you shall convey me to Solitude. This was the agreement, yes? Or have you decided that some other part of it was not to your liking?"

The Dunmer was making no effort to curb the energy now radiating off of his body, a force so strong that she would wager even Jolf could feel his skin tingling in its presence. Serana wondered if it was deliberate, or if he was so aggravated by the idea of the Nord refusing to take them to her doorstep that he was emitting uncontrolled magicka. For the elf, who seemed to value restraint and discipline highly, she found it unlikely.

And, indeed, Jolf buckled in the face of Velandryn's ire. "Aye." His eyes were perhaps slightly wider than they would have been otherwise, and he took half a step back as Velandryn leaned forward, seemingly without noticing that he had done so. "Aye, I'll be here." With a start, he seemed to regain a bit of his spine. "But I'll not go out to that...that place, and you shouldn't either, if you know what's good for you!" He pointed a shaking finger at Velandryn. "I don't know why you're helping her, but it's evil out there!" He swung to point at Serana. "I've seen the way you wrap yourself in the sun, and those eyes, those eyes are wrong, you hear me? You're a vampire, and you're working some foul craft out there! I want no part of it! I'm a godly man, I am. You paid me, true, and I've done my bit, but I won't go into that fog, nor be part what lies beyond!" He pulled a stone token, what appeared to be a snake coiled around a crescent, from a pocket on his vest, and swung it before him. "By the bones and blood of Shor, I swear it!"

Velandryn had let his magicka subside, and now studied Jolf, expression inscrutable. "Conviction is admirable. We are all godly here, in our own ways." He bowed slightly, and made a strange gesture with one hand, running his thumb gently across a small leathern book she had never seen before. "We will be fine from here, I think. Be waiting for me, and ready to cast off." He had raised his hood, and now tugged the edges forward, the thick fur enshrouding his face. "This air does not agree with me, and I will not linger. As you said, there is darkness at work ahead."

Serana paid the others only half a mind as she pushed the little rowboat into the water. She was so close that she could almost feel the stone of the castle beneath her feet. At Velandryn's remark, however, she spared the elf a thought.

She pitied him his inability to ignore the cold. Or perhaps his refusal to do so. If a vampire could not feel the cold, was he embracing his misery in order to draw a contrast, revel in even his weakness? She couldn't say, and while she would never ask him, it seemed like the sort of thing Velandryn would do.

With a sigh, she gave one final tug and the old boat came free of the shore. She was so close. Amazingly, it floated, and did not even seem in that poor of shape. Did someone from the castle use it? If so, she might be stranding them ashore. But, she could have something done about it once she was safely returned.

Returned. She would be, soon. So close to safety. To home.

Serana rowed with inhuman strength, and the boat fairly flew across the water. Velandryn, sitting in the prow, was at once impressed with her ability and annoyed that he was forced into a situation where he had to witness it. As the time approached for him to actually come into contact with her family, he found himself running over every way this could go wrong. He had marked his location back with Jolf, but there was no telling what would be waiting ahead. In this pale facsimile of sunlight amidst the fog, all of his worries, those fickle imps who had hidden in the recesses of his mind throughout their travels, came to the forefront.
For once, he saw no purpose in planning out contingencies, as his information was so sparse as to be nonexistent. He could not even begin to imagine what was waiting for him as their destination, as the only thing his analysis of Serana's abilities had revealed was that her magic operated within a framework wholly alien to his own. The combination of her vampiric abilities and pre-Galerion magical theory meant that any attempt to anticipate her abilities was folly. So, he focused inward, to quell his fears and muster strength that he might pass through whatever lay ahead.

The little jetty and their reluctant boatman had fallen behind quickly, and now they pierced into the great fogbank that lay offshore. Velandryn tried to peer through the fog, but even his night-eye proved insufficient for the task. Serana rowed on confidently, silent and seemingly drawn onward by some force felt by her alone. Eventually, he decided to speak. Ordinarily he had no issue with silence, but this blank stillness around them was unnerving.

"Is the fog part of your family's defenses?" He had no idea how far this Volkihar clan's power extended, and if it was about him now, he wanted to know. Besides, when they returned to strike the Volkihar down, this could save lives.

She looked up, apparently startled. "Hmm? Oh, yes, it helps to hide us, but it's mostly just," she shrugged, smiling a little, "one of the joys of the Seas of Ghosts. I always loved when the fog would roll in. It's nice to see that we still get it. Feels like home." She paused for a moment, still rowing, and then continued. "I don't know everything my parents did to keep the island hidden, but any of our blood can find it. My mother once said that," she bit her lip and turned her eyes downward, clearly trying to recall, "'The only ones who can find it are those who know where it is.' Perhaps the magic touches those who have come, or something." She smiled again. "I'm afraid I'm not half the witch my mother was."

"Clearly." He spoke without fully thinking, words coming easily as he tried to figure out the implications of her statement. Such magic was impressive, but it did raise the issue of why Serana had tried to get Jolf to bring her out to the castle proper…

"Excuse me?" He looked up, to see Serana's golden eyes fixed on his. "I say I'm not half the witch my mother was, and you agree?"

_Oh, fetch it all._ He hadn't been paying much attention to his words, lost in thought as he was, but when he went back over what had just been said, he saw it. "Serana, listen—"

"Oh, listen is it now?" Something flared in her eyes. _'Listen while you disparage my ability! I don't have to take that from you!'_

Velandryn was caught off-guard, flailing around in his mind looking for some answer. Then, belatedly, he realized just what it was that he had seen in those eyes. "Having fun, are you?"

She smiled broadly. "If you aren't going to pay attention when I answer your question, you have to pay the price." Rowing on, her smile saddened a little. "Truth be told, I really am nothing compared to my mother. She lived and breathed magic, while I just benefit from vampiric gifts and the spells she taught me."

"From what I've seen of you, then, she was a good teacher." Serana bowed her head then, and Velandryn almost thought he could see a flush of color on her pale face. He dispelled that thought, though, before such foolish fancies got the better of him. Something else occurred to him then, a flash of inspiration. "By the sound of it, she also designed the ward that Movarth used?" At the vampire's nod, he felt a slight twinge of satisfaction as another piece of the puzzle fell into place. _A single family, responsible for so much vampire history. And bearing the name of Volkihar besides… "If she was responsible for your home's defenses, I pity the one who tries to breach_
them." Which, by the way things are shaping up, will eventually be me.

She made a sound of assent. "Mother always had a wicked sense of humor and a knack for… appropriate punishment. I would not envy the foe who tried to find us with an eye towards violence." She gave him a look. "You might want to keep that in mind."

Right. The same qualities that drew him to the vampire made her an agile opponent, and he would do well not to forget that. Instead, he tried to focus on looking as innocent as possible as he gazed out into the fog. "Well, whether magic or no, it does a good job of hiding your home."

" Doesn't it?" Serana's voice was light, but there was a hint of something else behind her words. "It's as good as any spell, for sure. The fog comes and goes, but I always felt safe, as a little girl, looking out my window and seeing it there."

Velandryn wondered what the proper way was to ask a vampire their age. Considering that physical development was halted when the curse corrupted the soul, Serana should technically have both an age and a duration, though he doubted that she would appreciate it being referred to as such. So, he wondered in silence, and watch the vampire work the oars. Under her black cloak, the linen of which was looking decidedly threadbare given the ordeals through which it had been dragged, her movements were strong and sure. He noticed, not for the first time, how clean her motions looked, with her pale skin accentuating the subtle play of muscles as she powered the boat onward.

Velandryn had never found humans on the whole particularly attractive, which might have been the reason Serana was so fascinating to him. At first, her superficial similarity to a Nord, combined with her paleness that verged on pallor, had been something else to mark her as foreign, the ultimate outlander, and an antithesis to his own values. However, somewhere along the way, his view on her look had changed. He wasn't sure when he had first realized that she was beautiful, but now it was simply one more thing that was true about her. He was still slightly concerned that it was some subtle form of vampiric seduction, but the fact that he was still planning to wipe out her entire clan seemed to preclude that. If I find myself seriously considering the offer when she makes it for true, then I can be concerned. The fact that she would offer him the curse of vampirism seemed to now be an open secret between the two of them, at least as far as he was concerned. He wouldn't accept, of course, but it was flattering, in its own way. The only thing worse than being coerced to join a gang of undead bloodsuckers, he supposed, was them not thinking you were worth having in the first place.

Serana spoke suddenly, interrupting his thoughts. "What is my lord to you?"

"I'm—what?" He genuinely didn't understand what she was asking. Serana must have been getting better at reading him, since she clarified immediately:

"Molag Bal. He's some sort of evil spirit to your people, right? The way you reacted, I was curious."

Tempting as it was to give her a long theology lesson, Velandryn decided to keep it simple. "My people recognize seven principal Daedra as significant. Of those, three comprise the Triune, and four the House of Corners. The Blessed Three want the best for the Dunmer, to see us fulfill our destiny and theirs. The House wants to see us falter. Bal is one of the four. I oppose him as I would Mehrunes Dagon, Malacath, or Madgod Sheogorath."

"So, you have nothing against him personally?"

Velandryn had to laugh. "I'm a priest, not a Daedra. I know the rituals and stepping-ways to negotiate his pitfalls and negotiate with him should his presence come upon me, but I'd not call it
personal in the least!" He chuckled again, amused by the image of newly-made Anointed trying to enrage Daedra Lords with personal vendettas. "The Temple teaches us to stand strong in the face of their trials, not to start blood-feuds. Truth be told, they're more metaphysical concepts than individuals to the populace at large."

Serana looked slightly put out by this, though why he could not say. "Do any Dunmer worship him?"

Velandryn thought, trying to recall if there were any cults of Bal not involved with vampirism. "I don't think so, not openly at least. They all go to vampires eventually. Why?"

Her smile was bright, but her eyes were sad. "I was just curious."

He very much doubted that, but decided to leave it be. They would soon be parted; there was no point in quarreling now. Ahead, he could see sunlight, and the fog seemed to be thinning. Then it was, and a moment later, it was gone.

It took them less than three heartbeats to go from twilit gloom to full sun. With an annoyed hiss, Serana dropped an oar and pulled her cowl forward, moving so fast that she had the hood up and her hand back on the oar before the wooden shaft had even touched the boat's railing. Velandryn briefly admired her speed, but as he took in the spectacle around him, he found his gaze arrested.

Behind them and to either side, the fogbank squatted, long and looming, a grey wall of that hid the world to the south. To the north was open water, dotted with floes of ice, and a single rocky island, devoid even of a shore upon which to land. Velandryn didn't know what form Serana's home would take, but he had expected something…grander. The vampire, however, began rowing with new vigor.

Slowly, as though sketched out by the hand of a god, lines resolved out of sea and sky, and a great swirling mass took shape. At first, it seemed a heat mirage as one would find above a pit of lava, but it gained in strength and definition, and soon it bore the unmistakable impression of solid stone, ancient and unyielding. Sky became towers, craggy island became sheer walls, and in what seemed no time at all, a castle rose before them, dark and imposing against the radiant sky.

Velandryn's breath caught in his throat as the reality of what he faced sunk in. "Here it is. After all of this, he was going to come to face to face with Serana's family, with the Volkihar vampires who he half-suspected had spawned the clan. Worshippers of Molag Bal for certain, and ancient beyond the imaginings of most mortals. A father who commanded power and respect such that his very name had nearly sent Serana to the ground, and a mother who had designed spells whose very basis was impossible for him to understand.

Serana drove them towards a shore that had appeared with the castle, a hundred feet or so of gently sloping sand and snow that was the only harbor amidst the craggy rocks rising from the sea. It sported another desolate jetty and was watched over by a crumbling stone tower set some way back from the water. She leapt out and splashed out through the knee-deep surf, dragging the boat behind her. Velandryn rose and leapt onto the beach, taking care not to let the water splash on his cloak or legs. He was quite cold enough without factoring water into the situation. Before them, a stone path rose gently to a bridge that arced up to kiss the stone of the castle, wherein was set a massive gate. The bridge was lined with gargoyles like those they had encountered in Dimhollow, and Velandryn eyed them suspiciously.

Serana strode forward, however, and Velandryn found himself following her. Dov would not allow
him to do otherwise, to quail where a mere Daedra's spawn walked boldly. Joor quietly pointed out that she might be returning home, but they walked into the unknown, and a dangerous unknown at that.

For that, Velandryn found his two halves in agreement. Learn, and the unknown is just another challenge.

And challenges? He smiled to himself. I live for those.

The bridge was exactly as she remembered. At the far end, the gate had been altered slightly with the addition of two more gargoyles, but the castle was all but unchanged. She stepped onto the bridge, and walked past the dormant gargoyles quickly lest the memories overcome her.

From behind, she could hear Velandryn's footsteps as he followed. Under other circumstances, she might have taken a moment to reassure him that the gargoyles here would not bestir themselves at anything less than a direct command from one of her bloodline, but she was too caught up in the moment. If it feels as though I've been gone no time at all, then why does this affect me so? Shaking her head, she hurried onward.

The gate, as she knew it would be, was shut up tight. Behind a steel grate off to one side, a Nord in elegant armor—not a vampire, she noted—was peering out at her. "Hey, who are you? You're not one of ours!"

Doubt flooded her. Could this all have changed? Had her parents fled Castle Volkihar, or could some other calamity befallen them? Had bandits or pirates taken up residence here, turning her family's home into nothing more than a glorified hideout? Had—

Velandryn jabbed a finger into the guard's face. When he spoke, every word was accompanied by a puff of breath in the cold air. "Listen here. This is Serana of Volkihar. Do you want to be the one who stands between her and Lord Harkon?"

The man went pale, and began hurriedly working at a great winch. "Apologies, my lady! Of course, you are welcome! Please, enter, and it is so wonderful to see you home!" The gate lifted, the heavy doors swung wide, and he bowed deeply. "I am beyond honored, Lady Serana!"

The tunnel was long, she remembered, studded with murder-holes and alcoves from which defenders could slay any enemy who had breached the front gates. At the far end was another door, one that had in her time been made of rich dark wood from the forests of Falkreath; her father had always insisted on elegance as a display of his power. That door too was shut tight, and the guard remained outside, so she and Velandryn had a moment to themselves.

He looked…odd, for lack of a better word. Worried, but with resolution in his eyes. As if he knew that something unpleasant was coming, but he intended to face it no matter the danger. His posture too was paradoxical, at once wary and proud, adamant and guarded. Heroic. That was a good word.

The moment ended when he chuckled, and suddenly he was just Velandryn again. She found herself curious as to what amused a Dark Elf in a vampire's lair. "Does something about my home amuse you?"

He continued chuckling for a moment more before responding. "Only that I am capable of forcing my way into a vampire's lair if I'm cold enough." With another huff of laughter, he ran gloved hands along his arms. "By the gods, your family picked an inhospitable place to call home."

She quite liked it, actually, bleak as it was. "Would you like to meet them?"
The look he gave her contained so many emotions she couldn't begin to sort them all out; how had she ever thought him stoic? "Do you, know, Serana, I quite think I would."

With four quick steps she was at the far door, and a single push served to open it. All at once, light broke in, and she stepped forward eagerly before being accosted by a vampire she recognized. He was tall, with haughty features that shouted his Altmer blood. When last she had seen him, Vingalmo had been a freshly blooded schemer, eager to make his mark. Judging by his rich robes and fine accoutrements, he had succeeded. And if the look on his face was anything to go by, he knew who had just walked in.

"Lady Serana." His voice betrayed the surprise he must surely feel. With a bow, he stood aside, but as she passed, he shouted out "The Lady Serana returns!"

She stood on a balcony she remembered well, overlooking the hall below. Two stairways wound down to the floor, where the court of the Volkihar passed their eternity. My people. They were perhaps a hundred, and each pulsed with the power of their lord. They sat around the great long tables than ran the length of the hall or stood near the walls, talking or feeding or simply watching the others. The cattle stood placidly for the most part, though here and there some danced for the amusement of their masters. At the far end of the room, seated on a great heavy chair that dominated a richly laid table adorned with both food and the comatose bodies of feeding-slaves, sat her father.

Father was unchanged. Lord Harkon. She had to remember to call him that. Not even her mother was permitted to call him otherwise, not after their transformation. Mother! She looked around for the Lady Valerica, but she was nowhere to be found, and her eyes were drawn back to the man who had dominated every aspect of her existence from the day she was born. My Lord, second only to the God-King Molag Bal. He had taught her those words himself. As memories surrounded her, his eyes met hers, and she felt the years fall away. For a moment, she was back at the altar, hearing the voices crying out. Pain, blood, cold metal and—

No. She was stronger than that. The past was the past, and Serana of Volkihar was stronger than that. I am stronger. She forced herself to meet Lord Harkon's eyes, and prayed that he had not seen her weakness.

Her father rose, eyes fixed on her, and the hall fell silent at once. The assembled Volkihar stared away from her, gazing upon their lord—my lord as well, she must not forget that—with curiosity. Clearly he was not in the habit of addressing his underlings during a feast.

Nor did he now. Instead, Lord Harkon stretched out a hand towards her, and spoke with the rich tones she remembered. "Come here, Serana." He acted as though she just had been up in her room rather than missing for the past four thousand years. Of course he did. Lord Harkon believed firmly in power being as much in perception as fact; he would never allow himself to show surprise or be taken off of his guard.

She descended the stair as though in a dream, her surroundings feeling unreal. Velandryn was a step behind her, but stopped when he reached the bottom, seemingly not wishing to approach Lord Harkon. For an outsider, it was understandable. However, for her to disobey her father was unthinkable; she was halfway up the hall before she even considered the possibility of pausing to wait for the Dunmer. She strode forward, heedless of the mutters from the surrounding court. Although she did not recognize any of those she chanced to glance at, they would doubtless have heard Harkon's words and now know her, by reputation if nothing else. She would not give them the pleasure of seeing her balk or hesitate; her return would be nothing but triumphant.

Lord Harkon had come around to their side of the high table, and now stood at the end of the long
path she trod. Ten paces away, she sank to one knee and bowed her head before him, as propriety demanded. "My lord, I return."

"My long-lost daughter returns at last." She looked up, eager to see her father's face again, but the stern visage that looked down at her held little warmth. "I trust you have my Elder Scroll."

After all these years, that's the first thing you ask me? Her hand dropped to the bundle on her back, the one she sometimes forgot existed. "Yes, it's...yes, I have it, father." She held it out to him, and he moved forward with long steps and snatched it from her. His eyes were still cold, but now alight with triumph. Father. She wanted to...to...

She didn't know what she wanted. This was all wrong. It should have made sense, it was supposed to be right, she was finally home. So why did she still feel so worried? Lord Harkon ran a hand over the container, seemingly enraptured, and Serana felt her annoyance flare up. "It's good to see you too, father."

He looked down at her. "Your time away has made you impertinent. Of course I'm delighted to see you, my dear. Must I really say the words aloud?" If he was delighted, his voice his it well, and his eyes could not leave the scroll.

She bowed her head again. She had pushed him, but it didn't do to push Lord Harkon too far. "And I you, my lord."

Her father held the Elder Scroll tightly in his hands, as though he feared it would vanish if he let it go. Well, you never know. She smiled slightly, remembering Velandryn's reaction upon learning what it was she carried. He couldn't decide if he wanted to snatch it away from me or get as far away as possible. She was sorely tempted to glance back over her shoulder and see what the Dunmer was doing now, but such rudeness was unthinkable when facing her father. Instead, she merely waited for her lord to speak.

He gestured, and she rose. Turning the Elder Scroll over in his hands, his eyes flicked between it and her. "Ah, if only your traitor mother were here, I would let her watch this reunion before putting her head on a spike."

She found her voice at last. "I take it you two never managed to work things out?"

Her father's lips tightened. "She betrayed me, stole away two of my Elder Scrolls and my daughter besides, and you think we could simply make amends?" He laughed darkly. "No, my dear, your mother is beyond redemption."

She bowed her head, hoping he wouldn't see the look on her face. "Of course, father." She didn't like playing the part of a cowed child, but certain things were expected of her. I'd forgotten what it feels like to just be another one of his prizes.

Lord Harkon stepped forward, and his free hand gripped her shoulder. "You return absent the master I sent to retrieve you." His voice was a harsh whisper in her ear. He's angry. It never ended well when her father was angry.

She bowed her head. "I never met him. That elf," her eyes found Velandryn, now with arms at his side and the aspect of a hunted animal as others in the room began to notice him, "woke me and saw me safely here." She turned and stared into her father's eyes. Not a challenge—never a challenge—but strong nonetheless. I must be strong. "I wish him rewarded."

Her father's eyes widened imperceptibly. "I had thought him a thrall, something you had picked up
on your return. He is here of his own volition?" With a swift motion he let go of her and swept down the hall towards Velandryn. She hurried after him. She didn't want the Dunmer harmed, after all. *If he rejects the gift, though...*

Lord Harkon stopped before Velandryn, and slowly looked up and down, surveying the Dunmer. "I understand I have you to thank for returning my daughter to me." If such impressed him, his face and voice hid it well.

Apparently, Velandryn had no wish to be the more emotive of the two. "Certain mysteries require investigation."

At that, Serana decided she'd had enough. "I'm right here, you know." Her father's dismissal was what she had expected, but Velandryn wouldn't get away with referring to her like that!

Her father raised his hand sharply, a gesture she recognized.

Silence is it, father? You wish me cowed?

But she was not a child anymore.

Velandryn, however, gave her a look with eyes full of mirth. "I think only one of us is to blame for you being a mystery, and it certainly isn't me." Well, she couldn't argue with that. Smiling just enough that she knew he'd see it, she inclined her head the merest amount. Turning slightly, he addressed her father, words now formal and laced with something she could not identify. "Serana deserves the credit, in truth. She has moved Aetherius and Nirn alike to return here."

Lord Harkon did not even deign to look at his daughter. "As is expected of her. But you, you came here as well, even, I think, knowing what we are." Her father was taller than Velandryn, though not by as much as she would have thought. Her family had too much Nede blood in them to equal the stature of those who primarily descended from the Atmoran invaders, and the Lord Harkon from her childhood memories was a towering figure. The Harkon of this new world, for all of his power, was of a merely human stature. It was strange, realizing that. "Do you know what we are, truly, I wonder?"

"Vampires." The single word left his mouth quietly, but somehow it carried to every corner of the room, and amplified itself against the waiting crowd. *Vampires. An ancient coven, reclusive and powerful.* They smiled, or bared fangs, or merely watched to see what would unfold. She knew those looks. Lord Harkon's court still did not lack for those with ambition. *Vampires. Velandryn, however, was not done. "The Volkihar Clan." He snapped his mouth shut, and Serana wondered what else he was suppressing. Clearly part of him wanted to say something else, but he had decided against it.

It only took Serana a moment to figure out his odd behavior. She felt half a fool as she wondered how much of their history Velandryn was carrying around behind those red eyes. How many of their secrets had she let slip, or given him the pieces to assemble? And now, faced with her father, the side of him that rejoiced in revealing his knowledge was warring with that bit of him that knew doing so might well spell his mortal end. It was too funny, and Serana wished desperately that she could laugh. *Not now.* Such discourtesy before her father was unthinkable.

The three of them stood there for a moment in what felt uneasily like the calm before a storm. Then all at once, her father smiled, and for a moment he was the man she remembered. "You have done well, Dunmer, and must be rewarded." He gestured to the great hall. "Can you guess your reward, my clever friend?"

The assembled vampires' laughter filled the room. Around them, the blood-thralls stared blankly or lay without emotion on the tables. Once, Serana would have found that only proper, but now it gave her a shiver of repulsion. Tinged with hunger, to be sure, but mostly she found their bizarre
calmness wrong in a way she never had before.

Amidst the merriment, Velandryn stood silently. As the noise began to die away, he finally spoke. "Humor me, Lord Harkon. What do you offer?"

Her father spread his arms wide. "This. The fellowship of a superior breed. There is only one gift I can offer equal to the return of my daughter, and that is the gift of the pure-blooded Volkihar. Take my blood, and you will walk as a lion among sheep."

Velandryn said nothing. Serana, though she knew what his answer had to be, hoped against hope that he would change his mind. Don't refuse. It's only going to be more painful if you refuse. She knew that first-hand. But the Dunmer's red eyes simply watched Harkon.

Finally, he spoke, quietly and without apparent worry. "You are asking me to give up much, and for what? I can train my body to be strong, my mind is sharp and I have centuries to live. You would offer me a short-cut to power, but one with prices that render it ruinous. Why should I accept?"

"You doubt me?" Her father reared up, and Serana knew what was coming next. She hated this, hated seeing the form. She didn't like being reminded how that was inside her too. But, it came anyways. Her father's skin tore, great wings pushed out from his back, and the monstrous form of Lord Harkon loomed over the suddenly diminutive Dark Elf. His dark features were twisted and bat-like, and now his golden eyes shone with renewed fire. Serana could feel her own blood pulsing, yearning to join its master in showing her true form. No!

Velandryn, for the first time since entering the hall, was taken off-guard. He staggered back mutely, eyes opened wide, and one hand came up in a gesture she recognized—

She darted forward, but her father had moved first, and faster. He raised his wings and lifted himself from the ground. "Do you see now?" Velandryn's hand clenched into a fist, but no fire came forth. "Do you see what we truly are?" He gave one more beat with his great wings before landing on the ground again. "This can be yours. A gift I have bestowed upon none other, even here among my court. The true-blooded power of a Vampire Lord, given from my own bloodline in the presence of Lord Molag Bal. It was for this gift that Lokil was sent forth, for which Vakken yearned so deeply. The chance to accept purity such as no other vampires save those of my own blood possess. What say you?"

Clearly, he expected Velandryn to accept. Of course, Serana thought with a smirk she let none see, he didn't know the Dunmer. Velandryn had regained his composure, even if his eyes were still horrified.

"You state this power is held by none at your court. Why would you gift it to me?" There we go. Velandryn would pick this offer apart, even if—as she strongly suspected—he meant to refuse. It wouldn't do him any good, of course, but if her father turned him...then he would come to me of his own will. I would be his only friend. That thought, at least, pleased her.

Her father's voice always sounded strange coming from his greater form, as he liked to call it. "There are events at play of which you have no understanding. My daughter has a part in all of this, and I believe you could as well. There is power in you, in your blood; I can feel it in ways you cannot comprehend. I offer you a position at my side!"

Velandryn glanced around the room, and Serana wondered if he too could feel the resentment of the court. She knew what Lord Harkon felt in him, though her father doubtless could not identify it as a dragon's soul. None of the others would feel it, though, and so see only an impertinent upstart
being elevated far beyond all reason. An opportunity like this was one that many present would kill for.

Again the Dunmer paused, and when he spoke, his words came slowly. "No. No thank you. I decline." His red eyes blazed suddenly. "Were I to tell you all the reasons why, you'd slay me before I was half done." He bowed his head in Serana's direction before fixing her with a stare as intense as any she'd ever seen from him. "You're better than this, Serana." He pointed at her father, but his eyes never left hers. "You're better than him."

With a roar, Lord Harkon lunged forward, claws outstretched. Velandryn, however, danced backwards and pulled a small leather-bound book halfway out of his coat. She'd seen it before, but she couldn't quite remember where…

There was neither flash nor sound to signal his departure. One moment Velandryn Savani was there, and the next he was gone. Her father's grasp passed through the space where the Dunmer had stood, and his bellow of rage echoed off the cavernous ceiling. The court broke into alarmed chatter, and Serana sagged against a pillar, completely drained.

Her father reverted to human form and confronted her, voice harsh with fury. "Where is he? Where did he go?"

She could only shrug helplessly. "I don't know." She looked at the spot where he'd been. I don't know…

The world spun around Velandryn, matter and time, light and sound, and his own soul existing as one and the same and—for an instant—switching places in a trans-liminal dance. It was one thing to know intellectually that all of reality was simply webs of creation layered over a complex magical and metaphysical framework, but getting a glimpse of it made his head hurt. As reality reassembled itself around him, however, his first thought was sheer relief that he had managed to get out of that castle. His second, as he felt himself yanked downwards abruptly, was that perhaps not everything had gone exactly according to plan.

He hit the ground hard. His knees buckled, and he pitched headlong onto the frozen earth. Rolling, he tasted salt water and opened his eyes just in time to see a wave crest over him ready to break. Gasping, he sucked in air and held his breath as it crashed over him, drenching his head and sending a chill into his bones all at once.

Not ideal. Scrambling out of the shallows, he took stock. He was on the edge of the water, apparently in the far north. Instead of the castle Volkihar there were only trees and scattered rocks. Offshore lay the omnipresent fog, and off to one side—

The jetty. Perfect. That same dilapidated jetty meant that he had only been off by a few paces. He winced as he pulled himself to his feet. He had never actually tried field teleportation outside of practice arenas before, and had no desire to do so again, for all that it had likely saved his life. By the look of things, those vampires hadn't been planning to let him go. The safeguard built into the spell seemed to have worked, even if the one who had scribed them had been a bit overzealous in enforcing the minimum distance between the subject and the nearest solid mass. Or perhaps that was me. Either way, he was away, and safe.

With another wince, he checked himself for wounds, missing limbs, or anything else that could have occurred after hurtling oneself through time and space. Fortunately he seemed to be intact. All things considered, that could have gone worse. It could have gone better too, but it was foolish to hope for everything in life. He focused on a spell of healing, but the magicka only swirlled around
him, not locating anything in need of work. Good.

He remembered his last words in the Volkihar hall, denouncing Harkon, and smiled. That felt good. Then, he thought of Serana, and his levity faded. She had looked very alone behind her father. He hoped her homecoming was everything she had dreamed, and couldn't even tell himself if he was being facetious.

He gave a tremendous sneeze, and suddenly remembered where he was. Looking around, he saw the jetty once again, and felt that same surge of satisfaction at a plan well executed. That feeling lasted for all of a moment, until he noticed the worrying lack of a certain Nord and his ship.

No. He pivoted, hoping that he had simply misremembered where Jolf had beached his ship. Not good. For the length of the coast as far as he could see, there was no sign of his way back to Solitude. He spun to check the sea. Perhaps he put out to fish, or—but no, there was nothing.

Panic rose in his throat, and he looked inland. Craggy mountains rose far to the south, and the sparse trees that made up what could charitably be called a forest did little to alleviate the feel of desolation. Whether in Morrowind or Skyrim, to venture too far from civilization was to take your life into your own hands. Without the Nord, he was alone in the middle of nowhere.

He recalled the fishing villages they had passed, but the nearest of those would be days away on foot. It was possible there were clans of the Old Nords hereabouts, but given their primitive ways, even if he found them they would be unlikely to embrace an elf. What else is there? These infamous Reachmen that apparently plagued the roads to the south were unlikely to offer much aid, and while he had heard stories of Orc strongholds in the Drudach Mountains, he had neither the means to find them nor any reason they should offer him aid. That is, if they aren't the pious type and shoot me on sight. Malacath bore the Dunmer little love, and Morrowind had never had especially warm relations with Orcish leaders.

That left heading south and east, and hoping to reach something approaching civilization south of the mountains. From what he recalled of the maps in Morthal, there was little between him and Solitude, but the Empire must have patrols or outposts. They claim this land as theirs, after all. It was a thin string on which to hang his hopes, but the alternative was returning to the Volkihar and accepting Harkon's foul offer. If he'll still have me, which I somewhat doubt. Velandryn knew his type, powerful and immensely proud. Rejecting his gift had left him incensed and fuming, most likely. Which, while immensely satisfying from a moral standpoint, doesn't improve my situation any.

He had to move, and fast. The day wasn't getting any younger, and he was cold and wet besides. The majority of his possessions were either in his saddlebags in Morthal, or in the keeping of a money-house in Solitude. Quickly, he took stock of what remained to him. Full leather armor lined with fur, well-made but now a bit the worse for wear, with the sacred hand Ghartok blazoned on the breast, and padded linens beneath that offered some warmth but little protection. A blade, of Orcish make; and two daggers, one of simple iron and the other of vampiric craftsmanship sat on a belt studded with pouches. In those pouches he had a flimsy mortar and pestle made for the travelling alchemist, a few dried flowers and roots as well as the journal in which he had recorded their alchemical properties, a folded map that helpfully informed him that there were neither roads nor landmarks in northern Haafingar, and four soul gems, two of which were filled with meager souls from slain wolves. He also had a bedraggled fur cloak and a purse containing three hundred and eighty-two drakes in small coins. Another pocket contained a few strips of dried meat and a chunk of stale bread. A half-full waterskin hanging from his belt completed his perishables.

One small pouch, carefully designed, contained eight potions, four of which were designed to inure
him against the cold alongside three for restoration of magicka or stamina, one for the healing of minor wounds, and a single dose of a curative for most diseases that he had wedged into the pouch despite it not having a slot. He had brought that one in case things with the vampires went wrong, and while he was fairly certain he hadn't been infected, he swallowed it anyways. He carefully placed the empty vial back into his bag; by the look of things, he would run short of frost resists and need to brew his own long before he made it back to Skyrim's closest approximation of civilization. *This should be an interesting experience, if nothing else.*

That thought gave him pause, and as he dug through his last bag, unearthing a small hood and some pieces of jewelry that facilitated magicka use, he felt something he couldn't quite place. It wasn't a foreign thought such as a vampire would have placed there, nor was it *Dov* and *Joor* quarreling over courses of action. This was… excitement.

At first, it seemed too strange to be true. Here he was, abandoned in a dark and desolate corner of a frozen hellscape of a province, and he had nowhere to go but—

*Nowhere to go but forward. Just me and this damned province.* He grinned a Dunmer grin, though it was something of a waste that there were no humans around to be unnerved by his eyes. Pulling deeply on his magicka, he suffused his body with heat and felt the water steam and the cold flee. It would return, of course, but his control of magicka was greater than it had ever been. By day, at least, he could keep himself from freezing, and by night, well, there was plenty of wood lying about.

It wouldn't be easy. His map suggested it would be some three hundred miles to Solitude at the very least, and that was as the dragon flew. He would have to either stick north of the mountains and content with the frigid weather or try to force a passing over the peaks and deal with the warmer but possibly foe-infested lands to the south. *That's for later. For now, he had to start. And once I finish, I can find Jolf in Solitude and feed him his own spine.* That would be a nice reward for the both of them.

Filling his lungs with frigid air, he slipped on the necklace and rings, feeling his magicka swell within him. The task ahead would be arduous, but he would persevere. *If it wasn't difficult, it wouldn't be worth doing.* He checked his blade, and let fire flare out around his hands for a brief moment.

*It's three hundred miles to Solitude. I've got a full brace of potions, half a flask of water, it's cold and I'm the gods-damned Dragonborn.*

*Skyrim, do your worst.*

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**Home**

The court didn't know what to make of her, that much was certain. Vingalmo, seated down near the end of the high table, was surely plotting on how best to turn this to his benefit, but the rest of them were likely reassessing where they sat in the current hierarchy. For her part, she was still trying to figure out what exactly was going on. Since landing on the island, everything had become a bit of a blur, and most of it still didn't seem real.

*Damn you, Dragonborn.* For the life of her, she couldn't figure out how he pulled off that escape. A part of her was happy that he had, even as she recognized that he could very well pose real problems for her family in the future. A family, to be fair, that seemed to need no help in tearing itself apart.
She was seated beside her father, but Lord Harkon clearly didn't care too much about how his daughter was feeling. His attention was on the Elder Scroll and a great book he had open before him, and the intensity of his eyes belied any attempt to break his focus. The others of the court might be curious, but none of them were coming up to make conversation. There was too much tension in the air for her to feel comfortable, and the sounds of feeding from the assembled Volkihar did little to settle her. She was hungry, but right now she didn't want to feed. So, she sat, and tried to feel as one with her people.

All at once, the far doors slammed open. Her head jerked up at the sound, and she stared into the blackness. Had they found Velandryn? Unless he was a far greater mage than he had given evidence of being, he could not have gone very far. She couldn't place the feeling, this unease at the idea of seeing him dragged in through the doors. *It would be for the best.*

But it was not her onetime companion who entered. Rather, a pack of three vampires strode up the length of the hall, a very familiar Nord shambling along behind them. Jolf looked none the worse for wear, but the vacant look on his face and slackness of his motions betrayed his enchantment. The vampires went down to their knees, and Harkon beckoned at the foremost to speak.

The vampire, a woman of Nord blood and with cruel features, rose. "My Lord, we patrolled the coast as you commanded, but upon our return we found our ship missing. This one was there, and tells a most interesting tale. Speak!" She grabbed Jolf and pushed him forward.

Serana had no wish to hear whatever version of events the Nord would tell, so she rose as well. "This is the one who brought us here. He's a common fool but I hired him to do a job." She turned to face the three vampires below. "I took a boat that I presume was yours, but I had need. I am glad to see you made it back safely."

The lead vampire hissed in anger. "Lord Harkon, who is this? I have never—"

"This is Serana, Hestla. My daughter." His voice betrayed no emotion at making that statement after four thousand years, but Serana felt a familiar warmth somewhere in her chest. *His daughter. I'm home.*

The other vampire, who was apparently called Hestla, fell to her knees once again. "My lady! Forgive my impertinence! Had I known you were returning—"

Once more Harkon cut her off. "You did as you should. Nobody," he shot Serana a dark glance, "who sees this place may be allowed to leave, and even this one," his hand indicated Jolf, "must be taken care of."

Serana felt a brief pang of guilt for Jolf, but there was nothing she could do. Even if she had wanted to rescue him, it was impossible.

Her father was speaking again. "But, this is fortunate. You have done well, Hestla." He approached the stupefied Jolf, and turned to Serana. "You must be famished, my dear. Come, let this Nord help you one time more."

She rose without thinking, trained since birth to obey her father's voice. Only as she was rounding the table did she realize what she was about to do. *He helped me.* Reluctantly, to be sure, but she had brought him here.

As she approached, the scent of his blood rose in her nostrils. She had grown accustomed to suppressing her hunger, but her father's words and the presence of so much feeding around her now brought those feelings to the forefront. As she approached, she reached out subtly to influence the
Nord's mind, and Jolf knelt.

With a shudder, she realized what she'd done, what she was about to do. It's so easy. Here, among her family, it was the simplest thing in the world to command mortals. Standing over him now, it felt so natural, so right. It was so simple, letting go.

She knelt beside him, and felt the blood pulsing in his veins. His eyes were dull, but she knew he was in there somewhere. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry it came to this." The court chuckled appreciatively at her light-hearted tone, but she felt better for having said the words. This dissonance was unpleasant, but with time, surely it would fade.

Her father leaned in close enough that she could feel his breath when he spoke. "You have been away a long time, Serana, and I will not fault you for having become…unfocused…in your time abroad. It is easy to forget our place, or even to feel some misguided sympathy for the cattle, I know. However, now you are returned." His soft words became more insistent. "It is time for you to feed."

"Of course, father." As the court watched, she bowed her head and drank.

Chapter End Notes

A/N And so the party is split. We now have three main characters in three separate locations. This was necessary, but I'm not going full Song of Ice and Fire on you just yet. There will be reunions before too terribly much longer.

Some theology and lore in this chapter, just comment or PM if anything is unclear.

AN IMPORTANT DISCLAIMER: This has been proofread and edited, but it's still the work of one person. Please point out grammatical errors, typos, or logical inconsistencies if they are significant enough to bother you. It won't offend me, and future edits of the chapters will be all the better for it.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

There's bad, there's worse, and then there's being stranded on the northern coast of Skyrim.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Long Miles of Cold

"I hope you're well, Aunt Lexie, but as you've probably figured out, Father needs a favor. The Council is worried that Skyrim is two bad meals and a sneeze away from open warfare over the Concordat, and I'm inclined to agree. Ever since that idiocy at Markarth, the Nords haven't been able to shut their gods-damned mouths about Talos, and a lot of people are worried that they might do something stupid.

High King Istlod isn't much longer for this world, and Torygg needs to be primed for rulership. Simply put, we want him firmly in his place before he becomes High King. With Ulfric banging his chest and calling for independence, we can't take chances with the Moot, and some on the Council are worried Torygg is too sympathetic to Ulfric and his Talos talk.

Once the dust of succession clears, we need a stable Skyrim, which means someone reliable on the throne. With Torygg, an heir would make a lot of people breathe easier and the new High King has to come to the throne thinking the Empire is the best friend he could ask for. I wouldn't dare tell you how to do your business, but a marriage would be ideal. Someone well-bred, not too controversial, preferably not infertile, makes him happy, the usual business. He's young; parade some pretty faces in front of him and he'll eat out of your hand. Oh, and make sure she's not ambitious? Nobody needs another Wolf Queen.

We can't lose Skyrim. The Concordat stings, but we all knew what we were getting, and now we have to keep the peace. I know you can do this. No matter who you might have married, you're a Mede.

By the Glory of the Divines and the Authority of the Elder Council,

Your loving nephew (You know which one)."

Attrebus II Mede, First Prince of the Empire, coded letter to Countess Alexia Vici, written 4E 198, 1 year prior to the assassination of High King Torygg

Ulfric Stormcloak entered the throne room like a hero of old, splendid in his silver furs and flanked by two warriors in bear helms. He strode towards the dais as bold as though it were he, rather than the man he came to meet, who was High King.

Torygg, seated on the gilded throne beside her, rose to greet him. She knew that her husband admired the jarl of Windhelm, but for the High King of all Skyrim to stand when receiving an
underling in his own hall was too much. Her husband should know that, and he would doubtless bemoan his foolishness this evening. He was a good man, but sometimes he could be a bit of... well, a Nord. She smiled fondly at the thought, and wondered what it was Ulfric wanted. He was always angry these days, it seemed.

That much, at least, happened as in life. Every time, it mirrored her memories until this moment. From here, though, her nightmares ruled.

When her husband spoke, his lips moved but no sound came forth. His short beard—he had been so proud of his beard—quivered as he tried to make himself heard, but it was in vain.

Then, Ulfric responded.

She would never forget it, hearing the Thu'um. In her dreams though, it was different. It was smoke and wind and fire that cracked and hissed and bellowed, stalking about the room. It held her husband fast and pierced him with blades that vanished as quickly as they appeared. Torygg writhed and fought, but no sound escaped his lips. His mute protests did nothing, and soon he struggled no more.

When she tried to shout to the guards, to demand that Ulfric stop this insanity, the smoke and fury forced itself between her lips, pouring down her throat and suffocating her with the taste of hot blood. As she retched, trying desperately to catch her breath, she could only watch as Ulfric advanced, a sword appearing in his hand.

This was always the worst part. She knew she was dreaming, knew what had happened; but every time she relived the death—relived the murder—she had a moment of agonizing uncertainty, where she was there once more and did not know how it would end.

It ended as it always did. Ulfric plunged the sword through her fool of a husband's chest, and Torygg coughed, blood bubbling out of the wound in his breast and trickling down from his mouth. His face bore an expression of almost childlike puzzlement, as though he couldn't quite figure out what was happening. Then, that expression of befuddlement still on his sweet and simple face, he keeled over, sprawling on the hard stone before the throne.

Ulfric pulled the sword free, and her husband slumped to the floor. In life, the jarl had turned and left the hall, doubtless knowing that no matter what the ancient laws of Skyrim said, the people of Solitude would not look kindly on what he had done. In her dreams, though, Ulfric had one thing more to do. Cold eyes turned towards her, and he took a step forward.

She was next. Rooted in place in her throne, she found herself transfixed by the malignant smoke that rose behind Ulfric, the same evil power that had held her husband down as he died. The jarl of Windhelm, that demon in human form, raised his blade. Its edge still shone wetly with Torygg's life-blood, and she wanted to weep.

She would wake before the blade went in. She always did. She just had to wait, just sit there, helpless, trusting her nightmare to let her go.

She held her breath, willing it to be done. Above, Ulfric was a specter of hate and shadow, cursing her in a voice far deeper than the man had ever possessed. Finally, inexorably, the blood-soaked weapon fell, eager to claim her life.

Her eyes opened, and she took a deep breath, keeping herself from gasping for air. I'm free. The dreams weren't as bad as they had been right after the murder, but this particular one didn't want to go away. She hated them all, but none of the others made her feel so helpless. It was over though,
and she was in control again. Or at least, as in control as she ever was these days.

The High King's chambers—her chambers now, for better or worse—occupied the upper levels of the broad tower that crowned the Blue Palace. She knew that this location held immense political and symbolic significance, but she'd only ever loved one thing about it, and that was the view. Huge windows of clear sand-glass from Sentinel looked out in every direction, giving her what had to be the finest view in Skyrim. Now, she strode to the eastern wall, and pulled back the thick drapes to let in the morning light. As she reached out and gently opened one tall panel, the wind snaked its way in, and she felt goose prickle along her arms.

Liking the feel of the air this morning, she pushed the panel open fully. Stepping out onto the balcony, she spread her arms and let the dawn surround her. Out to the east, along the distant and snowy hills of the Pale, the sun was rising, sending vibrant reds and golds arcing across the sky. Another gust came in, this one setting her bed-shift to flutter.

Whatever the Stormcloaks might say, she was as much a Nord as any, and the brisk wind off of the Sea of Ghosts felt wonderful. Kyne, Mother of Men, I welcome you once more. May you give me strength this day, and for all of the days to come. She had prayed to Dibella before, of course, and for the brief time she had been wed she had offered benedictions to Mother Mara, but in these days of uncertainty it was Kyne, Hawk of the Winds and Warrior-Wife of Shor, who was most often in her thoughts.

She knew that her personal faith was neither truly Imperial nor wholly Nord, but it mattered little. Her parents and priests had taught her that the gods existed to offer comfort and guidance, and the Three Wives of Shor were just that, bright lights for her to face during hardships. So, she embraced the wind, and didn't worry overmuch if it was Kyne or Kynareth who had sent it. Most of Solitude did the same, blending Imperial and Nord beliefs into a tapestry of religion. The Old Holds might disapprove, but if she found Akatosh more pleasant to think of than Alduin, did it matter?

She sighed. Apparently she couldn't even take in a morning breeze without it becoming philosophical. Is this growing old? Once, that would have been a joking thought, but now, still shy of her twenty-third name-day, she wasn't so sure. She'd been widowed now for longer than she'd been married to Torygg, and it seemed that any remaining youth the gods had meant for her had been consumed in the fires of Ulfric's ambition.

Quickly, she buried that unworthy complaint. Such thoughts are selfish. If I am to rule, I have to put my people first.

Reluctantly, she turned away from the window, and began to dress herself. Not for the first time, she gave thanks that Nords valued simple and direct presentation; some of the designs currently in fashion in High Rock and the Imperial Province would have required hours and all three of her maids to construct. Fortunately, no Nord of Skyrim would ever hold court in such, and so she was spared.

Idly, she wondered what new problems would arise today. She knew that General Tullius was unhappy, but that was nothing new. The man seemed personally offended every time she even spoke to him; doubtless he would prefer that she simply agree with his every decision and give him control of Solitude. Well, that she could not do. She was jarl of these people, and would speak for them even if it meant defying the Military Governor. Plus, while he might bark at her, she knew that he preferred dealing with one problem to fifty. And so I am the go-between, with my people on one side and the Empire on the other. Again she sighed. It was to be an introspective morning, it seemed.

Looking in the mirror, she winced at the look on her face. Any who saw her would be able to tell
she hadn't slept well. She had best start getting ready. The jarl gently pressed her thumb against a small crystal set into the wall, and it glowed for a moment before returning to darkness. The magical chime had been installed by some long-dead ruler and might be considered foolish or un-Nordlike by some, but she would never give it up. It was one thing to distrust the secret machination of mages, but simple magics like this made life easier and had never hurt anyone.

Down below, she knew, Ilsa would be waiting for her summons. The woman had been her attendant since girlhood, and knew when she was needed. After all, the jarl couldn't afford to hold court looking anything less than perfectly in control.

When the maid appeared, the other woman was carrying a letter from Falk. Her steward, as always, felt the need to remind her that they were at war, and that food and drink were not as plentiful as they once had been. She knew that this latest reminder was aimed at the feast she was planning for the last day of Hearthfire, to welcome the coming winter. He felt it was a foolish frivolity, but she disagreed. In times like this, it was vital that they show the strength of Solitude. If the jarl could not even feast the mighty of her city, why should they respect her?

No, I have to do this. She would take her lessons to heart and rule justly. She would be the Queen, the ruler Solitude and Skyrim needed in these dark times. She mourned Torygg, but she wouldn't let Skyrim crumble with his death. I will rule it, make it whole again. She swore the oath to herself silently, as she had done every morning since her husband died.

With a satisfied sound, Ilsa finished making the intricate braid that held the jarl's hair. "You're ready, my lady."

"The court awaits." Rising, she made for the door. In the antechamber, Bolgeir was waiting; her housecarl, as always, looked like someone had partially shaved a bear and then stuffed it into steel plate. The big man fell into step at her side, where he would remain for the entire day. Standing at the top of the gentle stairway down to the throne room, she took a deep breath. I have this. She had been born and raised to nobility. Perhaps her parents hadn't intended her to rule all of Solitude herself, but they had always told her to try her best. Smiling to herself, Elisif the Fair, Widow of the High King and jarl of Solitude, strode out to face the world.

I can do this.

Less than an hour after leaving the desolate jetty to which he had teleported, Velandryn conceded that his boastful challenge before setting off might not have been the wisest course of action. Pride was good, of course, but tempting fate meant giving fate a chance to hit back, and that could end badly. As if to punctuate his thought, another gust of wind swept through the trees, sending a chill down to his bones. At least it isn't snowing.

He had decided to head inland, figuring that any pursuit from Castle Volkihar would have a harder time tracking him if he was sheltered and away from the coast. He was operating under the assumption that they were pursuing him, though he doubted they would actually set out before nightfall. The gate guard was the only thrall he had seen not under direct supervision, and any mortals sent out would sacrifice the advantage of superior speed. He had to assume that they knew the region better than he did, so he would have to make use of superior distance and hope that finding him wasn't their highest priority. If every one of those vampires he had seen was sent forth, he wouldn't stand a chance. And if one of those monsters comes after me...

The image of Harkon's transformation still lurked in the back of his mind. It had tapped into something primal deep within him, a fear that he hadn't even known existed. The thought of that... thing...behind him gave his every step a little more length, every sound around him just a hint of
malice. He could suppress it for a time, but it always came back. *Hunter and prey.*

Lost in thought, he stumbled over a tree root, and for a moment he was certain that he'd been found. Panic choked his throat, and he gathered magicka to his skin and reached for the sword at his hip. Glancing back, he saw what had happened, and had to chuckle ruefully. *Maybe I should get out of my own head now.* He'd always had a tendency to overthink, but this time, a lack of focus could actually get him killed. If the Dragonborn was going to die, he'd do himself the honor of dying on his feet.

Ahead, the ground sloped upwards, and sunlight unbroken by trees could be seen. Velandryn was cold and footsore, but he knew there was no way he could pass up a chance to get his bearings. So, pulling a slightly greater trickle of magicka to warm his extremities beyond the bare minimum, he began to climb the hill.

Once he attained the summit, he found himself atop a modest rise, looking down into more forest identical to that behind him. Off to the north the shoreline was visible, and that fogbank squatted on the water like some malevolent shroud. *Still too close.* He had to be further from here by nightfall.

The mountains ahead loomed ever higher, but even their foothills were still too far to reach today. He'd avoided taking the obvious route back along the shoreline, but his path needed to start steering in the direction of Solitude if he didn't want to spend gods-only-knew how long alone in the wilderness.

Resolved, he pulled magicka through his hands, readying a spell. His time with Serana had him thinking about alternatives to the traditional schools of magic, but his modes of thought were, for better or worse, tied up with the way he had been taught. So, he aligned a framework of Illusion, and cast his magicka outward.

To either side, ghostly images appeared, each a perfect facsimile of the Dunmer. He drew deeply on his well of magicka, and *commanded.* As one, the illusory doubles started down the hill. They would last for several hours, and take paths deep into the forest. With any luck, the multiple magical residues would confuse the vampires. He had also, at the cost of more than a little of his remaining magicka, given them his scent. With any luck, even if the Volkihar brought hounds of some sort, they'd still be stymied. He probably shouldn't count on it, but it made him feel a little better. This was the third time today he had cast this spell, and he was starting to feel the deep ache of magical exhaustion. His reservoirs were improving, but this was a complex spell being cast in unfavorable conditions.

He uncorked a potion of magicka and downed it in a single gulp; he only had one vial of the foul-tasting stuff left but should be able to brew some more with his empty vials and the plants he had found today. He patted the journal and alchemical apparatus at his side; it had become almost a reflex to check them whenever he drank one of his few remaining concoctions. So long as he made more potions to resist the cold and restore his magicka tonight, he should be okay. *Perhaps one that combines the properties?* It would take a bit of experimentation, but combining both properties would permit him to stretch his supplies considerably.

He had considered using the enchanted jewelry he'd picked up; he had a pair of rings and an amulet that all boosted the flow of magicka through his body. Eventually, however, he'd decided against it. Long-term usage of enchanted items, especially those made of common ingredients and with non-expert workmanship, caused strain on the user. After a few days with them on, his body would be expecting elevated levels of magical potency, and when he removed them he'd suffer a backlash. It was nothing a day or three of rest couldn't fix, but he was fairly certain he wasn't going to get that
luxury. *I can always put them on if the situation gets dire enough.*

That last thought cheered him, and he decided it was time to press on. Putting the falling sun to his back, he started down the gentle descent before him, eyes on the mountains framing the southern sky. They were the wall he would have to cross, one way or another. *Not tonight though.* He would put more distance between himself and the vampires, and then he could worry about the mountains.

As he trudged through the woods, his final words in the castle kept coming back to haunt him. *You're better than this.* Why in Oblivion had he said that? Had it been no more than simple revulsion, an attempt to distinguish Serana from the horrors that apparently surrounded her? Or had it been something else?

He recalled the look on her face as he vanished. He couldn't quite identify it, but it certainly hadn't looked like a feeling of relief at being home. He was no expert at reading faces, gods knew, but hers had been something far from peace. Was she regretting returning? Or did he simply want to believe that?

He liked Serana, definitely more than was wise, but he had to face the reality that they were on opposite sides of a very old conflict. Lord Harkon's clan, the group that Velandryn now all but knew were the origin of the Volkihar bloodline, would have to be dealt with sooner or later. They had been content to torment their little corner of the world, but he couldn't in good conscience let them continue, especially considering he may well have helped them with…well, he didn't know what, but Harkon's pleasure at his daughter's return didn't seem to be all that related to Serana herself. He had eyes only for the Elder Scroll, and that was worrying.

Truth be told, Velandryn couldn't see what practical use a vampire could get out of an Elder Scroll. The Empire had conducted millennia of study into their use, but whatever they had found had been unable to help them avert any of the calamities that had befallen Tamriel in the last few hundred years. Certain discreet investigations into the Scrolls had been made by Temple researchers over the centuries, but none of them had ever uncovered anything of interest, so far as Velandryn knew. Perhaps a Telvanni master wizard had uncovered some ancient knowledge, but the Parliament of Bugs did not share their secrets. The Scrolls held immense power, to be sure—even a moment looking at Serana's had been enough to sense that—but it was power of a hugely remote and almost cosmic nature, the kind that did not translate into mundane applications. Unless the vampire had a desire to read vague prophecies and risk going blind, he shouldn't get much use out of it. *Or I'm missing something.* It was possible that Lord Harkon knew something about the Scrolls, something that—

*Something that Serana's mother knew as well.* He'd wondered why the scroll had been secreted away with her, but perhaps, if there was some significance…

*Or an attempt to keep it out of Harkon's hands?* He sighed. He had no way to answer this. He needed more information, but he had a feeling that he'd played right into someone else's plan. Whether it was Serana's plan or if she was just another pawn he couldn't say, but the sensation of being used was more than a little unpleasant.

*Enough.* He was letting his wandering mind betray him. He turned his focus inward, concentrating on the here and now. *I am stronger than the trials around me.* For thousands of year his people had been beset by foes, and had survived through faith and resolve. *Duty, piety, wisdom. Through virtue we are made superior, and through superiority we show ourselves to be Dunmer. Nerevar Twice-Born, as you triumphed, so do I aspire. Watch my path and rejoice in my victories, Redeemer.*
With a start, he realized that he'd been completely lost in thought, and took his bearings. He was, unsurprisingly, still in a freezing cold forest, surrounded by trees that looked identical to all of the others he had passed this day. Judging by the sun's position behind him, he was still heading in a generally eastern direction, but it was also getting colder, meaning he needed to decide if he was going to camp for the night.

A few minutes later, something else occurred to him. *I should probably eat something.* He had been running on nerves and magicka all day, but that wouldn't last forever. He'd refilled his waterskin several times when crossing streams and grabbed some berries that the wretched traitor Jolf had pointed out as edible several days before, but he hadn't eaten anything substantial since that morning. He should keep an eye out for game. *And then I just have to kill, skin, cook and eat a wild animal.* Several of those steps he was familiar with, but he doubted it would be the most appetizing meal of his life. Better than starving, at least.

He began paying attention to the wildlife as he progressed, thought there was little enough to be seen. He knew he wasn't the stealthiest thing in these woods, and every potential meal must have had the same idea, since they had cleared out. If he hadn't been burning all of his excess magicka in an attempt to warm himself, he would have tried to detect life in his vicinity or use night-eye. Unfortunately, he couldn't afford to waste the energy, so he had to make do with mundane senses. *Or fail to make do, I guess.* He had found nothing, and the day was turning inexorably towards night.

Finally, something darted through the trees, kicking up puffs of snow in its wake. Spinning to follow the motion, Velandryn raised his hand and fired off a stream of flame. A whine came from the creature, and the Dunmer darted over to see what he'd killed.

The fox rolled helplessly on the ground, fur aflame. It kicked and yelped, trying to extinguish itself, but to no avail. Standing over it, Velandryn felt a moment of absurd guilt at what he'd done. *It's you or me.* Drawing his iron dagger, he knelt and finished the job.

Now, he had the limp corpse of a fox, raw but for some crisped skin. Using the dagger, he tried to do something akin to skinning, but that turned out to be a much tougher job than he'd anticipated. He perched on a log and maneuvered the blade, accidentally lopping off a leg as he worked to get some sort of chunk of meat he could eat.

Finally, he extracted a chunk of muscle and fat, cut from somewhere on what had once been the torso and with only a few tendons remaining. He held the piece gingerly, not really wanting to get raw meat all over his hands but not seeing an alternative. Removing a glove, he wrapped his hand around the fox meat and called forth his fire.

Instantly, the smell of roasted meat filled the forest. *Blessed Three, I need to eat!* Soon enough, the piece was charred and blackened, and he took a bite that still smoked and burned with tiny embers. It was satisfying to eat the fruit of his labor, even if it was probably the worst meat he'd ever had. Fox didn't taste particularly good, and he'd blasted it into charred ruin with his hasty cooking.

He missed having kitchens prepare food, to be served at regular times. He missed the pantries in the Temple basements, and the way the doors had creaked. *How many acolytes got nabbed by old Sister Nelen, since they thought the lock was all they had to worry about?* One time, he remembered—

"So, you're the one getting elf all over my forest." The voice came from behind. He leapt from the stump, fox still in his mouth. His hand fell to the Orcish blade, and he spun to face the speaker. However, trying to rise, turn and draw a weapon from his hip in one motion proved too much, and he lost his footing on the uneven ground. The blade went skittering away as he fell, and he heard...
laughter from above. "An idiot elf! Better and better!"

From his new spot on the ground, Velandryn looked up. A few feet away, arms crossed over his chest, was a Nord. The man was wrinkled and clearly quite old, but he looked immensely strong. His bare torso and arms were covered in blue tattoos and scars; beneath the skin he was thick with muscle, and his sackcloth pants were tied with a piece of rope at the waist. A mane of white hair stuck out from the old man's head, and a thick beard covered the lower half of his face. He had neither weapons nor footwear, and looked none the worse for their lack.

Glaring down at Velandryn, he made no move to help the mer to his feet. "Why are you out here, elf?" His teeth were yellow and his nose red, but the Nord's pale eyes were sharp. His breath, however, was foul.

Velandryn eased himself up into a sitting position, trying not to breathe through his nose. "I'd rather not be. I'm headed for Solitude."

"Didn't answer my question." The old man glanced down at the fox. "You're no woodsman, that's for sure."

Velandryn had hoped the human wouldn't notice that. "A treacherous ship captain left me out here. I need to get to Solitude so I can thank him personally."

The old man waved at the fox. "You won't make it, not if this is how you survive in the wild." He hunched down and poked the corpse. "Breath above, you're terrible at this!"

"Your insight is appreciated." Velandryn hauled himself to his feet. "Is your village around here?"

The old man spoke Imperial Common too well to be one of the Old Clansmen he had seen during the fight with Mirmulnir, but he knew little about Skyrim, and remote villages seemed like the sort of thing Nords would have.

Instead of answering though, the old man leaned in towards Velandryn and sniffed. The Dunmer flinched back, startled by the odd behavior. The Nord leaned back and glared at him.

"Don't like liars, elf. You smell like the sea, true enough but no ship puts ashore here. Only one thing out on those waters." He bared his teeth in the most feral smile Velandryn had ever seen. "What you runnin' from, boy?"

Boy? He decided to let it go. Clearly, the old man knew more about the region than he did, and was at least somewhat aware of the Volkihar besides. "I think you know."

The blow came so fast that Velandryn was reeling before he even noticed that the old man had moved. The follow-up sent him face-first to the ground, and a moment later her felt the old man's knee pressed into his back. "You don't have the eyes, elf, but nobody comes out of that castle 'cept them as the vampires want to. So, what are you doing out here, and maybe try the truth this time."

"I ran!" He paused for shallow breaths between statements; anything more was impossible given the knee driving out his air. "Trying to get out of here, want to be far away by nightfall!"

All at once, the pressure was gone, and Velandryn scrambled to his feet. The old man was standing a few paces away rubbing his chin. "That's why you cast the shadow elves, huh? Makes sense. But how'd you get out? And what business do you have with them." He squinted. "You got dealings with the vampires?"

Whoever this man was, Velandryn saw no harm in telling him the truth. He doesn't seem to have any love for the Volkihar. "I…helped one of them get home. She didn't tell me all of the details,
though." No reason to burden him with too much truth through. He had figured out almost every-thing before entering Castle Volkihar, and chosen to walk in regardless. He was somewhat proud of that, but this Nord might not be as appreciative. "I took some precautions beforehand, and teleported back to shore when they got a little…enthusiastic. Unfortunately, the s’wit who took me out here had vanished, leaving me with a bit of a problem, which I am now trying to solve." He exhaled through his nose, less from amusement than to get some warm air flowing through it.

"That answer your questions?"

"Just about." The old man was leaning against a tree now, eyes still fixed on Velandryn. "Good to know elves are as dumb as humans, though."

"What?"

"You said she. Let me guess. Golden eyes, pale skin, whispers promises in the dark? Didn't even need to use magic, got herself a fine pet all the same! Guess you didn't mind the face too much, eh? You like them like that? All scrunched? And the nose! Like a bloody bat!" He chuckled. "Volkihars, ugliest damn vampires I've ever seen. Right bastards too, the lot of 'em. You got damn lucky if you're telling it true. Only reason you're not still there is you have a bit more wit to you than most." He glanced at the sky. "Might be they leave you be, might be they don't."

That was helpful. "Well, I would rather not find out the hard way, so, unless you're planning to help me…" Velandryn let his words trail off. He didn't trust the Nord, not exactly, but he also didn't have many options right now. Unless he wanted to attack the old man, he had to play nice. Well, somewhat nice. "Or do you just tell people they're terrible at survival for your own amusement?"

"When they're as shit at it as you are, then yeah." Grinning with yellowed teeth through his beard, the Nord glanced down at the fox again. "Shor's bones, elf, you'll be dead inside of three days trying to survive."

"So you'll help me?"

"Did I say that? I don't much care if you live or die."

"But if I escape, you'll be putting one in the eye of the Volkihar out there."

The old man smiled sharply. "And who wouldn't want to do that! You know things you shouldn't, smell like cold and fear, and you're running in the direction of nothing but death besides. If those bastards out there wanted to try again at killing me, they wouldn't go through the trouble of using you. Your story smells funny, but not like a lie." He nodded once. "I'll point you the right way, and show you how to clean a kill. From there, you're on your own."

Velandryn bowed, relief causing his knees to almost buckle. "Thank you. Truly."

The old man held up a hand. "But first, payment."

Fetch it all! "I have a few drakes——"

"Not gold! No use for it out here." He pointed at what was left of the fox. "You'd offend a babe with that skill. Your payment is you learn. Your kill, give it to me."

"It's yours." An odd request, but one with which Velandryn had no problems.

The old man hefted the limp body in his hands, and grinned again. For the first time, Velandryn noticed how sharp his teeth were. "Watch and learn, elf." He began tearing the body apart with his bare hands, nails digging into the skin and tearing off long strips of flesh attached to the hide. In
less than a minute, he had removed more meat than Velandryn had thought possible, much of it still attached to the skin. "It's all in the wrists."

"Knowing what to do with them, perhaps." He would likely never be as skilled as this master, but he had noticed a few things that would help. He pointed at the meat. "You want the meat, then?"

The Nord shook his head. "Not my hunt, not my kill." He held the pieces out. "Plus, you're too damn skinny. Eat this, maybe you get some muscles. Or not." He chuckled.

"My thanks." He took the meat, not quite knowing what to do with it. "If you could point me in the right direction now…"

The old man pointed. "You need to—ah, forget it. You'd just get lost." He took off. "Follow, elf!"

Velandryn hurried after. The Nord was only a bit taller than him, but each stride seemed to be much longer than one of his. "So, what are you doing out here?"

The old man shrugged expansively. "Living. Gotta do it somewhere, and this is as good a place as any. These hills have everything I need and none of the things I came out here to get away from."

Even if that was true, there were easier places to be alone. "The vampires don't bother you?"

"We have an, ah…agreement, seems like. They don't bother me, and I don't bother them." He waved his hand. "Never sat down around a table all fancy-like, but I think everyone understands their part."

Somehow, Velandryn had a hard time seeing the Lord Harkon he had met liking that arrangement much. "And this band of vampires just lets you be? That hardly seems like them."

The Nord chuckled and leapt a fallen tree, landing lightly on the frozen earth. Very lightly. This Nord moved better than any of his kind Velandryn had ever seen. "First time a hunt brought me up this way, met one of them. He tried to grab me while I was sleeping, so I tore his arm off. Light sleeper, y'know." He scratched his beard, picking some small speck out of the bristly hair and popping it into his mouth. Had Velandryn not been Dunmer, he would have grimaced in disgust. "Sent more then. A whole pack of them, so I made myself scarce for a few weeks. Went up into the mountains, got myself a bear and ate like a king! Next few years, when I came round this way, they'd send some newbloods and slaves after me. If any of them got separated from the pack, I'd pick 'em off, real quick-like. Then, eventually, they just stopped attacking. Don't even come back in the hills much these days." He shrugged. "They can have their sea. Never much liked horker anyway." He leaned in. "Between those High Elf bastards at Northwatch, those vampire bastards out to sea, and the Forsworn bastards, orc bastards, and bandit bastards back behind the mountains, getting a mite crowded for the middle of nowhere."

"Altmer, you said?" What in Oblivion were Altmer doing out here? If the Thalmor had some business in northern Haafingar, he was only glad that he hadn't run into them. No, wait, the rest of his story… "They left you alone because you killed enough of them?" That didn't sound like the Volkihar he'd seen. Could I have judged them wrong? If they were so easily cowed…

The old man gave a bark of laughter. "You think they just rolled over and stuck their tails up?" He laughed again. "The Father gave me his gift, elf, and this is the greatest of hunts."

Velandryn studied the man out of the corner of his eye, trying not to be too obvious in his scrutiny. Almost naked, half-mad, living alone…this might be a Nord out of the best kind of Dunmer stories, if not for the fact that he was all wrong. He had torn that fox apart with his bare hands, and his
Not my hunt, not my kill.

In an instant, Velandryn understood. Oddly, realizing what his companion was didn't fill him with dread so much as a sort of doomed calm. *If he wanted me dead, I would be.*

Velandryn stopped in his tracks, and the old man turned to look at him. "Something wrong, pup?"

"A question, if you don't mind."

Another smile spread slowly over the old man's scarred and bearded face, a crescent of yellowed teeth that grew among the whiskers and wrinkles. "Figure it out yet?"

"I think so. But if I'm right, why did you help me? Shouldn't I be your prey?" He was more than a little proud of the way he delivered that line, almost as though he wasn't afraid.

Another laugh. "I live for the chase, elf. No sport in you." He stepped closer. "I could smell it the instant you realized what I was, and the instant you decided not to fight." He inhaled. "Still, you reek of fear." He stepped back. "You hide it well, but there are no secrets from a favorite son of the huntsman. The wolf blood is strong in me, and the Horned King's blessing gives me a nose like nothing else in this world."

"So, what happens now?" Velandryn managed to keep his voice steady. Despite the other's assurances, he knew that he would be dead in an instant if the man-beast so wished it. He had never met one before, but they were said to be mercurial even at the best of times, afflicted with fierce passion and fanatically dedicated to the ideals of Hircine.

*Werewolf.*

The thing he had been speaking to, the altered mortal that was neither human nor beast, stretched, a motion that moved a great many muscles, most of which could doubtless be used to kill him in interesting ways. Velandryn wasn't sure if his eyes were playing tricks, but the bare chest seemed hairier than it had before. "Now, we keep going until you're out of my territory. I told you, I don't want elf-stink in my forest."

Lycanthropy was rare in Morrowind, and most afflicted were unknowing victims who had to be dealt with decisively before their rampages could infect others. They were dangerous, but this Nord was clearly of the rarer kind: the true were-kin, chosen hunters of Hircine who were not of the cities but dwelt in the wildest reaches of the world. *Like in a stretch of desolate forest out on the farthest scrap of nowhere.* The Temple had no quarrel with Hircine, and official doctrine stated that his followers were to be treated with the same tolerance as any other outland cult. *If I ever make it back to Blacklight, I'll add a note to the library about looking as pathetic as possible. "Lead the way."* It wasn't as though he had any other choice, and being rude to a werewolf might just mean it came at you claws-first the moment your back was turned.

With another laugh, the werewolf leapt ahead. "Try and keep up, elf! No reason to go easy on you now!" He bounded forward, and Velandryn had to put on a new turn of speed not to be left behind.

By the time the man-beast stopped, it was almost full dark, and Velandryn was exhausted like he had never been before. Training with Lydia had been demanding, but there had always been the knowledge that his housecarl wouldn't intentionally hurt him, and so some reserve of energy and dignity always remained.

Now, he was traveling with a complete unknown, a werewolf whose decision not to kill him
seemed to be based on a somewhat vague interpretation of a Daedric code. That wasn't a problem in and of itself, but Velandryn wasn't going to trust a werewolf any further than he absolutely had to. *Follow, reach the edge of the forest, and put this madness behind me.* It was simple. *Easy, really.*

They had stopped not at the edge of the forest but atop another rise, this one giving a view over the surrounding trees. The mountains still loomed to the south, and the moons illuminated the silver ribbons of breaking waves far to the north. The werewolf pointed east, to something in the distance that might have been open ground. "That's the edge of the forest. From there, head due east for a couple days until you come to a river, one with some size, not a trickle stream, you hear? Follow it south, and there's a pass over the mountains near where the river comes out from the rocks. Should get you to roads, at least." He nodded. "Haven't used the pass in years, but should still be there." He glowered at Velandryn. "You go and die after I help you like this, I'll hunt your soul down myself."

Velandryn tried to speak, but was having trouble with his breath. The cold, combined with the hour or more of running, had left him utterly without air to spare. Finally, he gasped out a faint "Thank you."

The old man turned, an odd expression on his face. "Copurtesy. That's a rare one, out here." He fell silent for a moment, then spoke again, though this time each word came slowly, as though it were being tasted first. "One thing, elf, and you'd best listen well. While you're travelling, if you hear strange tongues in the dark, or see a cave that has odd pikes and fences and great black bugs, get away. Run if you have to, run through the night, but don't be near caves like that when the sun goes down."

Velandryn was taken aback. "Why? What's in them?" He'd never heard of anything like this, but there were always regional hazards, and whatever this was might be one of northern Haafingar's. The werewolf was shaking his head, however. "Don't know, not for certain. They keep to their caves for the most part, but now and again they'll come out for a spot of killing or rape or torture. I don't go looking for them as a rule, but one time found a whole camp of bandits what camped outside a cave like that." He bared his teeth. "Well, found the camp, at least. Awful lotta blood too, but no bodies." He shrugged. "Might be ghosts, might be goblins, might be the Falmer coming back from below. Your path shouldn't take you near them, but best you know, just in case."

That didn't sound like any goblins Velandryn had ever heard of, but it also wasn't standard ghost behavior. The Falmer had been extinct for millennia, and he would expect this old beast to know of any other obvious suspects, making this more than a little interesting. Whatever these cave-dwellers were, he could learn about them after getting back to civilization. "I'll keep an eye out."

The old werewolf pointed. "Down there. Grab some wood, get a fire going. Like I said, you make me waste my time by dying on me, I get the Hunting-prince to call your soul back, just for me."

Once Velandryn had gathered a few braches, the Nord—*is a werewolf still truly a Nord? Serana called herself a vampire first, after all*—pointed to a tiny cave in the side of the rise they had descended. "Shelter, or close enough. Don't worry, nothing living in there right now."

Velandryn nodded, and began setting up a fire. He had dropped the remains of the fox on a rock nearby, and looked forward to the meal.

"What do you plan to eat, then?" He asked the question with only half a mind, focused on not looking like a fool while trying to start the fire. He could have just blasted it with magic, of course, but he got the feeling that the old wolf would disapprove, and he had looked a fool enough times
today. He had said he wouldn't eat another's kill. *Unless it's offered, maybe?* If he gave the meat as thanks, would Hircine allow the man-beast to take it?

The werewolf gave him a studying look. "You still think I'm gonna kill you, elf?"

With a start, Velandryn realized how he must have sounded. He started to explain himself, but paused before the first word had left his mouth. *Yes, a little.* He hoped he hadn't done too much damage with the question, but it had been honestly meant. Of course, his scent probably reflected his unease; that might have been enough on its own. *Or maybe it's just a fair assumption when dealing with people.* For the first time, he considered why a werewolf would live out here besides simply wanting to hunt. It wasn't an entirely pleasant notion. "The thought had crossed my mind."

The old man sighed. "Don't bother. Like I said, you'd be a boring hunt." He paused before continuing. "You ever met one of us before?"

"A werewolf?"

The old man squinted at him. "Don't like that word. I'm blessed, not were-beast, and the blood takes more forms than just wolves. Besides, werewolf is common. There's a fancy word, starts with L, I read a book that used it once…"

"Lycanthrope." It was a medical term originally, one that some scholars preferred to use as an overarching term for the various gifts of Hircine. It lacked specific information on what beast the affected individual turned into, but if the old hunter didn't like werewolf, he had the right to another name.

"That'd be the one. Call me that if you want, or man-beast. That's the old Nord word, you know. *Krallvyng.* Man and beast, as one." He grinned. "Better than werewolf. You ever met one? Didn't get an answer."

"No, no I haven't. Not until you."

He grunted. "Might be you did, just didn't know. There's some around, a few who know what it means, more who are just stupid fools playing with something they can't understand. Here's a question for ya. What'd you call a bandit with lycanthro-whatever?"

"I assume you're looking for something other than 'werewolf.'"

He frowned. "Mmm, maybe not. That's your answer. Mine is 'bandit.'" He smiled humorlessly. "Some thug with the gift isn't a true hunter, no matter what they turn into when the blood rises in them."

"Hence why you stay out here? Avoid…misunderstandings?"

"That's a cute word for a pack of townsfolk busting down my door and trying to kill me because some damn fool went and gutted a traveler, but aye." He looked into the fire. "Guess I thought I was better loved than that. Thought the ones who knew would understand. I brought in more game than every other hunter in the village combined; sure, I prayed at the Shrine of Bones and gave choice parts to the Horned Hunter, but did I ever turn a hand against any of them? Hah!" The harsh bark of laughter made Velandryn jump, and the old man waved his hand. "Listen to me, going on like some sort of grandfather. Been too long on my own. You've naught to fear, but I'll be back in the morning, and I'd best not find you here. We understand each other?"

Velandryn wondered how long the old werewolf—the old man-beast, he corrected himself—had been alone out here. Hunting was well and good, but this had to be a lonely existence. The Dunmer
nodded gravely. "We do." They were silent for a moment then, but there was more that Velandryn had to say. "I was hasty in my judgement. Forgive me."

The old one waved his hand again. "Forget it. You did better than most. You from Morrowind?"

The sudden change in topic took him off-guard. "I am."

"That island out there, Solstheim, you know it?"

"Of it. Never been myself." In the chaotic decades following the Red Year, many of his people had taken refuge there. Now, it was something of a backwater, too remote to be of any real interest to the Great Council, and notable only for a few isolated historical events, including—

Suddenly he realized why the old man was asking. "The Bloodmoon Prophecy, the—that hunt, Hircine's game. It happened on Solstheim, didn't it? Back in the Third Era." It was a half-remembered scrap of history, notable to the Temple only as one of the many victories of Nerevar Incarnate, but it was a link, at least.

The man-beast was nodding. "Lots of my kind there, they say. True hunters, not the miserable whelps who go and turn every time they see the moon."

"Perhaps. Most of the island is unsettled, so far as I know." Something the old Nord had said struck him then. "You can control your transformation?" He had never heard of that.

"Aye. If you've the strength, the power obeys you. If you're weak, it's the beast who's in control. Some fool who got slashed in a brawl can't choose when it takes him, but I drank the blood of a bested brother beneath open sky. Hircine's gift demands worthiness."

"I see." He did. The old man offered fascinating insight into an area he had never given much thought. Of course, this one seems to be an outlier. It would be foolish to judge all of his kind by this single example.

The singular lycanthrope rose and stretched again. "I'm off, elf. Hunting by moonlight has a special flavor about it, and you'll need your sleep. This place is safe enough, but I doubt you'll be getting good nights of rest for a while after this."

"Wait." He still had questions, but he got the feeling his …what was this old man-beast to him? Rescuer? Reluctant guide? Whatever he was, he didn't seem to want to stay here much longer. "Why did you help me, really? You said your code meant you won't hunt me, but you're offering me aid, a place to stay the night, and more. Why?"

The old man sighed. "I'm old, you know. The gift's kept me spry for my age, and I figure being a stubborn old bastard can't hurt, but I've been out here for a long damn time."

"Every now and then, it's nice to do right by someone else. Besides, you're the first I've ever seen make it out of that rock out there. Always good to poke it in one of their yellow eyes."

"So you like vampires even less than elves?"

He laughed that barking laugh. "Ain't got a problem with elves, pup. Some of your lot are bastards, some aren't, but same goes for anyone, no matter the shape of their ears. Besides, I don't think I get to look down on someone for having the wrong gods." He snorted. "You'll do alright, I think. You get back to Solitude in one piece, you hear? Then, you get strong and come back, maybe bring some friends. You'll give me a hunt worth having, and that's enough for an old man like me. That's my price."
All at once, Velandryn wasn't afraid anymore. "Be a shame to kill you, so you'd best keep sharp."

The Nord grinned. "Words like that, boy, and you might find me chasing you outta these woods."

It was likely a futile offer, but maybe... "You want to come along, I've room for another mad bastard heading back..." he trailed off, waiting. He wasn't entirely certain he wanted this one anywhere near him in a city—the smell alone would ensure that—but he would be of immense help on the way back.

"Hah! You'll have no luck barking up that tree. This world? It's mine. Kill or be killed. Hunt or be prey. Makes sense, and that's how I like it." His eyes were piercing in the darkness. "Not yours, that's easy to see. You like people, like talking, and that's your way. A good way, for you, but not mine." He rose. "I'm off. Snow bears should be coming down from the mountains soon. One of them nearly killed me last year. Gave me a good scar, and I gave him one right back. Hope he's still alive. We've unfinished business, him and me."

"Blessing of the Three upon you, and go with my thanks."

"Hunt well, elf." With that, he was gone, vanishing into the darkness.

Velandryn looked out into the blackness for a long minute, considering how odd his life had become. He had never held much hatred for werewolves, but he certainly hadn't expected to count one as an ally, even in this unlikely way. The old hunter had been fascinating, and given him insight into a world Velandryn could scarcely imagine. And I forgot to ask about those Altmer at Northwatch. If they were Thalmor—and he had a hard time seeing why else Altmer would be in Skyrim willingly—then they were doubtless up to something. Ah well, not my concern, and not much I could do about it if it was.

There was more than enough fuel lying about outside the cave to grow the fire to something that would actually keep him warm throughout the night. As he carried the dead wood inside, he considered the cave itself. A good place to take shelter. Maybe the werewolf—no, the lycanthrope—rested here, and he had to imagine that the scent of something like that would keep lesser beasts clear.

As the fire blazed higher, Velandryn held one of his pieces of meat above the flame. This time, he decided to let it cook properly. The meat earlier had been delicious due to his own hunger and fear, but it had been somewhat lacking in actual taste. This one, by the look of it, would offer finer fare. He would have sold a soul—not his, but somebody's—for a few roasted trama stems, but he would have to make do with only fox meat tonight.

He looked out over the fire, into the blackness of the night. The moons were little more than slivers, and there was no aurora to be seen. It would be a cold night and a dark one; Velandryn was not at all displeased to have this little cave. He pulled out his journal and reagents, and set to work. He needed to prepare his potions, and he wanted to try blending effects for greater efficiency. Checking his notes, he pulled out some likely ingredients. I'll need the mountain flowers, a pinch of salt, and a couple of thistle sprigs to start. Carefully, he ground the reagents to dust and added them to the silver bowl, filled with water set to boiling by his hand.

By the magical signature, he could tell it hadn't taken. Cursing under his breath, he discarded the mixture and prepared another batch. Fortunately, he had filled his waterskin before sitting down, and there was a pond not thirty paces out of the cave. He was a bit tired, but the scale of the task before him and the insanity of the past day gave him the drive he needed. I have all the pieces, I just need to fit them together. There were always answers; they just needed someone clever enough to find them. He drew a line across the page, demarcating a new section in his alchemical notes.
Columns denoted quantities and orders of addition. *Show me your secrets, and I will bend you to my will.* Humming a few bars of an ancient Dunmer hymn, he got to work.

He rose well after sunrise, almost outrageously late by his standards. He had been up far too long into the night, but now he was the proud creator of a formula that seemed to fortify and sustain magicka while simultaneously shielding against the cold. Ideally he would have like to see about lengthening its duration, but he was fairly certain that he had reached his limit given his current knowledge and primitive equipment. So, he had prepared a few vials, and now felt, if not ready to face the trial ahead, as though he had even odds to make it out of this alive. *And that's all I need.*

Checking his gear, he stepped out into the sunlight. *East.* Towards the rising sun. *Like the pilgrims of old, following Saint Veloth to salvation.* It was a nice thought, if nothing else.

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It was *cold.* He made potions and drank them, and although his formula might be improving due simply to his increased practice, he still felt the chill all the time. Two hours after leaving the cave, he had torn a strip from the lining of his cloak. It was good thick fur backed by linen, and when he wrapped it around his mouth it no longer hurt to breathe.

He had quickly learned that his sword was too heavy to hang comfortably at his hip while he walked all day, so he'd fashioned a crude leather strap out of the sword-ring and attached it to his armor. It required occasional tightening and stopped his cloak from falling as gracefully as it had, but by keeping the big Orcish blade on his back he had some of his balance restored, and walking became a simpler matter. Which was good, because he was doing quite a lot of it.

He soon fell into a pattern of sorts, walking until his feet were sore and his legs ached and then sitting to massage his calves and have a quick meal of whatever berries and game he had managed to forage. By taking breaks every few hours, he reasoned, he could stave off injury or ravenous hunger. His iron knife made short work of the foxes and rabbits he found, though he was sure that the old lycanthrope would have been disgusted with how much he was unable to save. Sometimes he had found nothing edible, and went hungry, but more than once he had actually had enough food to carry some with him until the next break. It had been a very long time since he was quite so proud over something so trivial.

He reasoned that there was no point in speed if he froze to death, so he made a fire each time he stopped. His magic and attenuation to flame meant he had no need of kindling, as there was dead wood in abundance and the magicka required to ignite it was trivial. Roasting the meat over the fire, rather than using his hands, was both good for his mood as it let him eat meat that wasn't charred to a crisp and gave him a chance to warm up without directly spending his magicka. While sitting beside the fire he had moments of actual reflection, times when he could let his mind wander. Invariably, it wandered on one of three paths.

The first, and the one that crept into his thoughts even while he was focused on putting one foot before the other, was this Dragonborn business. The voice of *Dov* had been silent since leaving the Volkihar castle, but dragons were never far from his mind. He didn't know why they'd returned, but their voices, their thoughts, were far too easy for him to conjure.

He had no doubt that the Greybeards had some knowledge of his powers and purpose; their use of the Thu'um back at Whiterun proved that much, but they had clearly removed themselves from the concerns of Skyrim as a whole, a luxury he did not have.

Therein lay the second of his three concerns. The political situation in Skyrim was anything but stable, and he had the feeling that while both the Stormcloaks and the Empire would loudly proclaim their support of the Dragonborn, neither would be terribly accommodating to Velandryn
Savani.

The Stormcloaks would doubtless have preferred that one of their own be so honored, obsessed as they seemed to be with Nord tradition. And the Empire, well, he didn't actually know how they would respond, but he had no desire to become a cog in their machine. The Thalmor seemed unfriendly but their concerns were not his, so he was perfectly willing to live and let live. They wanted to hunt down worshippers of Talos? They were welcome to waste their time. He could have told them, stamping out belief was a damned hard task, and they'd need more than a few Justiciars to stop the Empire from revering its founder.

Some of the jarls might render assistance, so long as he was willing to advance their interests along with his own. And if his gambit with Lydia went as predicted, well, he might gain a few allies in Morrowind, but he doubted the Great Council would authorize any substantial military action across the border. Which left…

**Serana.** She was the face that he saw when he closed his eyes. Her golden stare as he vanished, or the shape of her huddled against the sun. She wasn't the only one, of course, but she was easier to conceptualize than trying to list all of the myriad factions and threats that inhabited the forgotten corners of the world. He had chanced upon her; how likely was it that other forces, similarly powerful but completely unknown to him, were lying in wait?

He had held out hope that Serana would turn away, but that had clearly been folly. By the look on her face and the speed with which she'd moved, her father's control was stronger than her desire to be free. It was obvious what she had wanted while they were travelling; the longing in her voice when she talked about distant lands or thing she'd never seen or done was painful in its intensity. However, she'd thrown that away the moment she stepped foot into the castle. Velandryn sighed. He couldn't blame her, not really, and maybe in a century or two she would break free and find her own path. Unfortunately, he didn't have that sort of time, and hanging around to try and seduce her away from her family would have required some…sacrifices…that he wasn't willing to make. No, Serana's choice was in her hands alone, and he had other matters that demanded his focus.

Thoughts like these paraded through his mind both day and night. He would travel until it was too dark to see and set out each morning as soon as there was enough light to guide his way, and his fatigue meant he had little difficult getting to sleep, no matter how wretched the conditions. The potions stopped the cold from causing any lasting damage, though he was soon spending far more time than he'd thought necessary scouring the shrubbery searching for more ingredients. They weren't rare exactly, but at the rate he was going through them, his pack held less than a day's supply. Over the large fires he set each night and the smaller ones throughout the day, he would top off his vials, and in this way he survived.

One morning, he woke to a cold fire and snow falling around him. He'd set up under some sort of spreading tree the night before, but the branches did little to alleviate the snow, and he was cold and wet in a matter of minutes. By the time he found a dry patch of ground he was shivering so hard that he couldn't even keep his teeth from chattering, and he burned through far too much magicka circulating heat through his body. In the end, he was forced to waste most of the day scuttling between sheltered spots, until he found a dugout and used rudimentary telekinesis to deepen it until he could huddle miserably and wait for the snow to pass.

It did, eventually, and he managed to get in a bit more travel before it became too dark and cold for him to continue. That night, he built the biggest fire yet, dug out a hole in the middle of the flames, curled up, and went to sleep. In the morning, he almost felt alive again.

As he travelled, he was grudgingly forced to concede that some of the sights were nothing less than
magnificent. There were the meadow of frozen grass, miles across and glimmering like gemstones, split by stones jutting from the earth and tiny streams that could be heard from afar but not seen until they were underfoot. He saw a dragon, though only from a great distance, as it wheeled over the mountains to the south. Small game was uncommon, but flocks of birds soared overhead.

As he was cresting a hill one morning, he saw a pair of bone sledges, pulled by great shaggy dogs and ridden by equally shaggy Nords, traversing the open ground below. They were following a creature of some kind, one that looked like kin to the deer he had seen in his travels. This one, however, had antlers sprouting from its head that reached far wider than his arms and its fur was long and shaggy. As he watched, one of the Nords threw a spear and pierced the beast in its side, though the prey bounded away into a stand of trees and the hunters followed. Velandryn gave them all a wide berth.

Once, as dusk was falling, he even spied a herd of mammoths, tramping across the tundra far to the north. At his distance, it had taken him a moment to understand what he was seeing, and another to realize that the shaggy two-legged things riding and walking among them must have been giants. Awed, and not about to get any closer than he currently was, he watched until they became indistinct in the evening gloom. That night, he'd fancied he heard the rumble of far-off footsteps.

When he did reach the river, he had trouble believing that he'd actually managed to do so. The werewolf had said three days, but Velandryn had lost count at five. Granted, the old skin-changer probably hadn't anticipated how utterly unsuited the Dunmer was for a cross-country trek in temperatures below freezing. His stops and foraging—not to mention that wretched day of snow—had added on more time, and at this point he was walking as much out of habit as because of a genuine belief that he would find anything. So now, staring at the water before him, he was unable to conjure any emotion save a sort of resigned relief. *At least it'll be different, walking along a river.*

Sadly, it turned out to be almost exactly the same, save for the fact that he now had the omnipresent sound of rushing water in his left ear. He had followed the easiest paths heading east, which led him some distance away from the mountains, so now he had a rather long trek along the river's edge. The mountains loomed before him, but didn't seem to be getting any closer over the course of the day. So, he resigned himself to another cold slog, downed his second to last potion, and continued on.

One side effect of traveling with the river was at once annoying and amusing; he found himself reminded of his bladder far more often. Consequentially, he added a third type of break to his journey, and slowed his pace even further.

It was at one such that he happened to glance up, and see the bear watching him across the river. *Oh, gods be damned.*

There passed a moment in which neither of them seemed quite sure what to make of the other. Doubtless the bear was unused to seeing humans, let alone mer, and Velandryn wondered if that confusion had bought him an extra few seconds. He had only ever read of them, but bears were said to be some of the mightiest animals in Skyrim, the greatest of those the snow bears of the northern coasts. Naturally, the one facing him had white fur like snow bears were supposed to, and when it rose onto its hind legs, it looked to tower some ten feet or more. *Blessed Three, it's a brute.*

Apparently cured of its indecision, the great beast lumbered into the water. With a kind of horrified fascination, Velandryn watched it wade deeper, before his brain caught up to what he was seeing. *The snow bears are coming down from the mountains,* the old man had said. This one would be travelling, and he was in its way. Quickly, he ran through the patterns for a ritual of calming, and
sent as powerful a spell as he could manage at the beast. It looked at him for a long moment more, then opened its mouth and roared so loudly that the sound caused him almost physical pain.

*Not ideal conditions, and I'd never tried to ensorcell a bear before.* The thought salved his pride somewhat, but pride wouldn't help much if he became a meal for this monstrosity.

With a deep breath and a moan of pain for his miserable legs, he took off to the south, heading towards the mountains and away from the great beast. From behind, he could hear growls and splashes, but they didn't seem to be getting closer. *Thanks be, it doesn't want a fight.* Probably.

Hopeful thoughts notwithstanding, he kept up his half-run for a few minutes more, despite the protests of his lower half. He was lucky the beast hadn't pursued, else he'd likely be done for. He was in no condition for a fight.

Once he had slowed—though he wouldn't take a break for some time yet, just in case the beast wasn't quite as ready to let their encounter be a one-time occurrence as he was—he had a thought, one that had come upon him now and again. It wasn't a worry, exactly, though doubtless it would have set Lydia's dour face to frowning. The way Serana had described the Dragonborn, the title seemed inextricably linked with power, for good or ill. In his travels, nearly every person who had known he was Dragonborn had treated him differently, instantly considering him a figure that belonged more to legend than fact. He had to imagine that, for most of them, the legend didn't include running away from a bear while cursing in pain because his legs were so weak that he couldn't handle a few days' walk. *Hardly the stuff of myth.* Fortunately, the only benefit to his current situation was that, no matter how foolish he looked, only he would ever have to know.

Jogging along the river and channeling the pain in his legs into a sort of infuriated energy, he managed to keep up this new pace for what seemed like several hours, though the sun had inexplicably barely moved by the time he collapsed, shaking and panting, onto a patch of thin grass along the river's edge.

He was cold, and tired, and miserable out here, no matter what brave words he'd declared. He hurt, and he hated that pain. It might be amusing in the abstract for the Dragonborn to be doing unheroic things, and the writers could wax eloquent about the agony required to overcome one's own limits, but right now he wanted none of it. He didn't want to be Dragonborn, he didn't want to fulfill whatever destiny was supposedly laid out for him.

He would give it all back, right now, if whatever force had made him Dragonborn offered to trade it for a warm bed and some safety. If he could sell his dragon's blood for the price of a teleport to Blacklight, to a cozy sleeping cell near the kitchens, he would have done it and counted himself fortunate. As he sat there, he half-expected Sheogorath or Clavicus Vile to appear and make him an offer. *But this isn't that kind of story, is it?*

He sighed. *Would I give it up?* He didn't know, not really. This was awful, but he couldn't even point to this as the fault of his being Dragonborn. If he had no gifts beyond his own skill, he would likely have acted much the same. He would probably be dead now, but it was somewhat comforting to know that Velandryn Savani was the one and only fool who had gotten him into this mess.

*Well, guess what, Savani, you lucky bastard. Time to get yourself out of it.*

He hauled himself to his feet. The ground sloped up gently ahead. Time to find the river's source. *And then we can see about that pass.*
The pass was there above him, even if the so-called road seemed to be more of a suggestion than any sort of civilized path. Of course, given how miserable this place was, Velandryn really shouldn't have expected anything different, but he'd found himself hoping for an Imperial guardpost or village of some sort. Something to break the wilderness would have been nice.

More than once as he ascended the mountainside, he found some pretense to look back. The first time was genuine, when a stone slipped out from his foot and clattered down the slope behind him and he spun to see what had caused the noise. What he saw took his breath away; the coastline of Haafingar was visible in the distance, and between he and it lay nothing but wilderness, cut only by the silver line of the nameless river that had shown him to this place. It was a desolate beauty, cold and harsh and as likely to kill as not, but exceptionally fitting for this land. It might lack the beauty and grandeur of the winding foyadas and volcanic fields of Morrowind, but Skyrim had wonders of its own, and it would be wrong of him not to acknowledge that. A pity they're wasted on Nords.

As he continued his climb, he kept glancing back. Each time, the view made him pause; it was nearing evening when he reached the top.

Cresting the pass, he decided to overnight as soon as possible. The south side of the mountain was noticeably warmer than the north, likely due to the lack of winds off the Sea of Ghosts, and for that he gave thanks.

He found a shallow cave in the hill, thankfully free of the mysterious hazards of which the werewolf had warned. He built a fire with an ease he'd lacked before starting this fool's errand, and, sighing in exhausted relief, stretched his aching body out before the blessed warmth. He had nothing but a relatively smooth patch of dirt for a pillow, and no blanket save his cloak; he was asleep the moment his head touched earth.

The next morning, he rose tentatively, sore but better than he had been yesterday. It was well past dawn again, and he noted that, once this was over, he'd need to devote some time to getting back on a reasonable sleep schedule. When it's over. He chuckled to himself. When would this be over? When he reached Solitude? When he spoke with the Greybeards? Or would it have to wait until he had cleansed the land of dragons forever? It might be a while before he could sleep properly again.

He broke his fast with a few strips of old meat and a swig of water; he had seen neither game nor stream on his climb, and with the prospect of a proper road so close, he was willing to make do with a meager meal to save time. Soon enough, he was heading down the slope, and within an hour, he found old posts that looked as though they could well be marking out a path of some sort. When he came to the remains of what was unmistakably a signpost, he could have leapt for joy. He didn't, but he could have. The Dragonborn had to maintain some decorum, even if he was alone and freezing on a road seemed to end at the closest approximation of the middle of nowhere he had ever encountered. Smiling slightly to himself, he adjusted the Orcish sword on his back and set off. How much further to Solitude, I wonder?

It started subtly, a pressure behind his eyes, trivial given how cold and sore and generally miserable Velandryn was. At first he thought it was a side-effect of the cold, or perhaps his body's protest at the long marches and substandard food. However, as the day stretched on, it only intensified. Not until he realized that he had been focusing on the feeling to the extent that he'd stopped walking to stand and feel it did he decide this might be something more than mere discomfort.

When he turned his attention to the pressure, it only took a moment for him to realize what it was he was experiencing. Magic. It had to be relatively close, quite powerful, and exceptionally unstable.
By rights, he should never have felt it at all. Reactions like this happened when the magicka inside an individual reacted to an external source, but souls were too strong to react easily. However, if someone had been channeling magicka for days on end, and was strung out from cold and fatigue and a dreadful overuse of potions, his body might well be sucking in energy from anywhere it could reach. *Turns out I'm a veritable dowsing rod for magic. I just need a few days of torture first.*

The other issue, namely the nature of what he was feeling, was more worrisome. Spells weren't supposed to bleed magicka like this, not least because it was exhausting to the point of stupidity. No mage could keep this up for long, unless they were siphoning energy from somewhere else. Generally, that meant necromancers. You could wring a lot of magicka out of a soul, if you knew what you were about.

As he followed the road, waiting for the closest point to the source to leave the beaten path, something else occurred to him. Someplace this isolated would have very little in the way of background magicka, even by Skyrim's standards. Whoever was behind this had doubtless chosen a remote location to reduce the chance of discovery, only to stab themselves in the foot by projecting their spell like an amateur.

*Why proceed with a spell so sloppy if it's happening all the way out here?* One possibility was that the spell demanded such instability by its very nature, which would put it in a category of magic that not even the most lunatic of the Telvanni would attempt.

*Or, something went wrong.* It was possible that a ritual had failed, or been interrupted. He could be feeling the desperate attempts of some unfortunate mage to contain some Daedric summons or Aetherial manipulation gone horribly wrong. He should be getting as far away from the source as possible, so that when it inevitably exploded, he wasn't caught in the blast.

He hurried on, aching body and misery from the cold cast aside. This was far too interesting to pass up. Something out of the ordinary was happening, and he'd hate himself forever if he left these questions unanswered.

He found a path that led off the road and straight towards the source. It was a little trail, nothing more, but even he could tell that more than a few people had passed this way very recently. He was no tracker, but even he knew that boot prints in mud didn't last for weeks on end.

The power was stronger now. He was almost running, the pain in his legs forgotten. He heard voices up ahead, and a yell that ended in a high-pitched laugh. Pulling himself up, he ducked off the road and behind a tree, then crept forward to see what awaited him.

Some ten or so people were gathered around the mouth of a cave. They had the look of mercenaries or adventurers, clad in armor that was far more personalized than that of any guards Velandryn had yet seen in the province. They were also somewhat observant; one of them was already pointing in his direction.

"You there, in the trees! Identify yourself!" The voice was female, and obviously from Skyrim. Nobody else pronounced vowels quite like a Nord. It was different from some of the others he had heard, though he couldn't quite place how. *Regional accent, or maybe a difference in social station?*

*This is going well.* Placing each foot with deliberate caution and keeping every motion smooth and slow, Velandryn stepped out from behind the tree. "I heard noises, thought it best to investigate. I mean no trouble," Considering that he had no idea how much information about him had leaked out, it might not be best to let a band of strange Nords know that they had the Dragonborn alone out here.
The Nord who had spoken stepped forward. Behind her, others readied weapons, though Velandryn was somewhat relieved to note that they seemed to be doing so defensively, rather than preparing to attack. Two months ago he would have been unable to tell the difference, but training with Lydia had given him the basics, and his adventures up and down Skyrim had given him some practical experience with the topic. After dealing with a number of people trying to kill him that was, in hindsight, frankly alarming, he had come to have something of an instinct for it. This group was wary, but not bloodthirsty. I can work with that.

The Nord removed her helmet, an ornate piece of steel in the shape of a wolf’s head. Blonde hair spilled out, framing a face that put him somewhat in mind of Lydia, though this woman's features were fair where his housecarl's were dark. Blue and red war-paint had been daubed onto her brow and checks with an expert's precision, and every piece of her armor was inlaid with fine scrollwork and crimson tint. Had he been forced to wager on her origin, he would have placed money on her being high-born. "Long way from everywhere, to just happen by." She hadn't drawn a weapon, but her posture spoke of wariness. She was young, he guessed, based not just on the lack of lines on her face but also the foolish speed with which she'd removed her helm when facing an unknown. Even he knew not to do that.

He sighed. "Something happened. You are all on edge, and you wonder if I'm involved. I have no idea why you're here, but I am cold, tired, and ready to be done with walking. I've had a feeling all morning, the kind brought on by magic gone very wrong, and I think whatever is causing it is down in that cave. So, answer me, and maybe I can help. Don't and I'll be on my way." He was too miserable to give them any banter. If the situation wasn't exceptionally interesting, he might just leave them to their business. Solitude couldn't be that far away. He'd been walking for a week or more. How much longer could it be?

To his shock, a grin split the blonde Nord's face. "A man of action, eh? I can respect that." She tucked her helm under one arm and extended the other. "Jordis, Sword-Maiden of Haafingar, at your service."

Velandryn smiled as he gripped her wrist. It was only polite. "Velandryn Savani at yours." Man of action. Heh.

She nodded, clearly already thinking about something else. "You said you felt magic. How do you mean?"

He glanced over the others in Jordis' group, none of whom looked to have much in the way of magical acumen. They did, however, have a warm fire and a pot of something that smelled exquisite. He managed another small smile, though he was worried that this one might not come off quite as well. He was distracted, after all. "It's like a headache. Not painful, exactly, but it's there, and you know it. Best I can figure, someone's doing powerful magic down in that cave. Is that what you're doing out here? Keeping watch?"

Jordis pulled him aside; he moved reluctantly away from that tantalizing fire and pot. When she spoke, it was in a low voice. "You're certain someone is doing magic down there? Truly sure?"

He shrugged, too weary to consider the right phrases. "It feels…ragged, maybe, would be a good word. If you spoke Dunmeris, I'd call it kettif-endal, but I'd need a few hours and a book of erotic poetry to properly explain the term." Trying to explain the feeling to someone who couldn't wield magic… "If this is natural, it's like nothing I've ever felt." He considered further. "Could be Daedric. Might be a Prince is up to something down there. But first I'd know what brings a group of…whatever you are…to camp out here."
Jordis pointed at the entrance proudly. "It's called Wolfskull. There's always been foul rumors about it, though I've never heard of anything worse than bandits or wild beasts living here. Locals heard noises coming from the cave, and asked Eli—Jarl Elisif to do something about it. I volunteered."

He hadn't missed her slip on the jarl of Solitude's name. Clearly this woman was more than a mere underling. "You volunteered? Who exactly are you, Jordis the Shield-Maiden?"

"Sword-Maiden," she corrected, "and I'm the one who's going to purge Wolfskull Cave, with these, the Young Wolves of Solitude."

Velandryn had never heard of the Young Wolves of Solitude; they looked to be well-equipped, if not battle hardened. Mostly Nords, all human, none of them with telltale signs of age or deformity. A band of rich children, off to prove themselves? "And how did the brave Wolves of Solitude come to purge Wolfskull Cave?"

"I told Elisif that no matter what was down there, I'd make sure it never threatened anyone again, and I meant every word." She had set her jaw firmly, and gave him a look full of bravado. "They'll sing songs of our cleansing the evil within!"

Elisif again, no title needed. A jarl's friend might not be a bad person to aid, assuming he had the right of it. "What evil is that, exactly?"

She shrugged, though her eyes betrayed her worry. "We've run into skeletons and draugr, but that's not unusual if there's evil about. We worked slowly all day, killing the undead where we find them and making sure we get them all. I'd rather take an extra day but have every one of us walk out at the end. No magic like you described down there, not that we've seen."

"And how many of your number are mages?" This would likely end with him helping clear out this cave, but curiosity had gotten the best of him, and now he wouldn't be able to leave before figuring out what was in this 'evil place.'

She flushed. "We'd no need for that. Besides—"

"Better to have good honest steel? You Nords all sing the same sad song, it seems." He looked at the cave entrance. "There's a spell down there now, and it's got power. You need a mage."

She was already nodding before he'd finished speaking. "Alright, if you're certain. You'll join us then."

"Just like that?" Most Nords he'd met would have suspected this to be some elven scheme.

She grinned. "I know a wicked man when I see him. That's not you."

Too trusting by half. That wasn't necessarily a bad thing, however. It would certainly make his job easier if this lot wasn't waiting for him to stab them in the back. "Give me a moment to warm up, then we can get going. I'd rather not leave whatever'd happening down there for any longer than needed." He noticed suddenly that he'd lapsed into an informal way of speaking, but decided it wasn't worth getting upset over. It wasn't as though he had to be the Dragonborn for these people. Just a Dunmer. He rather liked that.

The Nords made space for him around the fire, and he murmured greetings. One of them, a beardless Nord boy who looked to be even younger than Jordis, offered him a bowl of whatever was cooking. Velandryn accepted, trying not to let his eagerness show.
It was good. Tears filled his eyes as the taste of well simmered vegetables and meat exploded across his tongue and warm broth slid down his throat. Merciful Ancestors! At that moment no earthly pleasure had ever felt half so magnificent as that first taste of soup, though it could have stood to be a bit hotter. He closed his eyes and raised the bowl to his lips again.

The Nord who'd handed it to him chuckled. "Mighty fine, no? The secret's in the broth. I'd tell you, but then my da'd tan my hide for giving it away." By the tone of his voice, he enjoyed seeing people enjoy his food, and by the taste of the soup, he got to experience it often.

All too soon, his bowl ran dry, and he reluctantly raised his eyes. A pair of the group called the Wolves of Solitude were watching him from across the fire, and Jordis had her arms crossed over her chest, grinning. "Taste good? Don't suppose you'll tell us why you're all the way out here?"

Velandryn handed the bowl back to the Nord who'd given it to him. "My thanks. Been too long since I had a meal like that." He wanted more, but he had to get control of himself. This lot seemed friendly enough, but he still knew too little about why they were here, and he wasn't going to let down his guard just yet.

The fact that he'd just achieved near-orgasmic bliss from a bowl of soup notwithstanding, he would remain at a safe distance. The sooner he was back in Solitude, the better.

Jordis leaned in. "How about a story, then? Say, what brings you out to Wolfskull Cave?"

He looked at Jordis. "Later. For now, I want to know what's happening in there. The magic I'm feeling is substantial, after all."

That set the ones around him to muttering. One, a woman with a shock of red hair under a knit cap, peered at him curiously. "What kind we talking here? We've been clearing the cave for two days, haven't found anything but undead."

A large man with armor trimmed with fur and gilded edges laughed. "He's just making it up! That's what elves do, tell stories to make themselves the hero!"

"Velandryn shrugged. "Don't believe me, then. I'll be on my way, let you get back to your business." He bared his teeth, not bothering to make it a smile. "Hopefully whoever's down there isn't a necromancer. Knowing my luck, I'd have to be the one to burn your bodies when they come walking." Groaning, he rose and made to walk away. He'd sooner kiss a draugr than actually leave this mystery unsolved, but these adventurers were young and foolish, and if he was going to work with them, he wouldn't be their lackey. He didn't look over his shoulder, but hopefully they would be considering his words, and making a decision. Any moment now—

"Hold!" Jordis' voice wasn't panicked, exactly, but it was a bit higher than normal. Humans. He was starting to get the hang of them, and their preconceptions about elves were so easy to play with it was almost laughable. They expected arrogance and mysterious knowledge. So long as he gave them that in excess, everyone was content with where they stood. Plus, I get to be arrogant and lord my knowledge over them. She strode over to him. "What is it you want?"

"You Nords have a choice. Either accept that I know what I'm talking about, or make do without me." He tapped the sword on his back. "This doesn't make me a warrior, so I won't tell you how to fight. Do me the same courtesy and don't tell me I must be wrong or something is impossible. I know magic better than any of you; accept that and we'll get along fine."

She leaned in and grinned ruefully. "We don't deal much with mages, you know." She glanced back, speaking softly. "They mean well."
He gave her a smile. "I know, but I figured forcing the conflict now would save trouble down the road."

Her laugh was a pleasant sound, though he could have done without the clap on his shoulder that sent him staggering forward. "Hah! Clever! You'll do fine here." She waved at the group. "Let's finish eating and get back down there."

Velandryn eagerly accepted another bowl of the soup, and listened as his companions prepared for the fight ahead. He quickly realized these weren't hardened warriors, but rather would-be heroes, the well-to-do youth of Solitude craving adventure. The one who had prepared the meal proudly declared that his parents owned the best inn in Solitude, and another showed off the arms and armor he'd forged himself at the smithy where he was apprenticed.

The red-haired woman—girl, rather, Velandryn mused, realizing that she too was terrifyingly young, rose and sang them a snippet of some song about a long-dead hero, and several among the group wiped away tears. When she finished, she sat with her arms wrapped around a Nord with a scraggly brown beard, the two of them whispering to each other and giggling occasionally.

I'm going into battle with children!

Jordis brought him a mug of some drink. "Don't suppose you want a drink before battle? You seem like you could do with some higher spirits."

He raised an eyebrow. "You want a drunk mage with you? That might make you the first in the history of Tamriel." Nonetheless, he accepted the pewter mug and inhaled the scent of the liquid within. Ah, mead. He'd almost forgotten how much he hated the smell of mead. And the taste.

A laugh from one of the others drew their attention. The bard had made some joke, and her fellows were showing their appreciation. Velandryn handed back the drink. "Quite the army you brought out here." None of them were seasoned, but Jordis had the bearing of a trained warrior, if nothing else.

She smacked his shoulder playfully. "I know what you mean. You think we're young fools."

He didn't bother to deny it. "I hope I'm wrong about what's down there. I'll look a proper fool and once the cave is clear, you all can have a good laugh at my expense." He bared his teeth. "It won't happen, but I'd like it to." He looked over at the group, joyous in the daylight. "Why them? Surely there are others at your disposal." He gestured to her armor. "You can afford it, clearly."

Jordis snorted in laughter, a sound that put Velandryn oddly in mind of Lydia. "Oh, aye, I could buy steel." She grinned. "I can be just like some Imperial noble, sitting back and letting someone else do the work." She leaned in. "Or, I can go out myself, take up weapons and armor, and show what I'm made of." She smiled. "I didn't bring Sophie just because I thought Irek needed his sweetheart, I brought her because she's part of the Bard's College. When they sing about the legend of Jordis the Sword-Maiden, I want them to get it right!" She was shouting now, and the rest of the Nords raised a cheer.

The red-haired one, Sophie apparently, leapt to her feet. "For the Wolves, and the Sword-Maiden our leader!" She led the group in a round of singing, which Jordis joined enthusiastically.

Madgod be true, I'm surrounded by glory-hounds! He'd grown up with the lessons of Boethiah and Mephala as watchwords. Oftentimes, action had to be taken, but it was simply foolish to place yourself in the spotlight. Careful maneuvering would put the blade in another's hand, and give them the will to strike. That was true victory.
The Dunmer had ever been outnumbered and beset by enemies without and within, so their heroes had a nasty habit of dying long before their time. Those mentioned in songs rarely got to enjoy hearing them, and he could count on one hand the number of saints who had died of natural causes. The thought of bringing along somebody to make sure everyone knew what a high opinion you had of yourself caused him almost physical pain. *On the plus side, these idiots will be so busy shining their own armor I could probably use the Thu'um and they'd all just try and take credit.*

Soon, enough, the festivities died down, and Jordis corralled the Wolves—a foolish name for a foolish lot—into something approximating an order of battle. They'd been telling their stories, and he'd gleaned that most were of high birth or rich families, those who had been trained with arms growing up but never had the need to use them. *And each one is certain it will be like the stories.* Well, if all they had to deal with were skeletons and zombies, perhaps it would be.

The fact remained, however, that generally dead bodies didn't just get up and start walking around on their own. Jordis had mentioned draugr, but his studies in Whiterun had shown that the Nords attached that word to any risen corpse that had undergone mummification. The half-living monsters he had fought, those who had some unexplained link to the dragons, might have been the origin of the term, but they were far from the only examples. He had found a book stating that necromancers would raid Nord tombs to create draugr of their own, and another postulating that sufficiently vengeful spirits could inhabit their preserved bodies to fulfill some last mission or prophecy. He couldn't speak to the accuracy of those, but he wasn't going to make a categorical classification of those down in Wolfskull Cave based solely on the word Jordis had chosen to use.

Groaning slightly to himself, he rose as well. For the first time in a week or more, he was among people who he couldn't see drinking his blood or eating his flesh, and he rather liked it. Fools they might be, but they were better than wandering alone through frozen mountains. *And so now I'm helping them clear out a cave.* A cave that, as the pounding in his head reminded him, almost certainly held a few nasty surprises.

With a roar, Jordis drove her shield into the last skeleton's ribcage. The creature gave a moan, and half its torso flew away, the scattered bones clattering against the walls and floor. Irek followed up with a gauntlet to its face, and the innkeep's son rammed his shield into another. It was over in a moment, and Velandryn, watching from a safe distance away, had to give them credit.

This group lacked the methodical efficiency of Lydia, and none of them came close to matching an Ordinator, but they all clearly knew one end of a blade from the other. The fact that they were all having an enormous amount of fun, while odd to his eyes, did not seem to harm them in any way. He still thought they were fools, but he felt comfortable standing back and letting them clear the way.

As they descended, every undead they put down only strengthened his suspicions about this place. The skeletons fell easily, and the draugr were little more than puppets on magical strings. There was no comparison to the creatures in Bleak Falls or Dimhollow; those draugr would have lain in wait and emerged from tombs at unexpected moments, laying ambushes with grim cunning. These merely wandered the halls and charged at noises, only to quickly fall.

Nonetheless, the pressure behind his eyes kept him from complacency. The entire cave *reeked* of spellcraft. Whatever was below was putting off energy in abundance, and they were only getting closer.

Something struck him then. They had encountered draugr, but had yet to see a tomb. He might not know too much about Nord culture, but no priest could become Anointed without having a thorough understanding of corpse handling. Mummification was difficult and required special
preparatory tools and dry conditions. Unlike the elaborate and well-built tombs where he had encountered the far-deadlier draugr previously, Wolfskull was nothing more than a hole in the ground, completely wrong for storing bodies. A quick glance upward with eyes enhanced by night-eye confirmed that this cave had visible moisture beading on the ceiling. *There's no way draugr were made here.*

He glanced down at the motionless body at his feet. Either the draugr had come up from a deeper tomb, or they had been brought here. The second seemed more likely. A Nordic tomb where the bodies weren't walking around would provide an ample supply of material for any necromancer interested in animating some servants. *But why bring them here?*

Jordis had spoken of evil in Wolfskull Cave. Perhaps…

There were possibilities, to be sure. He had ideas, some of which were more troubling than others. To be certain of them, though, he'd need some help.

Looking up, Velandryn realized that he'd fallen behind the party. Up ahead, he could make out the sound of them putting down another undead. He hurried to catch up, and reached them just as a woman with a battleaxe was decapitating what was left of a draugr.

Jordis noticed his excitement. "What is it?"

"I think I might know what's going on here."

"What do you mean?" Irek had heard them and now made his approach, his mace stained with some dark liquid. Behind the bearded Nord, the others gathered around, waiting.

"Undead generally don't go walking on their own. I want to finds out who or what's controlling these, and we might get some answers about what lies ahead."

Jordis was nodding before he had finished speaking. "Sounds good. Grab yourself a body and take a look."

Now it was Velandryn's turn to grin. He gave this one some thought, making sure that the smile crept over his face in such a way as to perfectly express the dark glee he was feeling at what he was going to make them do. "I'm afraid it's not that simple." He looked over the group of Nords. *My group of Nords, if I play my cards right. Who wants to go capture a draugr?*

He had expected protests, or perhaps accusations of treachery. He had an entire logical backing laid out, and a dozen phrases that he was confident would spin their heads around. In short, he had expected to embrace the Dunmer, and the dark nature attributed his race.

He did not expect Jordis' grin, or Sophie's whoop of glee. Irek began laughing, and the woman with the battleaxe grabbed one of her companions. "Let's get moving!" In an instant, he and Jordis were alone, and he felt more than a little perplexed.

He waved down the tunnel. "Aren't you going to go haring off after them?"

She chuckled. "I'd like to know why, first."

'So would I." At her perplexed expression, he explained. "Why in Azura's name would they be so eager to run off and try to capture a draugr alive?" He briefly considered letting that last word be, but it was beyond his abilities. "Not alive, but animated. No matter, the point's the same. I worry for your lot if this is how they respond to—"
"Adventure?" Jordis was smiling again. "You gave them a mysterious task, one that's difficult and dangerous. I thought it a clever tactic on your part, asking which of them wanted to do it. How could any refuse?"

They're all mad! Shaking his head, he followed Jordis down the hall. "I'll never understand Nords."

The golden-haired human laughed. "Weren't you ever young, elf?"

"I am young, Nord." Combined with his splitting headache, her typical human inability to tell his age annoyed him more than it should have. "What I'm not is stupid."

By rights, that should have offended her. Instead, she only laughed again. "You say stupid, I say adventurous! Come, let's go get a draugr!"

Up ahead, the sound of a struggle was mixed with laughter and excited shouting. The others were coming back, and they were dragging with them a disarmed draugr. One of the Nords—Velandryn hadn't bothered to learn this one's name—was bleeding from a gash in his arm, but even he was smiling as he pulled the creature along.

"Here you are, elf! A draugr, just for you!" Sophie's voice was triumphant as she gestured to the creature.

What is it with Nords and that word? He hadn't forgotten his deal with Lydia, but even if he wouldn't assume that any who used the word was an ignoramus, he did have a name. He'd even told it to them, a move that in hindsight had been quite foolish. Fortunately, the identity of the Dragonborn didn't seem to have reached this group. Or none of them paid any attention to my name.

He gestured to a wide spot in the tunnel. "Secure the draugr." The Nords pushed the undead down, eventually securing it with four people at the ankles and wrists. He noted with interest that the draugr was not attempting to attack them, but rather free itself.

Kneeling beside the torso, he unsheathed his iron dagger. This old piece of metal with the flame-scorched grip had proven invaluable numerous times on his cold and lonely trek, and now it simply felt right in his hand. Besides, the enchantments on his other dagger might well interfere with his examination. Carefully, he aimed the tip of the blade at the torso. There was little he could read from the outside, but with luck…The flesh should be pulsing with energy. Hopefully—

"What are you doing?" Jordis' voice came from just over his shoulder, almost making him miss his mark. He hoped that the glare he sent her conveyed his annoyance, but she seemed impervious. "What is it you hope to find?"

Velandryn didn't especially feel like explaining, but considering that they'd helped him procure an animated draugr, it was only fair. How did he explain the intricacies of necromancy to Nords who had never had even a day of training, though? How do you teach a wasp to dance? With a whip made of fire, as generations of House Dres beastmasters had learned, but that probably wouldn't work here. The first incision was shallow, barely even going beneath the skin. He wanted to see an intact muscle first. "Necromancy is poorly-defined even by those who practice it, but raising dead bodies always falls into one of two categories." The muscle responded well to stimulus, which was worrying. An awful lot of magicka flowing through this one. "It's either anchored, or held." He cut deep into the flesh, and felt the tip of the blade nick bone. Energy lanced up his arm, and he focused, dissipating it before it could do anything. "This one's anchored, and well."

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"Meaning?" The group was quiet save Jordis, seemingly hanging on his words. *An unusual audience, but attentive.*

"Holding a reanimation is just what it sounds like." He was lecturing, he knew, but he was trying to get a feel for the nature of the spell, and had little concentration to spare. He'd give them the information, but they'd get it as it came. "The spellcaster sustains the body with their own magicka. It's far quicker and simpler than an anchor ritual, but the caster has to maintain the link." The flesh was paper-dry; he had to be careful that his probing magicka didn't ignite anything. "A novice can hold onto one skeleton or so, while two or three is a mark of skill, and a master could probably directly control half-a-dozen or more, if they didn't feel like focusing on anything too strenuous." The draugr thrashed as his knife dug in again. "Hold it still!" *Core seems relatively stable, anchor holding but not offering alterations to original reanimation. Unlikely they've noticed me poking around.*

They wrestled it back into stillness, and he extended his magicka once the draugr was again restrained. *"Anchors are the opposite. The body is prepared, and raised through ritual. Energy is pulled from external sources, so the caster doesn't have to do all the work."* This time, he made an incision along an arm; rate of magicka die-off along the extremities should show if this was a single or multi-node anchor, which would be a key clue to determining the complexity of the origin ritual. "Problem with anchors is, there's a degree of separation between necromancer and thrall. Meaning that there's a good chance whoever raised these doesn't know exactly what's going on."

He nudged a Nord away from one of the wrists, and cut into the bony joint. *Rate of decay consistent. Single point of fixture.* That was good. It meant that any part hacked off of the bodies would become inert.

*A powerful array, but one not specialized for resurrection.* Briefly igniting his hands to clean off the draugr bits, he rose and slipped his gloves back on. "This undead is probably one of many linked in to some larger ritual. If I had to guess, they were raised en masse to provide protection."

One of the Nords coughed. "Umm, what should we do about…?"

Velandryn realized the half-dismembered draugr was still there and waved his hand in dismissal. "I have no further need of it. Pulverizing the torso should disrupt the reanimation."

Another Nord, the innkeep's son, he saw, rose in protest. "We should treat the body with more respect! He helped us, and never asked for this."

Velandryn was about to snap at the Nord for being a sentimental fool when he saw that the rest of the group was nodding with various expressions of agreement. *Ah, well, so it goes.* He supposed he couldn't fault them, as he'd likely be more than a little incensed if the necromancers had been using Dunmeri remains for a similar purpose.

Jordis, as ever, served as their voice. "Is there a more…noble way to end it?"

"Noble?" Putting down undead wasn't noble, it was necessary. Then, a thought struck him. It would be pointless, but it might placate them. "I can burn the body. Give it a warrior's sendoff."

Frankly, he didn't know if that was even a tradition, though it seemed vague enough that someone in Skyrim's history had done it. Hopefully, it would do. And, indeed, some of them were nodding at his words.

Jordis too seemed amenable to his suggestion. She glanced down at the draugr, and nodded again. "Do it."
As he once more removed his gloves and placed his hands atop the draugr's chest, he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. The bard, Sophie, was standing over the draugr, and as the fire flowed from his hands and took root in the dry skin of the undead, she began to sing, a low chanting hymn whose words he could not quite make out. At first he thought it was simply a matter of accent, but after a moment he realized she was singing in the ancient Nord tongue, the same one Serana had spoken upon awakening.

As he listened to the song, he wondered if the Nords would treat his body with so much respect, should he fall. *More likely they'd just dump me and be on their way.*

The body reduced to ash, he rose again. Jordis stepped forward, and the spell was broken. The group began gearing up, and Jordis drew Velandryn a bit down the hall. "All right. What exactly did you figure out? I want all of it."

He raised an eyebrow, a gesture of which he was growing increasingly fond. "All of it would be too much, unless the details of necromantic array structures interest you." He shrugged. "We're dealing with necromancy, to be sure, but there's no chance they're doing all of this just to make a few bodies walk around. The energy I'm feeling from down below is far too powerful for the crudity of the binding I just inspected. Unless these necromancers are controlling literally thousands of undead, and doing so with an insultingly basic tether, they're up to something else, and modified the array just enough so that a fraction of that power would go into sustaining their watchbeasts."

Jordis' eyes narrowed. "You know a lot about necromancy, it seems."

"As well I should. My people have studied the craft extensively from an adversarial standpoint, and I can interact with and deconstruct most common forms of necromantic arrays." He gave a smile, hoping to show good faith. "Rest assured, I find the practice abhorrent." That wasn't entirely true, of course, but he had no desire to have *that* debate with anyone today. "However, it would be foolish to ignore an entire school of magic simply because it isn't one I practice." He thought back to endless lessons on the variants of necromancy, and which were permissible within the strictures of the Temple. *No, I know plenty about this.*

Jordis seemed inclined to take his words as face value, however. "Well, in that case I'm glad you're here." She waved to the others. "Let's go!" Turning back to Velandryn, she smiled broadly. "Ready to see what's down there?"

"Well, we've come this far." He reached out and ran a hand along the cave wall. It was cool to the touch, and ever so slightly damp. *Time to bring the fires of Morrowind down upon whatever lies below.*

"It's just ahead." The innkeep's son spoke in a whisper, and Velandryn crept forward towards the opening in the tunnel wall. Jordis was already there, peering through, and waved him up beside her.

It had been perhaps an hour since his examination of the body, and he could feel that they were getting closer to the source. Jordis had told him about this place, how it had always had an evil reputation, but generally held nothing more dangerous than wild beasts or bandits. Obviously, that was no longer the case.

The hole through which they were looking in the wall of a great cavern, giving them a magnificent view of the crumbling tower ruins rising from the floor. The scene was lit by luminous fungus and daylight through cracks in the ceiling as well as torches set around the ruins and on the cave walls. Dozens of undead patrolled the grounds, and figures in black robes moved here and there, though
what work they were up to Velandryn couldn't make out.

This was all secondary, however, to what was happening atop the tower. The crumbling stone drum rose high enough that Velandryn could only make out the effects of whatever these unknown mages were up to. Shafts of light in various shades of purple and blue shot out from the crenelated crown, and the pulses of raw magicka that flowed out from the site left Velandryn with no doubt as to what he had been feeling all day.

This close, the intensity of the feeling was not exactly more intense, but he was more acutely aware of it. He could have closed his eyes and been spun about, and still pointed to the exact focus of the ritual. As to what they were trying to accomplish, he still had no idea.

One thing about what he was seeing, however, solved a minor mystery. "They knew you were coming for them."

"What?" Jordis had been gaping at the scene below, but apparently she'd still heard him.

"That ritual, whatever it is, shouldn't be bleeding like that. They must have been half-done setting it up when you started killing undead up there. They panicked, and now they're trying to complete it before the Legion or whoever they fear comes crashing down on their heads."

The odd light gave Jordis a sickly pallor, making her cheerful demeanor seem almost ghoulish. "Well, then, we'd best not disappoint them. How many can you take?"

Sometimes he wished his face was as expressive as a human's simply because he was worried that right now he wasn't properly conveying exactly how insane her question was. "Not nearly that many, if that's what you wanted to know."

She chuckled. "Good, or there'd be nothing left for the rest of us!" She pointed down below. "Look, there's tunnels leading in. We can rush them and take them by surprise."

"Are you mad, Jordis?" It might have been the first time he had used her name, so strange it felt on his tongue. "You'll send your people up against an entire coven of necromancers and Three-only-know how many undead? With what? Swords and battle cries?"

"And if those necromancers succeed, what then? If they pull off whatever foul sorcery they're after?" Her face was drawn with something that could well be either rage or fear. "You might think we're fools after glory, or whatever insults you've been dreaming up while watching us, but you'd best never doubt our spirit!"

He would have been more impressed had he been unable to count her vaunted forces on his fingers. "I don't doubt your commitment, merely your sense. Charging in there gets you all killed."

Jordis' glare was matched by the Nords gathered around them. "What would you do then, elf?"

He considered for a few seconds. How would he approach this? The ritual was key, obviously, but there was no way for him to get more information without either getting much closer or revealing his position with a magical probe of the array. Not much I can do from here...

"Speaking as the only one here who knows an array from an atronach, I'll need to get as close to that ritual circle as possible. Disrupt the spell, and everything comes down." He gazed out at the tower. "And while I could levitate myself over there, I doubt they'd just let me float in without sending some nasty magic my way." He stroked his chin, annoyed by the bristly stubble he felt there; it was an unwelcome reminder of how ragged he'd become. "Whoever dreamed up this scheme chose a good location."
One of the Nords spoke then. "Couldn't you shoot magic at the tower, ruin their spell? Your magic fights theirs!" His voice was choked with excitement at the idea.

Velandryn was shaking his head before the Nord had finished speaking. "That array's spitting off so much magicka that anything this far out will cease to exist long before it can affect the source. You'd do better to throw rocks at the tower and hope they scuff a focal rune. No, the only way to attack the ritual is to be on top of the tower, using immediate directed magicka integration." He thought further, then chuckled. "Or, kill all of the mages. That'd do it too."

The Nords were muttering among themselves, though Jordis was gazing out at the scene. "Why do you think they built a tower down here?"

Velandryn didn't know if she was talking to him, but that had never stopped him from giving his opinion before. "Ego. Even the kind of scum that hides in caves wants to feel important. Looks like this ruin is ancient; all it takes is one outlaw band with too much time on their hands. Not like weather's going to do much to it down here."

She was giving him a look he couldn't read, but then she nodded. "It's a good thing you've a sharp mind, Vel, because you're a bit of a know-it-all." The smile robbed the words of any sting, and he nodded thanks.

Vel, is it? He would have castigated one of his own for butchering his name like that, but no Dunmer would have been so rude. Unless they wanted to insult me, I suppose. A few had, over the years. Then, his mind finished hearing the rest of her words, and he had to chuckle. "There are few higher compliments you could pay me."

Jordis laughed. "I don't doubt it!" She sobered quickly, however. "You get on top of that tower, can you stop this magic?"

He closed his eyes, trying to feel something, anything else he could glean about this massive ritual. "I don't know." He opened his eyes, and felt absurdly guilty upon seeing the expression on Jordis' round human face. "I don't like making promises I can't keep, but I have a better chance from the top than anywhere else. First rule of arrays is everything gets more complicated with distance, and I'm not nearly skilled enough in Destruction to try and overwhelm it from here." Mind still poring over the possibilities, he nodded absently. "If I can get inside the array up there, I can at least disrupt it. Might be we all die when it goes, but I can make it fail." He shrugged. "That's the best I can offer, but it's also the best you'll get."

Jordis' eyes held an almost elven intensity as she surveyed the ground below. "If you get to the top of the tower while we...no, we'd never make it. Could..." Suddenly, she perked up, and that familiar joyous light returned to her countenance. "I've got it! Hern, Ilana, get over here."

At her words, two of the Wolves, a nondescript Breton woman in dark leathers and a man with a beard that looked to have been oiled and painstakingly sculpted into its point, approached. Jordis smiled. "Vel, meet your new best friends."

Vel again? He'd let it go the first time, but this was a little bit absurd. Maybe Nords strung their names together from whatever grunts sounded appropriate, but his was a name that echoed the history of his people, and he felt as protective of it, and the lineage it represented, as he did of his own body and soul. Unusual by the standards of the House Dunmer, it gave him a link to his heritage as a child of two traditions, and he had never had cause to wish it changed. And I will not be disparaged by some ignorant human!

However, if he were trying to come up with inopportune times to get into a fight with someone...
over names, he would be hard pressed to find one worse than this. *Maybe a dragon attack.* So, he bared his teeth, remembered at the last second to make it a smile, and raised his eyebrows in a gesture of benign curiosity. *I'm getting better at this.*

Jordis was still grinning, and he had to admit that her face was made to smile. "All right, you three, listen up. Here's what's going on…"

"Victory or Sovngarde!"

"To Victory!"

"For the Wolves!"

To the mages below, the war cries must have appeared to come from nowhere. They might have been accelerating their ritual due to their undead being destroyed, but clearly they hadn't expected an attack so soon.

With the war cries still ringing, Jordis led the charge into the cavern. Behind her came the rest, each trying to outdo the others and be the first to reach the foes. They crushed the first few undead they hit, battering skeletons into bonemeal and hacking draugr apart with fury born of exuberance. By the time the mages had cast their first spell, the warriors were upon them.

Ilana nudged Velandryn's shoulder and pointed. Hern had already slipped out of the tunnel and dropped to the ground, and the two of them followed. Velandryn landed safely, if not gracefully, and the three of them took off across the cavern floor.

Their goal was a crumbling hole in the ruin's outer wall, now guarded only by a single skeleton. The mage who had been standing there was currently running full-tilt towards the other side of the cavern, where Jordis' attack seemed to be having exactly the desired effect. Thus far the three making for the rear hadn't been noticed, and so long as that held true—

The only warning Velandryn received was a flash of movement from behind the wall, and then the mage was attacking. Velandryn's only impression was of a deep dark robe, and a harsh shout accompanied by a pair of fireballs aimed in their general direction.

As soon as he realized what was happening, Velandryn altered his course. He noticed the skeleton moving to attack as well, and barked notice. "Skeleton!"

Hern's blade went flashing towards the undead, who met it on an axe that looked to be as much rust as iron. However, Velandryn only had an instant to notice the fight, since his own target was drawing closer.

That first salvo from the mage had told Velandryn plenty. Whatever this cultist, or necromancer, might be playing at, it was no true mage. Those fireballs had been weak and without true intent; fired from panic and driven by only a trickle of Will, rather than the great torrent that should fuel battle-magic. The strength of a mage depended on many things, but somebody who lacked the arrogant certainty that each change they made to the world was *correct*, that it *should* be, would never be strong.

Doubtless this cultist had joined craving power, or respect. It was a simple thing to teach a neophyte a spell or two, make them just competent enough to prepare the bodies for reanimation or scribe a portion of a ritual circle. But here, this human's lack was clear.

*Time to die, pretender!* He reached up, grasping the hilt of his sword. The heavy Orcish weapon
was a bit too much for him to use one-handed, so when he pulled it free, only a few strides away from the mage, both of his hands were occupied. This was the moment of danger. Even a weak spellcaster could pull out a nasty trick, and both his hands were filled with sword.

He needn't have worried, however. The cultist was too busy stumbling back over his robes, pale face drawn with panic beneath his hood, to try much of anything. He was fumbling with a dagger when Velandryn reached him, and had almost brought it up into a guard when the Orcish sword sliced open his chest.

The wound wasn't especially deep, but the necromancer was unarmored, and began screaming in pain. *He makes too much noise, more'll come back here.* That was the last thing they needed.

Fortunately, long days on the road had made him handy with his dagger, and it was in his hand almost before he realized he would need it. Still holding the heavy Orcish blade awkwardly with his right hand, his left brought the dagger to bear and he stepped in to finish the job.

The point of the dagger entered the man's throat cleanly, and Velandryn followed it up with a quick slash that opened the side of the cultist's neck. Blood streamed from the wound, and the man's head lolled to one side as he collapsed.

That issue dealt with and no more foes before him, Velandryn turned to see what had happened with the undead. Hern and Ilana had things well in hand, it seemed. The skeleton had fallen, and they were now dealing with a draugr who had come to help its fellow.

A noise from above alerted Velandryn to more danger, and he managed to throw himself out of the way of a chunk of ice that would have torn clean through his torso. Of course, as he watched the ice shatter upon hitting the wall behind him, it might not be that substantial. It wouldn't do to grow complacent, but these necromancers were most assuredly not battlemages.

His attacker did not stick around to try again, however, and Velandryn soon realized that whatever the mage in the tower window might lack in skill, their ability to raise an alarm was not in question. He ran around the tower, the other two following close, looking for a way in.

When they found an entrance, Velandryn had a full heartbeat to wish they had not before the undead fell upon them. Nearly a dozen of the shambling creatures lurched forward, and the mage behind, now firing off more of those large but somewhat fragile ice projectiles from a long staff held awkwardly in one hand, left no doubt as to why so many had gathered here. *So much for surprise.*

He'd used the large Orcish sword last time, but here it would likely be too unwieldy, especially if he made it into the tower proper. Rather than reach to his back, therefore, he extended one hand and let his mind form a familiar pattern. *It's time for a superior blade.*

He had used his magicka sparingly since entering the tunnel, letting the Nords do the brunt of the fighting and rationing his spells so as not to be caught with nothing in reserve. Now, he was not. He flexed his fingers, and a familiar heat suffused his arm as the Daedric blade materialized.

The moment his hand touched the blade, he wanted to *kill* these bastards. This wasn't the dragon's certainty, which was an acute outrage at the temerity of lesser beings’ challenge; nor was it Dunmer fury, the age-old knowledge that the world stood against you and you had to fight for every inch of gain. This was the unadulterated scorn of the Daedra, a clarion call that sounded across the worlds and heralded damnation for all that stood in its path. This was Oblivion given voice, the footsteps of Dagon's red hordes that had burned Tamriel in the name of their master. This was the hatred, the primal conflict, and this scum before him would *burn* in his fires!
Before him, two skeletons and a draugr were advancing, weapons raised. He brought the burning sword up to meet the first, his void-honed edge slicing through the other's rusted iron like it was cloth. With one stroke he removed half the draugr's sword and most of its upper body, setting the pieces ablaze.

Yes! The thought was exultant, yet somehow wrong. He stretched out his free hand, and a lance of flame shot forth, immolating one of the skeletons and overwhelming the magicka that bound it. The bones collapsed to the floor, and he turned his attention to the mage.

To one side, he was vaguely aware of Ilana hacking at a skeleton with her paired axes, and the thud of Hern's shield absorbing a blow. But those were distant concerns. Right now, this mage before him was all that mattered. This trivial human, this mortal that had the temerity to—

Mortal? He might not like Nords overmuch, but he had nothing against mortality. He glanced down at the sword in his hand, flickering by the light of fires that burned as nothing on Mundus could. He began to extend his magicka to probe the blade, but a flicker of motion caught his eye, and then the ice hit him.

Pain exploded across his chest, and cold shot through him. His hand jerked open, and the blade fell away, vanishing the moment it was gone. He spun to the ground, tasting blood as his face hit the rough stone floor.

He lay there for a moment, not wanting to rise. Why had he been so eager to fight? This wasn't his battle.

You made it your battle the moment you joined them. He might not have sought this out, but he couldn't abandon these Nords to die. Well, I could…

He chuckled to himself, still laying on the ground. Gods, it felt good to just lie there. How long had it been since he spent some time doing nothing? Not since—

"Get up, elf!" The voice came as someone gripped him by the cloak and hauled him bodily to his feet. Ilana's face was screwed up with stress and her hair matted with blood, and her voice was more than a little panicked. Hern was fighting off a skeleton and trying to parry the mage's ice shards at the same time, but neither was going too well. As Velandryn watched, the Nord fell to one knee, raising the shield above his head. Ilana gave him a shove, shouted something indistinct, and ran off to help her fellow.

He stood there for a moment longer, head pounding and legs unsteady, before reality hit him. He'd taken a bad blow and hit his head. This wasn't some deep personal crisis, it was trauma and fatigue. He was in a cave filled with necromancers who were trying to kill a pack of good-hearted but naïve adventurers. He could hardly imagine a more black-and-white moral delineation. So why am I still standing here?

He took one shaky step forward, then another. A skeleton turned and hissed at him; he waved a hand and summoned a gout of flame that tossed it aside.

I made this my fight. Time to win it.

Another step, and he noticed the mage, now without his staff but conjuring a stream of fire that splashed off of Hern's shield, though by the sound of the curses, not entirely without consequence. With two more steps, Velandryn was in range, and this time he pulled his weapon free and gripped the Orcish blade firmly with both hands.

The mage turned, and the fire turned with him. Velandryn wanted to laugh. A Nord turns flame against me? Instead, he brought the blade up in a vicious sweep, cleaving off the man's hands and
most of his forearms.

The necromancer's screams filled the room, and Ilana looked up from where she was hacking another draugr into pieces to shout, "Shut him up, elf! He'll bring the dead down on us!"

*Even the ones who weren't raised will come checking, with a racket like that.* He cast a spell of silence, a simple enough matter when your target was nearly incoherent from agony, and the necromancer's screams suddenly fell eerily quiet.

He looked down at the necromancer. It was a long shot, but just maybe…"What's going on up there?"

The necromancer's only response took the form of bulged eyes and some writhing on the ground.

Velandryn sighed. "Very well." He placed the point of the blade on the man's throat and pushed down until he heard the scrape of metal on stone.

"What's the point of asking if you'd silenced him?" Ilana was leading Hern over; both had various cuts and scrapes, and half of Hern's chestplate was covered in icy crystals.

"He could have nodded, or given some other sign. Truth be told, it was a shot in the dark from a very long way off, but that's no reason not to take it." He waved at them. "Do either of you need healing?"

Ilana grinned. "I've had love bites that did more damage. Hern might need some help though."

The Nord with the pointed beard glared at him. "Not from you. What happened? You went down like a…like a…"

"Like an elf." Ilana's wit was sharper than Hern's, clearly. "You talk a good game, but you failed when it came time to stand and be reckoned."

He would have given her a tongue-lashing were it not for the fact that she was absolutely correct. He wasn't sure why the rage of the bound weapon had affected him so deeply, but it had completely pulled him out of the battle. *The rage, and my reaction to it.* He had heard of bound tools overwhelming the mortals that wielded them, of course; the risks associated with using the Daedric powers were well-known to any who studied the arts of Conjuration. He had always thought himself better than that, however, and the notion that, even weakened and exhausted, his mind was so vulnerable, was an unwelcome one.

Instead of arguing, he nodded. "I did."

That caught them by surprise, he could tell. *Probably never seen an elf admit they were wrong before.* Well, he might have to kill them later to keep his mystique intact. *At least they don't know I'm the Dragonborn.*

Finally, Hern nodded, looking skeptical but not as angry as he had. Ilana simply stuck her hand out and grabbed him by the shoulder. "You better now?"

Slightly shamed by their forgiveness, he bowed his head, then looked at his two companions. "Jordis is buying us time. Let's finish this."

They had entered the tower, but the epicenter of the ritual still lay above them. This close, the magicka was almost tangible, and Velandryn was struck once more by how unstable this entire array must be. *And just what in Oblivion are they doing with this much magicka?*
The stair was guarded by yet more draugr, with a mage behind them, though this one, a human with her cowl pushed back, seemed more interested in remaining behind the undead than engaging them directly. His eyes met those of the woman in the black robe, and Velandryn easily read the necromancer’s fear. *I could get used to that.* He raised his hand and sent a lance of flame towards her. She hurriedly raised a ward and his fire splashed harmlessly off, but it also forced her to adjust her footing and turn her focus to him. *You and me, human.*

Hern and Ilana might not have been trained to the extent of Lydia, but these undead hardly required her skill. They fought well together, and that was enough to counteract the superior numbers of the foe. Had the mage been focusing on them, she would have broken them in moments, but Velandryn had her occupied.

They were locked together, him and this necromancer, neither able to bring the other down. She was stronger than the one he had faced earlier, and while he would likely have been able to outmaneuver her at his most lucid, he was too ragged right now to do much more than try and overwhelm her. He hurled bolts of fire and sent jolts of magicka that would have reduced her mind to incoherent agony, but her wards were strong.

In the end, the two Nords and Velandryn prevailed, mostly due to having three minds at work rather than only one. Undead had a certain tenacity about them, but they were only as clever as their animation spell, and whoever had designed the ritual behind these had been more concerned with quantity than quality. That it was a ritual was no longer in any doubt at all; Velandryn could almost physically feel the connection between the maelstrom above and the movements of the undead.

With her front line destroyed, the mage tried to retreat, but Velandryn had seen that move coming. The torches in the scones behind her flared up at a wave of his hand, and when she turned to defend against the sudden light and sound, his other hand gestured and sent a bolt of flame slamming into her back.

Ilana leapt, pinning the woman to the floor. Velandryn hurried over. A single word, any hint he could get about what awaited them above, could make all of the difference.

The woman's arms and legs were pinioned by the Nords, and Velandryn squatted, bringing his face close to hers. "What are they doing up there? Tell me the spell, and you might walk out of here."

She laughed in his face. "Go fuck yourself, elf."

He raised an eyebrow. "So you wish to die?" Necromancers were one and all motivated by a fear of death. None but those who dreaded the cessation of existence would study so assiduously ways to extend it.

She laughed again, and spat at him, missing by quite a bit considering the close range. "I'll tell you nothing. You'll know soon enough, and then you will wish you'd never tried to stop us. Death is nothing compared to what comes!"

The tower shook, and a booming sound that might have been a voice echoed through the stones. Velandryn looked up, feeling the way the magicka twisted, swirling *around* something. *A cage of magicka, to hold—*

"What did you summon?" He grabbed her by the collar and pulled her upwards. She was jerked towards him but brought short by the hold on her arms, and he planted his face mere inches from hers. "What dead soul have you brought forth?"
She smiled. "The Wolf Queen is come, elf."

With a snarl, he grabbed her by the throat. "Potema? You summoned a necromancer? You fools!" he might not know too much about the minutiae of Imperial history, but the Wolf Queen was infamous. Potema Septim, daughter of one Emperor or another, had waged decades of war on her family, fighting an ultimately doomed battle to seize the throne. She had died in the end, but not before raising legions of the dead and entire hosts of Daedra to serve her, rituals that had doubtless required immense amounts of death to fuel. And they thought this was the soul they should bring back?

Ilana looked as though someone had hit her very hard in the stomach, and Hern had actually gone pale, something Velandryn had always thought was simply a figure of speech. "Potema…no, they can't be…"

Velandryn pulled out his dagger, the one he had taken from Lokil, and drew it across the necromancer's throat. As she died, he felt her energy and magicka flow into him, and when he stood, it was with a straighter back and lighter step than he'd had in some time. "Time to finish this."

Ilana looked like she would be sick on the steps. "We can't…Potema, she's…"

"Four hundred years dead and being summoned by a pack of fools! A soul like that doesn't come gently back into the world. If she'd arrived, we'd know it." He pointed upwards. "There'd be a lot more screaming, for one."

Hern had apparently managed to get his fear under control. "What's the plan, elf?" Ilana too, though breathing heavily, was listening intently.

Oh, so when the undead necromancer queen gets involved, suddenly they're listening to me. They weren't wrong, though. He had a few ideas about how to wreck that ritual array, for one, and while it might have been the body he'd just drained of magicka, he was feeling better than he had in a while.

He pointed downward. "Jordis should be playing it safe, pulling as many of the forces below as she can, but they might well be coming for us once this starts. I'm going to try and disrupt the reanimation portion of the array, but that might require taking down the whole thing, which requires killing every living thing on that rooftop. Either way, the moment we're out, we move fast and hit hard. Powerful souls echo before appearing, but I'd rather not have Potema move beyond a voice before we shut this down."

"Why are you so sure she hasn't?" That was Ilana, looking down at the corpse. "This one thought she was here."

"Because the entire thing hasn't descended into bloody chaos yet. The mages we've seen so far wouldn't have a prayer of containing her, and the ones up top are panicking. Their array wasn't finished, remember? That's why I felt it from outside." He rubbed his chin; the fact that the stubble no longer bothered him was a sign of how desperately he needed to spend a night somewhere that wasn't the wilderness. "I'd wager some self-taught necromancer dreamed this up, thinking he'd bind her like another zombie. When she shows up, she'll rip his soul out and drink it whole as thanks. Summoning a necromancer's soul is like…locking up a soldier in the armory. She'll be sitting in the middle of a powerful array, and all the mages trying to control her are linked into it." Pulling a necromancer's soul into an array similar to one such as they had used in life was asking to have things turned around. The only way they could have been more foolish was if they'd gone for Mannimarco! But he doubted the Worm would have deigned to appear; Potema seemed like the
sort who would devour the souls of the ones who had summoned her because she was irate. "No, let's go put down a queen."

"Aye!" In moments, the Nords were ready.

Velandryn found himself running over spells and counters in his head, but he knew this wouldn't be that kind of fight. *Move fast, hit hard.* They needed to break the array, deanimate the undead, and prevent Potema's emergence. They took the spiral of steps two at a time, and gained the roof in a rush.

The scene they encountered was exactly as bad as Velandryn had feared. The entire tower was taken up by a tremendous ritual circle, and it pulsed blue and purple light in the same tempo that had been pounding itself into his head all day. A ring of black-robed cultists stood around the edge at even intervals, each shouting and gesturing wildly.

The cause of their alarm was obvious, though that did little to make Velandryn feel better. The center of the circle, which was a mass of concentric runic rings that looked to have been scribed in no less than six languages, held a pulsing violet mass, one that bore the unmistakable signature of a soul. A voice was sounding; female, loud, and commanding, it was mocking the mages trying to control it. For the moment, it seemed that these necromancers and the spirit of Potema were locked in a stalemate.

That changed quickly. Ilana decapitated one of the cultists before the black-robes had time to realize they were no longer alone on the roof, and Velandryn knelt immediately, placing his hands on the spot vacated by the cultist now bleeding out onto the stone. With all the magicka swirling around him, it was the easiest thing he had ever done to tap into the flow and connect to the ritual.

*By Azura!* He'd been wrong, calling it a ritual. This was a cacophony, dozens of overlapping and cascading spells performing four completely separate tasks. The fact that the entire situation hadn't collapsed into anarchic magical overload was a testament to whatever lunatic had made it. The array wasn't badly designed, just haphazard, and it was doing as good a job as could be expected at containing Potema. Judging by the resonance, it would hold her for five minutes more, perhaps a bit longer if a few of the mages sacrificed their own souls to hold it.

The Triune Temple had strict protocols concerning the use and storage of magical knowledge confiscated from lawbreakers and outlaw spellcasters. There were few areas that were completely off-limits, but numerous practices and conventions had been deemed inefficient, profane, or excessively dangerous, and so were taught only as a prerequisite for understanding how to avoid or counteract them. *Fortunately, as I was learning why a circle of this nature is evil, I was also learning how to bring it down.*

From somewhere beyond his current range of awareness, he could hear voices and the sounds of battle. However, anything that was not him or the ritual was irrelevant. *I'm detecting ten foci for the array.* They were spellcasters, human all, nine of them merely acting as magical anchors and providing basic manipulation in rote patterns. The last was more complex, and seemed to be doing the majority of the complex spell work needed to maintain the four simultaneous castings. *Impressive, for a human.*

There was one other major presence in the ritual, and that was the enraged bundle of magicka sitting at the center of the array. He had to assume that this was Potema, and the speed with which her essence was deconstructing the wards around her was more than a little impressive. *Even in death, she's more dangerous than the fools who summoned her.*

Of the four spells the array was sustaining, three pertained to Potema. One seemed to be drawing
on a number of artifacts and magical signatures to locate and identify the soul of the Wolf Queen, while a second had drawn her to this place from whatever pit she had inhabited; their combined effect had resulted in one very angry necromancer's soul. The fact that she hadn't yet annihilated the array and those attached to it was due to the third spell, a massively powerful binding.

The fourth spell in the array was almost trivial by comparison to its fellows, a simple soul siphon that animated any corpses connected to the circle. The mages controlling the circle could give broad commands to the reanimated dead, and their residual magicka, scant as it might be, would offer some support and stabilization to the array as a whole. And that's the first to go.

It was easy to ruin an array from the inside, and this one was no exception. Velandryn sent jolts of magicka, the densest he could, skittering along the transliminal pathways that crisscrossed the array.

His first sign that it was working was a terrific wrenching, an intangible twist in his gut that felt like it should have been accompanied by a screech of breaking metal or stone. Immersed as he was in the intricacies of the array, he couldn't afford to check and make sure the dead had truly fallen; he needed to abort this summoning before Potema could destroy them all. Hopefully that deanimated the dead. If Jordis and her lot were still alive, they'd be of use in cleaning up the rest of these cultists.

As he unraveled a knot of magicka that had been integrated into a reservoir tethered by an Ayleid-derived runic array, he wondered at the origins of this group. He'd been thinking of them as a cult, but he didn't actually know what they believed. They weren't Daedric, unless this group had bound itself to some Daedra so minor that it couldn't even scrounge up a few scamps to keep an eye on things.

The summoning of Potema too was odd. Had it been any other Septim, he might have considered a radical cult of Talos, but Potema was infamous, and rightly so, as a necromancer first and a member of Tiber Septim's dynasty second. It was possible, he conceded, that they had simply been seeking to conjure Potema and bind her to their wills, but that seemed an ill-advised plan at best.

Well, regardless of their intent, he was going to stop them. If he could destroy the wards that had drawn Potema's soul to this place while holding the ones that kept her from breaking free, the liminal barriers should force her soul out of the Mundus. Hopefully the Nords would have killed the rest of the necromancers by then, and this business would be over and done with. Not that I'm like to be that lucky.

On closer inspection, however, it wouldn't be as easy as he'd thought. He'd seen that the array was a piecemeal construction drawn from multiple magical traditions, but this was even more of a nightmare than he'd imagined. He recognized Ayleid- and Aldmer-derived patterns, a few that were undoubtedly Nord in nature, and some that looked as though a half-blind imbecile had tried to copy Daedric sigil dry while rats chewed off their thumbs. It would be difficult to disrupt, and nigh-impossible to stop one of the three primary spells without also halting the other two. Fetch it all, you necromancer s'wit!

Sighing, Velandryn carefully began extracting his magicka from the ritual. There was another way; removing the focal mages should deny the array its energy, leading to a depletion event. If he killed the necromancers, the whole thing might well shut down. Or Potema seizes control and then I'm dealing with an undead Empress. As fascinating as it would be to question the existence that was Potema, he didn't think that would end well too for him. When subtle magical craft fails, just kill everyone in a black robe. There were worse plans. No vampires this time, at least.

He opened his eyes, the last tendrils of his magicka returning to his body. The circle was in
complete pandemonium. Three of the mages were dead, their bodies held standing in place by the ritual that was still pulling power from their souls. The others were trying to fight off Hern and Ilana while keeping Potema contained, and doing a poor job at both. One in particular, however, was funneling magic quite adeptly; Velandryn could only assume that this was the ritual master, the slightly more clever fool who had probably devised this idiocy.

*Time for a Redoran Silence.* It was an old joke among the Dunmer: while House Redoran did boast some pure mages among its nobles and armsmer, the warrior house’s general approach to dealing with magical threats was a straightforward one. If it was bad magic, whack it with something heavy. If it was still moving, you should probably give it another just to be safe. A Redoran Silence, therefore, while not held in high esteem by the academies of the Temple or the Six Towers, was widely accepted as a useful alternative for when traditional means of counterspell failed. *And it’s cathartic besides.*

His thoughts had taken only a few seconds, but in that time two things had changed. The first was that Ilana had put one of her axes into another mage, and blood flowed freely from under a black robe. The second was that the leader had noticed him, and, with a casual gesture, sent a surge of magicka through the array that manifested as a burst of lightning beneath his feet.

He threw himself to one side, avoiding the attack but hitting the ground hard. *This isn’t good.* The ritual master had control of the circle, and as long as they were within it, this necromancer could hit them from anywhere. Diverting so much attention to them might let Potema get free, but the ritual’s failure would be cold comfort if Velandryn died along with the cultists.

He glanced around for a moment, tentatively extending his magicka to try and get an edge on any more incoming attacks. Ilana and Hern had moved on to another mage, and were wearing this new one down as well—

He had half a heartbeat's warning, throwing himself aside once more before another eruption of magicka cracked the stone where he'd been standing. *Can't get distracted.*

The necromancer leader had pulled back her hood, revealing the lined face of an aged Nord woman. Smiling slightly, she sent another attack through the array. Velandryn readied himself, but this time—

*Shit!* The curse came to his mind in Imperial Tamrielic, but it seemed somehow tried to shout a warning, but he was a moment too slow. By the time his lips had finished forming the words, the sparks and discharge had exploded beneath Hern and Ilana, and the duo were sent flying before collapsing limply to the stone.

Whirling, he sent a bolt of flame at the master necromancer, but she raised a ward and the fire splashed off harmlessly. In response, she unleashed a torrent of ice, not bothering with the array this time. He raised a ward of his own, ducking down to minimize the space he needed to cover.

Cursing under his breath, Velandryn pulled out a potion, studying the slightly murky liquid within. He'd made this one outside the cave, hoping he wouldn't have to use it. It would give him magicka in excess, but he’d been unable to filter it completely with his current ingredients and skill, meaning he was likely going to experience all kinds of wonderful side effects. *What doesn't kill me…*

The potion tasted foul going down, but instantly the magicka within him swelled in response. Grimacing at the sharp pain in his gut, he rose, letting flames flow out to surround his arms. The necromancers were distracted by the array and Potema's swirling rage, but the master still faced him, smile still stretched across her wrinkled face. At the sight, *Dov,* long silent, roared rage, and Velandreyyn felt an old excitement rise from deep in his soul.
…Makes you stronger. He sent a spray of fireballs across the circle, almost a dozen spinning out in a great fan of flame. The master raised a ward and shielded herself, sneering and saying something that he couldn't make out over the roaring in his ears. He figured it was a taunt, some jibe at his expense, but he really didn't care. She hadn't been his target in the first place.

_Time for a taste of your own medicine, witch._ By the time the other cultists realized they were under attack, it was almost too late. Most at least managed to throw up wards or duck away, surviving with little more than burning robes and bruises.

Two, however, were not so lucky. One looked to have been focused on the ritual to the exclusion of all else, and a lucky trio of shots punched through the other's ward. He had charged his bolts with the fury and flames of Red Mountain; neither would be walking out of here without grievous burns. Both of the unfortunate necromancers were on the ground screaming and thrashing in moments, and Velandryn's enemies were down to four.

They faced each other again, now slightly less unequal but still far from a fair fight. At a gesture from the leader, one of the cultists knelt and spread his hands on the ritual circle. The wounded cultists were hoisted into the air, and they jerked as bolts of light stabbed upward and pierced their bodies with savage speed. _Keeping the ritual going. Efficient for the short-term._ It wouldn't last long, however. With Potema's spirit still trying to break free and the undead decoupled from the array, a few dead cultists wouldn't be able to keep things together for more than a few minutes. And when that happened, there was no telling what would happen next.

Hopefully it wouldn't come to that. He shielded himself from a burst of lightning sent by one of the cultists and sent a long finger of flame lancing back. He began moving slowly forward, hoping to get into range of the nearest cultist and cut him down. Hern and Ilana were still on the ground, and Velandryn wondered where Jordis had gotten to. _I stopped the spell, the undead should have fallen!_

"That's far enough!" The roaring in his ears was brought on by the potion rather than any actual noise, and somehow the lead necromancer's words made it through. "When Potema is bound—"

He stopped listening. He needed to figure this out, and that didn't include paying attention to taunts. The possibility that the ritual master would let something slip wasn't worth the split focus. He gathered magicka in his hands, and sent another barrage of fireballs at the four foes he had left.

Had these four all been facing him with their full attention, he might not have lasted too long. Numbers mattered, and four lesser mages could overwhelm him. However, the three underlings were still managing the ritual, leaving the master to deal with him. _A mistake._

He could see his path to victory. A pulse through the ritual would stun the mages, leaving them vulnerable. Any more of the underlings fell—the nearest one was less than five paces away, and his blade was solid on his back—and the ritual would begin unraveling in earnest. Chaos like that—and the close quarters—meant that he could cut down the rest in a matter of seconds. None of them were even armed, after all.

Except…he had allies down in the middle of it all, and pulsing magicka through the array would do nothing good for them. Plus, with Potema there, they would undoubtedly be in danger.

He'd already played this game with himself; he knew where he stood on the subject of this little band of would-be heroes. He couldn't let them die. Unfortunately, there was only one other tactic he could think up to get them out of this.

_They'll never see this coming._ He let magicka flow into his hands again, sending forth another barrage of fireballs. _Give them what they want. Predictable, but maybe I get lucky._ All but one
avoided the attack, the last was heard to curse loudly. Velandryn stepped forward and cleared his throat. He had rather liked being just another traveler, but all good things had to come to an end. It was a fine thing to walk cloaked and unseen, especially in foreign lands. There was no shame in his pretending to be no more than a Dunmer. _And where does caution become cowardice?_ For him, it was apparently the place where he would risk the lives of others to protect his secret. _If I am Dragonborn, let them see me as I am!_

_FUS!_

For an instant, the roaring abated completely. There was an infinitesimal moment of pure silence, then the earth-shaking force of his Thu'um, and then one moment more of blessed silence before the roar returned.

He had not used the Thu'um in some time, but it had come to him as easily as shockwave sent the ritual master staggering back, her ward dissolving as her concentration crumbled. _Shouting does do that to people._ He hadn't aimed at the other mages, but they too seemed to be every bit as shocked, and he could feel the ritual fluctuate as their holds wavered. _Perfect._

He rushed forward, pulling his daggers from their sheaths. This close, shorter weapons would be faster. He drove the iron through the ritual master's robes deep into her gut, and the vampire's blade he drew across her throat. She was dead before she hit the stone, and the ritual blazed up in response.

A roar filled his ears, and he realized that Potema's spirit was trying to break out, to seize control of the array and make her will felt on Mundus once more. Hurriedly, he spun, realizing that he needed to finish the other necromancers so he could deal with Potema without interference. _Hopefully I can banish her, or we might all be dead before sundown._

He turned, daggers raised and ready to take down the nearest of the remaining necromancers, but the man was busy dying, one of Ilana's axes buried in his back. From her spot half-lying on the ground, she gave him a bloody grin. Then, she slumped limply to the stone beside Hern, neither moving.

A war cry from below heralded the arrival of Jordis and the rest of the Wolves, all of them looking ragged and bloody, but as welcome a sight as any he'd ever seen. The reinforcements fell upon the necromancers with wild abandon, and in moments the cultists were little more than corpses staining the stones.

Now, only one thing remained. The roaring in his ears drowned out anything else, and he turned to regard the entity in the center of the array. The malevolence pouring off of it was palpable, and he had no issue imagining that this was indeed Potema the Wolf Queen.

With quick strides, he moved to where the ritual master had been standing and extended his hands. The array flared, and the multilingual riot of power cascaded into his mind. _By the Scourge, this is madness!_ One mind could scarcely hold all of these threads, let alone try and do anything with them. Clearly the other mages had been providing more than simply raw power.

Fortunately, he wasn't trying to do anything fancy. From this position at the head of the array, and without the interference of the necromancers, he could at least grasp the three major spells that were still working. _A summoning, a liminal holding, and a binding._ If the first went, parts of the soul might be weakened or possibly vanish entirely. The second, and it might slip back to the place from which it had come. The third…._best not to think about what happens if the third fails._ The idea of being the undead thrall of a lich was not especially pleasant.
So, all he had to do was disentangle a single part of three interwoven spells while an opposing entity that had far more knowledge about this type of magic than he did attempted to do the same. *This should be fun.*

It soon became clear that Potema was far and away his superior when dealing with this type of array. He found himself destroying parts of the summons and liminal transference matrices simply because he was hoping that his actions would make some part of the soul return to nothingness. A new attack, blinding and painful, lashed out, and he almost lost control. Desperately, he responded with a surge at a node composed primarily of Daedric runes—

"—dying!" Jorids' voice broke in, and something gripped him by the shoulder and shook him roughly. "Do something, Vel! They're dying!"

He opened his eyes to see Jordis looming over him. Behind her, the bodies of Hern and Ilana had been moved to lie beside each other. He glared. "I need to focus!" He closed his eyes again and reached back into—

"They'll die!" Jordis sounded as though she was on the verge of tears. "You're a mage! Can't you heal them?"

He wanted to shout at her, to tell her that he was trying to return the Wolf Queen to the grave, and if they failed here, it was all for naught. However, as he looked over at them, he chanced to feel their magicka. *That's not natural.* It only took him a moment to realize what was happening. Potema was bolstering herself by pulling power from the dead, stealing life force from the array that held her. Ilana and Hern had simply been caught up in it.

It was in that moment that Velandryn lost control of the battle over the array. It was all too much, the problem was too big. This wasn't about having determination or finding a clever trick anymore, this was a contest beyond his capabilities. Potema was too strong for him. Every second he wasted she gained in strength, and all of his efforts were only delaying the inevitable. She would gather her power, overwhelm him and the array, and then she would be free. *Unless...*

Only one option remained to him. Sighing, he uncorked his last two potions, and downed them in two quick gulps. This was going to hurt.

As pain seized him, he poured every drop of magicka he had into the array. He wasn't trying to do anything subtle anymore. Now, he was ravaging every nexus and focus, disrupting each array and overloading every rune-pattern. He had to do it as quickly as possible, before Potema caught on to his plan.

Theoretically, holding a soul in Mundus was a more delicate procedure than binding it within a circle. If everything collapsed in a cascade of failure, the liminal barriers that permeated the Aurbis should force her soul back into whatever darkness it had inhabited. Of course, if his wanton destruction damaged the bindings too severely before unmaking the soul vice, Potema would be able to force herself fully into this world, and the Wolf Queen would be reborn with all of her legendary power.

It happened all at once, and then it was done. Whatever he had destroyed must have been crucial, since the entire array began to tear itself apart. He felt a stabbing pain and saw a flash of light, and Potema was gone. Blue and violet light recede into the shadows at the corners of the cavern, and Velandryn sagged to the stone, exhausted.

"Why aren't you helping them? They're dying, Vel!" *Oh, right.* It would be a shame if he let them die. *Can't have the Dragonborn doing that now.* Of course, given that those two were the only
ones that had seen him use the Thu'um...

Every part of him protested as he pulled himself to his feet. He staggered over to Ilana and Hern, and fell to his knees between them. Grimacing, he tore at their armor and clothing until his hands rested on the bare flesh of their chests. He had no time or energy to waste on modesty, and he wanted direct and central contact.

Restoration had been drilled into every Temple novitiate since their earliest lessons in magic. Every Dunmer could be a mage, and every priest could be a healer. It wasn't strictly true, of course; any race had outliers with no talents in a given area, but as a group the Anointed of the Temple were an exceptionally reliable source of healing for those in need. Were it not for his wretched state and everything he'd just gone through, he would have found this healing a calming and well-familiar experience.

Light poured from his hands, sucking out every drop of magicka in him, the air, and the patients. Their wounds were, for the most part, more numerous than severe. Burns and bruises he healed quickly on the outside, though the ones on their internal organs left by the ritual master's attack required a defter touch. They were drained dry of energy and magicka, though it seemed Potema hadn't had the time to pull out anything permanent. They'd be groggy and thirsty, but Nords seemed to live their entire lives in that state, given their absurd fondness for alcohol. Most importantly, they would live, and Velandryn was too exhausted to figure out why that was so important to him. As he removed his hands, Velandryn Savani felt...well, he didn't rightly know. Drained, but a good drained.

Sighing to himself, he stretched out on the blood-drenched stone and slipped into blissful unconsciousness.

The array exploded in a blinding torrent of chaos, and the power she had gathered began to unravel. She could feel the nothingness pulling at her, but she would never return. Not now, not when she was so close.

With a final effort, she gathered her strength into a single point, and focused it inward. Where this would send her, she did not know, but she would be free.

All she'd ever wanted was freedom. The freedom to choose her fate, to let her son live up to his potential.

She flew, flew as nothing mortal could. She did not have eyes to see, nor skin to feel the wind, but she could feel the world move around her, until she came to rest within a familiar vessel.

_Hello, old friend. It's been a while._

The work would not be swift. She'd managed only to salvage the kernel of her essence, that tiny and essential component of her soul from which all that was _her_ derived.

But she had time. They would think her defeated, banished back to nothingness. She didn't know who _they_ were, but it hardly mattered. Months, years, Eras, these were meaningless. There had been no time in the nothingness, and liberation from the needs of the flesh enabled her to take a longer view of things.

_No matter how long it takes, I will have what is mine! I am Potema, and I will not be denied!_

"So, Dragonborn, eh?"
Velandryn glanced over at Ilana, who was looking entirely too pleased with herself. "I don't suppose I'm lucky enough for you not to have told anyone else."

She smiled. "Just Jordis. Hern saw you too, but Jordis is the only one I told. Figured it was only fair, what with her making you save my life and all."

Velandryn snorted. "I told you, I needed to deal with Potema. But, you are welcome, since you've been so effusive with your thanks."

*Potema.* He didn't know what had happened, but it seemed that, at the very least, the Wolf Queen had not broken free with all of her power. *If she had, we wouldn't have made it out of that cave alive.*

They told him he'd slept a night and a day after his collapse; the sun had been high overhead when he came to in the Wolves' camp. They'd carried him out and destroyed everything they could that had been part of the ritual, though Jordis had been kind enough to hand him a pouch of gold and soul gems, telling him it was his part of the spoils. If it felt a little heavy for an equal share, he kept that to himself. There had also been a tome that the Wolves had salvaged, but it was more ruin than grimoire, and he'd burned it after a cursory examination had failed to produce anything of interest. However the ritual master had hatched her plan, she'd taken it to her grave.

When he'd woken, his wounds had been wrapped in bandages, and the primitive practice had nearly set him to panicking. He'd wasted no time in healing his wounds before they could scar or fester; while marks earned in battle were honorably won, he felt no need to acquire any himself.

They'd waited for him to come to and eat four bowls of that stew before setting off, and now they were well on the way back to Solitude. Traveling with a group meant a slower pace, but it also meant others watching your back, conversation instead of silent contemplation, and a level of camaraderie that he never would have expected to feel for Nords.

He had extended an offer of healing to his companions as well, and some had taken him up on it. More puzzling to him were the ones who refused; it seemed that they would rather carry wounds that doubtless caused unnecessary pain and hampered motion rather than be healed. Pride was one thing, but he'd assured them that he could heal the wounds so they left perfectly ghastly scars, and they'd still refused. Finally, he'd been forced to shrug and admit that he was still a long way from understanding these people.

Ilana and Hern looked none the worse for wear, though both were sporting a few new battle scars, though Ilana did let him mend her broken arm. Later, she'd pulled open her leathers to show him a spiderweb of burn scars across her breasts, and thanked him for giving her something new to brag about.

Hern now seemed to regard him with a wary respect, and the rest of the Young Wolves had accepted him as, if not one of their own, then at least a worthy companion. Sophie told him she was composing a song about the battle of Wolfskull Cave, and he would have a stanza all to himself. It was an odd honor, but kindly meant, and Velandryn thanked her with a smile. As for Jordis, he caught the Nord shooting him knowing looks over the campfire, but of his being Dragonborn she said nothing.

All in all, it was a pleasant enough way to return to Solitude. Four days on the road, and the great windmill came into view one cold morning. They were approaching from the west this time, so while the arch of Solitude was as impressive as ever, it lacked some of the looming grandeur it had held the first time Velandryn had seen it.
Last time, Velandryn had restricted his activities mostly to the Shores, and only gone towards the main gates of the city one time, when he'd been in need of a bank to store his money and a few things he hadn't wanted to bring north. Now, they went straight to the Climb, and Jordis steered them towards the main gates at the top of the wide cobbled road.

Last time, his mind had been filled with thoughts of Serana and the task ahead. Now, Velandryn noticed things he hadn't before. The main street was lined with inns and shops, to be sure, but now he peered into the alleys beyond and beheld the tall, narrow houses crowding each other for space on the slope. As they climbed the storefronts grew more ornate, and the houses more elegant. Clearly, proximity to the walls was desirable.

It wasn't until they entered the square before the main gate that Velandryn realized that his presence here made no sense. He needed to retrieve his possessions from the bank and commission passage to Morthal for the horses and gear they had left in the care of Jarl Ravenscrone. There was no purpose for his entering the city proper.

When he told this to Jordis, however, she only laughed at him. "You're a hero, Vel! We're going to show you Solitude the way it's meant to be seen!"

He lowered his voice. "I do have obligations elsewhere, you know. A certain mountain awaits." If everybody else was going to use the Greybeards to tell him what to do, he'd return the favor to avoid being dragged into whatever Jordis was planning for him.

He had neglected, however, to take into account just how stubborn the Nord woman was. "Nonsense! If you've waited this long, a few days more won't be the end of the world."

_Given what I've been involved with, I wouldn't necessarily discount the possibility._ Nonetheless, he squared his shoulders and faced the huge gate, really seeing it for the first time. It was impressive, wrought of steel and dark wood, set into the ancient stone of the wall. He'd come to realize that Nordic styles could be as ornate as anything his people made, and these gates were elegant by any measure. Nords liked incorporating animal themes into their metal and stonework, and it seemed that wolves had been the beast of choice for the artisans of Solitude, which was hardly surprising given how often the name and motif seemed to crop up around here. There were snarling wolves climbing the stone, and a great wolf's head overlooking the gate itself. Below, a group of Legionaries watched the crowd as it entered.

 Those entering the city looked to be mostly local, apparently shopping or simply out for a stroll. He saw mercenaries here and there, and a few merchants with laborers hauling goods behind them, but for every traveler, there must have been ten locals. _Not so diverse as the Shores, either._ The guards didn't seem particularly interested in stopping anyone, preferring to watch and occasionally ask a question before waving someone through.

Velandryn spotted a flash of familiar grey; a fellow Dunmer was moving towards the city gates as part of what looked to be a band of adventurers. Velandryn was only a little surprised to see the Dunmer alone be stopped by one of the Legionaries; his people shouldn't expect fair treatment in Skyrim.

Then, something about the Legionary who had done the stopping struck him. He turned to Jordis. "How many Dunmer serve in the Legion here?"

She shrugged. "Some. Not many. It's mostly humans here, truth be told." She grinned. "Most like you lot are too smart to get stuck watching over city walls, I'd bet."

"Hmm." His wordless response was little more than a distracted acknowledgement that Jordis had
spoken; he was busy wondering what the odds were that a Dunmer Legionary would just so happen to be inspecting Dunmer who came through.

He nudged Jordis again. "How easily can humans tell Dunmer apart?" There was more urgency in his voice now; if he was correct in his assumption, they didn't have much time until he was noticed.

"You? I could spot you at a hundred paces, now. Before we'd met? Not without a portrait, or calling out to confirm." She had noticed something was wrong, and answered seriously, a fact he appreciated.

Velandryn very much doubted that the Empire had a portrait of him. A description, however, was not impossible. Red hair, grey skin, arrogant, flanked by a big Nord in armor. Wearing boiled leather marked with a red hand, probably sneering down his nose at the locals. There were any number of people who could have spotted him in Whiterun, Morthal, or the Shores; the Empire could easily have his hair color, general look, and possible companions. It would be simple, really: order your agents to report any unusual activity from Dunmer, then compile the data to build a profile. Send out the profile, refine the search. Repeat and repeat until an individual is identified, and then...I don't think the next part is terribly good for me. They probably wouldn't kill him, but he wasn't in the mood to meet General Tullius again.

The problem, from the Empire's point of view, would be that red hair was hardly unheard of among Dunmer, and his bone structure was typical of inland Houses and Ashlander tribes. It wouldn't do for the Legion to harass every Dunmer they encountered, and Velandryn knew what he would have done in their boots. If they wanted to do it right, put a Dunmer on the gate, give him a description, and let someone who knows the look do the looking. It was clever, he had to admit.

Jordis had followed his eyes, and noticed the two Dunmer talking. "You think they're looking for you?"

"Unless something else happened to make the Empire post a mer at a city gate in Skyrim. Way I understand it, that's asking for trouble."

Jordis looked a little bit offended at that. "We aren't Windhelm, you know. We don't beat elves in the street for fun." She chewed her lip for a moment. "Does seem odd, though."

"I think I might need to pass on your offer, Jordis." Truth be told, he wouldn't have minded a night within the walls, but he had no wish to fall back into the hands of the Legion. This time, I might not have a dragon swoop in to rescue me."

He had forgotten, however, exactly who he was dealing with. "Nonsense! We'll just have to give them something better to think about!" She grabbed Sophie by the arm. "Think you can distract those guards?"

The bard looked at the gate and the legionaries standing watch. "Sure!" She grabbed Irek and Ilana by the arms and dragged them off, whispering rapidly.

Velandryn sighed. "This is all a game to you, isn't it?" He liked these Nords more than he would have thought upon meeting them, but that didn't mean he wanted to put his life in their hands.

Jordis only grinned at him again. "Is it wrong to enjoy life? I want things, sure, and I'm not going to pretend the world doesn't have problems, but at the end of the day we can only be as happy as we let ourselves." She punched him lightly on the shoulder. "You've got real problems, sure, but no need to let your attitude be another one."
"An…interesting…perspective, to be sure." He would have said more, but a slap and a scream rang out from the direction of the gate. He spun to see what had happened and pushed his way through the crowd that had formed up, fearing the worst. *Whatever plan Sophie dreamed up, it's gone wrong!*

Instead of tragedy, he was confronted with melodrama. Sophie was wailing and pounding on Irek's chest while Ilana wept loudly into her hands. Irek tried vainly to hold Sophie at arm's length, but she slipped through and delivered a forceful push that sent him to the ground.

"How could you? And with her!" She grabbed Ilana, but the other woman tackled the bard bodily, sending them both into the Dunmer Legionary.

With a snort, Jordis gave Velandryn's arm a poke. "Let's go, before that poor elf picks himself up." He followed her, weaving through the gathered onlookers to the spectacle and avoiding the sight of the guards until they were beneath the wall. The rest of the wolves had stayed behind or wandered off, and the two of them were now alone.

Jordis grinned at him. "Based on a true story, you know. Sophie wrote a beautiful song about it, and now none of us are allowed into a certain alehouse owned by the boy's family." Chuckling, she took the lead. "Onward to Solitude!"

The rest of the Young Wolves of Solitude had already dispersed or stayed behind to watch the show, and the two of them passed beneath the walls alone. "Have I not already been to Solitude? I spent some time down—"

"Pah, the Shores and the Climb aren't Solitude! They're…outskirts." She waved a hand airily. "The real city's behind the walls. Why else would we have them, if not to keep the best parts safe?" That last sentence seemed to bring her down from her earlier jubilation, and her pace slowed.

Velandryn looked up, noting the additional fortifications that would allow defenders to drop spells or burning oil should anyone in the passage. There was no sign of any guard there, however, nor were any watchmen waiting at the inner gate. "Not terribly safe, it seems. Were those two the only guards on the gate to Solitude? That seems as though…"

"As though most of our guard, and the legion that should protect us, is off to fight in a war?" The levity had fled from Jordis' voice. "Aye. We're the ones left behind, with families important or rich enough to buy us out of our duty." The tunnel opened before them, and the light was such that Jordis' face was in sharp relief. She was as somber as Velandryn had ever seen her. "So we go off and play soldier while they fight for the future of Skyrim." She'd stopped walking then, eyes downcast and mouth downturned, not stepping out into the light beyond.

*I could break her, here and now.* The thought came suddenly, a moment of dark realization that he recognized as wholly his own. He couldn't blame this one on *Dov.*

Those like Jordis, the ones who wore their hearts on their sleeve, were easy to manipulate, and in moments of downturn they left themselves vulnerable. It was a weakness of forthright warriors, and lessons of Mephala and Boethiah illustrated to brutal effect how this vulnerability could be exploited.

He knew every word he could speak to start her down a path of despair, but there was no purpose. They weren't enemies, he and her, and she had only aid to offer him at this point. Besides, it would be pointlessly cruel. She hadn't wronged him, and it would be dishonorable to take advantage of her weakness. *Another Nord I rather like. Will wonders never cease?*
Wordlessly, he reached out and tapped her pauldron, jolting her head up and arresting whatever path of dark introspection she'd been wandering down. *That's the last thing I need right now.* She looked at him quizzically, and he smiled in as friendly and upbeat a manner as he could. It felt horrifically unnatural, but it might help. "You just took out an entire cave of necromancers! A cult attempted to resurrect the dread Potema, and you sent them to the grave! Weren't you the one who told me they'd sing about you, the Sword-Maiden of Whiterun?" He gestured to the light in front of them and the indistinct shapes beyond. "Come, show me your city!" He nudged her again. "Besides, you mentioned knowing the best inn in town, and I feel as though I deserve that tonight."

It worked, as he'd suspected it would. He knew the symptoms of somebody who loved their home, and those so afflicted would never pass up the chance to show it off. Jordis' look brightened, and it was with a smile that the blonde human led him out into onto the city atop the arch, and Velandryn beheld the ancient Nord city of Solitude.

They stood at the base of the wall, at the end of a broad boulevard filled with people going about their business. All around were buildings of stone and painted wood. They were not particularly tall but had an air of attention and deliberate care about them, as though those who lived and worked in these buildings valued them greatly.

Off to one side was a raised platform of stone set out from the wall. A familiar block and basket sat there in such a place as to be clearly visible from below, and Velandryn was suddenly back in Helgen, being dragged to his execution. He took a step back involuntarily, before realizing that this was not Helgen, and no axe would come down on his neck today. He took a deep breath. *The Empire will not find me!*

Jordis noticed his gaze, but took entirely the wrong thing away from his silence. "Bad business, that."

"What?"

She pointed, and Velandryn noticed a tar-covered head impaled on a pike overlooking the execution ground. "The guard who let Ulfric Stormcloak escape. Man was doing what he thought right, but it he'd just kept the gate shut, this whole war would never have happened."

There, Velandryn privately disagreed. Even in Morrowind the Nords' outrage at the Concordat was well-known. They hated the idea of capitulating to the Dominion, and he had the feeling that even if it were Ulfric Stormcloak whose head adorned that pike, it would only have been a matter of time until something else set them off.

Grunting, he tugged at the hood of his cloak. "Ordinarily this is exactly the sort of thing that would fascinate me, but I have been on the road for far too long, so—"

"Right! The inn! Let's go!"

Jordis was pointing at the buildings as they made their way down the street, telling her story with each one. "Down that alley's an inn that serves the best mammoth you've ever had." She pointed at a shop that looked to sell rugs and tapestries; it was draped in its wares and was colorful even by the riotous standards of the Markets. "When I was eight I got in my first fight just over there; Hern had made Sophie cry, so I grabbed him by the hair and put his face into the side of the shop. Good thing a rug was hanging on the wall, or I might have smashed his head open and gotten in some real trouble!" She pointed out a building with sparkling crystal-studded walls and glass ornaments hanging from the roof. "That's Radiant Raiment, where a pair of High Elf sisters have been making the best clothes in Solitude since before my mother was born. Over there's…"
Velandryn still listened with half an ear, but now that Jordis was happily chatting away, he was content to leave her be and simply enjoy her excitement. His own eyes, ears, and nose were enough to take in the city as it was. His impression was one of color. All around them fluttered banners and streamers in red and green and gold. Every windows had curtains, and many doors bore painted sigils or images of what was offered or sold within. It was somewhat overwhelming, but when added to the bustle of the crowd it became something extraordinary.

As they approached the plaza, the crowd grew thicker, and when Velandryn found himself unable to see over or around the humans that surrounded him, he was suddenly and uncomfortably reminded of his small stature in comparison to the average Nord. It was easy to forget when he was out in the wilds, but in the cities he was always on the small side. As a child pushed past him, he glanced at Jordis, who looked completely at ease. It's been a while since I've seen a crowd of my own people. It was a sobering reminder that, for all that he might get along with some Nords as individuals, he was hardly less an outsider in Skyrim than he had been on the day of his arrival.

But, there was nowhere to go save forward, so he looked out once again to see what sort of place the heart of Solitude was. According to the river-boatman Jorik, the Blue was where the Jarl held court, and Castle Dour was the headquarters of the Legion. Velandryn didn't see any harm in going to the Blue, but he had the feeling that getting anywhere near the Castle would be an unwise action verging on stupidity. He might not deny the Empire its right to exist, but even the possibility of running into anybody associated with Helgen turned his gut to anxious knots.

Turning to Jordis, he caught her making eyes at a Nord with a braided golden beard, and decided he would rather embrace the moment than wallow in bad memories. "Friend of yours?"

"Not yet, but who knows?" She grinned and pointed. "Inn's that way. You came to Solitude at a good time, you know."

"Oh?" Velandryn couldn't help but notice how…ostentatious…all of this color seemed, so it would make sense if it was only a sometime occurrence. "What's happening?"

"The Hearthfire Banquet. Winter is upon us, and this is the Nord way, to welcome it with feasting and song." She grinned at him. "I'd hoped to get back before the festival, and it looks like we just barely made it."

Velandryn could think of worse fates than seeing a Skyrim harvest festival. However, he really didn't want to spend too much time in Solitude. Lydia should be on her way to Ivarstead Village, and it would be crass of him to keep her idle for too long. That she might not be there when he arrived was too ludicrous a thought even to entertain. After all, he'd been stranded in the wilderness for weeks, and his housecarl had only to travel through Morrowind. There was no way she wouldn't be waiting for him, likely with an impatient word or two for his trouble. It will be good to see her again, though. He'd only had her as a housecarl for a short time, but he found himself missing her looming presence at his side.

He glanced over to Jordis. She seemed capable enough, but this woman was certainly no Lydia. Despite that, he was glad to have found her, and these Young Wolves seemed fairly acceptable, as far as humans went. No sense hating all Nords. Now I can save that hatred for the ones who deserve it.

His chuckle drew Jordis' attention, and she peered down at him curiously. "What's funny?"

He thought for a moment. "I promise you wouldn't appreciate it in the slightest."

"Elf humor? Fair enough." She took off walking again and Velandryn followed, wondering exactly
what divided elven humor from other kinds.

Speaking of mer...He hadn't seen many of his people in the Shores or the Climb, but nonhumans had been positively numerous down there compared to their scarcity up here. When he mentioned it to Jordis however, she just nodded. "Not too many foreigners in the city proper. Everything they need is down below, and most are just passing though." She shrugged. "Probably for the best; no reason for them to come up here, after all."

Velandryn could almost count on both hands the number of nonhumans he'd seen since entering the city; even Solitude's cosmopolitan nature, it seemed, did little to encourage integration. For all that Bretons, Imperial Cyrods, and even Redguards were in abundance, he still felt very much an outsider. *A mer who feels alienated in Skyrim, what other news is there?*

Jordis had stopped to look out over the crowd, and Velandryn followed her gaze. They were in front of a wide stone building some three stories high and with a front so broad that Velandryn couldn't make out either side without craning his neck. The sign hanging from its peaked roof proclaimed it to be the Karthview Inn, and he realized they'd reached their destination. With a wide smile, Jordis gestured expansively and indicated he should go in. He did so, approaching the bright green door with some curiosity. He'd been in many inns so far in Skyrim, but none of them even approached the scale of this monstrosity.

Inside, he found himself greeted by a rush of warm air and the burble of conversation. Before him stretched a room that, while large, was clearly only a small part of this building's footprint, judging by the doors and hallways leading off in all directions. Gazing about the room and taking in the several dozen people who were seated at circular tables or talking quietly while reclining on raised cushions, Velandryn realized what that innkeep's son had meant when he called his parents' place the finest inn in Solitude.

Redguards in flowing silk robes and Bretons in ruffled shirts sat together over boards laid out with games Velandryn had never before seen. A Cyrod of immense age was deep in conversation with an Altmer who stood at least seven feet, tall even by the standards of that race. Nords were everywhere, of course, though most of the ones Velandryn could see were dressed in a fashion he would have expected from Imperials or Bretons. Clearly, Solitude favored a more cosmopolitan Nord.

"And how may we assist you today, Serjo?" He turned, startled to hear his people's honorific spoken in a Skyrim accent. The woman who addressed him was clearly part of the staff of the establishment, a human whose stature suggested she was not fully Nord, with a lined face and silver hair. She looked at him quizzically, and he realized he was supposed to respond.

Before he could, however, the door swung open behind him and Jordis made her appearance. "Alfa, it's been too long!" She swept the Breton up into a hug, and the old woman laughed even as her feet left the ground.

"Jordis! Goodness, girl, you grow every time I see you!" She adopted an air of mock strictness. "I trust you brought my boy home safe? The ghosts of Wolfskull didn't cause too much mischief?"

Jordis laughed loudly. "Aye, Brenden's safe home as I promised, and right now probably getting a drink and stealing a kiss from a likely lad." Her tone sobered, and she lowered her voice. "Wolfskull, though, it was bad. Nobody died, thanks be to Kyne, but Vel here" her nudge was unexpected enough that he staggered a bit, "is the reason we got through it at all."

Alfa was looking at him with an expression Velandryn couldn't identify. *When next I see Lydia, I'm going to have her make as many emotional faces as I can think of, so I can get a feel for them.*
Some of these are impossible to decipher.

When the woman spoke, however, her voice had no strong emotion that Velandryn could detect. "Well, then, sir elf, you have my thanks."

Jordis did have a nice smile, which was fortunate considering how often it spread across her face. "Your thanks are appreciated, I'm sure, but Master Savani here need of a place to spend the night, and seeing as there's no place finer..." She trailed off and did some contortion with her eyebrows that must have held some significance. *It's either that or she's gone and gotten possessed.*

Alfa laughed. "Oh very well." She looked Velandryn up and down. "I'll throw in a bath as well; you look like one of those would do you a world of good."

She wasn't wrong. Jordis, however, wasn't done. "I'll pay for whatever he wants, Alfa. He saved all of lives down there, and healed Hern and Ilana up from the brink of death."

_She makes me sound a hero! _He raised a hand slightly. "I am perfectly capable of paying—"

"No! I'm covering it, and that's final!" She smiled. "Don't want it to get around that I owe you, do I?"

"I suppose it couldn't be good for your reputation to be indebted to an elf."

Jordis beamed. "Then it's settled. Alfa, your best room and anything else he wants!"

The old woman gave them both a look that Velandryn was fairly certain was exasperation. "My best rooms are currently occupied by a Redguard prince from Sentinel, here to court jarl Elisif. My second-best rooms have had a resident for the last two months, and they're paid up for three more. You'll get what you get, child."

Jordis huffed. "Alfa! We've been out in the wilderness, and—"

"You will get my third-best rooms, and that will be the end of that. Is this a problem, Mistress Proudspire?"

Jordis flushed red. "Mistress Proudspire's my mother. I'm—"

"Are you still the Sword-Maiden? Name like that, you'd best hope it's the good kind of song you wind up in. Else, you might hear them singing about how a sword got stuck—well, no need for that, I suppose." Jordis had turned an interesting shade of red, and was now studying the floor. "Really, sword-maiden. Of all the silly...It's good to see you, but you are a handful, girl."

Jordis had regained some of her composure, though her skin was still flushed from embarrassment. "The third-best room will be fine."

Alfa gave Velandryn a smile that for some word seemed..._motherly._ "It's a very nice room, have no fear."

Velandryn bowed. "I am certain it is, and the bath you mentioned sounds magnificent. If you could also send up a razor and shaving kit, it's been far too long for that as well."

Alfa smiled, and then reached out and patted his cheek before Velandryn could move. "Such manners, and from a Dunmer! Will wonders never cease?" Humming, she wandered away, leaving a shocked Velandryn to try to figure out how insulted he was supposed to be.
"Is it rude in Skyrim to disembowel your host for doing that?"

"I think so, except maybe in Windhelm. They're odd up there." Jordis was looking slightly stunned, but found her tongue soon enough. "I've got some business to take care of, but if you need some help with hiding the body—"

Velandryn decided that he could definitely see himself liking Jordis the Sword-Maiden. "Oh, I can manage. I'm very good with fire." He looked out across the room, but everything felt very far away. Then, he made up his mind. "Jordis, I'm about to go relax after trudging across most of Haafingar and fighting a coven of necromancers. You could come back tomorrow and face even odds I'll still be in the tub." He held out a hand, and she clasped it. "Fare thee well, Sword-Maiden."

She grinned. "See you later, Vel." And with that, she was gone, the door swinging shut in her wake.

Vel. He did not like that name, but he wasn't fool enough to let Jordis know that. She was the sort who would never let it go if she knew something nettled him.

From behind, he heard a quiet voice. "Master Savani?" Turning back, Velandryn found a woman he didn't recognize standing with her hands clasped at her waist. "Your room is ready. If you would follow me?" She wouldn't meet his eyes, and sounded as though the prospect terrified her. Humans.

Right now, he just wanted to get in the bath. She could be afraid of him on her own time.

He bowed slightly. "Lead the way."

Velandryn Savani was in bliss. They had filled the tub in good time, while he shaved with the provided razor and a thick paste the serving girl claimed was rendered from horker fat. By the time he was done, the wood and copper basin was full enough, and he thanked the servants for their service and dismissed them so quickly that he momentarily wondered if it had been rude.

It took him all of one heartbeat to decide that he didn't care. The bath was waiting, and as he eased his body into the lukewarm water, he could feel his body relax. It wasn't hot enough for him, of course; he hadn't actually expected Nords to heat water to something that a Dunmer would find pleasurable, but if he couldn't use magic to warm his bath, then what was the point of being mer?

In moments, the bath was boiling around him, and he let himself slip deeper into the water. Blessed Ancestors, thank you for this bath. He wasn't sure if that counted as irreverence, and right now he didn't care. He relaxed his neck, let his head fall back, and let his mind fill with warm thoughts.

As he lay there, enjoying beyond description the pleasure of hot water lapping against his skin, he felt the flow of magicka from his body into the water and realized something. It was coming easily, too easily. He'd never been this adept at moving large amounts of magicka through his body before. The most he could manage had been a burst of flame, and that required draining his reserves dry. What happened?

Worried, Velandryn prodded his chest experimentally. He was heating the water almost by reflex, and could barely even feel the strain. How did I get this power?

Then, he understood. For over a week, he'd been pushing himself beyond all reasonable limits. From waking until sleep, he'd been cycling magicka through his body and putting his reserves into constant use. Was it any wonder, then, that his body had responded accordingly? There were stories of such things, abilities that came from times of great stress or extraordinary feats. There
had long been whispers about divine favor, but in reality it was no more than a testament to the body's ability to improve itself rapidly when the need arose. *And I think I like it.*

A tentative knock came at the outer door. "Is there anything you need, Master Savani?" The timid voice belonged to the serving girl from before.

"I'm well, thank you." And he was. By the Three, he *was*. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been this warm, and the prospect of a full meal rather than whatever he could scrounge while hiking across the tundra lifted his spirits immensely.

All in all, things seemed to be looking up. While Alfa wasn't somebody he'd want to spend too much time around, she kept a good inn, and these rooms were more than fair. *Especially considering they're on Jordis' drake.* He wondered if the inn could get him some sujamma. It had been too long since he'd had a real drink.

The bathing-room both opened off of the main chamber, a richly-furnished room that could have seated all of the Young Wolves at once, and a bed that could have slept three. He had expected something a bit simpler when Jordis complained after hearing that he would be getting the third-best room, but if Alfa was willing to put him here, he wouldn't complain. *I've earned a bit of luxury.* He could go back and forth on the relative merits of luxury and asceticism all day long, but right now he wanted to relax, and these rooms were perfect for just that.

Upon entering the bathing-room, Velandryn had been shocked to see a functioning drainage system, but in retrospect it was the obvious choice. The streets of Solitude were dotted with gratings that clearly indicated an Imperial-style sewer, and it would be the height of foolishness for this inn not to tap into that resource. *Say what you want about the Empire, they know how to design infrastructure.*

Even his own people, when building and rebuilding their cities over the Eras, had incorporated a number of Imperial designs. Sewers especially had improved immensely since the days of Reman Cyrodiil. *Not that I'd ever tell that to a human.* There was no need to inflate their heads, and besides, almost all of the same effects could be achieved with some well-made spell arrays. Still, it was an interesting design under Velandryn's tub, and he was glad to have seen it.

There was a sound on the other side of the door, and Velandryn craned his neck to see. Perhaps one of the staff, come to see if he wanted food? As long as they weren't going to serve him roasted fox —

"So, how is it?" Jordis entered as though the rooms were hers, and he supposed an argument could be made that it was. "Brenden didn't lie about it being the best in Solitude, did he?"

Given the way Jordis had behaved previously, he really shouldn't have been surprised at her entrance, but he still spilled quite a bit of water as he submerged himself in the tub. He didn't particularly want to be seen nude, and she noticed.

"What's wrong, Vel?"

"Do you make a habit out of walking in on people as they bathe?" She wasn't making a fuss out of it at least; perhaps she truly acted out of ignorance rather than discourtesy. He had heard that Nords had no shame about nudity, but seeing it in action was a bit disconcerting.

"Sometimes. Like when I paid for their room. Why? Does it…excite you?" Her last words were spoken with playful intonation, and she wriggled her eyebrows again.
Suddenly he realized what she was implying, and had to laugh aloud. "You think this is sexual?"
He chuckled. "I'm exhausted, Jordis. After what I've gone through, I'm frankly astonished I'm still awake. Not to mention, you and I are better as allies."

The Nord laughed. "Glad you see it that same!" That, at least, was not in question. They worked fairly well together, but just as clearly neither was what the other looked for in a lover. Velandryn liked that. It relaxed things.

He stretched, enjoying the feel of his muscles in the warmth. "By Azura! This bath is wonderful!" Sighing, he slid deeper into the water.

Jordis shook her head. "Are you cooking a mudcrab in there? I can feel the heat over here."

"What you Nords are in the cold cold, that's me to heat. You can go out at night without a cloak and three layers, I can sit in boiling water and think the heat is perfect." He closed his eyes. "It is. It's nice to be warm again." He wasn't used to this level of comfort, so maybe that was why he was spilling his thoughts like this.

When he opened his eyes, Jordis was looking at him. "Is this a happy Dunmer, then?" She didn't wait for a response. "Oh, what do you think about that girl in the hall outside? By the way she's standing there, I think you're her type, if nothing else. Looks like she can't decide if she wants to run away or barge in."

"The servant?" At Jordis' nod he sighed. *Is that why she was acting like I was an unshackled Xivilai?* "So nervous she could barely speak? If she wants me she's welcome to come and get me herself." She hadn't been unattractive, though Velandryn wasn't really in the mood for anything much right now. Leaving the tub was something he knew would have to happen someday, but he wasn't ready just yet.

Jordis dragged a stool beside the tub and perched casually on the edge; she had changed out of her armor into the tunic and pants favored by so many Nords, though hers were of an obviously superior cut. Velandryn could only marvel at the fact that she was able to go out with arms bared, and not for the first time he felt a twinge of envy at how the Nords could ignore the cold. "You aren't going to go out and ravish her? I heard Dunmer do that."

"Ravish? Sounds exhausting." Truth be told, the woman hadn't been rather fetching, given the fact that she was a human. If she'd had the fire needed to make her move, he might well have gone along with it. But someone too timid to make her interest known didn't excite him at all, and he didn't have the passion at hand to work himself up for it. "Why'd you really barge in, Jordis? That eager to see what a Dunmer looks like naked?"

Jordis' mouth twitched. "Always important, that." She leaned forward, elbows on knees, and peered into his eyes. "So, what's it like, being the Dragonborn?"

_Ah, of course._ Ilana had warned him that Jordis knew, but when the leader of the Young Wolves of Solitude hadn't mentioned it at any point of their journey, he'd let that knowledge, and his edge around the blonde Nord, slip away. "Much like not being the Dragonborn, I suppose, except for the parts that aren't."

"That's not an answer."

"I know. I'm trying to figure out a way to answer your question in a way gives you information while also not forcing me to try and be a poet. It's different, is what it is. Once I can explain it to myself, I'll let you know."
She shrugged. "It'll do. So why were you really at Wolfskull Cave?"

He paused. "It was a…detour. Just my good luck to run into you lot. Simple as that. Why? Did you think I was on some mission of my own?" The fact that he had been was irrelevant here; he wanted to know what Jordis thought.

Instead, she shrugged. "A random elf going for a walk around there is strange, but not unheard of. The Dragonborn, though, the Dragonborn just turning up is—"

"More than passing odd?" At her nod, he continued. "I don't disagree, but I had to be somewhere. Just our good fortune that we ran into each other, I think."

She nodded. "Well, if it was happenstance, then I'm glad it happened. You saved a lot of us, maybe all." Rising, Jordis peered down at him, and he resisted the urge to cover himself. If she wasn't going to make an issue of his nudity he would have to do the same, no matter how unnatural it felt. "You know, it wasn't much of a beard, but you still look strange with it gone."

He had been looking in a mirror when he shaved, so he was confident in thinking that anybody who would call the scruff that had marred his cheeks and chin a beard was looking for something that wasn't there. "Well, I have confidence you'll survive the shock."

Jordis snapped her fingers. "Oh! You need to go to the Blue Palace!"

"What? Why?" A horrible thought occurred to him. "Did they figure out—"

"Oh, no, nobody knows you're the Dragonborn. It's just that it's the Hearthfire banquet tonight, and you should go. Good food, all the Young Wolves will be there, and I can introduce you to Elisif! Nobody even has to know you're Dragonborn, just my guest!" She looked excessively proud of herself.

"Clever. "So really, this is a chance to sneak the Dragonborn in to meet the jarl?" It would likely work, so long as nobody looked too closely at Jordis' guest and put two and two together.

Jordis just looked puzzled though. "What, no! I just think you should meet her. You two would get along, and the stories about Wolfskull will be so much better if she knows who you are!" She snapped her fingers again and exclaimed, "I bet she'd be able to give you help, too. Y'know, with Dragonbornin!"

Velandryn had never encountered accidental subterfuge, but Jordis was making a good stab at it. It was true what she had said, and so long as the Empire didn't catch on, it might not be the worst thing in the world to at least introduce himself to the jarl. Of course, is she truly is the Empire's creature, meeting her might be the same as stretching my neck out for the axe again. Who did he trust more, The Ravenscrone or the Sword-Maiden?

Instead of voicing these thought, he merely nodded. "I might be able to make some time to drop by. What time does it begin?"

Jordis waved dismissively. "Getting there on time only matters for an appointment. Show up after dark, and you're good. It's a party, and people come and go." She leaned in, grinning. "There's a lord up from the Bangorkai, trying for Elisif's hand. I aim to bed him before dawn."

Well, it wasn't out of character for her, at least. "Well, I wish you all the best in your escapades."

She jabbed a finger into his face, eyes narrowed. "You'd better be there. I already sent Elisif a note telling her I was bringing a surprise."
"As if you seducing one of her suitors wasn't enough. Also, thank you for giving me so much say in the matter." She was a bit much for him, but he was fairly certain Jordis meant well.

"First, she doesn't like any of them, so what's the harm? It's not like I'm ruining something for her. Second, you get to go to the best party in Skyrim! I'm doing you a favor, really."

Velandryn sighed. Truth be told, he might actually have fun there. *So long as they never find out who I am.* "Assuming I actually do decide to go, how will I get in? I doubt they're going to let a Dunmer in travel garb invade their party. I might decide to go ravaging."

Jordis matched his grin for a moment before bursting out in laughter. "Well, if you decide to give in to your instincts, I know a few ladies who'd be more than happy to help you find a dark corner."

She snorted, and sobered a bit. "Stop by Proudspire Manor. It's my family's home in the city, so you're more than welcome there. I can get you whatever you need. It won't be perfectly tailored, but it should serve."

*Her home in the city, is it? As opposed to the other one?* Jordis was obviously well-to-do, but it seemed he'd somewhat underestimated her family's wealth. "With a name like that, I assume it won't be hard to find?"

"Not a bit. Just ask any guard in the Blue, they'll point you there." She rose. "I'll see you tonight then?"

"Don't wager too much money on it, but you'd be safe with a little." He bowed his head, the motion feeling slightly ridiculous given how he was reclining in the tub. "I can safely say this is the most productive conversation I've ever had while bathing."

"Clearly you've never lived through a Solitude winter. Climb in the bath at the end of Frost Fall, and get out halfway through First Seed." He honestly couldn't tell how serious she was about that, but if this was the autumn, the winter must be horrific. "A good skill for the Dragonborn to have, making deals while bathing. Be well!" And with that, Jordis was gone, the door swinging shut in her wake.

*Well, that was certainly something.* He still wasn't entirely sure what to make of Jordis Proudspire, who called herself the Sword-Maiden and had a fondness for butchering his name, but she might not be the worst person with whom to cultivate a friendship. She clearly had resources to spare, and her willingness to go haring off on ill-informed adventures had enormous potential, both to advance his goals and for his own amusement. She seemed like the sort who would rally a force to help him bring down a dragon, for instance, and that was something he could see himself using.

As he lay there, his thoughts drifted once more. It was nice, being able to do nothing but think. For all of the grandeur he'd experienced while alone in Haafingar he'd been too preoccupied with travel and survival to be able to turn those sights into abstract thought. While among the Young Wolves he'd been inundated with stories and camaraderie, and it was only now that he could let his mind wander freely.

A glance at the door made him wonder about the maid who had shown him to the room. If Jordis could be believed, the servant was caught in some sort of fearful fascination, apparently with an undertone of lust. *A titillating thought, but unlikely.* Jordis had a romantic's imagination, and he had never laid eyes on this servant before a few hours ago. It made no sense for her to be interested in him.

Or did it? A basic exercise from the Temple came back to him, a method by which the Anointed could step outside of themselves for when a situation called for impartial consideration. *View it
through the eyes of others. This wouldn't solve any of his real problems, but it could prove diverting and maybe give him some insight into how he was viewed in the city.

He stripped away every true fact about himself, and replaced them with rumor and stereotype. Dunmer were dangerous, Daedra worshippers from a hostile land. They were versed in magic and untrustworthy, and rare in this part of the world besides. She wouldn't have seen many.

She worked here, in an exceptionally upscale establishment. Thinking back, Velandryn tried to picture the main room, searching for any grey skin or red eyes, but came up empty. Dunmer don't come here often.

It made sense. He could count on the thumbs of one hand the number of Dunmer he'd seen since passing the gate, and that one had been a private guard standing watch outside some sort of high-end alchemical perfumery. He doubted that was the sort who came to the Karthview Inn.

So, what does she see? A Dunmer where one shouldn't be, for one. Suddenly he wasn't just a weary traveler, but a mysterious one, and that warranted interest. And a mysterious Dunmer just cries out for sexual intrigue. If Jordis' offhand comments were anything to go by, the stereotypes of his people were well-known in Solitude, meaning that he doubtless had a reputation as a libertine and sexual deviant by the mere virtue of his skin and eyes.

Neither accusation was particularly accurate, of course, but that was irrelevant here. Velandryn was still open to the possibility of any random Nord suddenly turning into a drunken loon, so how much stronger must the rumors be when most of these people had never even spoken to a Dunmer before. A lifetime of tales, and then I walk in the door. He should probably be happy some sidelong glances were the only reaction he'd gotten.

From there, his thought drifted further astray. He wondered where Serana was now, and how she was liking her homecoming. It was an odd sensation, as he genuinely hoped she was content, but also recognized that she and her family had to be stopped. Still, it would have been nice to talk to her again. She had been an adept conversationalist when she could be coaxed out of her shell, and those last few nights on the Sea of Ghosts had shown him something…

Quickly, he turned away from that line of thinking. There was no need to go dwelling on a vampire, especially one who he'd just spent an inordinate amount of time and money getting home, and who he could probably have to kill one of these days.

That last reminded him, he still needed to hunt down Jolf and do absolutely horrific things to the man. He'd never tortured someone to death before, but in the abstract it seemed like it might not be the worst way in the world to make his displeasure known. Abandon me in the middle of nowhere, will you?

Almost at once, the face of Lydia swam into his thoughts, tutting a reprimand at considering actions that would reflect so badly on the Dragonborn. But Lydia, he betrayed me! His housecarl's silent response, that a swift and simple death would suffice, did make sense, though he had a suspicion that the real Lydia wouldn't suggest that as a first alternative. Then again, considering that his safety had most assuredly been threatened, Lydia might just kill the man herself.

It was with a twinge of guilt that he wondered how his one and only underling was liking Morrowind. She should have arrived some time ago, and might even be back in Skyrim by now, but he'd left instructions in his letters not to attempt contact by magical means, since he didn't want the Volkihar getting wind of her mission. The point was moot now, but it did mean he had no idea where she might be
She would come to no harm in Morrowind unless she went looking for it, that much was certain. He’d sent instructions to the Anointed at Great Fane to take good care of her, so hopefully she was still in one piece and not of a mind to throttle him for sending her so far away. Doubtless she was making for Ivarstead with all speed, and it wouldn’t do for him to be too delayed in arriving. Lydia might come looking for him, and he could only imagine how many broken doors and stunned guards she would leave in her wake. *Past time I was gone.*

Leaving Solitude tonight made no sense; there would doubtless be plenty of traffic heading south tomorrow morning, and he could likely reach Morthal and his horses in only a couple days.

That left him tonight, and while sleep was always nice, Jordis had piqued his interest. This party at the Blue Palace was an opportunity, though not one without dangers. Did the potential of finding an ally in Jarl Elisif outweigh the risk of the Empire realizing he was in the city?

On that note, it was entirely possible that he was being paranoid about the Empire and building a hunt for him where none existed. Perhaps the Dunmer had simply been on gate duty, and taken the chance to speak with another of his race. For that matter, perhaps the Empire truly wanted to assist him; General Tullius had to recognize the advantages that having a Dragonborn on his side could provide among the people of Skyrim. *Or, he wants me dead so I can't interfere with his plans.* If the general decided that he was a threat to the Empire, he had no doubt that the Imperials would waste no time putting his head back on the block.

The problem was, he didn't know enough to come to any real conclusions. He had to gather more information, view the problem from the outside. *Walk the streets, get a feel for the city.* It wasn't something he made a habit of doing, but the thought appealed to him at this moment. *I might even learn something about what's going on in Solitude and Skyrim.*

First, though, he could enjoy himself a bit longer. He let his mind wander, picturing that girl if she’d had just a bit more nerve. She would come in the door, shedding articles of clothing one by one as she approached, to stand naked before the tub. He saw her, arms folded playfully over her naked chest, and felt himself stir at the imagining. Delicately, she placed one pale foot into the water, and then the other joined it, so she stood above him, the fine dark hair between her legs glistening invitingly. Smiling, she bared her chest and ran a hand up between her breasts, twisting a stiff nipple and then bringing fingers to her blood-dark lips.

Her tongue darted out to tease him, and her golden eyes were moist with longing. She—

*No!* He opened his eyes, and Serana vanished. *No!* That was the absolute last thing he needed now, and thinking about her—

Such thoughts did him no good, he knew. *If only it was that simple.* Fortunately, he had plenty to occupy his mind; there was an afternoon and a night to waste in Solitude, and he'd be damned if he couldn't find a good way to do so.

There was no shame in lust, of course, but having such thoughts about a vampire made him feel… unclean. She was attractive, that much was beyond question, with her pale skin that made a wonderful contrast to her dark features. It wasn't just that, though. Her eyes as well were—

*Damn it all to the Corners!* He needed to get moving. This was only a sign that he'd been too long without sex. It meant nothing, only that he had spent time with an attractive woman, and his mind responded as it would.

Groaning, he heaved himself from the tub, eschewing the folded drying-cloths in favor of steaming the water from his skin with magic. The heat was pleasant, and it gave him a chance to appreciate
this new control he had over his body's magicka flow. It was a marked improvement over his previous capabilities, and he could only imagine how much easier it would be to cloak himself in flames should the need arise.

Dressing, he chose the plain, dark tunic and pants that had seen him across Haafingar—though, to be fair, *chose* was something of a misnomer when it was the only clothing he had available—and consciously left all of his armor on the table. He did bring boots and gloves, but only to keep himself warm. Wearing armor in a city sent messages he didn't necessarily want to send, and he doubted a few pieces of travel-worn leather armor would be the difference between life and death tonight.

He buckled on his belt, and slid both of his daggers into their sheaths. Armor was one thing, but he wasn't stupid enough to go walking around a Nord city unarmed. Besides, once he threw his cloak over his shoulders, they were completely hidden. A simple gold ring with an enchantment of magicka completed his ensemble, and as he walked out the door, he felt better than he had in a long time.

*Solitude awaits.*

One of the nice things about being in a proper city, Velandryn mused, was being once more in the presence of accurate timekeeping. The Empire had shamelessly stolen the underpinnings of clockwork from the Dwemer, and now their handiwork adorned cities beyond count. Humans might never be able to replicate the sublime delicacy of Dwemer machining, but a timepiece, in general, needed little in the way of fancy detail. So, Velandryn no longer had to look at the sun to tell the time. A simple glance at the square stone spire inset with a clock in each of the four faces told him it was two hours past midday, and that meant he had plenty of time before making up his mind about this Blue Palace business.

It was interesting, the selective diversity of Solitude. For all that every type of human walked the streets, mer and the beast races were in short supply. Truth be told, the lack of Argonians and Khajiit didn't bother him overmuch, but it was notable nonetheless.

As he travelled through the Markets, he had two constant landmarks by which to gauge his path. To the north, the grey bulk of Castle Dour squatted atop the highest ground within the walls. It was visible from every open space, a constant reminder of the Empire's presence. *Exactly what the Empire had in mind when they raised it, I'm sure.* He realized that he didn't know for certain that the Empire had built the castle, but it looked as though they had at least had a say in its design. That monumental bulk was a trademark of the imperial forts remaining in Morrowind, though none of them had hosted any Cyrod forces in centuries.

The second was the Great Windmill of Solitude, standing fifty feet above the walls, and towering a full eighty or more above Velandryn's head. It was visible by virtue of its height, but also by the shadows cast every time its massive blades slid in front of the sun. Velandryn couldn't begin to imagine the masterful engineering that must have gone into its design and construction, but he admired the vision—and ego—of the Nord who had decided to create it. The fact that it appeared to stand without magic made it even more impressive. The Dunmer had raised structures beyond count that put this piece to shame, but to do it without magic—that alone was worthy of recognition.

Focus returning to the world around him, Velandryn realized that he wasn't entirely sure where he was. He was on one of the broad streets that crisscrossed the Markets, but he wasn't entirely sure where the Karthview inn lay relative to his current position. It wasn't cause for concern, exactly, but he probably shouldn't be letting his mind wander while he walked anymore.
Orienting himself by using Castle Dour as a rough estimate of north, Velandryn turned in the direction that should have pointed away from the inn. *If I'm wandering lost, might as well see something new.* Facing east, the Blue District should be some ways ahead of him, and he was curious what the manors and estates of the well-to-do looked like. Cheerful at the thought of seeing the city, he set off down the wide boulevard, weaving between clumps of shoppers and avoiding the gaze of guards as he passed. He received a few second glances, but nobody seemed to care enough to stop him.

At first glance, Solitude had seemed to be thriving despite the war, but Velandryn was starting to reassess. People were out, but most weren't buying much, and every snippet of conversation he overhead was carried out in worried and hushed tones. As well, he noticed that very few of those he passed were adults in their prime. Rather, these were the young, the old, and the infirm. *War takes the strong, it would seem.* Not all of them, to be sure, but enough had heeded the Empire's call for soldiers that even Velandryn, who still had trouble pinpointing a human's age to within even the correct decade sometimes, could see what was happening. Of those young adults who remained, most seemed to be finely dressed and richly heeled; doubtless these were more of Jordis' peers.

Ahead, the street jogged to the left, and passed beneath a grey stone wall that looked to link the windmill to Castle Dour. Velandryn imagined that this would be where the Markets became the Blue, and indeed, a trio of guards in Solitude's colors and a pair of legionaries were standing watch under the arch. Fortunately, none of them were Dunmer, and they looked to be otherwise occupied. A vagrant of some variety had gotten too close, it seemed, and they were dealing with the problem with all of the tact and subtlety he had come to expect from Nords.

"Begone, beggar!" The guard who had shouted aimed a rock at the scrawny man in the dirty clothes, but missed by several feet. The target scampered away up the street in Velandryn's general direction, and the guards turned back to whatever conversation they'd been having before, unconcerned.

As he approached, Velandryn was forced to reassess, as this was clearly no man. The Bosmer was old, and looked much the worse for wear. His beard looked to have been well-kept once, though time had done it no favors, and the same held true for his hair and clothes. Everything about him shouted of a mer brought low from a position of power, and Velandryn wondered what had happened.

Perhaps his curiosity had been more overt than he'd intended, because the strange mer stopped a few paces away and fixed Velandryn with his dark eyes. "Oh, please, you must help me!"

"Must I?" Charity was one thing, but Velandryn wasn't going to get mixed up in whatever grudge this odd mer and the guards had against each other.

"Yes! You can find my master, and convince him to come home!" The Bosmer had transitioned from desperation to excitement instantly, and now he clapped his hands before him as though he were praying. "They won't let me go to him, but you can!"

Velandryn had to chuckle. "Sorry, but I'm the wrong person to ask. Wherever your master is, I'd wager a Nord would have an easier time getting there."

"Oh, but it must be you. Here, you'll need the hipbone!" Before Velandryn could do more than wonder for the briefest moment what the Bosmer meant, the other mer produced what was unmistakably a human pelvis from some unseen pocket. As it was shoved unceremoniously into Velandryn's hands, the Bosmer drew close and nodded vigorously. "He's in the Blue Palace, in the Pelagius Wing! You'd best hurry, he's been gone so long already."
Half-stunned, Velandryn opened his mouth, but before he could speak, he felt something. The item he'd been given resonated like only one thing he had ever known.

_Dragon!

He almost dropped the hipbone, but clutched it and spun on the Bosmer. "What is this? What have you done?" He couldn't say how, but this...thing...in his hand sang out.

Mad terror now covered the other's face, eyes wide and mouth spooning and closing soundlessly. "You have to go! The Blue Palace, Pelagius! You have to!" Then, before Velandryn could react, he was off, running down the street with arms and legs flapping in a graceless sprint.

With another start, Velandryn realized that this odd scene had drawn attention, and now he was standing in the center of a growing circle of curious onlookers. Tucking the hipbone beneath his cloak, he pivoted and headed down one of the side alleys, trying desperately to act as though he knew what he was doing.

After a few random turns, he was fairly confident that any curious onlookers had been left behind. He lifted the bone and examined it more closely. It was unmistakably human—he had studied comparative anatomy long enough to recognize the difference between a human's skeletal structure and that of a mer, and this one lacked the secondary iliac ridges that typified mortals of meric descent—but there was no mistaking what he was feeling. This bone belonged to a dragon. And there was only one way he could think of for a pelvis that looked like this to sing like dragonbone.

He hefted the bone in his hand and looked east, to where he knew the Blue Place could be found. It wouldn't be easy getting in, he imagined, and he ran the very real risk of being revealed as the Dragonborn, but there was no way in Oblivion he could just walk away from this.

After all, it wasn't every day somebody handed you the hipbone of a Dragonborn, and there was only so much that could be explained by coincidence. Meeting Jordis in the wilderness he could accept. This, however, reeked of design.

It was time to get some answers.

"Wake up, outlander."

With a start, Lydia pulled herself from a fitful sleep, and this time she remembered not to sit up. The cabin was cramped even for the crew, and she was a good head taller than most of those who served aboard the _Amar'balak_. For the past three days she'd given herself a fine blow to the head each time she sat up in her bunk, but now she rolled sideways and slid her bare feet down onto the rough planks of the floor. She still wasn't steady at sea, but at least this time she didn't fall when the floor rocked. _Deck. They call it a deck._

As she stood, the sailor who'd spoken reached out, handing her a skin that sloshed invitingly. The first time this had happened, she'd drank eagerly, but now she only sipped. Sure enough, it was the dry, bitter wine that the Dunmer called shein. She'd heard one complaining that they were all out of greef, and she only imagine the horrors that other drink would hold. Grimacing slightly, she handed it back. It seemed there was no interest in mead in Morrowind; the ship carried not even a single keg.

The sailor took it, and turned to go. "We've all but reached Morrowind. You should come see." This sailor—she could not for the life of her remember his name, though they had been introduced when she first boarded—spoke Imperial Common well enough, but his accent and occasional odd
turns of phrase were a constant reminded that she was aboard a foreign ship.

She took the stairs slowly, not bothering to pull on her boots. The floors were designed so that even bare feet could grip well, so long as you didn't mind the occasional splinter. Of course, these sailors put even her feet, well-worn as they were form a lifetime of patrolling, to shame. Some seemed to have soles that were more callus than flesh, and Captain Milara Andaram had shown Lydia her own feet, with which the Dunmer claimed she could walk on broken glass and feel nothing. Not for the first time, Lydia gave thanks that Whiterun was far, far away from the sea.

The Amar’balak had been cutting past icebergs and keeping watch for sea raiders when she'd gone to bed last night—gone to hammock?—but now they were sailing through a muddy grey sea, with no ice to be seen. Off to their right, a row of mountains rose from the water, and the sky above was a dark reddish-grey that put her in mind of a dying fire. She sniffed, and smelled smoke, though from where she could not say.

The sailor was waiting for her, and handed her a length of cloth. He pantomimed wrapping it around her face. "Bad air for outlanders. Don't breathe it." She did as he'd suggested, fumbling slightly with the unfamiliar garment. Face impassive, the sailor watched.

When she thought she had it well enough tied, she left it and looked out over the water. She could see the shore and the sky was clearer behind them, but the haze and grey made it impossible to tell what was ahead. "Is it always like this?"

The Dunmer shook his head, face impassive. "Wind from the east, brings Dag—Red Mountain’s fire." Now that he mentioned it, she noticed the wind was in her face. She hadn't though ships could sail against the wind very well, but she knew little of such matters, and wasn't about to question sailors on their craft.

Lydia nodded, her distaste for this entire scheme of Velandryn's not in the least abated by the knowledge that a changing wind could make the very air dangerous. "Why did you bring me up here then?"


At first, she saw nothing. The sailor left her standing there, going off to perform one of the hundreds of tasks that kept the ship running to Captain Andaram's pleasure, or the closest approximation the Dunmer permitted. She turned, looking for someone to question, and saw a Nord with a similar cloth around his face hauling a rope across the deck. That was Kollar, one of the few on the crew not a native of Morrowind.

When she asked, however, he simply shook his head. "I signed on in Jehanna. Never seen Blacklight." She'd known that, she suddenly remembered. Whether it was the unnatural light or the faint smell of smoke or something else altogether, she was on edge, and not thinking too clearly.

Muttering vague curses against all Dunmer, and her thane in particular, she stomped forward and positioned herself at the bow. If she was going to be shown something, she might as well get it over with.

Behind her, someone raised a cry, and ropes and sails creaked as they moved. The ship swung rightward, and suddenly, the shapes of mountians were before them, resolving themselves out of the fog with worrying speed. Blessed Shor, we'll crash! She wondered what madness had seized the captain, or whoever was driving this thing. No, they're all too calm. This must be the right thing, even if she couldn't for the life of her understand why.
She gripped the front railing so hard that she heard the wood crack, and watched the shore approach. The moment she could see details, it all became clear. She saw Blacklight, and what awaited her.

And it took her breath away.

Chapter End Notes

A/N Long wait, long chapter.

It's been a while. Of course, you could just about split this chapter in two and get halves that would stand on their own, so consider this an affirmation that I will split the story where it feels thematically appropriate, rather than where length dictates. However, if chapters of this length are actually bugging people or making it difficult to read, let me know rather than suffering in silence.
Chapter Summary

It's never easy to be in a foreign land, even less so when it belongs to the Dunmer.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“This isn’t a respectable book, and I’m very proud of that.

Odds are, if you’re reading this, you’re considering taking a trip to Morrowind. Now, I’m the last one to judge, so I won’t presume it’s entirely voluntary on your part. If, for example, you’re on the run in eastern Cyrodiil, trying to get over the border can look a lot better than rotting in the local Legion hellhole.

However, I must stress that Morrowind is not for everyone. If you’re Argonian or Khajiit, stay out! Cat-folk have it better than the lizards, but neither one’s going to get much love there. Everyone else, just remember that you’re an “outlander” and don’t try to fit in. You do this, you probably won’t get stabbed. I’ll go more into being an outlander later but don’t try to convince them you aren’t one, unless you’re the best liar this side of the Gray Fox.

Now, for some good news. The Empire might pretend Morrowind is still theirs, but nobody seems to have let the Dunmer know. Imperial laws end at the Border Forts, and the Dunmer really don’t care what you did in the Empire. Not their land, not their problem.

Of course, the Dark Elves also don’t want you in their precious homeland, so it might be a good idea to figure out a nice set of lies as to why it’s such a smart move for them to let you in. (Chapter Two is all about how to get over the border, so don’t start worrying yet!)

I’m not saying live the rest of your life there, because that would be terrible. But maybe a year or two out of the reach of whatever mischief you got up to back home is just what you need? Again, I’m not here to judge, just to help.”


As the ash and fog lifted, Lydia saw their destination, and for a heartbeat she thought her eyes must have been playing a trick on her. A moment later, she realized the truth of what she was seeing.

Before them stretched a cliff rising from the sea, a sheer wall of rough dark stone whose height she couldn’t even begin to guess. The Amar’balak was not, as she’d thought, on a course to ram straight into the rock. Instead, it was headed for a passage, a channel in the great cliff wall that, despite its considerable width, appeared tiny when scaled against its surroundings. Flanking this cleft were two towers, lone spires that towered above even the heights of the cliff tops.

“Indaryn’val. The Indaryn Gate.” Captain Andaram had come to stand beside her; the Dark Elf had her hands clasped behind her back and an unmistakable note of pride in her voice. “This is the sole
entrance to Baan Malur by sea, and a most welcome sight to every mer aboard this ship.” The wind whipped at the strands of multicolored beads sewn to her shawl, and their clicking put Lydia in mind of hailstones on a roof.

“Those towers, though. How do they stand?” They must have been raised by sorcery, for surely they would have come tumbling down in the first storm.

“Na Parat’ken. The Sentinels. Ayrne’ken and Kalira’ken—Defiance and Warning in your tongue—guard the port of Baan Malur, as they have since the Reconciliation. They stand by the faith of our people, which holds them aloft.” At Lydia’s disbelieving look, the captain’s eyes brightened slightly. “There are also spells of levitation and feathering woven into the stones.”

With a flush, Lydia realized she’d been played for a fool. The captain did not smile—many of the sailors aboard made Velandryn seem garrulous and open by comparison—but Lydia could tell the Dark Elf was amused.

Trying to regain her composure, she studied the approaching vista. The cliffs seemed to have a regularity to them, something she couldn’t discern. An insane thought occurred to her, and she had to give it voice. “Are those cliffs…did the Dark Elves make them?”

The captain laughed. “You see the pattern then? Many thought as you did, but the scholars say it’s what happens when molten stone cools in an instant. No, no hand save that of Mehrunes Dagon carved the cliffs of Baan Malur. Before this place was a city, it was a great cauldron of living fire, a volcano akin to Ash Mountain and Dagoth Ur to the east. You can see the shape of it from within.”

Within. She couldn’t see anything save the cliffs and towers, but presumably they would be going either behind or under the cliffs, and into an ancient volcano. What sort of place is Baan Malur, this Blacklight?

Amar’balak swept forward, and the cliffs in front of her grew ever more imposing. In the reddish light filtering through the smoky haze above, the cliffs appeared fully black, and glistened with what almost looked to be moisture. The towers were made of some dark material that looked oddly unlike stone, and their strange design—flowing, with sharp angles wherever two curves met—put her uneasily in mind of something not unlike a great insect or crab. Is this Dunmer architecture?

Captain Andaram, for her part, seemed completely at ease. She shouted something to her crew in Dunmeris, then turned to Lydia. “You may wish to cover your ears.”

“What do—“ An explosive blast of sound jerked her rigid in shock, and a second sent her stumbling. As tried to regain her balance, the sound echoed around her. We’re under attack!

Lydia spun as a third, longer blast echoed overhead, reaching for the sword that she belatedly remembered was with her armor belowdecks. Then, she saw the captain. Milara Andaram was standing there unconcerned, looking not at all surprised at having a sudden noise erupt around her. Whatever that sound was, clearly the captain had known it was coming, and had decided to have a bit of fun at the Nord’s expense.

The captain inclined her head slightly, her narrowed eyes managing to convey amusement. “They don’t call it the Tower of Warning for nothing. All ships are sighted and reported.” She gave a small shrug. “Two short blasts and one long signifies a Dunmer vessel returning. Our meeting-ship should be here shortly.” She turned to look forward. “Rest assured that were we hostile, you would see from where the Tower of Defiance draws its name.”

So far as Lydia knew, the Dunmer hadn’t been at war on the sea in a very long time. “Does that
happen often?"

The captain’s eyes were generally a shade or two lighter than Velandryn’s but here they darkened to match his. “When we were…in bad times, we transported much by ship since the roads were often too dangerous or unreliable. Pirates took advantage of this, and caused us much grief and loss of life in their predations. When the Great Council established the Rootspire in Baan Malur, they ordered the towers raised, to show that the seas of Morrowind belong only to the Dunmer.” She clasped her hands behind her back, an affectation that had come to remind Lydia of her thane. “A week after the towers were completed, pirates, made bold by years of Dunmer weakness, thought to raid a grain transport bound for our new capital, within sight of our new towers.”

“What happened?”

“These were raiders from Skyrim, taking what they could in lightning strikes. A dozen small ships or more, striking and looting Dunmer supply barges and mercy-skimmers. So, they thought they could give chase to this one, then turn tail and run if anything from Baan Malur came out to stop them. Instead, Defiance unleashed lances of fire from atop its crown. It is said that the time from the moment it first ignited to the destruction of the last ship was less than a minute. Of those raiders who survived to be pulled out of the water, most had not even known they were under attack until their ships were beyond salvation.”

“I see.” She couldn’t even imagine something like that. Then, she heard what the captain had said. “You saved the pirates?” That didn’t seem very like the Dark Elves. Perhaps she’d misjudged them.

She hadn’t. “They needed to be questioned, after all. We found their ports, their hiding places, the secluded coves where they put to shore in foul weather. Once they had run out of answers, we gave them to the war-wasps and sent a fleet to eradicate their pestilence once and for all.”

Lydia didn’t even want to know what a war-wasp was. “That’s an…incredible story.” She had a bit of trouble believing it, but then again, she really didn’t know what the Dark Elves were capable of. Perhaps they truly can burn ships from miles away. The brutality, though, that was perfectly in line with the stories she’d heard as a girl. Shuddering slightly, Lydia turned back to watch the approaching shore.

Just then, Captain Andaram gestured to get her attention. “You see? We’re being met.” From the passage between the cliffs, a single ship was coming towards them, still too far away to make out any details. “The Redoran Sea Guard. They’ll make sure we are who we appear to be.”

As the ship approached, Lydia got a strange feeling. The ship was wrong somehow. As it drew closer, she realized what was unnerving her. What in Oblivion is it made of?

Whatever material had been used for the ship’s hull, it wasn’t wood. Wood didn’t flow like that and form those strange angles. Glancing up, she confirmed that it looked the same as the towers above them. Puzzled, she looked over at Captain Andaram and voiced her thoughts.

The Dunmer nodded. “Good eye, but not quite. The ships are katta’skar, the towers kattar’mokh. We use chitin from mudcrabs for ships. Stronger than any wood, and lighter besides. The towers are in the ancient Redoran style, designed to withstand the winds of…well, ash storms, you would call them.” She shook her head and sighed. “Your Imperial tongue needs more precise words if you want to use it here.”

Lydia wasn’t so sure. “We call Dunmer armor bonemold at least, isn’t that the same?”
“No. Tebbehk—bonemold—is from bones of land-creatures; nobody would build with it. Ask an artisan what they use, I’ve never been able to keep all the materials and mixtures straight. For ships, well, you can’t do much better than a crab. Dreugh, maybe, but nobody wants to start another war.”

She’d heard of the near-mythical creatures called Dreugh before. “Are they that dangerous?”

Milara shrugged. “They don’t bother us anymore, and we don’t bother them. They’re an ancient race, wise in the old ways, and they’ve the favor of Molag Bal. Bad fortune to go courting the wrath of the House of Troubles.”

Lydia was growing more and more confused. The Dreugh were wise? “I thought your people hated Molag Bal? Shouldn’t that mean you want to kill the Dreugh, like you do vampires?”

When Captain Andaram spoke, she sounded slightly exasperated. “It’s not like that, human. The Four are the House of Troubles, but you can’t just…petin ketoss ilah—ah, forget it! Ask a priest when you get to the Temple. They can probably explain it.” Her face didn’t change—she was Dunmer, after all—but she was clearly annoyed.

Lydia for her part, hadn’t meant to cause annoyance. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to distress you.”

The captain waved her hand in Lydia’s direction. “Not your fault. I know what I want to say, but I’m not sure how to go about explaining it in this language, especially to somebody who doesn’t follow the faith.” She shrugged. “We hunt down vampires because they’re a thrice-damned plague, and the fact they serve Molag Bal just makes it holy. We don’t go killing Orcs just because they worship Malacath, or execute madmen for hearing Sheogorath in their heads. It’s a balancing act, you know? The Dreugh serve Old Burning-Stone, but they also know what is and isn’t their territory. Every Dunmer sailor knows where the Dreugh caves are, but it’s been two thousand years since the last time Ruddy Man came walking, so we hunt the few who come to our world, and don’t go looking for the rest. The treaty holds, though those who made it are long since gone.” She nodded once, and returned to watching the approaching ship.

Lydia still had questions, like just what the Dreugh were to the Dunmer, and how this apparent treaty with them worked, but the ship—made from mudcrabs, of all things!—was approaching, and no far-off question could draw her away from this strange sight.

The ship was of a size with the Amar’balak, but that was where the similarities ended. For one, the shape was unlike anything Lydia had ever seen. Instead of sweeping forward, the front—prow, Lydia half-remembered it might be called—pulled back after leaving the water, which, coupled with the bulging and oddly ridged hull, made the ship look as though someone had attached sails to a great beast of the sea, which now swam, half-submerged, towards their ship.

The crew as well looked like some sort of insects or crab-men, walking about with spiked heads and tan shells, but it only took her a moment to realize that was armor. As the ship pulled even with Amar’balak, one of the soldiers moved to the edge of the ship. This one was wearing a more ornate helm than the others, with what looked to be feathered plumes streaming back in a design possibly meant to resemble hair. When he removed the outlandish headpiece, it was to reveal a Dunmer with a shaven head and some sort of butterfly-looking design drawn in white across the entirety of his face. He uttered a long stream of Dunmeris, and Captain Andaram responded in kind.

The two spoke back and forth, and Lydia couldn’t for the life of her tell if something was wrong. Neither appeared agitated, but it sounded as though each was trying to shout over the other. The Dark Elf tongue was a harsh language, however, and their utter lack of facial expressions made them difficult to read. Once, the armored one gestured at her, but Captain Andaram replied with
what seemed like calm, and whatever answer she’d given seemed to mollify the…*what is this one? A guard, a customs official?* She doubted that last one, if only because no customs-man she’d ever met would actually venture any distance away from their nice warm guardposts to do their jobs. *That lot’ll be waiting on the docks, no doubt.* 

Apparently, all was in order, and the strange looking boat came around to head back where it had come. *Amar’balak* ran up her sails again at the captain’s shout, and the two proceeded towards the passage ahead.

Captain Andaram turned and started walking back towards the rest of the ship, and Lydia followed. Before they got more than a few steps her curiosity got the better of her. “No problems, I trust?” *My thane must be a bad influence on me.*

The captain shook her head. “I am well-known to the Sea Guard of Baan Malur. As we come from Skyrim, however, we must dock in the Outland Port, where we can be inspected and assessed more thoroughly.” She bowed her head slightly. “It would not do for…corruption…to enter our lands through a lack of vigilance.” She nodded to something behind Lydia. “This is your first time to Baan Malur, is it not, Lydia *ko’thil* Velandryn Savani? If you have never seen the approach, it may be worth watching.”

Intrigued despite herself, Lydia turned again and watched the dark cliffs draw closer. As they drew into the shadow of the walls to either side, she could see the pits and crags in their faces, and the imperfections suddenly drove home just how monumental these walls were. They had nothing on the mountains of Skyrim, of course, but rising as they did, all at once from the sea, made their hundred-foot height look more dramatic than mountains around the Whiterun Plains, many which were easily ten or twenty times that size.

From this close, she could see the truth of the pattern. Long vertical lines ran down the cliffs, and in places parts seemed to have peeled off or jutted out. Here and there dark rocks stuck out of the water, and when she glanced over the edge Lydia could see shadowy shapes in the water below. These submerged rocks, however, did not come close to breaking the surface, and so their path was safe.

Above, the alien towers of Watch and Warning loomed ominously, and Lydia couldn’t help feeling that these two guard-posts should, by all rights, be on the verge of collapse. Balconies and small turrets protruded out on all sides and seemingly at random, and one tower even had a great bulbous *growth* almost at the top, resembling nothing so much as a wasps’ nest in the bark of a tree. These two creations looked as though they had grown there, part organic and part artificial, and the union of the two struck her as essentially *wrong.*

Something else, a patch near the top of the eastern tower, caught her eye, and Lydia had to look away when she felt her skin begin to crawl. She told herself that it had just been her imagination. *There couldn’t have been insects crawling around up there.* They would have to be as big as horses, to see them from down here. Then she remembered Captain Andaram’s talk of war-warps, and scratched a spot on her arm that had started to itch, shivering.

Thankfully, they were soon at an angle where Lydia couldn’t make out any more of the towers, only the cliffs that held them. And, coming into view, the ship that had met them, now sitting at dock. It was moored, along with three others just like it, at a wharf that looked to be…

She rubbed her eyes and looked again, and then decided that she should really stop being shocked by what she saw in Morrowind. The docks were made from the roots attached to an enormous barrel-shaped plant, which had been hollowed out and anchored to the cliff wall. She could see smoke rising from a chimney-like protrusion in the domed roof, and numerous lights blazed in
window-holes around the periphery. The pattern of its walls put her in mind of some kind of mushroom, and she remembered tales of Dark Elf wizards who grew entire cities to serve their whims. *Maybe not so outlandish after all.*

As they passed the dock, one of the sentries standing watch aboard a ship turned to regard her. They were very close to each other, and Lydia could see the tassels hanging from the sentry’s helmet swing in the breeze. The Dark Elf—she assumed it was a Dunmer, at least, since she couldn’t see any skin to confirm it—raised a hand, though whether it was warning or greeting, Lydia could not say. *Amar’balak* was soon past the docks, and the sentry was lost to view.

Lydia turned to look ahead again, and to her shock found herself in what looked like nothing so much as a tunnel. There was a sliver of angry red and grey sky above, but the walls that flanked the ship made it seem a thin and far-off thing. Fortunately, the channel looked to widen ahead, and so Lydia focused on that.

Gradually, the sight beyond the passage became clear, and Lydia saw, for the first time in her life, a city that wasn’t founded on the hallowed principles of the Nords. She had thought she was ready for it, that the strangeness she’d seen already had given her an idea of what to expect from Blacklight, the city the Dark Elves called Baan Malur.

She hadn’t been.

“*If you’re smart, you won’t get involved with Dark Elf politics, but you should at least know who’s in charge of wherever you are.*

House Redoran are the ones on top of everything, but they’re not all bad. Most of them are arseholes, but their guards won’t run you through for looking at them funny. (Again, this doesn’t count if you’re Argonian. They *will* kill you for looking at them funny. Or not funny, or not looking at them. Basically, being Argonian in Morrowind is punishable by death these days.)

One thing to note, Redoran take their laws seriously, so have your fun when nobody’s looking. You might think you’ve seen some snitches in the Empire, but nothing compares to how Redoran’ll screech if they see you breaking one of their precious rules. I’m talking alert the whole town, get the garrison turned out, mages, nix-hounds, the works. And Redoran don’t bother throwing outlanders in prison. You’ll get hard labor, exile (if you’re very lucky) or death.

Their capital is Blacklight—they call it Baan Malur, but don’t bother using their tongue unless you’ve a gift for languages; they don’t like outlanders pretending to be locals—and I’ll say this, it’s a damn fine city if you’re Dunmer. If you’re not, well, you might be better off in Kragenmoor or another of the smaller cities. Blacklight can be confusing, and with a lot of important people around, everyone’s watching the outlanders a little more closely.

Somebody might suggest Solstheim, but trust me when I say that’s a fool’s game. You want to make Morrowind worse? Take away the civilization, make it cold even when it’s raining ash, and you have Solstheim.

Other than House Redoran, you got Sadras, the Temple, Dres, and Telvanni. If you’re in Dres or Telvanni territory, all I’m going to say is GET OUT NOW. Dres will slap chains on you and throw you on a plantation until you’re too weak to work and they let their wasps lay eggs in you, and the Telvanni are worse.

Sadras are a gamble, no two ways about it. Most of them were Ashlanders, and the ones that weren’t are descended from them. All you need to know about Ashlanders is that those guys make
the House Dunmer look like High Rock dilettantes. They will kill you for saying the wrong thing to them, and when dealing with House Sadras you’re better off keeping your mouth shut and your eyes down.

Now, the Temple’s not half bad, long as you stay on their good side. They’ll feed you and heal you even if you are an outland heathen, but you’d best believe they’re taking notes while they do. You can run to a new town, but the first thing the Temple will ask is where you came from, and then they’ll see what their friends from that town have on you. You can run from your troubles, but running from the Temple’s harder.

If you’re going to steal from the Temple, my only advice is write up a good will first. They have some nice stuff in their halls and reliquaries, but the Ordinators make other guards look like puppy dogs. You cross an Ordinator, you die. If you’re near Mournhold and you cross one of the bastards in black armor—Ordinators-Defiant is what they call themselves—you die slow.

So, if you still want to go to Morrowind, read on!”


Blacklight was circular. That was the first thing that came to Lydia’s mind. The entire city sat in an enormous bowl; towers and great buildings lined the rim, and the sprawl stretched from skyline to water’s edge. That upper rim had to be miles away and a hundred feet or more up; the line of rooftops looked more akin to mountains than buildings from down here. One spire in particular towered above the others; it had to be a mile up or more. Blacklight was larger than Whiterun, without question, and likely could rival even Solitude. *I thought the Dunmer were a broken people!*

The sea itself occupied the lowest part of the city, though numerous islands and dockworks broke up the water’s expanse. Some were pillars of stone rising steeply from the sea, others gently sloping expanses of sand and rock. Bridges were everywhere, of rope and wood and some that looked as though they were made of glass or bone or other, still stranger things. Less numerous but still notable were the docks, lining the shores and jutting out into the water seemingly at random.

Ships were much in evidence, most of them tiny and—Lydia assumed—used for fishing or personal transport. There were a few in the strange style of the one that had met them, but they seemed to be clustered in one region of the bowl, an area that Lydia couldn’t make out too well from here but assumed was some sort of naval dockyard. One in particular looked to be designed for war and nothing else; its deck—which sported a dozen or more ballistae that Lydia could see—was three or four times as high as *Amar’balak*, and its prow was adorned with what was unmistakably a massive ram, carved to resemble a great stinger. *Or was it harvested?* She quickly dismissed that thought, though. No insect could possibly get that large.

Even the buildings were alien, and Lydia began to despair of seeing anything familiar. What wood there was vanished quickly the farther the buildings got from the water, and instead of stone or brick, the Dunmer favored an odd tan material that looked to be like sand but was molded into fantastical architecture that made each building feel like a slumbering insect or crab. Those buildings that did have a more regular shape seemed to favor pyramids, though these had rounded edges and broad flat tops. Many of these rose directly from the water, and had small docks of their own. To be fair, there were other, more mundanely-shaped buildings, but they were few and far between, and got lost amidst the wild designs that pulled her eyes every which way.

And that was to say nothing of the Rootspire. Velandryn had spoken of it several times, and there
was no mistaking the single massive tower rising from the center of the bay. It sat on the largest island, and the bridge that connected it to the mainland was a broad span of that stone-like substance, shaped so that it seemed to be held aloft by roots rising from the water. The Rootspire itself was hugely broad at the base, but tapered up amidst balconies and galleries and columns that looked like the roots for which the building was named, until it reached a great flame surrounded by arches.

Fire, it was clear, was something of a theme here. Any building of more than three stories had a brazier or torch burning atop it, and so Blacklight was awash in flame.

The ash and haze wasn’t as bad down here, and when Lydia pulled the cloth from her face she found the air quite easy to breathe, with only a hint of that ashy taste. Whether it was magic or some trick of the basin they were now in she didn’t know, but Blacklight seemed to offer some shelter from the storm.

They were among the islands now, and as they passed, Lydia noticed Dark Elves going about their business. She leaned out to try and get a better view at all that was going on ashore, not caring how it must look.

Two figures who must have been guards patrolled one of the docks, though they were more heavily armored than any guards Lydia had ever seen. Each was encased head-to-toe in heavy armor, both suits made of that same tan material that so resembled the shell of some great crab. Their helmets especially completed the illusion, and she found herself feeling sorry for any lawbreaker who had to explain herself to those two.

A shadow fell over Lydia, and she realized they’d passed beneath one of the bridges that linked the islands. This one was a single arcing span, made of something that looked almost like pottery and stretched from the edge of one island to the top of one of the rounded pyramids that rose from the water. It was high enough that even *Amar’balak*’s main mast didn’t come close to hitting its underside, and once they were far enough away for her to look back, the Dunmer atop it were little more than tiny specks. Once more, she was struck by the scale of this city. *The Dunmer build large, if nothing else.*

Ahead, she could see what had to be their dock, and she found herself a little disappointed that her bizarre tour would be coming to an end. She’d caught a glimpse of an island that had looked to hold a hundred fountains of water in as many shades, and they’d swept by a figure who’d been walking a lizard the size of a hunting dog on a leash. She had no doubt a hundred things as wild and strange were just waiting around every corner. However, now she had a task that only she could do.

With shouts and the creak of wood, *Amar’balak* was made fast to the dock, and a single broad plank walkway was lowered to the shore. Workers had gathered along the docks, but the first aboard were two of the guards in their strange tan armor, with every humanizing feature hidden well behind faceless helms. Each had a shield on their back and a weapon at their waist, and while the shields were and of a kind with the armor, the weapons were not. One guard had a flanged mace made of some deep red metal—or, it’s made from bugs! Who knows anymore? The other bore a gleaming-hilted sword in a scabbard that looked to have been woven from some fiber or cloth that shimmered though no light shone on it.

The captain had met them at the top of the walkway, and soon waved Lydia over. She arrived in time to hear one of them finish some statement in the Dark Elf tongue and then turn to look at her. “Your business in Baan Malur, outlander.” It was heavily accented Imperial, slightly halting but very clear. The voice left no doubt that this was a Dunmer like her thane, and the tone made it
equally clear that this one lacked even Velandryn’s slight appreciation for the Nords.

“I have business at Great Fane, on behalf of Velandryn Savani, Anointed of the Temple.” She had practiced the best way to state this, and discussed how best to use Velandryn’s title with the captain. She held out the sheaf of letters that had not left her side since they’d been given to her. Each had been marked with a single unreadable line—in Daedric letters, she was fairly certain—of Velandryn’s precise script, presumably the intended recipient. “You see, here are the messages.” She didn’t hand them over, for fear they would simply take them. She’d been instructed to bring them to the Temple herself, after all.

The guards, however, seemed interested in only one of them. “Do you read Dunmeris, outlander?” That was the guard with the mace.

“Ah, no, no I don’t.” She wondered if something on one of the letters was amusing or offensive, and hoped her thane’s dark sense of humor hadn’t come into play while he was drafting these.

“This one is for us.” The guard pointed at a thin sheet of parchment, and took it before she could protest. He scanned it and handed it to the other guard, who had yet to move.

This guard with the sword looked at it briefly and then turned to regard Lydia. She—the voice was unmistakably female—uttered a short phrase in the Dark Elf tongue, and the first guard placed a clenched fist to his chest and gave a short reply.

He turned to face Lydia, and when he spoke his tone was slightly more respectful. “You speak true. I will show you how to find High Fane, and the ones you seek.” He pivoted, and make for the ramp. “Gather your things and follow.”

Lydia turned to Captain Andaram, but the other woman was already waving at one of her crew, who darted below. The Dunmer extended a hand. “Fare you well, Lydia ko’thil Velandryn Savani.”

Lydia clasped it in the Nord style. She had no idea if that was what she was supposed to do, but she wasn’t about to let herself forget who she was just because she was in some foreign land. *If Velandryn can do it, so can I!* “To you as well, Captain. May the winds be at your back.” She’d heard sailors say that before, and Kyne’s blessing was good for any to have.

The sailor who had vanished below now emerged, her armor, weapons, and pack in his arms. Captain Andaram looked back at it, then at her. “I can have it all sent to the Temple, if you’d like.”

By rights, Lydia should probably have been fully armored already, but she’d neglected to don it during their approach—a choice she didn’t regret, considering the fantastical things staying above had allowed her to see—and now it seemed a bad time to do so. *Still…*

She shook her head. “No, I’ll carry it with me.” It wouldn’t do to have another carry her burdens, after all, and making the guards wait for a few minutes wouldn’t be the end of the world. Besides, she didn’t want to be unarmed in this city.

As she descended from the ship, Captain Andaram’s farewell sounding from behind, she noticed for the first time the nature of the place they’d docked. It was part of a larger complex, one that seemed segregated from the rest of Blacklight. The bay surrounded it on two sides, and a cliff topped by more of the city blocked access to one more side. The final end was marked off with a smooth wall made of that strange tan substance that looked to be neither stone nor earth, with a single opening watched by four of the guards. *Is this where the foreigners are kept?* Captain Andaram had said something about that, after all.
There were three ships docked at this strange enclosure, and Lydia couldn’t help but notice that all of them looked to be from outside Morrowind. One had Imperial dragons on the sides, one looked to her like something Breton or Redguard merchants would use, and the third was unmistakably a Nord longship, of the kind that raiders in the stories used to prey on honest merchants. *Why would that be here?*

As she reached the dock, a guard stepped in front of her and gestured. “This way, outlander.” She assumed it was the same one from the ship, though to be honest most Dunmer males other than Velandryn had very similar-sounding voices. Either way, she wasn’t going to go wandering down any dark alleys with this one, but she couldn’t see the harm in following him here.

Lydia silently followed the guard down the docks to what looked to be a watchtower of some sort, and her guide rapped on the door. It was opened by another in the same armor, and the two shared a brief exchange in Dunmeris. Every time she heard that damnable tongue, Lydia couldn’t help but feel the space between her shoulder blades itch, as though it were waiting for somebody to plant a dagger there. She knew it was very unlikely that they were going to kill her, but there was something deep in her Nord’s soul that hated not knowing what Elves were saying.

Finally, the guard turned back to her. “You will be provided with,” there was a pause, as if for thought, “documents of identity, providing your status as *ko’thil* to a member of the Temple. This is an unusual situation for an outlander, and you may present these documents as needed.”

“What exactly will these documents show?” Lydia wasn’t entirely sure what her status was, but this entire thing seemed very odd. “What if I lost them?”

“That would be unfortunate.” This guard’s use of Imperial Common wasn’t nearly as quick or clever as Velandryn’s, but he spoke clearly enough. “You should not do that. The papers show that you are not an outlander, even though you clearly are.” He did not sound pleased about this.

“So wait, everyone who isn’t Dunmer needs to carry these papers?”

“No. Only those like you, who are both outlanders and not. You do not fit, so you must be described.” The door opened, and the guard from within handed her a tightly bound scroll. She took it, and the guard she’d been talking to turned. “Follow. You should ask at the Temple, if you have more questions.”

With that, the guard was off again, and she had no choice but to follow. She hated it, tagging along behind this figure that barely came up to her nose even in full plate, but her only other choice was to be left behind, and she wasn’t sure how to find the temple herself. So, she followed.

The guard stopped and pointed in the direction of the wall. “You go through the gate of the Outland Port. Follow the main road along the curve of Cauldron Hold. Keep the water to your right. You will come to a statue of three figures. Turn left until you face away from the sea, and take the broad road before you. Head uphill and you will see a hall with three flames. Turn right, and travel along the Storm Walk until you see the Temple. Is that clear?” He had spoken quite fast, and was clearly expecting her response to be confusion. *Any chance to mock the Nord, hmm?*

Lydia’s head was spinning from the speed of the description, but she thought she had the general impression. “Aye, I have it. Thank you for your help.” She had a good head for directions, and she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of having to repeat it for the dumb Nord. She knew how her people were perceived, and she was going to prove them wrong!

She hitched her pack onto her shoulder, smiled at the guard’s faceless helm, and was off before the Dark Elf could answer. It might be petty, but she was going to find this place, and without any
more help from Dunmer who clearly didn’t want her here. What was my thane thinking, sending me here?

Numerous times since my interviews began, the Prelate has drawn a distinction between the “old” Dunmer under the Tribunal and the current state of affairs. I asked him to clarify this distinction. He responded with characteristic candor.

“At the end of the Third Era, we experienced an upheaval unlike anything our people had known since the Tribunal gained divinity. In the span of fifteen years we saw the return of our greatest hero, the fall of the Tribunal, the devastation of our homeland in a chain of calamities, and the wholesale abandonment of our people by the Empire. We are not now the same people we were.

The greatest sin of the Tribunal was complacency. Not only did they grow overconfident and decadent, but they instilled such traits in our people. They told us that they would shield us from the evils of the world, and then we were left to fear and wonder when evil came. It is the great shame of our people, that we needed the Incarnate to usher in the Reclamation, when we should have done so ourselves!”

There was much to unpack here. I focused first on this idea of complacency, and asked him to elaborate.

“Our faith should not be one of avoiding responsibility, yet that is what the Tribunal taught us. They thought us children, and sought to shoulder our burdens themselves. Whether they acted from compassion or malice is not for me to say, but it weakened our people.

Azura’s gift to us was the Nerevarine (see Appendix III), who showed us that we were more than simply the sheltered children of false gods. The Hortator (an ancient Dunmer term for war-leader, and one of the titles associated with the Nerevarine) demanded that we see ourselves for what we were, and demonstrated the strength that we could wield as a single people. We didn’t know it at the time, of course, but now we can see, and give thanks. Those of us who survived our penance, at least.”

Pallodius Mavax, Words of the Dunmer: A Firsthand Experience, Compiled 4E 137-142

Lydia had made it almost a full dozen steps before she heard someone calling to her. “Not so wise to be leaving the port, my lady!”

She turned to see a Nord leaning against some crates, waving at her with his free hand while the other held a bottle of what looked to be mead. She almost turned away, but then thought better of it. Somebody who knew the lay of the land and wasn’t full of elven superiority might be good to talk to. “Oh, why’s that?” She had a fairly good idea of what he would say, but was curious how he viewed this odd city.

“Well,” he drew the word out, and she couldn’t help but notice the tones of eastern Skyrim in his speech, “Dark Elves aren’t so fond of outsiders, and I’d hate to see such a pretty face get ruined by some thug with a grudge.”

Oh, one of these. However, there was no call for her to be rude. Instead, she simply nodded thoughtfully. “I thank you for your concern, but I do have business with the Temple, so I must be off.”
The man blinked in surprise. “And here I thought you were just a beautiful merchant guard coming ashore for a good time. What would you want with those stuffy priests, anyway?”

She ignored his pathetic attempt at flirting and turned away. “Shor keep you, friend.” By the look of things, there were a more than a few like him, bored sailors who were loitering around until their ship left. There was an open-air tavern nestled in the shadow of the cliff, but little else for sailors to do. If this one was trying to woo a woman in full plate, he must be terribly bored. She suspected that this little enclosure was all the ordinary outland seafarer saw of Blacklight, and allowed herself a moment of smug satisfaction at her special status.

He shouted something else, but she had already put him from her mind. Ahead was the gate to the rest of this strange city, and she hoped the guards wouldn’t be too difficult.

When she reached the open archway that marked the edge of the area the guard had called the Outland Port, one of the guards raised a hand. “Where are you going, outlander?” It seemed they at least made sure the guards who dealt with foreigners spoke Imperial.

This time, she had a good answer. She held out her papers, and the note from Velandryn. “I’m going to Great Fane, on Temple business.”

The guard glanced down. “Ko’thil?” He looked back at her. “Pey’ik danav tel? Lydia, karaz?” That line, unintelligible as it was, seemed by its tone to be the friendliest Dunmeris she’d heard since arriving. The fact that she’d heard her name as well certainly didn’t hurt.

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, I don’t speak your language, but yes, I’m Lydia.”

The guard made a strange sound, one that, if it had come from a human, Lydia would have thought was a laugh. From these dour guards, though, she couldn’t see it. “Only thing stranger than a human as ko’thil would be an outlander actually mastering our tongue.” A shrug. “You’re free to go. Watch yourself out there. It can be confusing if you aren’t used to the city. Sight yourself by the Rootspire and the towers of Great Fane, and you should be fine.” The guard stepped back. “Glory to the Three, and let your way be true.”

“Yours as well, and my thanks.” The Dunmer liked their ritual, it seemed, and if she had to respond to each greeting and parting, she might as well get used to it.

To any and all who name themselves Dunmer, or friends of the same:

Should the woman bearing this letter be a Nord by the name of Lydia of Whiterun, dark of hair and eye, and standing somewhat over six feet in height, know that she is ko’thil to Velandryn Savani, Anointed of the Temple of the Blessed Triune, and serves the business of the Temple. I hereby charge whosoever reads this letter with aiding in whatever way is within your power her conveyance to Great Fane in Baan Malur.

Should any other than the woman described be bearing this letter, they have come into the possession of this note against my wishes and should be viewed with suspicion and mistrust. Should it be revealed that they came into this letter by violence, any involved should be considered as having committed crimes against the Temple and the nation of Morrowind.

By the Grace of the Three,

Serjo Indoril Velandryn Savani, Anointed of the New Temple of the Reclamations of the Blessed Triune
The city beyond the wall was nothing like the Outland Port. Instead of an open space dotted with lazy workmen and shipping crates, Lydia faced a street filled with Dark Elves, far more than she had ever seen in her life. They wore a hundred different costumes, and were going about what looked to be their daily lives, unconcerned with the wondering Nord walking past them.

*No, that’s not quite true.* Some gave her sidelong glances, but none looked at her for more than the briefest second. Almost without thought, she scanned the street, looking for threats as her guard’s instincts kicked in.

Almost at once, she noticed someone’s gaze. They were leaning against the curved wall of one of those strange buildings that resembled animal shells, eyes fixed on her. Or, she corrected herself, eyes *probably* fixed on her. Every inch of the watcher that wasn’t covered by milky-white armor – undoubtedly the famous chitin of the Dunmer—was wrapped in grey and black cloth, save for the eyes. Those were huge black orbs, doubtless some material that could be seen out of but not into. The figure’s entire face was wrapped, but the shape of the whole suggested armor under the cloth. The watcher held her gaze for a moment more, then turned and entered the building it had been leaning against. Shivering slightly, she moved on.

It quickly became obvious that the Dark Elves’ famous dislike of outsiders was not mere myth. While it was possible that outlanders all went about completely concealed, she found it more likely that the few humans and non-Dunmer elves were representative of Blacklight as a whole. She did, however, see more types of Dark Elves than she had ever considered.

Open stalls held merchants, shouting in their harsh tongue at passersby. Some sat cross-legged on rugs, while others reclined in chairs made of wood or stone or bone, each with their wares on display. There were shops as well, judging by the signs, but this part of Blacklight seemed to favor the smaller stalls. Clearly this was a trade center, not surprising given the proximity to the foreign dock. In fact, there was even a sections of stalls—staffed by Nords, though they were shouting in what sounded like fluent Dunmeris—with pottery, furs, and textiles on display that could only have come from Skyrim.

A pair of workmen—*workmer*?—were hunched over some sort of hole in the street; Lydia could hear the rush of water from below, and wondered if the Dunmer, like the Empire, had one of those famous sewer systems. If so, that might be nice. Whiterun was a good place to live and she would defend it to the death, but the poorer parts of the city could get rather…unpleasant in warm weather.

As the flow of the crowd parted around her, Lydia caught a glimpse of some odd lurching contraption far off down the street. She hurried forward, wondering if this was one of the famous Dwemer machines, but as it reared above her she realized her mistake. It wasn’t a machine, but a mount.

The long-legged bug stood at least fifteen feet tall, stepping over the crowd with ease. Lydia gaped upwards as it strode over her, and tried to see who or what was riding on its back. However, all she could make out was a canopy. She’d heard of silt striders, of course—giants insects used for travel were too good a story not to share—but she’d heard they went extinct long ago. Or, *I could stop assuming that I know anything at all about Morrowind.* Frankly, that seemed the safer option.

Shaking her head in wonderment, she continued on. Awe quickly gave way to an odd sensation of overload, and she found herself looking straight ahead, trying to spy the statue before she completely lost herself in this foreign sprawl.
Finally, she saw it. The street became a plaza of sorts ahead, and in its center was a circular statue with three figures reaching upwards and outward. She couldn’t have said who they were, but she knew what they meant. *Turn inland, and head uphill on the broadest street.*

As she turned away from the sea and began to climb, she was once more struck by the scale of the city. It was nowhere near as crowded as the Whiterun markets or the Solitude docks, but every building seemed to have been crafted with an intent to make it as unique as possible. It was impossible not to be impressed by the alien lines and intricate detail on the structures she passed, and when she turned back to look out at the city and the shore below her, she found herself confronted with a sight that looked almost like something from a fantastical realm of Oblivion. If this was the capital, she could scarcely imagine the wonders that must lurk in the far-off corners of Morrowind.

However, she had a task before her, and while she couldn’t see the sun through the ashen clouds overhead, the day had to be well into its afternoon already. So, she hurried on, and hoped the sights she was ignoring weren’t too fantastical.

Soon enough, she found herself before the hall the guard had mentioned, and turned right, towards where the Temple of Great Fane was supposed to be. As she walked towards a distant but massive palace that must have belonged to the chief Councilor, or whatever their equivalent to a jarl was, she wondered how the temple would look. Doubtless it would be grander than the Temple of Kynareth, which was the largest religious building in Whiterun. Nords respected the gods, but their pantheon did not require halls for worship, and the Imperial Divines, for all that they were respected and invoked when proper, did not—with the notable exception of Talos—have such massive followings that great centers of worship were required. Lydia herself attended the feast-day sermons, of course, but that was more for the sake of togetherness and tradition than any deep devotion. She’d always preferred Kyne to Kynareth, after all.

The palace loomed large to her left. It was farther away than she’d thought, but even more massive than she’d first believed. Whoever it belonged to must be powerful indeed. It was odd, though. She couldn’t recall Velandryn—or any other Dunmer, for the matter—mentioning anyone who had such power. This Great Council met in the Rootspire, and she’d seen many huge mansions and the like below. Earlier, she’d passed through a district of them, where the guards watched her closely for any mischief. *So who in Oblivion could live there?* She recalled the Dunmer Queen Barenziah, of course, but she had been a ruler in High Rock, if Lydia remembered correctly. *No, there was definitely a king of Morrowind in the Third Era. His name sounded like Helmet, or something. Do they have a king now, I wonder?* There was only one way to find out, and so she continued on.

Soon enough, she was walking with a wall to her left, a mighty length some ten feet high or so that hid all but the highest tips of the palace’s three great spires. It was inscribed with what she recognized to be Daedric runes, so many and so small that she would have had trouble with them even if she could read that alphabet or language. They did not travel in straight lines, but curved and spiraled about each other. Intrigued by something odd about their appearance, she reached out and felt the wall; where some of the letters were carved, others were actually raised from the stone. It was stone, she could recognize the feel of it, even if it looked like no stone she’d ever seen. For one, it was of a single piece, as though this entire wall had been carved from the rock itself. *But that’s impossible. Could it be magic, then?* She could see no other explanation.

*However this wall came to be, it is impressive.* From a distance, the writing seemed to make a picture, as the swirls lent themselves to larger shapes. She couldn’t make out what it was, but the effect of the whole was pleasing. Sometimes the lines ended abruptly, giving a sense of finality or jagged disconnect, and she wondered what artist had dreamed this up.
She wondered what the wall was for, since she doubted it was merely to keep people out. The intricacy of its design meant that it clearly had some other purpose, but she couldn’t figure out what that might be. It was excessively long, to be sure. Could the palace warrant such finery? But what manner of—

Oh. She felt a fool. What manner of person, in this land governed by a Council and a Temple, could command such a magnificent home? The answer was obvious. None of them.

She stepped back, nearly running into a guard who was passing by. She had the papers out and presented before the Dunmer could do anything more than grunt in surprise, and after a perusal of the papers, the guard gave her a faceless stare that Lydia assumed was meant to be intimidating and went on his—or her—way. Once more, it was only her and building before her.

Now, standing well back, she could see the whole, and understood. What she had thought was a palace, a building that dwarfed even Dragonsreach, and was topped by three spires each crowned with a flame of a different color. The Blessed Triune. Red and black and white fires winked down at her, and her gaze fell to the wall she’d failed to see in its entirety.

How often had Velandryn quoted prayers, snippets of Dunmeris that held significance or had been laid down by great scholars and priests? How many of those were etched on this wall, lessons for those who could read them? What better way to guard Great Fane, center of the Dunmer religion, than with all of their wisdom and parables etched into the very stone of the walls that surrounded it? Lydia had never been particularly religious, but the very idea of such a monumental feat of construction and craftsmanship, and the fervor required to complete it, sent chills up her spine.

No time for marveling, I’ve got a job to do. Off to her right, she saw an opening in the wall, and headed over to see if that was where she could gain entrance. Thankfully, nobody seemed to have been paying her too much attention, even when she’d been gaping at Great Fane, so she was able to stand and observe the gate without attracting too much attention.

Like the entrance to the Outland Port, this gate had no door. Rather, it was another archway, though this one, like the wall from which it rose, was covered in more Daedric writing. The guards before it were different as well. Rather than the inhuman armor of the guards below, these wore a kit that was exotic in an entirely different fashion.

There were two guards at the gate, and while each wore a suit of armor that was different from the other, they were obviously part of the same design.

One was a set of scaled plates that looked almost Orcish or Akaviri in design, though it was more ornate than any of those sets that she had seen, with massive spreading pauldrons and form-fitting greaves below dark blue pants and a dangling loincloth. The chestpiece had been sculpted to resemble a bared male breast, though Lydia did note that it had a good center-line that would deflect any glancing blow. There was a blue-black cape flowing down the armor’s back, though it only fell to the thighs; it was short enough that it wouldn’t tangle with the legs in a fight. This was armor designed to be at once extravagantly ornamental and mortally dangerous. This guard carried a long halberd in one hand while the other held a shield that, when raised, would cover the Dunmer from neck to knees.

The other set was equally intricate while being almost entirely dissimilar. The shoulders still sported large pauldrons, though these sloped down and looked almost of a piece with the thick golden collar-plate that sat below the neck. A blue robe covered everything from the chest down, though it was patterned with so many shades of white and gold and black that Lydia wondered if some of them were holes or slits; she could have sworn she spotted the glint of gilded scales beneath. This one had a wicked black mace on one hip, and a long-hilted sword on its back.
The most striking things about them, however, were the similarities. For one, the masks. Both were identical representations of a very particular face, wrought in whatever metal had gone into the armors and crested with tall manes of stiff bristles, with gold for the spear-wielder and black for the robed one. The gauntlets of both guards were carefully shaped to shield the back of the hands, but looked to leave the fingers free; Lydia would bet every coin in her purse that either of these was as adept with magic as they were with their weaponry. Velandryn had spoken of the Ordinators with a respect that he usually reserved for his gods alone; looking at the two before her, Lydia could see why. That these could be anything other than the legendary holy warriors of the Dunmer was absurd; a small childish part of her that had loved the old stories was cheering right now for seeing them so perfectly realized.

The guards in the city below had been unnerving in their strangeness but ultimately, they acted like any other guards she’d served with—maybe a bit less fond of dealing with foreigners than even the worst of the Whiterun town watch, but simply doing a job, and willing to send an unexpected outlander quickly on her way so they didn’t have to interrupt their routine. While travelling through the city, she’d seen them relaxing and interacting with the populace, one even with her helm removed while she knelt to stroke a scaly creature that looked more like a lizard than any sort of pet. She knew the signs of good guards and watchmen, and while the Redoran Guard was well-trained, it was ultimately made up of Dunmer who put on the suit and went out to do their job like anybody else.

The Ordinators were different. Both stood ramrod-straight, scanning the street before them with a focus that was frightening in its intensity. There was a tiny pause every time their masks turned towards her; they were letting her know, with arrogant subtlety, that they were watching. She had no doubt that if she made a threatening motion, they would strike without mercy.

Slowly, she produced the papers from her pack and walked forward. Neither of the Ordinators acknowledged her presence, though a shift from the one with the spear might have been intended to bring the shield into a better position. She stretched out a hand and offered the papers, a gesture to which neither responded.

Finally, one of them spoke. “What is your purpose here, outlander?” She thought it was the one in the robe, but honestly, she wasn’t certain. Whichever it was, her speech was rapid and flawless despite an accent almost identical to Velandryn’s but a fair bit stronger.

She kept the hand with papers outstretched. “I have business at the Temple. It’s all written here.” She couldn’t read Dunmeris, of course, but it had been enough for all of the other guards…

The Ordinator in the robe stretched out a hand and took the papers. Like all the others, the Dunmer looked over them. This time, however, the guard looked up sharply, and Lydia could see the gleam of red eyes within the mask.

“Your name, outlander.” This voice was male.

She was taken aback. “L-Lydia, of Whiterun. Ko’thil to Velandryn Savani, of the Temple.”

The robed guard nodded. “Describe him.”

“What?” None of the others had done anything even remotely—

“Describe Velandryn Savani. If you are indeed his ko’thil,” his voice held a tone of deep doubt, “this should pose you no difficulty.”

Lydia was at a loss. How was she supposed to summarize her thane to this Ordinator’s satisfaction?
She didn’t want to insult them by listing his less...complimentary qualities, and right now those were all her treacherous brain could conjure. “He has red hair, a long face, ah...he is clever and skilled with magic—“

“You have just described one in every ten Dunmer in Morrowind, myself included! You—“

“For one he knows how to listen!” Her retort seemed to shock the elf into silence, and she found her voice rising in volume as her irritation with her constant belittlement at the hands of these people finally overwhelmed her better sense. “You want a description? He’s smart, but thinks he’s better than everyone else, which would be even worse if he didn’t make a habit of being right so damned much! He asks questions because he can’t stand not knowing something, and the idea that something might be a bad idea is generally taken as an indication that he needs to do it even more!” That wasn’t, strictly speaking, a terribly accurate description, but she still wasn’t particularly happy with her thane for sending her to this place.

Neither guard said anything, and she instantly felt shame flood her. Oh gods, what did I say? She’d been so caught up in her own anger that she’d—Sweet Mara’s mercy, I insulted my thane!

Quickly, she tried to correct herself. “He’s insightful. He sees things, and thinks about them. When he acts, it’s for a goal, not because he’s afraid of doing nothing. He...he saved my life, and never once used that fact to coerce me.” How did she describe being Dragonborn, what that meant? “He...he is my thane, and I serve him gladly, because the path before him is difficult, but he is resolved to walk it.” She fell silent again, but this time she was content with what she’d said.

The guard in the robe nodded. “Enter.”

Again, she was taken aback. “Just like that?”

The masked head tilted slightly. “This displeases you?”

“No, but, it’s just...” She trailed off, not certain how to describe their bizarre test without offending.

The guard in the robe shifted slightly. “I have known Velandryn Savani for the better part of twenty years. Your letter and your words claimed his name and title to pass the way we guard. I would not see his name used as part of some deception, so I discovered the truth of the matter. You know him well enough, though it is through an outlander’s eyes. You say you have business within, and so I bid you enter.”

The other guard’s mask turned to regard her now. “Be welcome at Great Fane, Lydia of Whiterun ko’thil’ten Indoril Velandryn Savani. Enter without fear, and leave without regret.” The words had the weight of ritual behind them, and Lydia bowed her head in thanks.

Taking back her papers, she walked under the arch, and onto the grounds of Great Fane. She stood on at the end of a long walkway that stretched towards the central palace building—except that it wasn’t a building at all.

Great Fane was an island, though it was an island unlike any that she had ever seen. The wall she had seen from outside formed the rim of a basin that contained—of all things—a lake. It was perfectly still, and Lydia had no doubt it had somehow been constructed here, another gesture to show the power of the Temple.

Five structures rose from the water. Lydia would have called them islands, but she was fairly certain that islands weren’t built. Each was a flat-topped and multi-leveled pyramid with rounded
edges, and four of them seemed fairly similar in design. These were spaced evenly towards the outside of the lake, and each had two levels. Just above the water, there was a walkway of sorts, and numerous doors and windows leading into the building. Then, on the flat top that she was thinking of as the second level, there were more structures, many of them in styles she recognized from the city below.

In the center of the lake was the final island, and Lydia had no doubt that it was the main complex of this temple and likely the Dunmer faith. The idea that there could be another structure superior to this one was beyond her capacity for belief. Where the outer islands had single walkways around their edges and broad flat tops, this one rose in a confusing jumble of platforms, walkways, and galleries that seemed to sprout at random from the sides of the pyramid and arced around to connect with other level or islands through some logic she couldn’t imagine. Atop this madness was the palace—she had decided that she was going to keep calling it that, as she knew no other word grand enough to encapsulate it.

The palace looked as she’d seen it, a great three-spired hall pointing into the stormy and ashen sky. It shared the top of the central structure with what looked from a distance to be fountains or ornamentation of some sort, but there were no other buildings to rival its dominance of the scene.

She started walking along a bridge that stretched out from the gate to the central structure—*should I call it an island?* An Ordinator was walking towards her at a measured pace, in armor similar to the ones outside, but still different enough to be unique. Wearily, Lydia made ready to show her papers, but this one did not stop her. Indeed, they passed each other silently, and if the Dunmer under the mask was confused by her presence in Great Fane, he or she hid it well.

Thinking as she walked, Lydia decided that the Ordinators within the temple must have enough faith in the ones guarding the outside that they wouldn’t randomly harass those who’d made it through the walls. She still wasn’t comfortable around them, but it made good sense. *Or, they communicated by magic and let that one know I was coming.* She didn’t think they could do that, but she’d decided to assume the worst when it came to Morrowind.

Ahead, the central structure of the temple loomed above her, and it was with a bit of apprehension that she kept walking towards it. She’d never been any place quite like this, and this place made her feel small in a way that all of the mountains and tundra of Skyrim could not. She passed a pair of statues, matched Dunmer, male and female, gazing down from their pedestals rising out of the water. She felt as though they were judging her, and stood a little straighter as she marched on.

The bridge she was on led straight to the central structure, and she noticed for the first time the other walkways linking the islands. Some were huge and flat, hanging just above the water, while others were high arched spans that rose and fell seemingly at random. Somebody unfamiliar with the area would certainly get lost, but doubtless someone who had known the place for years could use those bridges to—

Ahead, a pair of blue-robed Dunmer who seemed deep in conversation stepped off one of the bridges, and she started to shout out a cry of warning. Before she could, however, they were over nothing but open air. She started to run, hoping to at least catch one of them. However, they did not fall. Still talking casually, they walked on the air until they arrived at an outer wall of one of the islands, where one of them opened a door and they vanished. Lydia drew herself up, hoping against hope that nobody had seen her panic.

“You look a little lost, outlander. Your first time here?” The voice was female, and evidently amused.

Sighing, she turned. She hadn’t even heard the other approach. “What exactly do you mean by
The Dark Elf facing her was shorter than Velandryn, clothed in a green robe inlaid with a pattern of golden shapes that seemed to spin if she focused on them. She looked young, but Lydia was the first to admit that she couldn’t tell elf ages well at all.

The Dunmer’s eyes shone. “Civilization, of course. Outlanders are rare, but you all have the same look.” She tilted her head. “What brings you to Great Fane?”

Lydia decided to ignore the civilization remark. “I have business here. Look.” She produced the second letter, the one Velandryn had said was for once she had arrived at the temple. This one was broad and thick, more a sheaf of papers, in truth.

The elf glanced down at the writing on the document. Her eyes shone, though with what Lydia couldn’t say. “Oh. Well, you should go straight ahead, and ask once you’re in the Hall.”

“The Hall?” By the way the elf had said it, it was less a description than a name.


Lydia was seized with a sudden urge to smack this impudent little elf in the head. “Thank you. Kyne be with you.” It wasn’t a proper farewell in Morrowind, she supposed, but neither was “Fuck you too, little elf,” which was the only other thing coming to mind.

“Wrong gods, outlander!” That last was said in a mocking tone, and Lydia had to bite her tongue. Be better than her. She’d help nobody by assaulting a Dark Elf in their holy place.

“Acolyte, if you have time to be harassing outlanders, then you are clearly being underutilized.” The voice came from over Lydia’s shoulder, clearly belonging to another Dunmer woman, though it carried calm authority that the little elf before her lacked.

The Dunmer who’d been belittling her flinched as though she’d been struck, and quickly bowed her head. “No…I was only—“

“And you have the time to argue back as well! Shall I learn your name, or would you prefer to leave before you compound your error?” The voice was from behind Lydia, but she wasn’t about to miss this little elf’s cringing to see who was talking. A part of her knew she shouldn’t be enjoying it this much, but she didn’t really care.

The Dark Elf bowed deeply and scurried off, and Lydia let herself turn to see who was behind her. It was another Dunmer woman, taller than most, with a face that managed to convey age while still remaining smooth. She had a tattoo that resembled nothing so much as a dotted line that wound its way around and across her features, and her clothing, a robe of mottled gold and blue, was marked with similar patterning.

“Though I will not antagonize you, I am curious as to your purpose here.” Lydia had never heard a Dark Elf voice that she could call calming before, but this one managed it.

“I’ve come to deliver this.” Once more, she proffered the thick sheaf of papers—though this time, she made sure to include Velandryn’s note as well, and the tall elf took them with a long-fingered hand.

Her eyes narrowed as she studied the note Lydia had been showing guards all day, and she blinked
a single time upon seeing the single line of text that was, Lydia assumed, the name of whoever the thick letter was for. “How…interesting.” She turned, tucking the papers under an arm. “Follow. The one you seek is in the central canton, and no outlander could hope to navigate it unaided. Acolytes should have better things to do than play guide to lost humans, so you shall follow me.” She moved away, not bothering to check if Lydia was following.

For once, Lydia found herself not having to shorten her strides while walking alongside a Dark Elf. This one was still a few inches shorter than Lydia, but she moved with quick purpose, and though Lydia couldn’t tell for certain because of the robe, the length of each stride made her suspect that the other woman’s legs were quite long for her body. So, they matched each other, something that made conversation easier.

Or, it would have, if Lydia had had anything to say, or if the Dunmer had shown any inclination for conversation. Finally, she decided to break the silence. She had too many questions, after all. Clearly Velandryn had been a bad influence on her.

“Thank you for helping me, though I never learned your name.” It wasn’t the most elegant inquiry she’d ever had, but she wasn’t at her best right now.

The Dunmer might have been amused; her voice suggested the hint of it, at least. “You failed to learn it because I did not give it.” They walked on for a moment more. “I am Nas-anu Assashami.”

“What? Lydia knew what Dunmer names sounded like, and whatever this woman had said wasn’t that. “Well, thank you.”

“Just like that? Are you more familiar with the Dunmer than you appear, to let my name go unremarked?” Damn it all. The woman was definitely amused now. She could appreciate Dark Elf humor, but only when it happened to someone else.

“I didn’t want to be rude, but you’re right. I’ve never heard its like.”

The other woman’s eyes were bright. “You are an outlander, as incapable of courtesy as you are of impropriety. I would not punish a child for speaking of matters beyond its knowledge, and I will not criticize you for displaying your ignorance. I do wonder, though, if it was this consideration that inspired the Repentant to allow you past the gate armed and armored. Perhaps the title of ko’thil, archaic though it is, holds weight for them.” She paused. “Or, they decided that a single outlander, no matter how she was attired, could do little to harm us. If so that is a lapse in their judgement, and must be remedied.”

Lydia was confused, as much by what the elf—Nassa-something, was that her name?—had called the guards as by anything else. “I thought the guards at the outer wall were called Ordinators. What are Repentant?”

“Their proper title is the Order of the Repentant Temple Militant, though it is rarely used. Some prefer to shorten it to Ordinators, a reminder of the lineage from which they claim descent, though I find that distasteful. The Ordinators of the Tribunal persecuted my people for generations. So, to me and mine they are the Repentant, that they do not forget the sins of the past.”

They walked on in silence for a moment, Lydia trying to process all of this. The Dunmer are confusing enough as it is, and now they go and disagree with each other? She was getting lost, and fast. What was it this woman had said? Her people had been persecuted by the Ordinators, and now the Ordinators were…repentant? What exactly did that mean?

First things first. “You said your people? Who are those?”
The elf clicked her tongue. “Your master, this Velandryn Savani. How long have you served him?”

She didn’t even pretend to answer my question! Still, she was a stranger here. “Since the end of Last Seed, so…about a month, a bit more, actually.” However, this Nassa—*ambu, was it?—* had said outlanders couldn’t be rude, so… “You never answered my question.”

The woman stopped abruptly, and Lydia nearly tripped over her own feet as she tried to stop and turn at once. “How old are you, human?”

“What?” Apparently this elf didn’t understand how a conversation worked.

“You are young, this much is obvious. I have often wondered if it is due to the short lifespan of your kind that humans are so intolerably impatient. Your question will be answered, but I am not in the habit of arresting or paring down my thoughts and words for the convenience of one who cannot be bothered to listen.”

*Or you just like the sound of your own voice.* That wasn’t a worthy thought, however, so it would remain unsaid. *Not to mention I’m a nobody here.* She didn’t want to even think about what happened to outlanders who deliberately insulted high-ranking natives. That this woman held some rank was beyond question. Nobody without authority carried themselves like that.

They walked in silence for a few moments more. Ahead, the central canton loomed and the temple atop it reared into the sky like a dragon, complete with fire billowing from high above. Lydia could make out tiny figures standing at balconies and walking along pathways high above, and tried to imagine what the view must be like from up there. *Higher than Dragonsreach, for sure.*

“Impressive, no?” Nassa—*close enough to whatever her real name is*—was looking up as well.

“What do you think of it, outlander?”

Lydia said nothing. *She can answer my questions if she wants answers of her own.*

The Dark Elf sighed, and clicked her tongue. “Petulance does not become you. If you insist on acting a child, I shall treat you as one, and I do not think you would enjoy the discipline I administer.” A hand snaked out and gripped Lydia’s jaw. “I know the difference between thoughtful silence and its sullen cousin, and I do not tolerate the latter.”

Lydia yanked herself away, easily breaking the other woman’s grip, though the elf’s thin hand had gripped her with surprising strength. “Hands off, elf!” She almost drew her sword, but the sight of the gold-clad Ordinator not twenty feet away turning to see what this commotion was all about made her think better of it. She took a deep breath. “I’m done playing your games. Take me where I need to go.”

The elf turned and resumed her measure pace towards the central temple. “As you wish.” Lydia hurried to catch up with her. “To answer your question, outlander, I am of Clan Harisali. I am Velothi, though the House Dunmer and your kind would call us Ashlanders. It is for this reason that a bear a name pregnant with the syllables of my ancestors, and do not trust those who wear the armor of Indoril, no matter what they call themselves in this latter age.”

Ashlander. She’d heard of them, of course; nomadic Dunmer who had some sort of quarrel with the city-dwellers. They’d refused to join the Temple or something, and now they lived in the remote places of Morrowind. They were like the Old Clans, in a way, and every story agreed they were both dangerous and untrustworthy. Frankly, she’d never actually thought she’d meet one.

“I see. I...um, what are you doing here? I thought your kind—erm, the Ashlanders didn’t worship
the Three.”

Nassa laughed. “Your ignorance shrouds the truth in your intent. We never worshipped the False Tribunal, but with the fall of the Three Thieves and the Restoration of the Temple, some of us see our place as among the House-born. I would not want to live my entire life among these walls, but for ten years I have shepherded the acolytes and taught them the proper ways of the Velothi. We alone among the Dunmer never forgot who we truly were, and this knowledge must be imparted to each generation of the Anointed.” She looked up at the massive temple above them. “No matter how lofty its peak, a mountain will crumble if its base is lacking. So it is with this new world the Temple is building.”

Lydia was, if anything, left with even more questions that before. “So, the Ashlanders are part of...I mean—“

The elf made a cutting motion with her hand, and Lydia stopped short. “Do not try to say we are part of their Council, or swear oaths to this House or that. We are honored for keeping to the true faith, but we are not them. The Redoran made the offer to the Tribes, and some chose to join their House Sadras, to serve and live among them. I did not. I am here as Velothi, not as one of them. I would not expect an outlander to understand.”

Lydia thought about Velandryn, about his comments during their adventures, and her experience travelling through this city. “You might be surprised.”

The elf studied her. “I might be.” She took one more step, then turned back. “Your master, he has never spoken of this, of his heritage?”

*He speaks of little else.* “He has told me stories of Morrowind, and his time with the Temple.” She was picking her words carefully. This elf was keeping secrets, and Lydia didn’t want to give more than she got. *I wish I was better at this.* Velandryn or the vampire would have enjoyed it, but these games were not something she enjoyed.

The elf shook her head. “You misunderstand. I refer to his Ashlander heritage.”

“What?” Velandryn had never spoken of that. He didn’t seem much like this one, and his name was nothing like hers. *Wait, didn’t she say she didn’t know his name* “I thought you didn’t know him.”

“I don’t, but a name like Velandryn was not chosen at random, and it was certainly not given by a House Dunmer, no matter how pious. No, that name was chosen by an Ashlander to be at once acceptable to the House Dunmer while still proclaiming his heritage.” She studied Lydia. “Perhaps he is half-blooded; they are becoming increasingly common in this latter age.” She shrugged. “It is not the worst of things, the mixing of the ways. Better than the old patterns, of hunting and hatred and heresy, I think.”

Something about the way the woman had spoken struck Lydia as odd... “How old are you, exactly?” It had almost sounded as if—

“I have two hundred and ninety-eight years. The first century of my life was spent as an outcast, and these last two as honored outsider. I have known the Temple as both adversary and ally, and thus, when I speak of them and my mistrust, it is with the weight of experience. Does that answer the questions you have yet to ask?”

Lydia bowed her head. “Yes, and thank you.”
“Is that contrition? It suits you no more than did your earlier sullenness.”

She hadn’t intended it to be seen as an apology or anything; bowing one’s head was simply a gesture of respect in Skyrim. However, she was sick and tired of being tugged around by this elf as though they were on either end of a rope.

She sighed. “Just take me wherever I need to go, and I’ll be out of your hair.”

The elf didn’t smile, of course, but her eyes were bright. “That suits you much better. Come along, outlander.”

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Bringing down the Hlaalu was easy. The merchant lords had grown fat and soft, using mercenaries to guard their plantations and funding Legion presences in their towns. Once the Red Dragon fled back to Cyrodiil and abandoned us, their time was done, even if they could not see it.

With the Ashlanders bolstering the forces I had brought from Vvardenfell and the Temple in disarray, it was easy to neutralize those councilors and nobles who had not died or fled. Most were holed up in what remained of their lands or manor houses, desperately trying to gather some semblance of power about themselves. I will make no apologies for what happened to them. It was unsavory, perhaps, but ultimately necessary.

No matter what the rumormongers will claim, I did not order the culling of the Hlaalu nobility. I led our army to Mournhold, true, and shattered the gates of the royal place with Veloth’s Judgement, but my only goal was to ensure that King—a meaningless title bestowed by the Empire—Helseth could do no further harm with his machinations. That the people of Morrowind killed nine of every ten Hlaalu nobles should be seen as an indictment of them, rather than some master-stroke on my part.

I will never deny the orders I have given, and it is with pride that I say I slew the last king of Morrowind in single combat, but I will not be held accountable for the actions of others. Nonetheless, I do not weep that Hlaalu was so weakened, and I firmly believe that Morrowind is the stronger for their removal from the Council. Had they remained, they would have only spread their outland poison and undermined the resolve of our people.

Indoril, however, could not be destroyed, no matter how much they deserved it. Casting out one Great House was all but unheard of, and had I tried for a second, I might well have started another war. It is one thing to curse the merchants who sold your homes to foreign rulers, and quite another to tear down the House that had, for four thousand years, served as the face and name of the Tribunal Temple. They could hardly be left alone, however. Every noble of House Indoril had family in the Temple, and I was forced to sit through a dozen motions calling for the cessation of the Temple Reconciliation in the first year of the New Council alone.

It was Mehra Milo who suggested the plan, and I shall forever be in her debt. By merging House Indoril into the Temple, we ensured the survival of both while bringing them to heel. The resources of House Indoril went a long way towards allowing the Temple to begin rebuilding its infrastructure, and the former Dissident Priests under Archcanon Barelo made sure that the Indoril nobility did exactly as they were told. Within fifty years, “joining Indoril” was a term for becoming a priest—I personally suspect Mehra’s indescribably wicked tongue of spearheading that little barb, though she has never confirmed it.

With Indoril pacified and our Ashlander allies in House Sadras seated firmly on the Great Council, the internal safety of Morrowind has been assured. I neither know nor care how history will remember me, for my every action has been to strengthen Morrowind and the Dunmer. I pen this
only so that the future leaders of our people may look back on my victories and mistakes, and become stronger for it. We alone are the chosen of the gods, and we alone control our destiny.

Memoirs of Banden Indarys, Grandmaster of House Redoran and First Councilor of Blacklight, written 4E 129.

Publisher’s Note: These memoirs have never been released publicly, as it is felt that some of the sensitive information contained within would prove detrimental to the unity and harmony of the nation of Resdayn-Morrowind. However, they are very useful for members of House Redoran who wish to familiarize themselves with Grandmaster Indarys’ exploits.

The hallways of the central building—the “canton,” Nassa called it—were lit by a warm golden light that seemed to come from everywhere at once. Lydia chalked it up to magic, and focused instead on studying the people and sights they passed. Dunmer in robes of a dozen different cuts and colors scurried by, more than a few staring at her as they passed. Nassa, for her part, might as well have been alone in the hall, so swift and assured was she in her stride. Lydia kept moving as well, and tried not to miss anything.

One door that they passed stood slightly ajar, and Lydia spotted what looked to be some sort of ritual. She heard chanting, for cure, and the light within was far dimmer and redder than it was outside. When she asked Nassa, however, the Ashlander barely spared the doorway a glance.

“Prayer is a private matter. It is not for outlanders to question.” The Dunmer wasn’t unfriendly, but Lydia got the feeling that the other woman regarded her as some sort of creature that, for all that it might walk and talk, wasn’t fully human. Or fully Dunmer. My being human is the problem.

The hallway they were traveling down suddenly opened before them, and for a moment Lydia thought they were outside again. However, a moment later she realized her mistake.

They were in a massive domed hall, the roof easily thirty or forty feet above them. They stood on one of many walkways that ran along the walls, perhaps a third of the way up the side. The floor below was covered in life, and though the only things growing there were mushrooms and other strange plants, some were so tall that she had to crane her neck upwards to see their tops.

Studying the floor below, she realize that it was some sort of garden. She could see paved paths marked among the plants, and glowing crystals lit bridges and walkways that wound over and about the room. As she looked, she made out a few fountains and streams as well, and even a fire pit that doubtless had some religious significance. Dunmer walked, read, spoke in quiet voices, and practiced magic everywhere she looked.

She noticed a human suddenly, some sort of Breton or Imperial in a simple green robe, one of four in similar clothing gathered around a fountain. She barely had time to register this, however, before Nassa was pivoting and leading her towards a ramp that arced over the room and met a doorway in the upper reaches of the ceiling.

“Come. The Mycologeum is a magnificent room, but the hour grows late, and I would see you to Nerim before the evening prayers.”

“Nerim?” The name was unfamiliar to her.

“You do not know to whom you were sent? I must meet this Velandryn Savani someday, and complement him on how well he educates his retainers.” Lydia briefly tried to figure out which of the possible meanings Nassa had intended, before giving it up as a fool’s task. Knowing Dark
Elves, it might well be all of them.

The hallways above the chamber—*Mycolo-something, she called it*—were much the same as the ones below it, though finer in almost every regard. The halls themselves were slightly wider, the doors they passed were both more ornate and spaced farther apart, and the alcoves and stairwells boasted paintings and sculptures that made the place feel as much museum as temple. When they passed a balcony that looked out over the massive temple complex below, Lydia realized just how high up they were. *Higher than Dragonsreach, for certain.* If she took into account the sea as the lowest level, she was certainly even higher than Dragonsreach was above the tundra outside Whiterun. It was an odd thought.

The Dunmer they met here were fewer, but clearly of higher rank. Rather than the greens and browns of the ones below, most she saw wore gold robes or red, many of them intricate with scrollwork and embroidery. She considered trying to figure out what the robes meant, but quickly realized it would be impossible without asking Nassa, and she’d decided not to ask the Ashlander anything else. *Doesn’t like me angry, doesn’t like apologies, doesn’t seem she likes much of anything at all!*

Nassa stopped abruptly before a door much like the others they had passed, with a small plaque at just below eye-height with some Daedric writing that, while likely useful for them, told Lydia nothing at all. Lydia looked at her curiously, but the Dark Elf simply stood there for a moment, apparently thinking. Then, nodding, she reached out and rapped twice.

A moment later, the door opened and an Ordinator faced them. This one’s armor was black but accented with silver, and shone as though it was enchanted in some way. The mask turned to regard Lydia, and then spoke a few short words of Dunmeris.

Nassa answered in the same tongue. Lydia heard the words “Lydia,” “Whiterun,” “*ko’thil,*” and “Velandryn Savani.” In the middle of her speech, Nassa handed over the papers she’d taken from Lydia, and the Ordinator took them in one glove. Lydia noted with interest that, unlike the others she’d seen outside, this one’s armor looked almost sparse, and she realized it was the same for almost all of the ones she’d encountered since entering the canton. She wondered if that was normal for those who had to operate indoors. Some of the shoulders she had seen, the ones with tassels and ornamentation hanging off of absurdly broad lengths, might not even have fit through some of the doors below.

The Ordinator glanced down at the documents in his hand, nodded once at the two of them, and closed the door. They stood out there for a minute, Lydia feeling increasingly awkward but determined not to show it, while Nassa was apparently perfectly at ease. Finally, the door swung open again. The Ordinator, papers no longer in hand, looked up at her. “You may enter, Lydia of Whiterun.” He turned to Nassa and spoke more words she couldn’t understand before vanishing back behind the door.

Nassa placed a hand on Lydia’s shoulder. “This is where we part. You are young, Lydia *ko’thil* Velandryn Savani, but you have potential. Serve your master well, and heed the teachings of the Three, and when next we meet you will have become the woman you must be.” With that, she was off, striding down the hall before Lydia could even think to respond.

The Ordinator had left the door ajar, and Lydia stepped inside. Within she found a small chamber, furnished with plants she did not recognize and art in styles she could not name. The Ordinator sat at a desk on one side of the room, glancing up from a stack of papers as Lydia shut the door behind her. Her mask was resting on the desk, and the woman beneath was as old as any Dunmer Lydia had yet seen.
In Whiterun, guards who survived to get too old to serve generally retired, getting happily drunk on their pensions from the jarl. Some hung around the barracks and harassed newcomers with stories of how things were done in their day, and Lydia had sometimes considered what kind of life she would lead should she reach that age. She hadn’t looked forward to her body, which she had always trained and taken pride in, failing her to the point where she could no longer fight.

This Dark Elf, however, didn’t seem to share her concerns. Her white hair and lined face screamed her age, but she moved with agility and grace, and Lydia doubted that the Ordinators would let any wear their armor who couldn’t at least put up some fight. She had heard the stories, after all, and she couldn’t see the heroes of Arik Pass letting their armor become a vanity for some old soldier. She might not feel comfortable here, but she couldn’t doubt the devotion of the Dunmer when it came to their gods and those who served them.

The Ordinator gestured across the room, to where a low bench was pushed against one wall. “Sit there. Prelate Llervos will see you shortly.” Lydia sat beside a sculpture made of what looked to be shimmering black glass, trying not to do anything stupid. The Ordinator wasn’t watching her overtly, but she got the feeling that the other woman was studying her out of the corner of her eye. *It’s what I would have done, after all.*

Long minutes passed, and Lydia gradually became aware that this bench had not been intended for somebody of her stature. Her knees came up slightly too high and the overall feeling was one of vague discomfort. Too much longer and she’d wind up sore, but she could hardly go pacing in this sort of environment. *I won’t shame my people!*

Finally, the Ordinator looked up. “He is ready for you.”

The words came before she could stop them. “Wait…how do you know?”

The Dunmer raised a hand and pointed to a small potted mushroom on her desk, one that Lydia had assumed was purely decorative. Looking closer, however, she suddenly saw the light shining from it, and understood.

“He told you through the mushroom?” Considering all that she had seen today, it seemed wrong for the most bizarre thing to be a communication mushroom, but there it was.

Dunmer didn’t smile or frown, but they could convey volumes of information with their eyes and tone, and Lydia was becoming very good at figuring out those clues. She almost wished she was still oblivious, as she was getting sick of Dark Elves laughing at her. “In a sense. Now, go. I do not expect an outlander to understand propriety, but I would hope that using this barbaric tongue would at least ensure understanding. Was I wrong?”

Lydia bit back a dozen retorts. “Not in the least. My thanks for—“ She couldn’t say *deigning—“for answering my questions.” She rose, bowed slightly to the Ordinator, and passed through the second door.

The room she entered seemed almost bare after the rich furnishing of the chamber behind her. A few tapestries hung from the walls, and a shrine at the far end held a trio of small statues, but overall the small room gave off an air of quiet in a way she could not place. Something burned at the shrine, and the scent of the smoke put her in mind of fire and earth, and made the hairs on her neck stand slightly on edge.

There was only one other person in here with her, a Dark Elf standing behind a desk laden with papers and books, and she knew immediately that *this* was who she had been sent to find. He had a long oiled beard where Velandryn’s jaw was smooth, and his hair was silver-white instead of red,
but their eyes were the same. While his face had a roundness that was sharply at odds with her thane’s, and his golden robe was so layered with embroidery and ornamentation that it was a minor miracle he had stood to greet her, there was no mistaking the eyes. Eyes that burned and pierced, and held humor if you knew how to look. Not cruel, but sharp. They were two of a kind, this aged elf and her thane.

The Dunmer tapped the sheaf of papers before him, and then gave her a perfect smile. “Lydia of Whiterun, I believe?” He gestured to her. “If you would be so kind as to give your crossbow to Ferana? Velandryn mentioned that our smiths might like to have a look at it.”

With a start, she realized that the Ordinator was still standing behind her. How did I miss a person in armor that ridiculous? Wordlessly, she handed over the crossbow, as well as the little pouch of bolts. The guard accepted them, and retreated, closing the door behind her. I’d better get that back.

The old Dunmer smiled again. “Why don’t you sit down? I have a great many questions for you, and I would be shocked if you didn’t have at least a few for me.”

Lydia sat. Her host smiled once more. It was odd to see from one of the Dark Elves, but it did help put her at ease. “My name is Nerim Llervos, and you have come quite a long way to find me, it seems. Velandryn has written to give me his telling of events in Skyrim, but I would like yours.” He leaned forward, and the intensity of his gaze was almost a perfect match for her thane’s. “I want to know everything.”

The Councilor was imperious, but not at all unfriendly. In this city, which had once been called Old Ebonheart and now went by Alum Bal, I had noticed a high number of non-Dunmer, all of whom seemed perfectly at ease not only living alongside the natives, but even in using their tongue and worshiping their gods. I had not expected this from the Redoran, who were historically unfriendly to the Empire. I inquired as to what had brought this about.

“Outlander” is a very faithful translation of a complex word, but, as is typical, outlanders have misunderstood it. The word means exactly what it says: one who is not of Morrowind, not of our way. The ones you say you saw are not outlanders, but garan sul (Note: while an exact definition of this word is difficult, it is derived from terms for “adoption” and “foreigner.”) who have lived among us for all of their lives.

I had never before heard of this term. I asked if this was related to the infamous Sixteenth Legion.

In a way. When much of the Sixteenth refused to return to Cyrodiil during what you call the Oblivion Crisis, they earned the love of our people. Many died in Dagon’s invasion, but those who survived worked alongside us to rebuild, and in doing so earned a place in our land. When the Argonians invaded and the Empire refused to send aid, Legate Darius and the Sixteenth Legion were instrumental in keeping the invaders bottled in Mournhold until Warleader Indarys could bring the Redoran host to bear.

When the Council was reorganized and the Hlaalu tried to raise their army, King Helseth famously offered Legate Darius his weight in gold to march against Redoran. In response, Darius and his officers dyed their banners and plumage red, and declared that they served Morrowind, not Hlaalu. Considering that the Sixteenth Legion had been in Morrowind without the blessing of the Elder Council for almost ten years and there was no Emperor, Darius must have seen the wisdom of making sure he and his had a place in the new world, and thrown his lot in with the Redoran. After The Great Council convened for the first time, the Sixteenth was given lands to hold and a charter
to train recruits in service of the laws and people of Morrowind. General Darius declared that they were the Sixteenth Legion no longer, but rather the only Red Legion in Morrowind. Since that event, the Red Legion has become a fixture in our lives, and we know that should we ever go to war, they will march beside us.

At this, I gently pointed out that she had never actually explained garan’sul.

(Laughs) I didn’t, did I? I’ve always loved the story of the Red Legion, but if you want to know about garan’sul, you are halfway there. Garan’sul are not of Dunmer blood but neither are they outlanders. Many were born here, descended from slaves or foreigners, while some few came here and submit themselves before the Temple and the Law, asking to learn our ways. The Red Legion are garan’sul, and most of non-Dunmer blood who choose to serve in a militant capacity do so within the Legion.

I asked about the famous dislike of foreigners, and how the garan’sul played into that.

Some older ones will tell you it’s about blood, but I disagree. If an outlander wants to be part of our world, let them display their worth, and I shall accept them gladly. Send them to the Temple, have them walk like us, and I will embrace each and every one and offer them shelter and service in my lands.

It’s the others, the ones who think us demons or whatever other words they’ve made up to justify their hate, who I find worthy of contempt. Pas kyr s’wit! (A Dunmer oath insulting outlanders of low moral character)

Pallodius Mavax, Words of the Dunmer: A Firsthand Experience, Compiled 4E 137-139

As Lydia fell silent, the eyes of the Dunmer were bright. He had his fingers steepled before him, and he gave her another of those natural-looking smiles. “Well now, that’s not the sort of story you hear every day.”

Lydia had been honest, but tried to keep her opinions to a minimum. She didn’t think this elf needed to know how many times she’d been tempted to smack Velandryn in the head at the beginning of their relationship, after all.

The Dunmer leaned back. Nerim Llervos, he’d said his name was. He was clearly of some authority in the Temple, since she doubted every priest had chambers with an Ordinator outside. Prelate, the old Ordinator had called him. Somehow, she doubted that was the Dunmer word. “I admit, the legends of the Dragonborn are not an area in which I have invested much study, but I understand why Velandryn sent you to me.”

“I’ve not been entirely clear on that, actually. Did my thane happen to mention what it was I was supposed to be giving you?” Lydia had some ideas, but she’d gladly play the ignorant Nord if it meant getting more information. She was sick of drowning in questions.

The Dunmer tapped the papers again. “This. An account of the events that have transpired in Skyrim, and a list of topics on which to get your perspective.” Another smile. “He has also asked me to provide him with any dragonlore we possess, as well as anything relating to the Dragonborn or the Thu’um.” The smile was gone now. “That last, we have much of, but little that would help you much, I think. Do you know why, Lydia of Whiterun?”

“I’m guessing it’s all about killing Tongues.” To be fair, the Tongues had killed a great many Dark Elves as well, but there was no love lost between the ancient Nord warrior-heroes and their favorite
enemy.

“You guess well. I do not think I can provide your master with much aid, but I will send some Attendants and Acolytes through the Archives tonight to see what can be found.” He tapped a finger to his lips, seemingly deep in thought. “I’ll also send notes to those nobles and scholars in the city who would be amenable to rooting through their libraries at my request. Their collections, while doubtless somewhat lacking in metaphysical essays and tomes on the arcane arts, likely have a greater breadth of political and foreign material. Several make a habit of keeping abreast of events in Skyrim, and there are two I can think of who might actually have something worth knowing about Shouting or the Tongues.”

Despite the Dunmer’s dour tone, that actually sounded encouraging. Nonetheless, it was odd that Velandryn was sending her as far as Morrowind for information on these topics. “Forgive my rudeness, but does Velandryn mention why he’s asking for this from the Dunmer Temple? Surely my people know more about these topics.”

Nerim Llervos nodded. “I have no doubt that they do. However, the Nordic tradition is one of ballads and oral histories. It is a common saying at the Temple that the only time Nord knowledge gets written down is when an Imperial holds the quill.” He raised his eyes to regard her. “I mean this with no offense, but much of your history is lost, or held only through songs and stories.”

Honestly, Lydia had never considered the bardic tradition to be a flaw. “We remember. If you need our history, you are free to learn it.” She shrugged. “We write down what must be preserved exactly, so I’d wager the College of Winterhold or the Grand Library of Markarth has more of what my thane requires.”

The Prelate raised a hand. “I don’t doubt that they do, but even I have heard whispers of the Dragonborn. If the news has reached Morrowind, do you think any corner of Skyrim could remain ignorant? I know little of Winterhold and less of Markarth, but I suspect that Velandryn has no wish to make his identity known in either place.”

That was a good point. “Did he say that in his letter?”

“Not in so many words, but I was his mentor for three decades. He wants to gather as much knowledge and power as he can before he is exposed to the world.”

Lydia nodded. “We discussed that a few times. He’s worried that both the Empire and the Stormcloaks will try to use him, or simply have him killed if he joins with the other. A Dragonborn is a powerful figure in the eyes of my people, and neither side would want him joining their enemy.”

Nerim smiled. “And so, he sends you to contact the Temple.”

Lydia had seen him smile too many times now not to wonder. “A question. How is it you smile like a human? Velandryn doesn’t, and I’ve seen no other Dunmer here that do.”

“It is an affectation, nothing more.” Nerim admitted it easily, and his lips curled up again. “As a youth I spent time in the Empire, and learned from humans the mechanisms of their expressions. Have you ever seen a skill come effortlessly to another, and desired it for yourself? I learned, I practiced, and now, I have a trick I can break out to unnerve outlanders.” He laughed in his gravelly voice. “The look on your face when you first saw me smile is exactly the one that makes it all worthwhile.”

Too much like my thane by half. That thought reminded her of something, and she decided that she
should be fine asking some questions. “The woman who brought me here, she said Velandryn is half Ashlander. He’s never mentioned it, so should I avoid the topic with him?” These insights could be invaluable for working with her thane.

When he wasn’t focused on being expressive, the Prelate’s face was as impassive as any Dunmer. “I don’t think that would be necessary. Velandryn has no qualms with his heritage, so far as I know. I would guess that his lack of mention was simply because he didn’t feel it was relevant. To the younger generations, having Ashlander blood is not nearly as remarkable as it would have been prior to the Reconciliation.” A shrug. “Or, perhaps in between becoming a Nord hero and pulling vampires out of ancient tombs, he decided it wasn’t worth the effort to explain.” His eyes narrowed. “It was Nas-anu who brought you here, no? Did she mention anything about Velandryn specifically?”

“I mean, she said she didn’t know who he was.” Lydia wasn’t sure what the Prelate was asking.

“Hmm.” He shrugged. “Ah, well, onto the other requests Velandryn made. One I am certain is a jest, and one is going to require some…delicacy.”

“And these are?”

“The first is a request for a battalion of Ordinators in full battle-kit and three platoons of Armigers. He mentions that they should be put under his direct command, and encourages me to mark them with the Red Hand Ghartok, so that they can be identified as his.” He raised his eyes to stare into hers. “This will not be possible. Even if I were interested in overstepping my authority such as no Prelate has done since the fall of the Tribunal, putting six hundred Ordinators under the command of an Anointed who has never served in any military is patently preposterous. This shall not be happening.”

Frankly, Lydia was astonished her thane had even asked for it. “I think he was joking, sir.” She didn’t find it funny, but there was no way he’d seriously asked for that.

“Sir? My title is Deyhn, and my name is Nerim. The Empire translated my position to Prelate, which I find sufficient. Sir, however, is a human affectation. It is, I am afraid, wholly inaccurate here.”

He smiled. “And of course he was joking. He also requested the Spear of Bitter Mercy; inform him that even if I were able to remove the Spear from Mournhold, his newfound status as a Nord culture-hero in no way qualifies him to handle Daedric artifacts.” Another smile. “The fact that I held the rank of…you would say vice-Prelate, I suppose, within the Temple when he left only further solidifies the idea that this was his idea of a hilarious jape. You may tell him that I have risen in rank, and am now able to reject these requests with even more authority than I possessed before. In fact, I shall include it in my reply to him. May he find it as amusing as I did.”

Apparently, Dunmer humor made sense to them.

“Or course, s—Deyhn Nerim. What was the second request?”

“A…troubling one, actually, and one that involves you.” He shuffled the papers before him, and placed his finger midway down a page. “Velandryn Savani has demanded, by right of his status as a Kinsmer of House Indoril, that his annual dispensation be given to his ko’thil. This means that you, Lydia of Whiterun ko’thil’ten Velandryn Savani, would be granted a weapon and piece of armor from the armory of the Temple, not to exceed bonemold nor silver for quality.” He paused. “However, while Velandryn’s legal right to claim this is ironclad—he was kind enough to cite antecedents in House and Temple Law—it flies in the face of propriety, and I am inclined to disallow it.”
Lydia felt her stomach drop. *This can’t be good.* “May I ask why not?” She didn’t especially care about the weapon or armor for herself, but a housecarl was to enforce the will of their thane. If Velandryn felt that these things were needed, then she would get them.

The Prelate spread his hands. “I won’t bore you with the history behind it, but all Anointed of the Temple are, by virtue of their station, Kinsmer of House Indoril. Traditionally, Kinsmer are considered blooded members of a House and granted full protection. Were he here, asking for himself, I would have no problem with it. Indeed, many Anointed who are venturing forth to minister or study in remote areas carry with them the weapons to which they are entitled.”

Lydia suddenly understood. “The problem is me.”

Nerim nodded. “In a way. Velandryn claims that as you are *ko’thil* to a Kinsmer of House Indoril, you hold rank as a Retainer of his bloodline. Retainers are permitted to act in the name of their masters for certain matters, and what he has requested certainly permits this.” The Prelate sat back and studied one of the tapestries—this one showed a woman who looked to be Dunmer stretching out her hand above a trio of cowering elves with golden skin—before continuing.

“However, you are an outlander, and whatever the traditions of Skyrim may be, foreign oaths are not sufficient to bind you to the Great House Indoril. Therefore, you exist in a puzzling state of half-legality, where you could be considered a Retainer in some lights, but not for any of the true privileges accorded that rank.” He sighed. “I would reject you outright, but Velandryn was kind enough to cite precedent that might well give you the legal edge.”

Lydia felt more than a little lost, but she was going to stand up on behalf of her thane, even if it meant fighting for weapons she didn’t think he needed too much. *It isn’t as if a sword will make much difference against a dragon.* “So, outlanders have been accepted as Retainers before? What makes my case different?”

“Velandryn cites three cases where outlanders were adopted as Retainers of Great Houses without being required to swear oaths. One is from the time of the Ebonheart Pact, another is from the Third Era, and the last is less than a century old. The first can be dismissed as an extraordinary circumstance, given the madness of that time and the unique nature of the Pact.”

Lydia knew only a little about the Ebonheart Pact. The Nords, Dark Elves, and Argonians had banded together after the fall of the Second Empire, but it wasn’t a time period that came up much in her daily life. She’d heard some good songs about battles from the War of Three Banners, but that was the extent of her knowledge. “The other two seem more relevant, don’t they?”

“Perhaps. I lack Velandryn’s somewhat impressive memory, so I will need to consult the books from which he is citing his cases. However, anything from the Third Era is suspect due to the influence of Imperial practices on our laws, and the instance from the Fourth Era concerns an outlander who risked his own life to defend a House Cousin of Sadras. An act of heroism could be argued to be sufficient extenuating circumstance.”

“Are there really only three times in the history of Morrowind that this has happened?” If that was the case, Velandryn’s request here might well be as absurd as his one for an army had been.

“No, not at all. Your master, however, has something of a talent for recalling things he read years or decades before. Doubtless these are the three he could remember, and so he included them.”

Lydia felt momentarily foolish—of course her thane couldn’t be expected to know every case from the entirety of his people’s history—but she would only have been a bit shocked if he had. Velandryn had shown her that he had all sorts of odd knowledge locked up in his head, after all.
Just then, something occurred to her. “So there could be more.”

The priest looked at her coolly. “Yes. The possibility exists. However, the real issue is that the Temple cannot condone gifting weapons and armor to outlanders. We have thrived these past two hundred years by focusing inward, and can ill afford to get caught up in the world’s affairs. You will have food, shelter, and transport to the Arik Pass, but you are not Dunmer, no matter what your oaths might claim. I understand that this is disappointing, but I will have copies made of relevant books, and will write out a letter for Velandryn before you depart.” He reached out and stroked a potted mushroom identical to the one on the Ordinator’s desk outside. “Your rooms will be made ready, as will baths and food should you desire it.”

Lydia felt a familiar heat in her belly, and let righteous anger fill her. “You understand nothing! I’ve fought a dragon, nearly burned alive in its flame, and the only reason I’m alive right now is because of the mer you are insulting!”

The Prelate rose, eyes darkening. “Watch your tone, outlander. You have been accorded rights beyond your station, but—“

“But nothing! I swore to defend Velandryn and make his battles my own, and he sent me here to deliver that letter. He sent me halfway across Tamriel to make sure that this was delivered to you. Now, I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure he gets what he needs! If that means weapons, then I will go down to your Archives and find every instance of an outlander doing what I did, and then I’ll come and dump them in your lap!”

Nerim raised his eyebrows, but his eyes were still dark. “Do you read Dunmeris? Perhaps you are fluent in Daedric, or Aldmeris?”

“I’ll find someone to translate them, then.” The anger was fading somewhat, but she couldn’t let herself back down. “My oath might not mean anything to your precious laws, but I am Housecarl and ko’thil to Velandryn Savani, and I take that duty seriously enough for the both of us! So, if you want me gone, call the Ordinators and have me dragged away. Otherwise, you’re stuck with me until you fulfill my thane’s request.”

“Actually, I think if young Velandryn had intended this to be a mere request, he would not have sent you.” The Prelate sat back in his chair, and steepled his fingers before him. “Suppose I concede to your…determination, and humor this…let us call it what it clearly is, this demand. It would be an act wherein the state religion of Morrowind—make no mistake, House Indoril is the Temple, and the Temple speaks with one voice so far as outlanders are concerned—sends weapons to one of its members abroad. Do you imagine the Empire would be pleased by this? I do not think the Stormcloaks will be overjoyed to see us sponsoring the Dragonborn.”

“Let them whine.” A month ago, Lydia would never had said that, but she wasn’t the same person she had been. “Velandryn is a member of the Temple, fighting for all who value their lives and freedom. The dragons have returned, and he’s fighting for all of us! If the Stormcloaks are upset you gave us tools to kill the dragons, I’ll drag them over to look at the bones outside Whiterun!”

She was sick of politics, of worrying if she was going to reflect poorly on her people or her thane. She understood why Velandryn had sent her hear now. Lydia, I need you to speak with my voice. She only had hers, though, and she hoped it would be enough.

The Prelate raised one hand to stop her. “Your passion, while admirable, is misplaced. My concern over the Stormcloaks was merely an illustration of my larger point. Any aid seen to be sent to Velandryn—and if so much as an arrow is taken from a Temple armory, rest assured it is logged—is, in essence, a direct intervention in foreign affairs. What should I tell the Council, when they come to ask why a Kinsmer of House Indoril has decided to start rampaging across Skyrim
claiming to be a Nord prophet?”

“Tell them the truth!” Why couldn’t he see the danger? “The dragons won’t stop with Whiterun, or even with Skyrim! Wherever they come from, whatever their plans, it affects you too! Do you think your border forts will stop flying foes? Isn’t it better to keep the dragons occupied in Skyrim than do nothing and wait until they attack Blacklight?”

The smile the Prelate gave her felt very genuine. “And there we go. Frame your argument to appeal to your audience. By battling the dragons in Skyrim, we are taking a proactive stand in defense of Morrowind. I have heard worse arguments, even if it isn’t precisely the one I would have chosen.”

“What would you have chosen?” Had this been a test?

“Your claim that we will prevent a dragon attack on our own soil presupposes our inability to easily defeat a dragon, which could well anger some of the more traditional Redoran Councilors. Rather, avoid that issue altogether and consider the Dragonborn’s unique potential to influence events in Skyrim. Velandryn’s letter indicates he is already aware of the implications raised by having a Dunmer fulfilling the role of a Nord culture hero. Such a figure mandates interest, and a pattern of support from Morrowind could prove advantageous in negotiations to come.” A pattern of lights flashed up the mushroom’s stalk, and Nerim glanced down. “I have much to do, and your room has been prepared. You should rest and refresh yourself. If you wish to bathe, I would recommend specifying that you wish to use water.”

“As opposed to what? Wait, just like that? You’re giving us the weapons?”

“You argued well, and I find myself quite convinced.” More like, you had already decided and wanted to have some fun with the outlander. Lydia knew what a test looked like, and now she could see the signs. “You will be brought to the armory in the morning, to choose a weapon and piece of armor as you see fit.” His eyes flicked over her. “There is much that will not fit you, but I believe the armorers will be able to make do.” He rose. “We shall speak on the morrow, Lydia’ten Whiterun, ko’thil Velandryn Savani. And, to answer your question, I suggested you bathe in water as opposed to flame. While many of our people enjoy a cleansing bath in a pit of living fire, I fear it would…disagree with you.

“Yes, yes it would.” She rose as well. “Thank you, Deyhn Nerim.” With a bow, she turned, but then remembered something. “You said you would answer my questions.” They were still bumping around in her head, risen again now that she knew she wasn’t going to be kicked out of the Temple or sent away empty-handed.

He laughed. “I did! Velandryn clearly intended direct and swift action by sending you in his stead; I can see that now. We have a saying that any deed requires an intent well-formed and a passionate advocate. Your master provided the first, and you the second. Very well, I can spare a few moments; your room needs to be made ready and a guide prepared for you, in any case.”

Once more the Prelate stood, but this time he turned to face a tapestry covered in geometric patterns and writing that looked like Daedric, but written vertically. He gestured, and the tapestry lifted itself away from the wall. The Dunmer turned back to Lydia, and indicated that she should rise. “This is a minor extravagance, but one that gives me great pleasure. Would you like to see?”

Curious despite herself, Lydia moved over to him. The old Dunmer gestured at the door. “Go ahead. I have had the pleasure many times, but this may be your only chance.”

*What in Oblivion is behind this door?* She put one hand on the smooth wood and pushed—and felt a rush of cold air.
She hadn’t felt air like that since—the mountains? Impossible! As she stepped through, though, she understood.

They were on a balcony more than halfway up the side of the huge temple. Before and below them stretched Blacklight, with jagged mountains around the city, and far in the distance, the grey and sullen sea. The storm seemed to have abated somewhat, and when Lydia looked out to the east and west she could see for miles and miles. Dark fields and mountaintops stretched away to the horizon, and far to the east the ever-present plume of smoke that could only come from Red Mountain.

Dusk was falling, and the city below was awash in flame. The braziers and pyres she had noted before gave Blacklight a network of constellations, and the torches carried by the guard were fireflies among them. *Listen to me. I’ll be writing poetry next.* It was beautiful, though.

“Not power, not prestige, not an office and Hand of my own. The greatest reward of the rank of Deyhn is this balcony. Do you understand why?”

“I…yes.” Words failed her. The Rootspire rose proudly from the distant waters, but even it couldn’t come close to their current height. “How tall…”

“Nine hundred *saet* from the cornerstone in the foundations, and three thousand, three hundred, and thirty-three from the level of the sea below.” His eyes were bright with amusement. “There is little in this Temple not designed to be in some way sacred or portentous. In Imperial feet, two thousand or so from the sea, and about six hundred from the base, if I recall the numbers correctly. A tower from which to see our nation, that we may remember our duty and our pride.”

“I don’t think Dunmer have too much trouble coming up with pride, you know.” Lydia spoke without thinking as she tried to find the dockyard where *Amar’balak* was docked. It wasn’t until she’d finished that she realized she’d said it out loud.

Fortunately, it seemed to amuse the old elf rather than offend him. “You aren’t wrong, but the Temple cannot be content with the pride of the mundane. A merchant or a guard may walk tall knowing that he is of the chosen people, but in the day-to-day that is life, they may forget the truth of their greater purpose. We of the Temple have no such luxury, and sometimes we need distance to see clearly.”

“Well, you certainly have enough distance up here. Is the truth something I can understand, or are you just going to give me the speech about being an outlander?”

“I will not, though I have no intent of trying to teach you the Psijic Endeavor in an afternoon. My goal, by showing you this, is to help you understand Velandryn, and in doing so help him understand you.”

She hadn’t expected that. “Why?”

The priest was not looking at her anymore, but studying the vista below them. “Do you know who the greatest enemy of the Dunmer is, the one foe that brings us to ruination without fail?”

“Well, I’m hoping you won’t say the Nords.” The sarcasm slipped out before she could stop it, but Nerim hardly noticed.

“Our greatest enemy is ourselves. The Nords conquered us by exploiting the infighting among the tribes and houses, and we only freed ourselves once Nerevar united Ashlander and House-born. The Empire seduced House Hlaalu, and used their dominion over the Council to keep the other
houses in check. Time and again we quarrel and destroy ourselves.” He fell silent for a moment, then continued. “The great mission of this Temple, known by many but rarely spoken aloud, is to transcend the hatreds and ambitions that drive our people, to forge a nation through common purpose. It is a delicate thing we do, but necessary. Even the Telvanni step lightly on sacred soil.”

“And you are telling me this because—“

“I did not lie before. The Temple can do little to help you or your master. My hands are tied by the strictures of my station and order, which enforce the impartiality of the Temple and ensure that our good work may continue. I may give Velandryn aid and counsel, but to offer any true material aid—other than that to which he is strictly entitled by law—would be catastrophic.”

“But why? He’s not even in Morrowind, and surely nobody would object to fighting dragons.” Couldn’t they see what her thane was up against?

“If that is what you think, then you’ve clearly never played politics with the Dunmer. The Dres would howl like branded Khajiit if the Temple even hinted at helping outlanders, and the only reason House Redoran is able to rule without fracturing into a half-dozen factions is because nobody’s brought up the idea of foreign intervention in almost two hundred years. The Telvanni have a habit of leaving the Council entirely when Morrowind gets involved in outside affairs, and half the priests here would start sharpening their knives if they thought the Ordinators would march to defend outland heretics. Believe me, if you wanted to watch the buildings of Baan Malur turn to dust before your eyes, go before the Council and petition on behalf of your thane! Velandryn did not send you to me by accident, you know.”

“You think he knows all of this?” Lydia had a hard time imagining her thane sending her here on a doomed errand.

“I am certain of it. In his letter, he mentions the political situation in Skyrim, and stresses the importance of, as he put it, ‘remaining just neutral enough’ that every side would rather work with him than against him. He doesn’t want to go making enemies, and it would be crass of me to make them here on his behalf.”

A part of Lydia was bothered that her thane had given this priest so much more information than he’d given her, but she reminded herself that these two had known each other for decades. “So, you’re trying to make me the best housecarl you can.”

“You call yourself housecarl, but to me, you are Velandryn’s ko’thil.” The priest’s eyes were kind as he gripped her shoulder in an affectionate gesture. “I wish him victory in the battles before him, and so I am going to make sure that the one who serves him is prepared for whatever may come. That you have strength of arms was evident from your armor and bearing. I had to test for myself that you had the wit needed to fight subtler foes.”

Oddly, this elf’s praise meant something to her. Might just be because it’s the first kind word I’ve heard in days. “So, where do we go from here?”

“As I said, I’m going to send somebody find out what there is on dragons in the Archives, and look into getting you access to the armory. As for you, there’s food and a warm bed if you want it, or can Nords live on ale alone? I’m certain there is a barrel or two of mead somewhere in the cellars; many of the Acolytes enjoy using it for pranks.”

Lydia was certain—well, almost certain—that he was joking. “Well, so long as there’s no poison in the food, I should be fine.” She wasn’t sure if her response was a joke or not, given some of the things her thane had mentioned eating. Why would you bake wasps into a pie, though?
The Prelate chuckled. “Well, you won’t be dining with Young King Helseth or Carvan Vel, so you should be fine. Step outside, and someone should be there to take you downstairs.”

“Wait, before I go…” she honestly didn’t know where to start with her questions. “In Skyrim, they talk about the Dark—the Dunmer like you’re done for. There are refugees in Eastmarch and Riften; everyone knows that! How is this possible?” her wave was over the balcony, but she meant it to encompass everything she’d seen today.

“Glorious, is it not? When the gods knock you down, what are you to do but stand back up?” Nerim sighed. “And yet, this is the greatest of our cities by a wide margin. There are fertile fields and peaceful towns across Morrowind, but many places are still barren, and our numbers, while rising once more, are still meager compared to the might we once commanded.”

Regardless of the priest’s observations, Lydia still couldn’t help but feel that the Dunmer were doing far better than she’d heard. “Why don’t people know about this? Why are there so many refugees, if you need people?”

Nerim smiled. “A very…human…consideration. You think in years, but I would rather wait a century to see these halls filled, so long as I knew that every soul in them held worth equal to its station. Even now, children are raised knowing the truth and glory of our people, and I would not trade the scholars and warriors they will someday become for untested outland aid.

“We took our blows, perhaps the greatest in our history, and we did so in full view of Tamriel.” Nerim was looking out over the balcony again, and Lydia left the doorway to stand beside him again. The sun was vanishing behind the mountains far to the west, and the twinkling stars above were matched by the burning ones below. Somewhere a drum was beating, and Lydia fancied she could hear far-off chanting. “Nobody offered to help us in our humiliation, and we wouldn’t have accepted if they had. The Empire was glad to be rid of their strange eastern subjects, I am sure, and I would imagine that the Nords had many a laugh at our expense.” His voice had grown rough and angry, and his eyes were as dark as the space between the stars. “The city below you was founded on the ashes of our fallen, and every one of us here has suffered to make this possible. Why should we share our toil with outlanders?”

“But the refugees—“

“They fled! They chose safety under outland rule, and that was their choice. They are welcome to return to us, and seek admittance as would any outlander. Some do, though most seem content to remain in Skyrim and Cyrodiil.” He shrugged. “I bear them no hatred, but some child who was born and raised in your Eastmarch is every bit as much an outlander as you are, whatever color his eyes may be. You have more questions?” Clearly, he was done with this subject.

Lydia was tired, she realized, and hungry besides. “They can wait until tomorrow.” Then, she had one final wicked thought. “But first, I have to know. What was Velandryn like, as a child?”

Nerim laughed. “There we go! A chance to gain secrets on your master? I’m shocked it took you this long to ask.”

Lydia was now even more curious. “You said you’ve known him forever. Did you teach him?”

“I didn’t know him as a child, actually; the instruction of juveniles is of no interest to me. He sought me out as an Acolyte, as I was and remain a prominent critic of the Cult of Nerevar. He had joined that group, and in his fervor sought to out-argue a Temple Brother who had been playing this game for three times as long as he’d been alive. I’d heard all of his arguments before, of course, and tied him in knots, but he did have some clever lines of thought, the kind of ideas that
spoke of cunning and a certain twisted wisdom. The next time he had a particularly thorny problem
to tackle, he came to argue it out with me.”

“The Cult of Nerevar?”

“A hero-cult, popular among those who have come of age since the Nerevarine. Unsurprising, if
ultimately incorrect. Nerevar was a mer, no more, and his return as Nerevarine was a lesson by the
Blessed Triune.” Nerim stopped talking suddenly, and gave her a sideways glance. “But I doubt
you want to have me lecture at you. As I said, Velandryn was clever, and, worse, he knew it.

“That typified our relationship, I suppose. I found him infuriatingly unorthodox, and he thought I
was so calcified in my beliefs that I may as well have turned to stone. In time the passion of
argument gave way to mutual respect and even a degree of understanding, and I would hear of no
other standing as Advocate of Wisdom for his Anointing. He’s smarter than he has any right to be,
and I’m very curious to see just how he’s going to play the role of Dragonborn in the days to come.
Is he much different in Skyrim?”

Lydia smiled at the memories now parading through her mind. “He’s generally quieter than you’ve
described, at least until he feels comfortable enough to try and take charge. I think he’s secretly
convinced that he’s the only one in Skyrim who knows how to do anything properly.”

“Secretly?” Nerim sounded moments away from laughter. “He is mellowing with age. Not even
fifty, and already he’s learned to hold his tongue!” Chuckling, the Prelate waved at the door.
“Come. I have much to do, and I’d bet you’re half-dead on your feet.”

She was tired, now that she thought about it, though the climb had been nothing terrible to
someone who’d grown up in Whiterun. Every guard knew two things at the bare minimum: how to
keep yourself awake while standing watch—the secret was to imagine, in graphic detail, the things
that would happen if Irileth found you napping—and how to get from the Outer markets to
Dragonsreach without losing all your wind. So, she might be tired, but she was far from useless. “A
meal first, I think.”

“Well, doubtless there’s an Acolyte standing out there waiting on your whim.” He grinned. “Once
you become a Deyhn, you find that there are an endless supply of them. So young, so, eager to do
whatever menial chore is required so that you might take a little notice of them.” A chuckle. “A
mere one in ten becomes Anointed, though it’s not for lack of trying.”

Lydia felt a bit sorry for these Acolytes. “What happens to the others?”

Nerim shrugged. “Some choose to be Attendants, a few might go to the Ordinators if they’ve
shown uncommon skill. Some keep on—an education is a fine thing, and addictive once begun—
and rather more take what they have learned and depart once they realize they won’t make it as a
full priest. House Redoran recruits scribes from the librarians who wash out of our Archives, and
the Six Towers are full of mages who started their studies in the Canton of Mystery. Do not pity
the Acolytes. There are many paths for them.”

“Hmm.” Lydia wasn’t quite sure how she felt about that. It still seemed cruel, to deny them their
dream. But we don’t just let any watchman serve on the Dragonsreach Guard, do we? She
supposed it was no different for this, especially how seriously these Dunmer took their gods. So,
she merely nodded. With one last look out onto the fiery city below, she followed the old priest
back indoors.

In answer to your inquiry, milady, I only wish that I had more to give. The Telvanni, as ever,
remain an enigma. Even House Dres, for all that its leadership disagrees with the Council’s decisions more often than not, at least participates in the process and attempts to sway policy in a direction more to its liking. The Mage-Lords, in contrast, seem to have decided that the Council simply isn’t worth their time.

I’m not sure how much you know about the actual structure of the Great Council, but voting seats are apportioned based on an ingenious system that appears proportional but ensures that Redoran and their Sadras lackeys can overrule any opposition when they vote as a unit. Indoril could probably petition for more seats, given that the Temple employs Divines-only-know how many Dunmer and controls an army that, but the priests are terrified of looking like they’re amassing power. Anyways, everyone gets a number of Root Councilors, and they sit in the Rootspire and argue until they turn blue. Well, bluer. Everyone except the Telvanni.

The Telvanni have one representative on the Council, who calls himself the Mouth. The Mouth rarely votes or proposes anything, but when he does, it’s done with the full weight of all Telvanni votes. Nobody likes this arrangement, but nobody wants any more Telvanni than necessary anywhere near them or their families, so the Council just lets it be.

As a warning, everything past this point is speculative.

The Mouth doesn’t seem to have much of a philosophy, considering how random the things he chooses to voice an opinion on are. I’ve kept my ear to the ground, and gotten wind of some truly bizarre decisions. One time, he proposed an increased tax on Dres textiles, then refused to support it in an open vote. It failed, but if he’d backed it, it would have succeeded! There’s other ones, too, that make me wonder what’s going on in that head of his.

My theory is that the clue’s in the name. He’s the Mouth of the Telvanni, and more literally than they let on. The Mage-Lords hate leaving their own territory so much that they even send representatives to their own gatherings, so why wouldn’t they do the same for this? Thing is, if every Lord had a Mouth, or as many Lords as were allowed, then divisions would become obvious. Everyone knows that Redoran Benthys wants to see slavery fully legalized again, but he hates the Dres too much to back any of their proposals. The Sadras are second only in number to the Redoran, but they can’t agree on anything long enough to form a voting bloc. These are weaknesses, and obvious ones at that.

The Telvanni wouldn’t want outsiders seeing their differences, so they all speak with one Mouth. This single speaker provides whatever the Telvanni tell him to, and the gods only know how they put the messages in that poor bastard’s head. He doesn’t receive any mail, that’s for sure!

So, the only answer I can give is this very long written shrug. The Telvanni almost certainly exist; their lands are populated and I’ve seen a few of their towers myself. I know that the Empire says they were destroyed, but I’d wager that when the Argonians reached Sadrith Mora and Port Telvannis, the Telvanni Magisters simply retreated to their towers and some human who learned everything he knows about Dunmer from half-septim romances got his facts wrong. I’ve no doubt that a lot of Dunmer in Telvanni lands died, but the power of the house was always in the Mage-Lords, and those bastards are going to live forever.

Unidentified Imperial Agent, Letter to Unknown Imperial Recipient, intercepted 19th Frost Fall, 4E 167.

Notes: Letter intercepted by Bal Molagmer agent, discovered in caravan leaving Morrowind. Exact origin of letter impossible to determine, believed to come from vicinity of Baan Malur. Further investigation deemed infeasible, despite troubling detail and accuracy of report on status of House
Cor da pa, but you’re a big one!” The high-pitched voice came from somewhere below her. Lydia blinked, and looked down. There before her stood a Wood Elf, a tiny little thing who barely came up to the Nord’s breasts. She was dressed in a plain blue robe, and her green eyes were wide. “You the outlander I’m to meet?”

“Only if you’re the Acolyte who’s supposed to show me where I can get something to eat and a place to sleep.”

The little elf grinned. “That I am, Pellani. Faedri, at your service!”

Lydia bowed slightly. “Lydia of Whiterun, at yours.”

The elf laughed, though at what Lydia couldn’t tell. “Come on! We got to go all the way down!”

As they walked down the hall, Lydia taking exceptionally short strides so as not to outpace her tiny companion, she couldn’t help but wonder why a Wood Elf, of all people, was her guide. She was considering how best to phrase the question so as not to be rude when the little elf interrupted her thoughts.

“So why you here, anyway?” If her guide felt awkward about asking probing questions, she hid it well. “Deyhn Llervos is too important to deal with outlanders.”

“Obviously not, since I spoke with him.” The girl clearly wasn’t perfect with Imperial Common but she spoke it quite well, which gave Lydia the inspiration to ask her next question. “Why is it that everyone at the Temple speaks Imperial Tamrielic?”

“Helmin dua! You have to, you know? Everyone learns Imperial and another language. Good for the mind, they say.”

“Another language? How many do you speak?” Was everyone she’d met at the Temple trilingual? If so, that was more than a little impressive.

“I speak Boiche, eh, I mean Bosmeris, and Dunmeris and Cyrodilis. I learn Daedric, too, someday.”

“I see.” Suddenly, her half-understood Nord dialects felt a lot less impressive. I can speak Nordic fluently, at least. “So, how are you one of the…er…” she didn’t want to come out and ask why the Dunmer would let a Wood Elf join their holy temple, but…

“I’m garan’sul, so it’s okay!” Lydia didn’t know the word, but Faedri certainly didn’t seem to be insulting herself.

“And that is?”

“Means I’m good in their eyes. All my people are!”

“All of your people?” Lydia had never heard of any link between Dark and Wood Elves.
“Daranbow Clan! Live over at Baryn’s Gift, north of Kragenmoor.”

“I see.” This was all new to Lydia. “How did the Daranbow Clan come to live in Morrowind?”

The Wood Elf seemed overjoyed to share her story. “Well, we worship Mephala in Valenwood since forever. Keep to ourselves, trained our spiders, and the other Boiche—eh, Bosmer, they don’t bother us. Some clans do not like us, but they still buy our silk and venom, and when we war, it’s just for pride and prisoners.” Clearly, she still had some ways to go before she mastered the past tense, but she was understandable enough. “When Dominion comes, they say, ‘worship the right gods or we’ll kill you.’ The Elders talk about it, but too many shed blood for The Webspinner to abandon her. So, we take all of our people and our good and our spiders, and we steal some ships from Southpoint. By Right of Theft, they’re ours, since Dominion didn’t see us until we’re gone.”

Faedri took a deep breath before continuing, still chattering along at a respectable pace. “We can’t go to anywhere where Dominion is, so we sail until we reach Empire. They tell us ‘how do we know you aren’t Dominion spies, come to invade?’ We tell them we worship Daedra, not the Altmer gods, but then they say, ‘we’ll take you in, but you have to renounce Mephala.’ Elders say, ‘if we wanted to do that, we would have stayed home!’ So, we sail on. We don’t stay in Argonia Marsh, though, since the woods feel wrong and the waters are black.” She shook her head. “Bad water, bad land.” She raised a hand and tapped her chest. “I’m not born yet, but the Elders say you could taste the wrong in the soil. So, we keep going until we reach Morrowind.”

She smiled then, and this time the joy threatened to overwhelm her narrow little face. “We pass a white city, and then we come to a temple rising from the sea. A boat comes out to meet us, and they say they saw us coming through visions. Said they were from the Temple of Reclamations, and we were welcome there! They worship Mephala, like we do, and they say that we can be as they are, even though we are outlanders! So, we go where they tell us, and soon enough we’re settled! The Elders say they miss the trees, but I like the graht-shrooms, and I am no outlander; I am garan’sul!” She beamed at Lydia.

It was somewhat unnerving, dealing with such a joyous little thing. Lydia was no depressive soul, but this one seemed to think everything was wonderful, and that was a bit tiring.

She found herself nodding, however, and spoke the first thing that came to her mind. “I’m glad for you. Do you like it here?” What a dumb question.

“Oh, yes! Back home, I’m not so good at hunting, and my craft-work is sloppy. The spiders like me, but I’m clumsy, and so sometimes I lose silk or venom. Here, though, we can do good work, and I can worship Mephala without having to milk a venom-sac.” Faedri grinned. “A drop or two makes trama-root paste delicious, but it burns something fierce when you breathe it in. Dunmer claim not to mind, but I say they just lie to look tough.” She laughed, and Lydia found herself smiling as well. She could see Velandryn—or any of the prideful lot she’d encountered today—doing just that.

They passed a window, and Faedri stopped. “Wait!” the sun had vanished from the sky, and the Wood Elf bowed her head and murmured a phrase in some language.

Lydia didn’t think it was Dunmeris, but she couldn’t be sure. “What was that?”

“A prayer of evening. It is night, and so I ask for the Lord of Craft to give me his cunning.” She smiled. “Always good to ask, no?”

“The Lord of Craft?” Lydia figured it had to be a Daedra. Or are there some other Bosmer gods Faedri worships?
“Mephala. She has many names. Come on, I’m getting hungry, and I know they’re serving mopate in Delyn’s Hall tonight!”

Lydia was confused. “You said him, though.” Or is gender another area where her language needs some work?

Faedri shrugged. “Mephala is a Daedric prince. She is both. Or neither. Does it matter?”

This one, however, Lydia wasn’t letting go so easily. “But others have gender. Azura is female. I’ve never heard anyone say Molag Bal or Mehrunes Dagon are anything other than male. Why is Mephala different?”

Faedri clapped. “I know this! Now I get to explain!” She visibly tried to contain her excited grin, and spoke quickly as they descended a series of narrow sloped hallways. “Daedra have form as a function of power. Too weak, and they can’t be anything. Most are strong enough to take one form, but only one. Strong enough, like a Prince, and they can be whatever they want. Some care about that matter. Some don’t. Mephala favors pure duality, so we offer her the form he prefers.” She bowed her head. “Me-Pha-La tiron, dua ta!”

“I see.” She wasn’t even lying this time. “So, are you going to be a priestess of Mephala, or of all three?”

“If I’m Sanctified and Anointed, it will be because I have mastered the basic rituals and mysteries of the Temple, which is all of the Triunes and the Corners and well.” Another of those sharp little smiles. “But it’s always Mephala first for me.” She sketched a circle in the air before her.

Faedri pushed open a nondescript door on their right, and Lydia was faced with a bare room, containing little more than a bed and a desk. A shelf on one wall held a line of books, but other than that it was empty. “Put your armor and things here and we can get food.”

Lydia paused. “Just leave them here?” If there was any chance something could happen to them…I won’t risk losing my things in this land, that much is certain!

“No weapons or armor while eating. Temple rules.” Faedri shrugged. “They’re perfectly safe. Nobody’s foolish enough to steal from anyplace guarded by Ordinators, and there’s more of them at Great Fane than anywhere else in the world.”

“Alright.” Lydia left most everything in the room, though she kept the small dagger that sat snug beneath her padded undercoat. She wasn’t going anywhere unarmed.

As they headed out, Faedri closed the door and locked it, handing the key to Lydia. “For you.”

Lydia bowed her head in thanks. “Good to know it isn’t just the Ordinators to keep my things safe.”

The Wood Elf shrugged. “Never heard of a Tong sneaker in the Temple, but it’s better safe than regretful, ne ke pa?”

“Tong?” She’d never heard of that. A local term for thieves?

Faedri blinked. “You’ve not heard of the Camonna Tong? Thieves and murderers, all wretched. They’ll have no blessings of the Three, that’s for a certainty.” A smile. “No need to worry about them, though. They’re cowards, so they never stick their fingers where the Ordinators are.”

Somehow, Lydia doubted that was true. In her experience, the most enterprising criminals responded to heavy guard presence as a challenge. And with so many people in Great Fane, the
opportunities for crime are too many to count. Still, though, her things were probably safe.

They had reached a large door, and Faedri gestured for her to enter. “Hungry?”

The room beyond was a hall of decent size, filled with long tables. Dunmer were scattered here and there, most eating bowls of some food that Lydia assumed was *mopate*. It smelled odd, but not unpleasant.

Faedri pointed to an opening in a wall on one side. “I’ll get you some! Grab a seat and I’ll be back.” She was off before Lydia had a chance to respond.

*And where does a Nord sit in a room like this?* The hall wasn’t exactly packed full, but none of the people looking at her seemed to wish for her company. The figures in blue robes mostly sat together at one long table, and the greens were clustered here and there. Here and there, the red robes sat in ones and two, or with a blue or brown-robed companion. Nine or so of every ten were Dunmer, and of the ones who weren’t, almost all were in green. *There’s no place for me.*

Slowly, she sat at the end of one table, far from anyone else. A green-robed Dunmer gave her a look as he passed, but nobody bothered her. She saw Faedri coming her way, holding two bowls and grinning broadly.

“Ever had *mopate*, outlander?” She looked as though she was going to say something else, but paused, and her brow wrinkled in thought. “Wait, what’s your name?”

At that, Lydia couldn’t hold back. She laughed aloud, and had the pleasure of turning heads all across the hall.

All of the tension, all of the mistrust, all of the uncertainty and carefully controlled unease vanished in the face of one little question. For some insane reason, the idea of this little Wood Elf not having bothered to learn her name perfectly encapsulated her experience thus far in Morrowind, and there was something terribly funny about that.

For a long moment Lydia didn’t speak, just letting the laughter take her. Finally, she wiped at her eyes and smiled up at Faedri. “I’m Lydia. Bring that here; I’m eager to try it.” Chuckling, she accepted the bowl from the bemused Wood Elf and set it down.

Faedri gave her a puzzled look. “So, uh, you’re okay?”

Lydia knew she still had a stupid smile on her face. “I’ve had a very long day.”

Faedri looked as though she was going to ask further questions, but a Dunmer in a blue robe slid in beside her and fixed Lydia with a stern gaze.

“So, you are who you claimed to be.” The Dunmer sounded thoroughly unamused, but the danger he gave off was somewhat lessened by the half-eaten bowl of food in one hand. His hair was as red as his eyes, and a long thin scar traced its way along the left side of his face from jaw to crown.

Lydia had no memory of his face. “Have we met?” She considered rephrasing that to be more polite, but if he wasn’t going to bother with it, neither would she.

The Dunmer nodded. “You made a claim to know Velandryn Savani, and to serve him. I questioned you, and you satisfied my skepticism. Therefore, I permitted you to pass. Do you have memory of this?”

She did. “You’re the Ordinator from the gate!”
Another nod. “I am pleased that you did not lie. Had you been bearing forged documents, it would have necessitated your execution, and that would have reflected poorly on me.” He appeared to think for a moment. “Did you find what you were seeking?”

“I think so.” Lydia dug her fork into the bowl, pushing aside strips of meats and sliced vegetables to see the thick paste beneath. “What is this mopate exactly?”

Faedri leaned in. “It’s good! Made from—“

“Have the Acolytes become Anointed, to speak without invitation?” The Ordinator’s eyes were dark. “Passion is admirable, but so also is respect. Learn to listen, and then to speak.”

Faedri bowed her head. “Karra nol, Tara-thil.”

The Ordinator too bowed his head. “All van mol’ad.” He waved at Faedri. “Would you care to explain to our guest what exactly she will be eating?”

Lydia realized she hadn’t taken a bite yet, and put one of the strips of meat in her mouth. A mix of bitterness and deep meat flavor exploded across her tongue. It was sharp and initially harsh, but as she chewed and swallowed she found herself anticipating the next bite.

Faedri grinned at her. “Good, isn’t it! You have to have saltrice and kwama eggs, and a meat too. Cook the egg and mix with the rice, then layer the meat on top. You can do any vegetables, too, if you have them.” Her smile widened. “If I am Green Pact, I would not be able to eat this at all.”

“If you were a follower of the Green Pact, Acolyte, you would be in Valenwood, ignorant of the folly of your ways.” That was a new speaker, from somewhere over Lydia’s shoulder. “You have also forgotten the most important ingredient.” A Dunmer woman of indeterminate age sat beside Lydia, a bowl of her own in one hand. “This Acolyte has neglected to mention the mopa root, from which the characteristic flavor of the dish is derived.” She looked across the table at Faedri. “A staggering omission, no?”

Faedri bowed her head. “Forgive me, Anointed.”

The woman—red-robed and clearly possessing some authority—raised a hand. “You have done well bringing the outlander here. However, I noticed that the planters at St. Vivec’s shrine to Mephala in the Hall of Solitude are overgrown. This should be remedied.”

Almost before the Dunmer was done talking, Faedri was on her feet, bowing low. “Of course, Anointed. I’ll get right on it!” She turned and almost sprinted out the room, nearly knocking over a pair of Dunmer in brown vests who had just entered.

Scarcely was Faedri gone before Lydia heard laughter. She turned, and the two Dunmer were laughing together, clearly enjoying some joke. She hoped it wasn’t at Faedri’s expense; she quite liked the little elf.

The Ordinator chuckled. “You are as wicked as ever, Kitaiah.”

The Dunmer woman—Kitaiah, her name seemed to be—dug into her bowl. “I do try. Tell me, Orvas, is this the outlander who claims to serve dear Velandryn?”

Another of my thane’s friends, is it? Lydia didn’t much like being spoken of as though she weren’t there, but there were battles worth fighting, and this wasn’t one of them. She rose. “I am Lydia of Whiterun. Velandryn is my thane.”
The Ordinator—Orvas—rose as well and extended a hand. “I am Orvas Mathen. “ He waved at the woman—Kitaiah. “This is Kitaiah.”

“No last name?” She wasn’t used to that from Dunmer. They sat, and the Dunmer woman swallowed a huge bite of the spicy food.

Kitaiah laughed. “When a name is as beautiful as mine, why alter it with anything else?” She leaned in. “Is it true Velandryn is a Nord lord now?”

Orvas shook his head. “A thane is a warrior title.” He looked across at Lydia. “How did Velandryn come by it?”

Lydia wasn’t sure how much to say, considering how adamant the Prelate had been that the news of Velandryn as Dragonborn could have repercussions for the Dunmer. “He helped us defeat a dragon. You’ve heard that they returned?”

Kitaiah laughed. “They say such things. Is it actually true?”

Orvas, however, did not seem surprised. “I spoke with an Armiger who’d been stationed at Fort Llothis. They reported an unusual number of merchants taking refuge there, and an upswing in applications for entry into Morrowind. Apparently dragons have been sighted across the province.”

Sobering, Kitaiah gave Orvas a significant look. “Could they cross the border?”

The Ordinator thought for a moment before responding. “It depends. We have watchtowers and fortresses throughout the Velothi Mountains, but there’s nothing designed to intercept an enormous flying lizard.” He shrugged. “Best case is they attack the fortified locations, but there isn’t much to be done if the beast just flies over. They’d get warning to the major towns and garrisons, but that’s not a scenario they’ve ever trained for.” He shrugged. “If we could bring enough mages to bear, we could keep loss of life to a minimum, but it wouldn’t be a clean victory.” Looking at Lydia, he raised a fork laden with food to his mouth. “How did your lot kill it?”

“Throw enough bodies at it, and even a dragon dies. Velandryn drew its attention, and we whittled it down with spears and blades.” It hadn’t quite been that simple, of course.

“Hmm.” Orvas was clearly thinking of dragon combat, and began peppering her with questions about the dragon’s size, capabilities, and any weaknesses. Kitaiah, for all that she was clearly no soldier, asked a question here and there, though as hers tended to magical properties and counterspells, Lydia was less able to answer those. Nonetheless, both were well-educated and perceptive, and brought up some ideas Lydia herself had been considering on how best to defeat the dragons.

They ate as they talked, and Lydia felt fatigue creeping in as her hunger abated. She was considering the best way to excuse herself without seeming rude, when a familiar head bobbed into view. Faedri waved at her from the doorway, looking only a little the worse for wear given the work she’d undoubtedly been doing. Lydia smiled back, which only broadened the little elf’s grin.

Rising, Lydia bid farewell to the two Dunmer at the table with her. Neither paid her much mind, deep in conversation as they were, and soon she and Faedri were walking through the halls again. The Wood Elf chatted about nothing of much import, and Lydia let the words wash over her as she half-listened.

Well, she’s more fun than the Dunmer, at least. Lydia knew that Nords had a reputation as dour, but she’d never met anyone as…well, dark as the Dunmer. Everything about them seemed razor-
edged, as though they were only a moment away from violence or cruelty. Even the kind ones, like the Prelate, had a sense about them, as though they were holding back a great many things and playing games with her. With Faedri, though… I really don’t think there’s too much she’s keeping from me. Not to mention, she was just a little bit cute, albeit in a very… elven… fashion. It’s the ears, I think, and the chins. It made their faces all look sharp and long.

They passed rooms and hallways, each filled with strange and alien sights. She saw a circle of children surrounding a creature made of flame that danced and twirled in the air. Elsewhere, a line of Dunmer in red robes proceeded down a hall, each with an orb of light in a different color hanging above their heads. One room was empty and dark save for a single Dunmer sitting naked in the center of the floor, eyes closed and looking for all the world as though he were on fire.

It seemed the temple never slept, though she had every plan to. No doubt I’ll be missing all sorts of things by sleeping tonight, but I’m not here to sightsee. She had to get what was promised her, and be on her way.

When they reached Lydia’s room, Faedri rocked back and forth on her feet as they faced each other in front of the door. As Lydia slid the key into the lock, the elf grew more agitated, biting her lip and looking as though there were something she desperately wanted to say. Finally, Lydia took pity on the little girl. “If there’s something you have to tell me, you’d best say it now.”

“Mephala!” The word came out as half a bark, and Lydia was taken more than a little aback. “Excuse me?” Was this some oath or bizarre farewell?

“You should come to the Rites of Mephala tonight, in the Steamworks. Even if you aren’t devout, you should come along with me!” Faedri’s sharp features were animated again.

For a moment, Lydia was insulted. How dare she try to make me worship a Daedra! Her thoughts must have shown on her face, because Faedri shrank back. “No, no, not in a bad way! I know outlanders don’t worship the Three, but it’s all right! There’s no mysteries tonight, you wouldn’t have to swear any oaths!” She looked thoughtful. “I mean… you might not like it, being all alone here, and I thought you’d have fun…”

Fun? She’d never given the circumstances under which someone would invite her to a Daedric worship much thought before, but fun certainly wasn’t the expected motivation. She was still indignant about being propositioned for Daedra worship, but a thought made her stay her tongue. They’re all like this. Every person she’d met today worshipped Daedra, and as strange and alien as this place was, they weren’t sacrificing innocents in the streets or tearing open portals to Oblivion. It wasn’t something she particularly wanted in her life, but they’d made it work. Her thane had made it work, and she owed him enough to be patient with those who shared his faith.

“I’m sorry, Faedri, but I don’t think this is right for me.” At the Wood Elf’s crestfallen expression, she felt a tug of curiosity. “What exactly do you do there, if there’s nothing that needs oaths sworn?” She was the first to admit she didn’t know much about Daedric cults, but she’d always believed you had to demonstrate loyalty to the Daedra. Isn’t that kind of the point?

“Well, tonight it’s all about the Seventh Strand of Devotion. Pleasure and appetite, to feast until sated! It’s a popular one, and you’d be welcome for sure.”

A feast? It wasn’t what she’d expected, but it sounded innocent enough. However, the fact that Mephala was involved and she’d spent as much time as she had with Velandryn meant that she
wanted more information first. “What exactly happens there?” She’d heard rumors about Mephala and her Spider Cults. Some of the stories—

“Sex, mostly. You can go with whoever you want, and try anything at all. Lots of alcohol too, good food sometimes, and some bring smokeweed or taballith kye.” Faedri’s cheerful explanation set Lydia’s stomach to churning. I was invited to a…a…

She couldn’t even figure out what word to use. “Why in Mara’s name would you want me to—”

“Because it’s fun to have outsiders there, and we don’t get many Nords! I mean, some show up now and again, but they’re mostly men,” her face scrunched up, “and I don’t like that so much. The big ones always want to try me, on account of I’m small, but it’s uncomfortable, you know?”

“Actually, no.” She barely even registered that she’d spoken. “You think I’d enjoy this?”

Faedri looked crestfallen. “You wouldn’t? I mean, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, of course, but…”

Suddenly, Lydia realized what the feeling in her gut was. It wasn’t disgust at the idea of the thing, but rather a particular upset at the idea of Faedri being involved. Why does it bother me? Could it be that she fancied the Wood Elf? Impossible! She’d never considered being in a relationship with an elf before, and Faedri was far too flighty for Lydia to tolerate for long.

You don’t have to be soul-mates to bed her, you know. Typically, Lydia did a good job of ignoring that wicked voice, but now it demanded attention. She’s practically begging you to give her a fucking. It had been a very long time, and the fact that Lydia had never thought of an elven woman in that way had more to do with their scarcity in Whiterun than any inherent bias. She was honest enough to admit that Faedri was attractive enough, albeit with a stature that put her uncomfortably in mind of a child. That figure, though, was far from childish, and Lydia realized that the cleavage the Wood Elf was showing wasn’t by accident. She knows what she wants; why shouldn’t you take your pleasure too?

It had been a very long time, to be fair. Nords weren’t shy about things like that, and the fact that Lydia liked women hadn’t been a secret in Whiterun, but it was also a fact that serving under Irileth meant that every waking moment was filled with drills and work. Not time for pleasure, but now you’re free. Why shouldn’t you have your fun?

Why shouldn’t I, indeed? Velandryn certainly wouldn’t mind, though he’d be insufferable if she relayed a story about having sex at an orgy dedicate to Mephala. Am I seriously considering this? It wasn’t anything she’d ever wanted, but nobody would ever have to know, and Faedri, well—

Faedri would be fun, Lydia had no doubt. She was clearly shameless and eager, and it was definitely a hungry look the Wood Elf was shooting her way. She might be short, but I could hoist her up to a proper height. She’d probably like that, and Lydia knew enough to make sure that it wouldn’t be uncomfortable. She know what she was doing, after all. She wasn’t some man, grunting and thrusting without regard. Imaging what Faedri could do with her tiny little—

No! She had a job to do, and all of this was only a distraction. Yes, she had a duty. Whatever else might or might not be true about her, she had a duty to her thane, and that took precedence. She had to retire, so that she could be ready for the morrow. Yes, I must be ready!

With a shocking amount of reluctance—You are a housecarl, serving the Dragonborn, not some randy harlot let loose in the Outer Markets!—She bowed and shook her head. “Forgive, me, Faedri, but I must rest. I thank you for your offer, though.”
Faedri studied her. “Ne sell, vos… do you not like mer? Or do you not like women? I thought from the way you were looking at me…”

“No! I mean, yes, ah, I do, I promise!” For some reason, it was very important to Lydia that her reasoning not be misunderstood. “But, I don’t like the idea of a… group.” She couldn’t bring herself to use any of the words that came to mind, and she didn’t know how they called it. “I mean, I’m flattered that you’d offer, but it isn’t…” she trailed off, uncertain of what else she could say.

“I understand.” Faedri didn’t sound happy, but the note of sorrow in her voice was somewhat less. “Some don’t like it.” She turned to go, but looked back. “You’d have a lot of fun though. You’d best believe we know what we’re doing.” A tiny smile blossomed then.

Lydia realized that she was about to ask something very foolish, but she couldn’t have stopped now even if she’d wanted to. “And if I didn’t want to be at the Rite, but wanted to,” oh gods, her face was burning, “take you somewhere else, what would you say to that?”

Faedri’s eyes opened wide. “You mean… just… not in the… no, I couldn’t do that!” Something not unlike fear was on her face now.

Lydia was puzzled, and more than a little hurt. Did I misunderstand? “I thought you wanted—”

“I do! I meant it; I want to, but you’re… you’re an outlander.” Faedri looked as though she had something foul in her mouth, but she kept going. “If it’s part of the Rites, it’s okay, but I couldn’t… I mean, you don’t bed an outlander, you know?”

“No! I don’t know, so what is it about me that’s so repulsive to you?” Faedri didn’t get to do that: act forward one minute, and then tell her that just because she wasn’t from here, she wasn’t good enough for her. Who does she think she is?

“Nothing! But, you don’t do that. I’m an Acolyte; I can’t have sex with somebody who isn’t even of the Faith!”

“That didn’t stop my master.” Velandryn hadn’t bragged about his exploits, but she was fairly certain, given a few comments he’d made, that he hadn’t been entirely celibate since leaving Morrowind.

“Your master’s Anointed, though.” Faedri was talking fast, words spilling over themselves. “I’m still learning; I can’t risk it! Sex is sacred to Mephala, and I swore oaths. If I lie with somebody who isn’t even part of the Faith, I’ve betrayed my mistress and everything I swore. I’m sorry! Truly I am, but I can’t.” She reached out a hand towards Lydia. “You could come with—”

“No.” She was tired. Tired of this outlander horseshit, tired of being treated like some half-civilized Orc because she hadn’t had the misfortune to be born here! “Look, Faedri. I like you, and I’d gladly sleep with you tonight, but I won’t be treated like some embarrassing outcast because of who I am.” She opened her door. “I’ll be in here, and you are welcome to join me, but that’s the only way.” She passed through, and shut the door behind her, making sure it did not lock.

She sat on the bed and waited, eyes fixed on the door. She wasn’t foolish enough to think this was anything more than a little infatuation, but if they found each other attractive and each of them wanted the other, why shouldn’t they enjoy themselves? Apparently, because her religion forbids it.

She watched the door, but nobody came through. Sighing, she shed her clothing, half-hoping that she’d be interrupted by the little elf. However, she was alone. As she stretched out on the bed—it
was a little too short, but she supposed that was to be expected—she wondered at this place. *I could have taken her amidst a crowd, but not in a bed alone?*

Lydia was the first to admit she wasn’t the most well-versed when it came to sex. She’d been with Freya for a time, but since then she’d never found anyone who was willing to put up with her duty to the Guard and give her anything more than a single night. She knew that some of the Watch and Hold Guard had families, but the Dragonsreach Elite were expected to live and breathe duty. Add that to the fact that she was expected to maintain decorum befitting her position at all times, and it was little wonder that it had been over a year since anyone besides her had been between her legs.

She sighed again. It was for the best, really, that Faedri hadn’t followed her. The strangeness of this place had driven her a little mad, but this was a terrible time to be distracted by lust. *It probably would have been terrible sex anyways.* That thought brought forth a laugh. Whatever other flaws Faedri had, anybody who regularly participated in ritual orgies doubtless put her to shame. *I wonder if Velandryn was a part of them at all?* The image of her thane having sex wasn’t something she needed to think about, but the idea of teasing him about it was too good not to file away.

Somewhat cheered, she closed her eyes. She was alone; isolated in a strange country, and Faedri had been friendly and then showed an interest in her. It was only natural that she’d responded. *Besides, once I help save the world, I can get any woman I want.*

Smiling sadly to herself, she drifted off to sleep.

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*We should have broken, but we didn’t. The Dunmer are a people whole and strong because of us.*

*I have heard Councilors and nobles ask, why must the Temple have the power it does? What do they provide in exchange for the food they eat, the resources they demand, and the children they raise to do no labor but read?*

*I answer every one of them with pride: we hold the Dunmer together! You rule one people instead of many, and that is because we stood strong when none other would! When the very gods abandoned us and the land beneath our feet erupted in water and death, it was the priests who spoke of the Triune and the Testing, of the great sin upon us and how we might make it right. And so we did. We reminded our people how to walk with pride, how to lay three shrine-stones in every hearth and make the Four Prayers to each corner so that the Troubles would turn away. In the absence of the Three Thieves, we gave them purpose and unity, and so they survived. Even in shrouded Telvannis, the mage-lords bow to the Sign of Three. We are the voice in every head, the sublime knowledge of the greater whole that unifies our people.*

*You ask why we are, and we answer: because we must be. We have overcome every trial, and we shall march onward to the inexorable beat of the Doom Drum.*

*AE ALTADOON DUNMERI! AE ALTADOON RESDAYNIA!*

*-Fragment recovered from the lesser fane at Ba’at Nur after Argonian raid, 4E 103*

Lydia woke to a pounding from outside. At first, she’d tried to ignore it, but years of training meant that she found herself listening for each knock before it came. You were always on duty at Dragonsreach, in one way or another.
Finally, she hoisted herself out of bed and went to the door. “What is it?”

“I’ve been sent for you.” The voice was male, and unmistakably Dunmer. Damn. Some small, unworthy part of her had hoped it was Faedri, having seen the error of her ways.

“One moment.” She pulled on boots and her padded under-garb. The thick cloth was travel-worn and more designed for going beneath armor than serving as clothing in its own right, but as the Dunmer hadn’t seen fit to furnish her with new clothes, she’d have to make do with what she had. She glanced down at her sword for a moment, before giving it up and taking her dagger instead. No need to antagonize whoever she was going to meet by showing up girded for battle.

When she opened the door, it was to find a Dark Elf in the nondescript brown robes she had seen all over the temple. She’d assumed they were the servants, and the fact that this one had been sent for her only reinforced that belief. “Where are we headed?”

The elf had large, sad eyes that blinked slowly at her. “They want you below. Something about your master’s request.” He turned. “You should come quickly. They don’t like to be kept waiting.”

She wasn’t certain if this one’s ignorance was better or worse than deliberately keeping secrets from her, but she followed him nonetheless. He took her down a series of ramps, and she noted that the air was growing warmer. A pair of off-duty Ordinators in their blue robes passed by, neither sparing the human nor the servant so much as a glance. Nonetheless, her brown-robed guide pressed himself to one wall and bowed his head until they were gone. Lydia simply stood aside and watched them go.

It was early morning; what glimpses she got of the sky through infrequent windows showed predawn light. They passed few people, and most of the ones they did meet were servants like her guide.

The silence grew longer, and Lydia found herself getting curious. “Where exactly are we headed? Who is it that sent for me?” Most likely it was whoever was in charge of the weapons she was supposed to be receiving, but she’d like to know for sure.

He glanced back over his shoulder. “Aravyn Nals. Kattash vul for the Temple. Well, that’s helpful. They passed through a door, into a long and empty hallway.

As they walked in silence, Lydia studied her companion. He walked with sure strides, clearly at ease down here. I’d imagine servants come to know this place well. After a moment, she realized she might be doing him a disservice. He could well be a lower class of Acolyte. After all, that Kitaiah had no issue with sending Faedri off to perform a menial task. Not to mention, the Prelate had indicated that Acolytes were ideal for showing her around.

“Are you an Acolyte here?” if she was going to be shepherded around by somebody, she should learn something about him.

The Dunmer ahead of her froze for the merest second, then grunted and kept moving on. After a moment, he spoke. “No. I serve.”

“Oh course.” She might have offended him, she realized. Prelate Llervos had mentioned that some Acolytes who failed stayed on as Attendants. She opened her mouth to apologize, but paused. She had learned to read body language as part of her training, and he didn’t move like he was offended. His steps were long and confident, and he held himself—
Is he trained at arms? She might not know exactly what fighting styles Dunmer taught, but he was moving like he knew how to fight. Do they give Acolytes training? Maybe he’d been an Ordinator or a guard once.

They turned a corner, and found themselves in a long hall, completely empty but for the two of them. The elf pointed at a door. “In there.”

She nodded thanks, and moved to open the door. As she did so, she noticed him pivot slightly, torso facing her. It was subtle, but it sent a chill down her spine. It could have been mere courtesy, were it not for the angle of his arms. **He has a weapon on him, and he’s keeping his hands free to go for it.** Something occurred to her then. **If there’s an army of Acolytes eager to jump at commands, why would an Attendant be used for this?**

She didn’t know what was behind the door, but she also couldn’t afford to turn her back on this one. She fumbled at the latch, and cursed loudly. “Come help me with this!” She didn’t know for certain that anything untoward was going on, but she knew that you never entered a potentially dangerous room if your back wasn’t secure. **Let him go first, and prove my suspicions wrong.**

He moved beside her, but when his hand reached out for the door, she saw his wrist twist, and something drop out of his sleeve. Her own hand flashed down to her waist and pulled the dagger from its sheath, but he spun away before she could do more than draw it.

They faced each other in front of the door, neither of them moving. The elf had abandoned the pretense of being anything other than dangerous, and his eyes, though still somehow sad, had lost every bit of their dullness. In one hand he held a short knife of some dark metal, and the fingers of his other were twitching in a strange pattern.

This situation, Lydia decided, was very bad. She had a dagger, but neither armor nor shield, meaning that she’d have to abandon her usual fighting style in favor of a lighter one. Unfortunately, she doubted her opponent was similarly handicapped. He’d prepared for this, after all.

Red eyes glowed in his dark face. “Put down your weapon, outlander. Enter the room and this will be over.”

“Don’t think I will, actually, but thanks for the suggestion.” She might not be in her ideal situation, but she would be damned if she let some sneaky elf bastard get the upper hand.

She feinted left before barreling straight forward. She was a good four inches taller than this elf, and much broader besides. No matter how quick the bastard was, there was no way he could get out of her way in time.

The elf dropped to the floor, and brought a leg around in a sweeping kick aimed at her legs. She leapt over it, but the movement also ensured she missed him completely, and instead nearly crashed into the wall. She brought a hand out, pushed off to steady herself, and turned to parry a thrust from the Dunmer’s knife. He fell back, eyes narrowed, and passed the blade to his other hand.

“Why are you doing this?” She stepped forward and brought her blade arcing in, driving the Dunmer back a step. “What’s your goal?”

“You.” He gestured with his free hand, and a plume of fire erupted towards her.

Had she never trained with Velandryn, this might have caught her off-guard, but she knew enough
now to counter the attack. She dodged forward, making sure she was spinning as she passed through the outermost edge of the fire, all while keeping the elf’s location fixed in her mind.

*Flame needs to find purchase. Spinning denies it that.* The heat was bad, to be sure, but it was nothing compared to a dragon’s flame. If she told herself that, it made the pain less real. And so long as her clothes or skin didn’t catch the fire, she should be okay. She sliced with her dagger, and was rewarded with a grunt of pain and the fire dying down immediately.

Once more, they faced each other, though this time Lydia could feel pain from the fire all over her arms and face, and the Dunmer’s arm was trickling blood onto the floor. He raised his wounded arm, making a fist and causing more blood to gush out. “*Shol zy drem, s’wit. Irk vay tol’aka’bal.*” His words were angry, spat out as his darkened eyes stared daggers at her.

She lifted her dagger in a mockery of a salute.

*He isn’t healing. Good.* That meant she could wear him down. He might be trained, but she was willing to be he didn’t have much experience fighting Nords. His elven build meant he had long arms, but she should still have a bit of an edge with reach. His magic was a problem, but that just meant she needed to end this quickly. *And find out why he’s really doing this.*

She charged again, and he dropped into a stance that showed he’d anticipated just this move. *Perfect.* Many Dunmer thought Nords were idiots, so this one was prepared for her to rely on a brute force charge again.

*Not this time.* As he moved out of the way, thrusting his knife into the space she would have occupied, she too threw herself to one side, catching him in a tackle and bringing him to the ground. She snaked an arm around his neck, and pulled with all of her might.

A gasp from the elf told her it was working, and his frantic movements did little to shake her grip. Grimly, she kept up the pressure, hoping against hope that he didn’t—

She felt a stab of agony as the knife dug into her gut, and her reflexive spasm of pain let the elf deliver a punishing blow to her face with his elbow and wriggle free. He crawled away and regained his feet, breathing heavily and clutching his arm, while Lydia drew herself upward, each breath causing a lance of pain down her side. She was bleeding, she saw, and gut wounds were no laughing matter. This one had been shallow, but she couldn’t drag this out for much longer.

Unfortunately, the elf clearly knew this too. He held his knife in a defensive grip, while his other hand wove some sort of shimmering trace through the air. “*You wait, you die, outlander.*” He flexed his free hand, and tiny lights shot towards her. She tried to dodge, but a few still struck her, leaving painful burns in their wake. “Surrender, and I promise you will live.” He attempted a smile; it was far more grotesque than Velandryn’s most unsuccessful attempt could ever hope to be. “You can return to your home, and your master.” A chuckle. “*Sketh halab; a most fitting place for a human.*”

Lydia’s only response was to charge again, this time weaving her dagger before her as though she were a child swatting at flies. Her world had narrowed to this moment, this battle, and she needed the initiative if she was going to win.

He interspersed his dagger in her approach as she closed, clearly intending to wound her. She was quick enough to meet him however, and blade met blade in a screeching clash that was over in a second but sent the elf’s weapon spinning away. He might know how to hold a knife, but he’d clearly underestimated the strength that Lydia could bring to bear. Instantly, she stabbed at him, but he darted backward again, bringing his hands up and sending a blast of fire her way. No longer caring about her wounds, she barreled forward once more, bowing her head against the searing
pain of the fire and putting every ounce of her energy into reaching the elf. This was kill or be killed, and there was too much at stake for her to die here.

With a full-throated cry, she pushed through the flame and got into arm’s reach of the Dunmer. He clearly hadn’t expected her to get this far, and her free hand slammed into his gut. He doubled over, and she brought in her dagger hand—

“Enough!” Lydia spun as a shape rushed into view. She only got a glimpse, but she could see the shimmer of magic and the glint of metal. Another! She raised her hand to finish off the male elf, but the figure grabbed her roughly and threw her away from the downed elf. “Stay your blade, outlander!”

From her new position on the floor, Lydia took in the scene. Her would-be kidnapper was huddled against one wall, and standing over him was a woman who looked to have stepped out of a ballad about the cruel and mysterious Dark Elves of the east.

This new Dunmer wore pale armor studded with spines and cast in insectoid shapes. Her face was pierced and studded from her ears to her nose to her brow, and tattoos carved patterns across her cheeks and lips. Lydia counted six blades on her, and she held another in her hand that looked much like the weapon her thane sometimes called forth from Oblivion.

The Dunmer woman looked down at her. “You are injured. Can you stand?” Her words were correct for inquiring after someone’s health, but there was no warmth to them.

Lydia gingerly got to her feet. “Aye, though you throwing me across the room didn’t help.”

She was met with a glare for her trouble. “You require healing. Follow.” She hauled the male elf to his feet, and marched him down the hall. She barked out a few words of Dunmeris, and her prisoner sullenly responded with a single syllable. In a single smooth motion, she drew a blade and sliced off one of his ears, so quickly that Lydia had barely registered what was happening before it was done.

“What in Oblivion! What was that for?” Lydia might be wounded, but she wouldn’t let abuse like that stand. He’s a prisoner! A little beating now and then was fine for criminals, but this went beyond anything she’d ever seen.

“This fetcher infiltrated the Temple and committed violence against a guest of Deyhn Llervos. There are questions that need answering.” She looked back at Lydia. “Or do outlanders not question their prisoners? Perhaps you bring them warm water and bread, so they are not hungry?”

He voice dripped with contempt.

“We don’t cut off their ears!” Maybe it was the blood loss talking, but Lydia was past caring about being polite. “Why in the name of every holy thing would you do that?”

The Dunmer laughed. “You understand nothing, outlander. Now come. If you die here, it will reflect poorly on the Temple, and myself.”

A few minutes later, Lydia found herself in front of a nondescript door, swaying slightly as she stood in place. It was getting difficult to focus, and everything kept going slightly fuzzy if she let her mind wander. That can’t be good.

The Dunmer woman had handed over her prisoner to somebody—Lydia couldn’t quite remember who, but she had a vague impression of too many eyes—and now half-pushed her through this new door. Inside, she found herself given a quick examination by a pair of red-robed elves and led to a
reclining bench padded with some sort of delightfully springy cushion. She prodded at it experimentally, while several Dunmer talked in the background about blood loss and poison. The woman handed over a knife to the pair. *Hey, that’s the knife that cut me!* She wondered if they’d let her keep it. A *good souvenir*. She giggled to herself.

She was asked to strip and lie down, and she did so slowly, taking care not to fall over or tear anything. It was a bizarre sensation, knowing that your mindset was *wrong*, yet being unable to correct it. *Did somebody say something about poison?* That might explain it. She’d lost blood before, and never felt anything like this.

She must have blacked out, because she came to with a Dunmer peering into her eyes. It was the woman who had saved her earlier, and she fancied there might have been a hint of concern in all that red. *She has pretty eyes.* Grimacing, she shook her head. Clearly, she still had a bit of whatever poison it had been in her system.

“What happened?” She spoke slowly, feeling as though her mouth were filled with wool.

Another Dunmer strode up; one of the red robes from earlier, she thought. “You were fortunate. The blade your assailant carried was coated in a potent venom designed to incapacitate. Had your rescuer,” he bowed deeply to the woman who’d found them, “not chanced upon you, you would have been rendered unconscious.”

That reminded her. “The room!” She sat up quickly. “He tried to get me to go into—“

The woman cut her off. “It has been dealt with. Had you entered the chamber, you would have been paralyzed and concealed, likely for transport out of Great Fane.” The elven woman studied her, eyes flicking down briefly, and with a start Lydia realized she was unclothed but for her shift. *What did they have to do to me?*

She glanced at the woman, who had returned to watching her impassively. “Thank you.” She turned to the red-robed Dunmer, watching from a seat near the wall. “And to you. You gave me an antidote?”

The elf nodded. “You were poisoned with *aril* sap.”

She knew little of poisons, but even she’d heard whispers of *aril*. “Do I want to know how bad it could have been?”

The elf tilted his head slightly as he regarded her. “It has been some time since I last treated an outlander. Was that question intended to be humorous? A worst-case reaction to *aril* sap would be an excruciatingly painful way to die.”

“What, what?” As notorious as *aril* was, it wasn’t lethal. In fact, the reason for its infamy was how easily it robbed a person of their sense.

The elf blinked at her. “You wanted to know how bad it could have been.”

“Thank you for your aid, esteemed healer, and for providing me with some amusement this morning. However, we must be on our way.” The Dunmer woman waved the healer away, then turned to Lydia. “He spends too much time with reagents, and not enough with people. But, this means he won’t go talking about treating you.” The woman leaned over and tapped Lydia between her breasts. *You put on some clothes. We need to get you over to the armory.*

“How do you—“
“How do I know where you have to be?” The Dunmer tossed her a shirt. “Put this on. Great Fane hums with rumor at your presence. For an outlander to be admitted is unusual. For one to hold counsel with a Deyhn is unprecedented.” She rose. “I do not know if the poison took your senses when I said this, but any harm that comes to you in this place shames the Temple.”

Lydia followed the other woman down the hall. “How long was I out?”

“Less than thirty minutes.” A pause. “Do they have time-keeping in Skyrim, or do you reckon the hours by the position of the sun?”

_Oh, for the love of_—“Yes, I know what a minute is! It’s how often somebody insults me in this blasted place!”

The elf’s eyes widened slightly. “Did I offend? Forgive me, it was a question honestly meant. I know little of Skyrim.” She paused, and turned. “You find it very unpleasant here?” Her voice was almost musical, rising and falling with emotive depth that more than made up for the stillness of her face. Here, it conveyed her disbelief at somebody finding Morrowind anything but wonderful.

Lydia sighed. “It’s not that. It’s just…it’s all different here.”

The elf nodded. “I have never been outside Morrowind, but I hear it’s nothing like this. Green as far as the eye can see, and forests without a mushroom in sight.” She laughed. “So strange, no?”

The silence that followed was a companionable sort of quiet, Lydia thought. Eventually, she felt bold enough to ask a question that might be considered rude. “So, what do you do in the Temple? I haven’t seen anyone else dressed like you.”

“Oh, you don’t see us. Or you might, and simply not know. I’m Morag Tong.”

_Oh, gods._ Lydia knew of the Morag Tong. _Everyone_ knew of the Morag Tong. Assassins who worshipped Mephala, cultists and murderers, the stories said they were as bad as the Dark Brotherhood, but even more mysterious. Rumor held that they had been destroyed a hundred years ago, but the proof against that seemed to be walking alongside her. _What does an assassin want with me?_ And could she do anything about it if this elf wanted her dead? She still wasn’t feeling great, and she had no armor besides.

Her fear must have shown through—or perhaps she was just silent for too long—because the elf turned to look at her. “Is something wrong?”

“Morag—Morag Tong, you said?” Lydia fished desperately for something to say. The last thing she wanted was an angry assassin. “In Skyrim they say that you were disbanded.”

She nodded. “The old Morag Tong was. They were corrupt, and had lost their way. They were retired, or killed, or driven out of Morrowind. But, Mephala speaks through her children, and so we were reborn. We serve the Temple and our Patron Lord.”

“Why does the Temple need assassins?” If nothing else, the Morag Tong would probably do better business if they weren’t part of the Temple. _Of course, this is Morrowind. Nothing makes sense here._

“Ah, I see your confusion. We’re not assassins.” She paused for an instant. “Well, not usually. Mephala’s sphere is subtle, and there is much that we can do to serve the Dunmer people from the shadows.”

Lydia was confused. “So you’re spies?”
“Some are. We all serve in our own ways. I mostly keep to the Temple, keep my eyes and ears open, and make sure nothing is amiss.” Her eyes brightened. “And sometimes, I hear a battle while I’m checking out a strange magical signature in the Underworks, and stumble onto something interesting.”

Lydia finally felt at ease enough to smile at the elf. *For a spy and maybe an assassin, she isn’t so bad.* She was even a little bit attractive, in a good light.

Then, she remembered the flash of a knife, and blood. *Don’t be fooled by a pretty face.* “And chopping off his ear? Was that *interesting*?”

The elf didn’t even bother to turn around. “No. Only necessary. He required a demonstration, a wound he could not ignore. Our healers can restore him, if he cooperates.”

That sounded suspiciously like rationalization to Lydia. “So what did you do with him?”

“I turned him over to my superiors for questioning. He will be dealt with, and we will learn who he serves.” She sounded very sure of herself.

Lydia envied her that. They walked a bit more, until Lydia realized that they weren’t returning to her quarters. “My things—“

“I’ve sent Attendants to bring them to the Indoril Armory. For now, you’re needed there.”

*How did she know that?* Suddenly, Lydia realized where she was. Somewhere in a temple dedicated to strange and cruel gods, following a woman of uncertain motives. Lydia was completely unarmed, and for all she knew, she was walking into another trap. With a sinking feeling, Lydia regarded her companion. She was friendly, true, but she was also an assassin and spy. *Can I trust her?* And, if she couldn’t, what was there to do?

She considered their respective positions, and began glancing surreptitiously around for anything she could use to even the playing field. Of course, if this was a trap, she probably wouldn’t have time—

They turned a corner, and a pair of Ordinators glanced over at them. They flanked a doorway through which Lydia could see red light flickering. Her companion gave her a little push. “Go ahead! You’re needed in there.”

Clearly, she’d been shepherded to her next destination by this elf, but she didn’t know why. “I thought you only knew who I was by rumor.” She didn’t believe it for an instant, but that was what the other woman had said.

The elf shrugged. “I’m a good liar, aren’t I? A good skill for an assassin, you know.” She bowed. “Blessings of the Three be with you, outlander.” She strode down the hall, vanishing before Lydia could even begin to think of a response.

*I never even learned her name.* Sighing, she turned back to the guards. “Is this the Indoril armory?”

One nodded. “You are expected.”

*Well, what else is new?* She entered the armory, and saw Dunmer working at forges, as well as others working leather and some sitting at what looked like lathes. The far end had a number of elves busily working what looked like stone. Weapons and armor covered the walls, and everywhere was the hubbub of busy work and chatter. She couldn’t understand a word of it, but she
got the impression that these were dedicated craftsmen, the same kind of perfectionists as Adrianne Avenicci and Eorlund Grey-Man back home. She also noticed that, though it was called an armory, most of what they were making seemed to be more mundane work, designed for everyday life. *Makes sense, I suppose.* The Dunmer weren’t at war, after all, and doubtless had more urgent matters than militarizing their entire people. She wondered how many plates and glasses and—*what else would Dunmer use? Mushroom pots? Little statues of Azura?*—the Dunmer of the Temple needed each year.

Just then, she was confronted by a heavyset Dunmer wearing a thick leather apron and more than a few burns. His bald head shone in the light from the forges, and his thick features, while impassive, put her in mind of more than a few craftsmen she’d known. *No-nonsense, dedicated to his work, I’d wager.*

“You! You’re the outlander? You’re late!” His barks cut off abruptly, and he looked her up and down. “A big one! Well, we’ll have something for you. Might not be the most delicate, but then again, neither are you.” Muttering to himself in Dunmeris, he ambled back away from the door, waving at her to follow him. “Come! Come! You must come now! We have much to do!”

*Do we?* She followed him back into the workshop, wondering when this madness would end. *I’m getting sick of following elves to places.*

He led her to a small inlet set into one wall, and showed her a rack of armor. “I got the order yesterday. Most of the stuff I make these days is *tebbekh’juhn*, but I’d wager a big one like you wants something a bit heavier, eh?”

The elf laughed loudly. “Right, forgot you’ve got only the one tongue. Not a problem, I’ll use your words.” He pointed to a set of armor much like the ones she’d seen the Ordinators wearing. “This is *tebbekh’juhn*. Ornamental bonemold. Light, flexible, and easy to enchant. However, not ideal for front-line soldiers.” He gestured to another set, which more closely resembled the armor on the Redoran guards in the city below. “*Tebbek’hahl*. You could say, hardened bonemold. Heavier and stronger but slightly more brittle. Lighter than steel, tougher than iron. A nice balance.” He waved at the two. “Word from above is you can have a piece of one of these, but seeing as you brought me my newest toy, I might be persuaded to give you a bit of an upgrade.”

Lydia already found herself wishing for good honest steel. *Why would Velandryn go through all of the trouble to get me this, when he knows I’d prefer my own?* Could it be some bizarre power play, making sure that she was carrying his people’s armor?

Before that, though, there was another matter. “Your new toy?” Then, she understood. “You mean my crossbow?”

The elf nodded. “Just so! The arbalest was considered a dead-end design, but the work on the piece you brought me opens up some exciting avenues.” His eyes brightened as he regarded her. “We all love the Temple, of course, but there’s no denying that keeping armor in good repair and hammering out prayer-tablets isn’t the most exciting work. When we get the chance to play around with something new, you’d best believe we take it.” He pointed at a table covered in drawings and mechanisms. “I’d say it was an Imperial who did the metal-work, but I’d wager that they used a Nordic woodsmith. Maybe a Breton, but I’ve not seen enough of their work to draw a meaningful distinction. They used more wood than I think is wise, either way; I’ve already sent out for a sample of bones so I can find a good replacement for our own production.”
Their own production. She felt like a fool for not realizing it earlier. “You’re arming your own soldiers with them?”

“Of course! I doubt the Armigers or Ordinators’ll take to them, but the Redoran are going to jump on this like a nix-hound on a Khajiit. Not to mention, with all that talk of dragons, might not be the worst idea in the world to have some of these sitting around in the border forts.” He tapped the table. “Magic might be divine, but nobody ever regretted having some extra weapons on hand.”

“Others here told me the dragons were just rumors.”

The elf snorted. “Maybe, maybe not. I’d rather be prepared and not have anything happen then get caught with my robe open if one of the bastards comes swooping down on us.”

Well, that was sensible enough. “So, where’s mine? I’d like my crossbow back before I leave.”

He glanced down at his designs. “How long you staying? I should have a prototype ready in a week or two, but it won’t be anything I’m comfortable making in bulk for at least a month and a half, assuming a typical amount of bad luck.”

“No, I mean the crossbow I gave you. Where’s that one?”

He pointed to his table, covered in…oh, mother Mara save me…covered in bits of steel and wooden machinery. “Something like this, can’t really study it without pulling it apart.” He shrugged. “Nobody said I had to put it back together.” Another shrug. “Sorry about that.”

Lydia sighed, and waved away his apology. “Not your fault, I suppose.” Damn it all, she’d liked that weapon! Well, at least she was going to be stopping at Castle Dawnguard. They might be able to give her another one. Just so long as they don’t learn we abandoned their people in a crypt. They might not be so amenable then.

The elf looked almost apologetic. “Look, I’m sorry about the crossbow. I know what it’s like, losing a good weapon. Tell you what, I’ll send you the best one of the first batch. Let somebody at the Temple know where to find you, and I’ll send you a weapon that’ll make you regret ever missing that human-designed piece of junk!” He seemed to realize what he’d said. “Ah, no offense.”

She smiled. “Only the slightest bit taken.”

He chuckled. “You’re all right, and not just for an outlander.” With a wave, he motioned to the room as a whole. “So, back to business. What’ll it be? You need silver? I’ve heard there’re werewolves everywhere in Skyrim. We’ll need to size you, but I can make it happen.”

He’s almost giddy, Lydia realized suddenly. It was odd to see in one of the dour Dark Elves, but this one was unmistakably over the moons about being able to play around with a crossbow. Some small part of her wondered if she could finagle an entire suit of armor out of him. I don’t know what I’d do with it, but maybe for my thane…

Her thoughts were interrupted as a shield caught her eye. Blessed Talos…

It was a strange thing, wrought in some bronze metal and seemingly at once very old and exceptionally well-maintained. It was roughly oval, a little larger than her current shield, but shaped entirely differently. Its central boss was recessed, and the plates surrounding it were set forward, giving it the look of some flower that had unfolded in the daylight. It shone dully, and Lydia was seized with a desire to take it down and try it out. Her current shield was all well and good, but this one looked to be something else entirely.
The Dunmer noticed her gaze. “Like it, do you? A masterpiece, taken from the ruins of Mthenganz.”

With a name like that, its origin was obvious. “It’s Dwarven?” Once he’d said it, it made sense. Dwarven metal lasted longer than any other, and it did have that same color as other Dwarven pieces she’d seen.


Lydia was taken aback. True, it was a magnificent shield, but she had no right to it. “No! I was only looking, after all, and my thane charged me with—”

“‘Thane.’” The Dunmer interrupted her with the single word, seeming to taste it as he spoke. “What is this?”

“Oh, my master. Velandryn Savani. He holds the rank of thane in Whiterun.” The warning about not letting people know her business here returned to her, but, she thought, this was fine. *It’s not like I said he was the Dragonborn, and knowing I serve a Dunmer might make this one happy.*

“Velandryn Savani? You serve Velandryn?” The Dark Elf laughed. “Last I heard he went wandering through the Empire. Never learned why, but glad to know he didn’t go and die. How’s he been?”

“He’s well. He thinks himself superior to just about everyone he meets.” From what she’d seen, the Dunmer took that as a compliment.

And, indeed, the Dark Elf only laughed. “Among you Nords, I’ve no doubt he is!” He chuckled again. “By the Branded Fire, I hadn’t thought of Savani in forever!”

“How do you know him, if you don’t mind my asking?” Given their long lives, Lydia supposed it was possible that they’d simply met, but they didn’t really seem to run in the same circles.

“You ever heard of the Nerevar Cult?” The Dunmer tapped his chest. “Met him there, and once you know somebody in this place, seems you just keep running into them.”

It might not be a bad idea, Lydia decided, to learn more about Nerevar and his cult. Velandryn had spoken the name before, but she hadn’t thought it was more than another of his strange foreign oaths.

“I’ve heard of it. Velandryn will be glad to know that his allies are aiding me, even in his absence.” If she had even half as good a read on this one as she suspected, that should get her whatever she wanted. *It might be simpler if I knew what it was I wanted, but that can come after.*

And, indeed, the Dunmer’s chest puffed up like a pig-bladder child’s toy. “Hah! You’ve the right of it there, Nord! Tell Velandryn that Fethan Daril’s got his back! Now, what can I do for you?”

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“Mistress Assashami, you honor me with your presence.” Nerim Llervos had long since learned not to show surprise, even if the mer standing before him had somehow managed to get into his office unannounced.

The old Ashlander bowed slightly. “I figured I would save you the trouble of sending for me, *Deyhn.*”
“Had you decided to announce your presence, you might have. As things stand, there is an Acolyte with a very difficult task ahead of him.”

“Well then, it is good that he will be getting his exercise. Too many in the Temple spend their days with noses in prayer books. It does not do to ignore the body.”

“One of the benefits of my rank is that I can do no wrong. If asked, he will doubtless relay that it was a mediation on futile endeavors. Is he is clever, he will thank me for the lesson.” Nerim had never knowingly given an Acolyte an impossible task—well, almost never—but he might have to start. After all, failure was a necessary component of improvement. He made a mental note of it, then grew serious as he faced the old Ashlander. “I have come into some information, Nas-anu.” He let no hint of emotion enter his tone.

“And you thought to share it with me? How thoughtful of you, Nerim.” Her reply was equally calm, and they looked at each other across his desk for a long moment.

“The Ordinators report that a member of the Morag Tong was seen escorting the outlander Lydia to Fethan Daril’s forge.” He held her gaze. “Did you enjoy your conversation with the Nord yesterday?”

The Ashlander dipped her head. “A dutiful servant makes for a dull conversation, I’m afraid. She serves her master well, but not us.”

“Us?” He raised an eyebrow—an affectation he’d never been able to give up—and placed his hands on his desk. “To what us are you referring?”

Nas-anu Assashami, once the Wise Woman of the Harisali Clan Ashlanders of Vvardenfell, reached into her robe. Producing a tiny idol, she ran her fingers over its surface before returning it to whatever secret pocket it had come from. “Have you spent time among my people, Deyhn Llervos?”

He shook his head. “I briefly met a few clans when I made the Pilgrimage of the Incarnate, but I have never spent much time among the Ashlanders.”

“When a clan must move, it will send scouts before it, so they do not travel blind. When I led the Harisali outriders, we would find all manner of dangers, from bandits and renegades to stray Daedra or blighted beasts. Those that we could defeat, we did. However, some threats would have cost the lives of my people to overcome, and so the only good option was to warn the clan to swing wide.”

Nas-anu had never been accused of brevity, but in truth Nerim didn’t mind. He would rather listen to her, after all, than deal with the work he was actually supposed to do. Her accent, usually all but imperceptible, grew stronger when she talked of home and her past, and he quite liked that sound. Already she was half-swallowing the ‘t’ sound in many of her words, and her lower vowels were beginning to sing.

Unaware of his musings, she continued. “For better or for worse, the world has changed, and my people need no longer fear death at the hands of our House-sworn cousins. So, we come to see the world we have never known, and many join their fates to yours.”

“Including you.” There’d been a note of something suspiciously like disapproval in her voice, and he wasn’t going to let her get away with that.

“Yes.” She blinked at him. “This is now my home as much as the Grazelands, and out there in the
city beyond I have kin I have never met. An odd situation for a Velothi, but I find it has grown on me. Even your Ordinators are less repulsive than they once were. And so, I find it intolerable that we close our eyes to the world beyond our borders, trusting in the goodwill of the lesser races not to seek once more our subjugation. If Morrowind as a whole is my nation, then I must safeguard my kin. I am doing this, as, I believe, are you.”

Nerim sighed. “And the events of this morning? If the criminal who sought to capture the outlander is found to have come from a noble or, gods forbid, a Councilor? Will you discharge your duty by threatening a member of the Great Council?”

Her eyes flashed. “If a Councilor of the House-born threatens violence against a servant of Velandryn Savani, they shall learn firsthand of the Thousand Rings.”

Nerim had been afraid of that. He didn’t know the details, but anytime an Ashlander brought up the Thousand Rings, it meant that they were going to close ranks against outsiders. “Lydia told me you knew nothing of Velandryn Savani yesterday, and now you are willing to invoke Ashlander law on his behalf?”

“It is not law, priest.” She was passionate now; ordinarily she was scrupulous with her use of titles and names. “And any with ears to hear his name would know of his heritage. I have ears, and so I searched and found the records. A son of the Urshilaku by way of his mother, he may be a half-breed but he is still of our blood.”

“Half-breed, is it?” How quickly her talk of all Morrowind being her nation vanished when she was incensed. “Ashlanders cannot keep their temper; a shame that Velandryn too carries that flaw. ‘We are all Dunmer here, you know.’”

She laughed. “Oh yes, how could I forget? You worship your false gods and then, when the Daedra punish you for your sins, you come crawling to those of us who kept the faith, begg—" from Oblivion? Where was that hand of friendship when the Ordinators hunted down and tortured any who spoke against your godly murderers? It was clenched into a fist so you could better beat my people into submission! We share blood, but for four thousand years your people murdered mine! I will not speak a word against any half-blood—there is no sin in a birth—but do not for an instant pretend that we are the same.”

Nerim should have held his tongue, but he was sick of this barbarian acting as though she was the arbiter of truth. “This Temple was founded on the ideals of the Dissident Priests! For millennia they fled from the persecution of the Temple. I was trained by mer who held the same ideals as you! We aren’t on opposing sides!”

“Be that as it may, I will not leave the fate of my people in your hands.” She seemed a bit calmer, if no less determined. “How many Dunmer of the true faith hold positions of power beyond our borders?” They both knew the answer to that. She continued, relentless. “And how many of our kin have the opportunity to influence the other nations of Tamriel?” She made a fist and stuck out her thumb. “Because I can count them on the thumb of one hand. It would be beyond foolish not to take this opportunity.”

“You think I haven’t? I have given him what he requested, and tested his retainer besides. He will not be alone, and he will remember who aided him.”

“How like a House Dunmer, to know nothing of esteem. Give him what he asks for, and he will think himself clever. Give him more, and he will think you generous. Give him a gift that honors
him beyond his worth, and he will think himself in your debt. Lydia, retainer to the Dragonborn, will leave this place with a gift for her master, one that will ensure he does not forget his nation and his blood.”

Nerim knew better than to contradict an Ashlander on the giving of gifts. They’d turned it into something of an art form, after all. However, something she’d said intrigued him. “How did you know Velandryn’s the Dragonborn?”

“I told you, I have scouts watching for what will come. When word reaches me of a Dunmer who is something called Dragonborn, I listen. And so, I learn what is needed, and keep a watchful eye on each ship from Skyrim.”

Nerim understood then. “You knew the retainer—Lydia—was coming.” Of course, there was no way that someone as cunning as Nas-anu would simply run into the outlander by chance.

“That only raised further questions, as she doubtless knew it would. There was no way that an Ashlander could afford to maintain a spy network herself, and Nerim couldn’t see her working with the Bal Molagmer. The Stonefire Elves served the Council, which left…

*The Tongs.* There was no way that Nas-anu would consort with the lowlifes that comprised the Camonna Tong, which narrowed the list of suspects down to one.

He’d long suspected that the old Ashlander held some rank in the Morag Tong, but he had as little to do with that group as possible. He was old enough to have grown up on stories of the *old* Morag Tong, little more than brutal killers sanctioned by Vivec and led by corrupt masters. That this new breed claimed to serve the Temple and nation of Morrowind was all well and good, but he still wasn’t going to seek them out. And if his office was lined with spells that could pull in a dozen atronachs as he needed them, well, it wasn’t paranoia if you were a high-ranking Dunmer.

“You know, the Morag Tong only takes writs for those who are doing harm to the soul and people of Morrowind. You have nothing to fear.” Whether he’d let some emotion slip or Nas-anu was simply adept as guessing his train of thought he couldn’t say, but he did appreciate her confirmation of his suspicions. *That was kind of her.* He’d never been much of one for subterfuge. He preferred books.

“And do they often escort outlanders to their destination? A destination, I was interested to note, where the out—where *Lydia* met with a smith who had not only been directly handed the crossbow but also had a preexisting relationship with young Savani.” He kept his tone light, as though he weren’t accusing her of weaving this whole things together for her own ends.

She shrugged. “Your hands are tied by convention and the need to keep the Temple neutral. Mine are not.”

“A great many people would be very upset hearing that coming from somebody associated with the Morag Tong.” The Tong served the Temple. *Theoretically, at least.*

She laughed. “Anybody with ability to do anything about it would have the wit to recognize the truth in there! I’m not saying there will be blood in the streets, but there’s a reason that the Temple made the Morag Tong subservient to the Temple itself rather than any individual or council.”
leaned in. “Do you think such...precise...mer would make an accidental omission of that magnitude? No, they wanted us to serve as the shadowed hand of the true faith.” Leaning back, she studied him with her piercing eyes. “And you know that, don’t you?”

Nerim touched his forehead and murmured a short benediction. “Through faith we are united, through suffering made pure.” Nas-anu whispered the rote response, and he rose. Pacing, he spoke as he thought. “I do not disagree with you. I too wish to see Velandryn succeed, and I’m not unsympathetic to your arguments. However, the Council will view this as foreign intervention, and you know as well as I the ramifications of such a course of action. I can assure you that the Redoran want an independent Temple as little as they want rogue Ashlanders, and I want to make very certain that you don’t go and pull the roof down on our heads while trying to repair the walls.”

Nas-anu looked thoughtful. “I’ve not acted in any overt manner. I would assume that it was the Ordinators who reported back to you, yes?” At his grunt of agreement, she continued. “I have my issues with the Repentant, but they are loyal to the Temple. Besides, you have acted appropriately in every particular, and I am a barbarian who knows little of political intricacies. At worst, you will be chastised by a Canon for humoring an Anointed too long gone from home, and I’ll be told off for sticking my nose into other people’s affairs. You overestimate how much the Council monitors the minutiae of events within Great Fane.”

He hoped that she was right, but it did not pay to underestimate the Bal Molagmer. Still, what was done was done. “She’s leaving later today. For now, it’s all but out of our hands.” He waved, and the door to the outer balcony opened. Nas-anu followed him onto the ledge, and they stood together in the morning light. “Did the one who tried to kidnap Lydia reveal anything?”

She shook her head. “He knows nothing. A common thug, paid by dead drop and recruited through intermediaries. He was instructed to bring her in alive, and given the tools to do so. A dagger and some poisons to incapacitate, and a crate to stuff her body in. It was all thrown together in a single day, meaning that whoever was behind it was reacting to the retainer’s arrival, rather than putting a plan into motion.”

“How did he infiltrate the Temple itself?” Nowhere was impregnable, but the Ordinators did good work with keeping Great Fane secure.

“Swam in through the Underworks. His contact gave him potions of water breathing and scrolls to dissolve the gratings barring his way. My people are already investigating the site, but it’s been done before and could likely be done again.”

She wasn’t wrong. However, that didn’t mean they had to make it easy. “How would the Morag Tong feel about being asked to quietly enchant the gratings and tunnels in the Underworks? Make sure that this route cannot be used again, and set a few traps for the next ones to try.”

Nas-anu nodded. “It will be done, Deyhn Llervos.” Her eyes brightened. “You are not unskilled at the subtle arts, it would seem.”

More than you know, at least. “Maybe, but I’ll leave them to you.” His suspicions confirmed, he thought about what he’d said, and nodded. “We’re both just trying to do right by our people, no? Next time you need help with the kind of Temple business I handle, come to me, and I’ll do the same when I need something accomplished...quietly.”

“I’m not used to having friends among the upper ranks of the Temple, you know. What if I accidentally use a Velothi prayer in place of one of yours?”

Nerim sighed. “You know, the House-Ashlander divide is lessening every year. One in ten of our
Acolytes are what you would call ‘half-bloods,’ after all. Velandryn is typical of the future, I would hope, rather than an exception.”

If Nas-anu shared his optimism, she hid it well. “Better he be this Dragonborn than some Redoran warrior with a head full of nothing but stories. If nothing else, Velandryn Savani is supposed to be clever.”

“You do fast work, if you already know that about him.” Of course, it never paid to underestimate Nas-anu Assashami. “I do agree, however. For a Dunmer to be in this position is beyond strange, but that it is Velandryn is…” He trailed off as something occurred to him.

Nas-anu waited. She was patient, to a fault.

His mind raced. How lucky that it was Velandryn! Exceptionally intelligent, passionate but not a zealot, a naturally talented mage and, by the sound of things, not doing too terrible a job at being some sort of Nord hero. Almost too perfect. If he had been hand-selecting candidates…

He finally voiced his thoughts. “Doesn’t it strike you as fortuitous that Velandryn Savani is so perfectly aligned for the role he’s playing?”

The Ashlander studied him. “A Dunmer priest fulfilling the role of a Nord culture hero? No, I think he’s in a terrible situation, and if I cared for his personal safety over the opportunity he presents, I’d have already sent the Morag Tong to drag him home. However, so far as Dunmer go…”

“He’s perfect, isn’t he? As palatable to some Redoran Councilor as he is to you. How does a Dragonborn come about, do you think?”

He could see Nas-anu’s mind snap to deceit. “You think we’re being played? I can’t see either the Empire or Dominion—“

“You misunderstand.” He gestured out at the city. “We are blessed because we walk once more in the grace of the Triune House. Their wisdom is great, and their power unknowable. That the Dragonborn is Dunmer—this Dunmer— should not be ignored, for surely this is a blessing conferred by the Three.” It was so obvious; how could he have missed it? This was not happenstance, but the will of the Daedra. “He must succeed.”

Nas-anu laughed. “You priests, always so willing to thank the Three. Whatever the reason, we both want to see him succeed, no?”

Nerim did, though his reason was less because of whatever political ploy Nas-anu had in mind and more because he liked the idea of Nords being indebted to a Dunmer. Not to mention, he’d prefer if Velandryn survived. Either way, it seemed he and the Ashlander were allies of a sort, in this at least. “So, why did you come and see me?” It had been convenient, but Nas-anu Assashami did not go out of her way for the convenience of others.

She blinked in surprise. “Why, to have this conversation, of course. I think it’s far easier to bring you in on my plans than to try and manipulate you into doing my bidding.”

“But I was the one asking all of the quest….” He trailed off as he realized how thoroughly he’d been played.

Nas-anu Assashami, onetime Ashlander warrior and a high-ranking member of the Morag Tong, bowed slightly. “You spend too much time worried about the soul of the Dunmer, and not enough remembering that you’re one of us.” She turned and snapped her fingers, and the door swung open.
“I’ll make sure the outlander is safely on her way, and that she gets what she needs.” She stepped into his office, then paused for a moment before turning back to face him. “For what it’s worth, I need you as much as you need me. Can you imagine if I was in charge of things?” Chuckling, she snapped her fingers again and the door clicked shut behind her.

Nerim looked out over Baan Malur, glorious in the morning light. *Well, wasn’t that something?* It would be nice if what she’d told him was true, but sadly, it didn’t seem to be so. He might not like playing games of spycraft and subterfuge, but you had to have something of a sense for these things to last any time at all in his position.

He might not have a network of fanatical cultists and assassins at his disposal, but he knew how to read people, even people as guarded as Nas-anu. She’d not been telling him the truth about the would-be kidnapper. It had been most noticeable when they were discussing the Underworks, and again when talking about who might have sent him. She knew something, and she didn’t want him to know what it was. Several possibilities came to mind, none of them particularly pleasant.

Well, such was life. He’d keep his eyes and ears open, and maybe write a few of his friends and see if they wanted to have dinner together sometime.

He had lived for quite a long time, and had quite a few friends.

_Velandryn, my boy, you are lucky I’m on your side._ He quickly amended that thought, as he wasn’t sure anybody, Velandryn included, knew exactly what side the Dragonborn was on, or even what game it was they were playing.

He took a deep breath before heading back inside. How he despised politics.

Lydia left the armory burdened with a new shield of Dwemer make, and though it was not the one that had first caught her eye, she had to admit it was one of the finest she’d ever held. It was lighter and more rigid than steel, but not as brittle as iron. It was cold to the touch, and the smith had assured her that it would shrug off heat and cold alike without deforming. She’d seen Dwarven shields in Skyrim before, but those had been wall-mounted conversation pieces intended as much for decoration as for protection, where this was a smoothed and reinforced oval of bronze, designed to deflect blows and magic alike. *If I had to give up my crossbow, at least I got something in return.*

Part of her felt guilty that she didn’t feel guiltier about giving up her shield from Whiterun, but the quality of the one she now carried managed to quash those thoughts. The metal that the long-vanished Dwarves—*Dwemer,* she now recalled, was their elvish name—had used to make their marvelous machinery and gear had never been reproduced in all the eras since they vanished, but it was possible to reforge it. She didn’t know how smiths accomplished the feat, but if it ended with the shield she’d been given, she was willing to let it be.

She was flanked by a pair of Ordinators tasked, she’d been told, with not only showing her where to go but also making sure she got there safely. After the events of this morning, she had a hard time saying no to the offer, even if she doubted they were there only to protect her. *Don’t want the outlander getting into trouble, do we?*

They came to a room, nondescript from the outside, and one of them moved to open the door. She wasn’t in the habit of letting other people do her work for her, but the possibility of another would-be kidnapper waiting on the other side meant she let the armored Dunmer proceed without comment.
The room beyond was, thankfully, free of obvious enemies, though it was more crowded than she’d expected. *Also more enclosed.* When they’d said she was leaving the city, she’d expected a carriage or a horse, and braced herself for some strange beast or riding-insect.

Instead, they stood in a room a little larger than the Prelate’s office, with a raised circular dais in the center. A Dunmer in rich robes stood atop the dais, looking at her intently. The rest of the room was filled with people, two of whom she recognized. Prelate Llervos nodded sagely to her, and Nassa—Lydia still couldn’t for the life of her remember that woman’s name—was leaning against one wall, eyes bright and holding something small and wrapped in cloth. The rest of the crowd was made of Acolytes and Attendants, each carrying a sheaf of papers or a stack of her belongings.

Prelate Llervos stepped towards her, and waved in the general direction of his Acolytes. “Here is our collection of dragonlore. Much is speculation and more is concealed within poetry or song, but hopefully it can be of some use to you.” A small smile flashed across his lips, and he handed Lydia a thick envelope bound with string. “This is for Velandryn. Give it to him with my regards.”

Next was Nassa, who pressed the wrapped bundle into Lydia’s hands. “Ensure that this reaches your master.” She moved off, catching Prelate Llervos—who looked more than a little interested about what was in the box—by the arm. The old Ashlander drew him away from Lydia, who now found herself accosted by an Ordinator in vaguely familiar armor.

Removing his helm, Orvas Mathen, the Ordinator from the gate and the one who’d joined her at dinner, looked up into her face. “I don’t know what Velandryn got himself mixed up in, and might be it’s none of my business. But he’s one of us, so you’d best do right by him.” Placing his helmet back on, the guard left the room. *Well, alright then.*

Looking around, Lydia was unable to see any indication of where she should go. “I’m supposed to be making my way south, no?”

Prelate Llervos nodded. “You are bound for Fort Virak, and from there to the Rift in Skyrim.”

Lydia knew of Fort Virak by reputation. Many a Nord had died beneath its walls, after all, and more than a few tragic ballads ended in a last heroic charge against its heathen owners. However, telling this group that bit of cultural history wasn’t likely to go over well, so she simply nodded. “Thank you. Is my horse nearby?”

The Prelate smiled. “In a way. Please stand there.” He pointed at the dais, and she stepped up, wondering what was going on. Prelate Llervos spoke a single sharp word, and the attending Dunmer piled the dragonlore and her gear around her. “They will provide you what you need at Fort Virak. Ask to speak to Sister Dranya. She has been made aware of your case.”

Lydia was still confused. “Okay, but where am I going? How am I supposed to get to Fort Virak?”

The richly dressed Dunmer who’d been staring at her earlier now stepped forward, and raised his hands. Light shimmered around her, and suddenly Lydia felt very strange. ‘What’s—”

A blinding flash of light came from all around her, and she threw up her hands in shock. *Damn!* Was it an attack? Had whoever was behind the earlier attempt returned?

Her vision returned a moment later, and everything was different. Either the world had changed, or she was somewhere else. *Was this teleportation?* She knew the art existed, of course—Velandryn’s little episode with the journal back in Solitude had made sure of that—but it wasn’t the sort of thing that happened to, well, real people.
The room she was in was similar to the one she’d just left, though the walls were darker and the lights were dim, but she recognized none of those before her. Instead of the Prelate, Nassa, and assorted Acolytes, she was faced with a pair of insectoid-looking Dunmer soldiers, and another with armor of black and gold who was clearly some sort of officer. He had on no helmet, and she recognized the set of those eyes. Another Dunmer who doesn’t want to have to deal with the outlander.

“You are the Nord we were told to expect?” The officer did not quite sneer at her, but only because Dunmer didn’t move their faces enough to make it work. A shame, really; they’d be great at it.

“Probably.” Lydia had no doubts as to who they were expecting, but she rather liked poking at these self-important types. “You get many Nords in by teleportation?”

The Dunmer’s eyes did not lighten. “Security is not a matter for levity, outlander. You are,” he consulted a piece of paper, “Lydia ko’thil’ten Serjo Indoril Velandryn Savani?”

It was certainly the longest name she’d ever had, even if most of it was her thane’s. “I think so. I serve Velandryn, at least. What’s a Serjo?”

“A term of respect, or is that another word an outlander cannot understand?” He really would have been good at sneering. “I use the word in your may be in your tongue, but I’ve never seen any evidence that your kind understand the meaning.

Lydia had just about had enough. “We’re at a border fort, right?” she didn’t bother waiting for an answer; she knew full well where Fort Virak was located. “If it’s people like you who interact with the rest of the world, then no wonder everyone hates the Dark Elves.”

The officer laughed. “Hate requires esteem. By hating us, you give us power in your minds, and that I will gladly have. You, however, I do not hate.” He managed to look down his nose at her while being almost a full head shorter than she. “You, and all of your heathen and outland kind, are beneath my contempt. Now, come. I have been bid give you provisions and gear for a journey into Skyrim.”

She followed him out of the room, despite an urge to punch him full in the face. Lousy stuck-up knife-eared ash-skinned—damn it all! When she realized that she was just running through every insult she’d ever heard directed at a Dark Elf, she caught herself and felt a moment of shame at how easily she’d slipped back into old ways of thinking. One bastard doesn’t make a race. I’ve got to be better than him.

Fortunately, they were met by another Dunmer before either one of them could say something inflammatory enough to bring them to blows. The new arrival was a woman in robes that looked a lot like the ones at the Temple back in Blacklight. She bowed politely to Lydia. “Welcome to Fort Virak, Lydia of Whiterun. Be welcome in the grace of the Three.”

The officer snorted. “This one is your problem now, Dranya. There’s a horse waiting for her down at the Rift Gate, so once you get sick of her, we’ll send her on her way.” He glanced at Lydia. “See that you don’t cause any trouble while you’re here.” He gestured with his hand, and he and his two escorts marched off.

“Charming man, that.” Lydia didn’t even realize that she’d spoken aloud until she heard the priest—Sister Dranya, Prelate Llervos had said—laugh.

“He is a dutiful soldier, but he has little love for outlanders.” She opened a door, and waved Lydia through. They proceeded down some stairs and along yet another hallway. “Too long on the
borders can cause resentment in even the hardiest of souls.” She opened another door, and light shone in. “Welcome to Fort Virak once more.”

On some level, Lydia had known that she’d been teleported, but it was something else entirely to be confronted with the reality of it. They stood on a covered walkway overlooking a courtyard, while tall walls of dark stone rose around them. Behind those walls, towering mountains stretched far overhead, and their snow-capped peaks put her achingly in mind of home. “How…how far are we from Blacklight?”

The priest thought for a moment. “I do not know how you measure distance in the Empire. Is it leagues you use? Miles? The Altmeri *saath*? Either way, we are far to the south of Great Fane. Nine days ride by silt strider, or fourteen by guar.”

*Two weeks’ ride in the blink of an eye!* Her annoyance at being considered an Imperial vanished in astonishment. She might not love magic overmuch, but she would have been a fool not to see how powerful this was. “Teleporting. Is there any limit to it?”

From below came the sound of shouting, and Lydia glanced over to see groups of Dunmer locked in mock battle and training. She looked back up as Sister Dranya started talking. “Teleportation is a magic with great power, but greater danger. We use guides, and send only from *aln’tur*—way-circles, I believe they would be called in your tongue.” She shrugged. “For safety, we send one person only at a time, and ensure that the receiving circle is prepared in advance. It is exceedingly rare that anything goes wrong.”

Lydia decided to leave that rather disturbing thought be. “So, you were told I was coming? Thank you for helping me back there.”

Dranya bowed slightly. “It is nothing. Your business is your own, but the Temple looks out for those who serve it, as you do.”

“I didn’t seem to impress the officer back there much.” She was still slightly put out by his behavior, after all. Even the others who had a problem with her had been more polite about it.

The priest sighed. “He is a warrior of Redoran. You must understand, the Temple instills an unusual amount of…introspection in its members. We study, and through understanding we gain perspective, which is vital for our role as the soul of the Dunmer. It is a great source of pride for Anointed and Ordinator alike, but House warriors do not require such. Captain Molaril has held this post for the last three years, witnessing all who come to our borders. What manner of outlander, do you suppose, most regularly calls at Fort Virak?”

Lydia didn’t even have to pause to think. “Criminals and lowlifes.” She knew the types who fled from their troubles, and only a desperate human would hope for a better life in Morrowind. *Although*… “Surely some merchants from outside do trade with you?”

“A few, but none through here in recent years. Cyrod merchants use the forts to the south, and most of your kind come in through the ports on the northern coast. We see few humans here who possess any redeeming qualities, so do not hate the captain too much.”

“Hmm.” Lydia decided that she would keep her own judgement on that, but she’d stay quiet, at least. *At least the priest seems more agreeable.* “Thank you again for your help, but I do need to be on my way.”

“Of course, for this mission about which I must know nothing. How *does* an outlander come to serve an Anointed as *ko’thil*? Who exactly is Velandryn Savani?”
Lydia tried for a mysterious smile. “If you weren’t told, then you don’t need to know.”

She must have been getting better at reading Dunmer, because she could see the pout blossom briefly on the other woman’s face. “Oh, all right. They’ll be moving your things to the stables now. Come on.”

The fort was well-garrisoned, and Lydia saw Dunmer working at numerous tasks as they descended. Most were either clad in simple tunics and robes or that same familiar bonemold armor, though now and then she saw one in pale chitinous plate or oddly shaped armor composed or irregular green glass that might have been malachite. When she asked Dranya about them, the priest blinked in what Lydia assumed was surprise.

“They are the Armigers. Scouts and light skirmishers, I’m told, but I never studied war-craft so I’ll take the soldiers’ word for it. Mostly Ashlanders or House Sadras. I guess you wouldn’t see them in Skyrim, would you?”

Lydia had never seen their like. They moved with practiced grace, and when she saw two of them sparring—one with a long, flexible spear and the other with a pair of short swords that hummed as they whipped back and forth—she decided that she would sooner not face them. There was something she’d been wondering about, and she supposed this was as good a time as any to ask. “So, your soldiers have decades of experience, don’t they? Those Armigers, how long would you say they’ve been doing this?”

Dranya shrugged. “Armigers are the elite, so all of them at least twenty or thirty years. We haven’t had a real war in a long time, but I’d wager most of them have served on the southern border against the Argonians. I know that their high officers and the Mol’lakan—Smoke Guard, it might be in Imperial—are mostly veterans of Sharmat’s War, so they’ve been serving for at least two hundred. Why?”

“Just curious.” She’d been right. An army of elves could have tens of thousands of years of experience among them, and each would be a seasoned veteran beyond anything Nords could field. She reminded herself that these were the elite, like Dranya had said, and not every Dunmer was an ancient warrior packed full of a lifetime of warrior’s tricks. Still, best not to pick a fight with any Armigers while I’m here.

The stable was spacious, but most of that space was given over to strange scaled creatures like nothing she’d ever seen. Two-legged, with stubby front arms and round heads filled with teeth, they gave strange growling barks as she entered. Could these be the legendary guar? To hear Velandryn tell it, they were superior to horses in every way except taste. The fact that her thane thought horsemeat a delicacy was more than a little strange, but she’d learned to live with it. The horses here were relegated to a far corner, and seemed profoundly uncomfortable in the presence of these beasts. Or maybe they don’t want to be dinner for a Dark Elf.

A Dunmer woman with a shaved head sauntered over, waving at them casually. Dranya bowed and offered a few words in Dunneris, to which the stable-hand responded in kind.

Then, the bald woman turned to Lydia. “Don’t worry about the guar! They don’t like the smell of human is all!” She wiped her hands on a dirty apron. “You’ll be the outlander here about the horse, I’d bet? I’ve got a strong one all ready for you out front—come and see!”

Lydia followed the woman out to a yard, where a hearty Skyrim horse—Whiterun-stock, she noted with some amusement—stood chewing a sparse red grass. It was laden with everything she’d brought from the Temple, which left no room on its back for her. Lydia didn’t really mind, though. She trusted her own two feet more anyways.
She made her farewells to the priest, and led the horse towards the western wall, and the way back home. Supposedly, Fort Virak had stood here since the First Era, and the massive wood-and-metal gate rose with a ponderous creaking that seemed to convey every one of those years. As it slammed into place high above her, she felt a stab of cultural regret at passing through here when so many of her kinsfolk had died trying to do just that. *Well, we did conquer them a few times, at least.*

Soon, she was past the tower, and heading up the gently sloping path that led to the Rift. She glanced back over her shoulder, to where the dark bulk of Fort Virak squatted in the pass. It was completely different from the architecture in Blacklight, but something it made her certain that it had been made by the Dunmer. *The angles, maybe?* They weren’t insectoid or flowing, but they were still very different from any human structure she’d ever seen.

*Well, no matter now.* Straightening her spine and looking ahead, she led her horse onward.

“You there! Hold!” Lydia drew up short as a pair of Nords stepped onto the path. She was reaching for her sword before she realized it was on her horse. *Not to mention, I’m unarmored.* So, she smiled at them as she slowly took a step towards where sword and shield were waiting for her. These might be bandits, after all.

One of the Nords, a woman in chainmail, was the one who had hailed her before and spoke now. “These are dark times, traveler. What brings you to Skyrim by the Morrowind road?”

With a start, Lydia realized how odd it would seem for a Nord to be doing as she was. Fortunately, she’d already thought of this. “My master sent me to see if the elves had any insight on dragon-killing.” She wasn’t a good liar, after all, so she might as well keep mostly to the truth. “They have a few documents, so I’m hoping it was worth the time I spent there.”

The other Nord, a bearded man in what she now noticed were Riften colors, nodded. “And who’d your master be, then?”

*I suppose this is the moment of truth, then.* Not that she was mad enough to give them an honest answer, but still… “Jarl Balgruuf of Whiterun. We’ve been attacked once already, and he wants anything and everything that could help us again.”

The bearded one turned to his companion. “Not the worst idea in the world. Those heathens to the east might be shifty bastards, but I’d bet they’ve all sorts of knowledge hidden away.” He gestured at the horse. “Get anything worth the time?”

*Oh, damn.* She didn’t want them to go looking for answers of any sort at Fort Virak. “A few old books, but nothing in a human language. Don’t think they liked me too much.”

The woman roared with laughter. “Aye, they’re a right pack of sour bastards over there, make no mistake! Bet you’re glad to be back in civilized lands again, eh?”

Lydia thought honestly about the question. Morrowind had been absolutely fascinating, but it was nice to be somewhere where things made sense again. “More than you’ll know.”

The woman chuckled, then sobered. “Best of luck to you, but I’d keep your sword a bit closer to hand. Winter’s driven some of the beasts out of the mountains, and if there’s bandits skulking in the backwoods, a lone woman with a horse makes a tempting target.”

Lydia nodded. They seemed agreeable, so she decided to push her luck. “I also heard about some vampire hunters near here. The Dawnguard, is it? I ran into a few around Whiterun, and I figured
I’d drop in, see if they could give me some tips on good ways to end bloodsuckers.” She could probably find them eventually even without help, but she didn’t want to go wandering around aimlessly if these two could point her in the right direction.

And indeed, they were already nodding. The woman pointed. “Few miles up the road, you’ll see a bridge to your right. Path over that’ll take you to their canyon.”

The man grinned. “Got a half-ruined castle back there, and a whole mess of folk they’re training. Good sorts, if a bit single-minded. They’ll tell you more’n you ever wanted to know about vampire hunting.”

Lydia clasped their forearms. “My thanks, and the best of luck to you.”

The woman clapped her on the shoulder. “And to you, friend. Tell your jarl that he should join Ulfric soon! You’re good folk down there in Whiterun; we want you on our side in the war for our freedom! And welcome home!”

Lydia’s smile was genuine. These were good people, and she’d gladly fight alongside them. *Maybe if things had been different, I could have served Ulfric Stormcloak…* but now she was on a different path. “Watch the skies, and give those dragons a taste of good Nord steel!”

Laughing and jesting with each other, they parted ways, and Lydia headed west once more, back into Skyrim.

*Back home.*

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*Another Place, Another Time*

As Velandryn sat on a bench, watching the people of Solitude and trying to get a feel for the place, his hand slipped into one of his belt pouches, more by habit than anything. The weeks in the wilderness had given him an almost compulsive need to check his supplies, and so he found himself ensuring that everything was where it should be dozens of times a day.

This time, however, his fingers found something unusual, and he pulled it forth. A piece of paper, folded over, smudged with the illegible remains of writing and bearing the unmistakable stiffness that could only have meant it had undergone some horrendous abuse. By the feel of it, it had been wedged into a fold of the pouch, where it had remained until now. By some unimaginable coincidence, he had carried this paper with him through everything, all while being completely ignorant of its existence.

*So what is it?*

It splintered apart in his hands when he tried to open it, and he could make out only one word, scrawled on the top of the page in a hand that was unmistakably his own.

*Lydia.*

All at once, his heart dropped into his stomach. Was this *that* letter? The one he’d penned to give his housecarl the names and locations of those who could help her in his homeland, and—

*Did I ever actually give it to her?*
If he hadn’t, then he would have sent her to Morrowind with a packet full of letters that she couldn’t read and no clue of how to deliver them. If he hadn’t included some sort of message for his housecarl, the Lydia was wandering clueless through a city of mer who despised her, without even a scrap of parchment to guide her way.

No, I gave it to her.

He’d even taken extra care when writing it. He’d been sitting at that desk, writing it and then—

Could I have stowed it in my pocket?

It was conceivable. The business with Serana had caused his mind to wander, and he distinctly recalled having to force his thoughts to return to the task at hand. But to forget to give Lydia such a vital missive would be…

No, there was no way he’d have forgotten it. Right now Lydia had a list of friends and allies in Morrowind. Nerevar knows she’ll need it. Gods forbid she go and cross a Councilor or something. Or get herself tangled up with the Tong, or the Telvanni, or the Dres.

Now that he thought about it, there were quite a few ways her journey could go bad if she didn’t know what she was doing. Still, the point was moot. He’d given her the letter, after all. This was doubtless some early draft, and he’d stuck the real one safely atop the bundle of documents to go to Baan Malur.

At least, he was pretty sure he had.

Well, no use worrying about it now.

He hoisted himself to his feet. The strange beggar’s words still disturbed him, and he needed to see who—or what—was waiting for him in the Blue Palace. He set off down the street, carefully turning his face to avoid an Imperial patrol and letting his magicka stir within him just enough to keep the chill palatable. He didn’t want to be uncomfortable, but neither could he afford to lose his edge.

Velandryn felt the strange hipbone once more, still nestled in one of his pouches. From the moment he had touched it, he had felt an inexorable pull towards the eastern end of the city. The Blue Palace was waiting, and something within it that demanded he come.

Velandryn Savani had never been one for blindly following orders, but sometimes there was no alternative. Sometimes life gave you the pieces and let you figure out the whole for yourself, and sometimes a mad beggar thrust a hipbone into your hand and gave you a cryptic quest to break into a Nord jarl’s home.

I wonder if this is what it’ll always be like?

If it was, well, at least he was getting used to it. He found himself humming, an ancient hymn called Nerevar’s Rising he had learned as a child, and flexed his fingers to limber them up and let the magicka flow. There was something delightfully clear about a single objective, even if the circumstances were surrounded in mystery. He needed to get into the Blue Palace, so that was what he was going to do.
My chapters keep getting longer, but they’re on track to shrink back down. Basically, if you stuck with me through this one, it should be a bit quicker from here on out.

This chapter needed to be published as one piece to give me flexibility for editing, but it’s way more than one chapter’s worth of content. A lot of worldbuilding, most of it inspired by Morrowind and with some hints of slightly more esoteric lore. We are returning to Skyrim now, and will stay there for the near future, so don’t worry about this veering off into complete OC territory just yet.
Chapter Summary

It's a party! What could possibly go wrong?

I think perhaps there is no tale in Skyrim as tragic as that of our fair jarl, the lady Elisif.

From an early age, Elisif was meant for a life of nobility and prestige, as befit her lineage. Her parents saw to it that no expense was spared, no tutoring overlooked, to ensure that their daughter was raised to be the epitome of the Nord noblewoman. And, in time, she caught the eye of Prince Torygg, and they were wed in a ceremony befitting the future High King of Skyrim. For a time, it seemed as though their future would be everything the young couple had dreamed of.

Sadly, the treachery of Ulfric Stormcloak cut short the couple's wedded bliss, and young Elisif was left a bereaved widow. In an instant, her king and her one true love was taken from her, leaving the young queen with nothing but a war and the deep sorrow of loneliness. Without even the comfort of an heir in her dark time, she bravely shouldered the burden of rulership, letting General Tullius act as her decisive and loyal proxy in bringing the foul Stormcloaks to justice.

Young, alone and yet so brave, our good Lady Elisif prevails, all the while hoping that the sweet peace of her youth may once more be returned to her. In these dark days, we should look to the example of our magnificent queen, and stand tall against adversity!

Jordis had herself a good chuckle as she read the pamphlet that had been shoved under the door of Proudspire Manor while she was away. Either the servants had been shirking their duties, or they'd left it there for her to find, knowing she'd get a laugh out of it. She was a generous woman, so she'd assume it was the second one. Besides, her parents might not use this manor often these days, but when they did they expected it spotless. No, this seemed like somebody had known just how to tickle her. She made a note to find out who it was and do something nice for them.

Poorly written, incorrect facts, and I have to wonder if the author had a hand down his breeches while he was penning it! She didn't like making light of Elisif's situation and she would never show her friend this filth, but it was interesting—and a just a tiny bit funny—to see what the common people were saying. At least the writer is on her side.

She'd read Imperial propaganda before, and this didn't read like that. For one thing, Imperials are subtler. No, this was likely some homegrown patriot who'd watch the jarl from afar and concocted his own little narrative as to what she must be experiencing. I don't see why he needed to share his fantasies with others, but to each his own, I suppose.

One of the servants came in with a dress for the banquet at the Blue Palace tonight, but she waved him away. After the events in Wolfskull Cave, she wanted to be known as a warrior. She'd wear armor, or nothing.

That thought gave her a moment's pause, but she quickly decided that wearing nothing, while no doubt fun, might cause a bit too much trouble for Elisif. So, armor it is. She couldn't show up in heavy plate, of course, but the Proudspire Clan had given Skyrim many warrior women throughout the eras. One closet or another had to have something fit for a feast!
She finally settled on an ornamental set of gilded chain owned by some ancestor or another. It looked at once presentable and warlike, and she found herself smiling uncontrollably upon seeing it.

As she tried it on, with servants hemming and hawing about her, she found herself wondering if the Dragonborn would make an appearance.

*I don't think he has anything to wear…*

---

There were five districts in Solitude, the boatman had said, and Velandryn had now seen all of them. The Shores had been teeming chaos, the Climb was a dimly-remembered haze of Jordis' bad jokes and his own tired and aching legs, the Markets were clamor and color and commerce, and the Castle had been the smell of fire and iron and the clang of hammers on anvils. The Blue, in contrast to all of these, seemed like something out of the heartland of Cyrodiil.

Broad streets were lined with colorful rows of flowers and palatial manors, while Imperial soldiers roamed here and there on patrol. At first, Velandryn had tried to avoid their gaze, but it quickly became apparent that they were more interested in enjoying their patrol than actually keeping an eye out for anything. *That, or they simply aren't looking for the Dragonborn.* In the end, he could stand the sting to his pride and concede that maybe not everyone in Skyrim was obsessed with him.

He had found Proudspire Manor without too much trouble, but decided against getting Jordis' help for this. While he had no doubt that she would be overjoyed to help him sneak into the Blue Palace, she'd also probably try and drag him to the banquet, and he'd decided that he wasn't going to risk attending that.

The way he saw it, every moment he remained in Solitude was a chance for something unpleasant to happen to him. The Empire, the Stormcloaks, even the Thalmor probably had an interest in the Dragonborn, and he wasn't in the mood to deal with any of them. This Jarl Elisif who Jordis was so fond of might decide that the Dragonborn was better off in her dungeons, or some Nord lunatic might simply decide that an elf had no business being alive in this city. No, he would sneak into the Blue Palace, deal with this hipbone business—the idea of not following through on this particular request never seemed to stay in his mind for more than a fleeting instant—and get out of town as quickly as possible.

Somehow, he knew it wouldn't be quite so easy as all of that, but he saw no reason to complicate things by planning to go to this absurd party. It was still the middle of the day, after all, and all he needed to do was get in and drop off this bizarre artifact. *Maybe ask a few questions, but that's it.*

So, he found himself eyeing the front of the Blue Palace, looking for a way in that wouldn't require him stating his name and business. The main entrance, at least, did not seem to offer any help. The guards were politely speaking with each person who came to the doors, and even if they weren't wearing Imperial colors, he would rather not deal with them right now.

Something occurred to him then, a thought he only had because he'd been thinking about Lydia earlier. At Great Fane, Acolytes were strictly controlled with regards to when they were and were not permitted to leave the Temple grounds. In practice, of course, that simply meant that there was a thriving black market for the nondescript brown robes of the Attendants. The Ordinators were dedicated and well-trained, but not even they knew every one of the servants, and nobody looked too closely at the disgruntled underling who was hauling a basket full of laundry downstairs.

*And there we go.* The side entrance to the Blue Palace was significantly less ornate than the front, but it also only had one guard, and this one didn't look as though he was cut from the same cloth as,
say, Lydia. He was shamelessly flirting with some women who seemed more than happy to distract him, and could barely spare a moment for the servants and workmen entering the palace.

*Workmen?* Velandryn studied the plain-clothed humans entering and exiting through the small gate. They were loaded down with crates of some sort, and he wondered if this was for the banquet tonight, or if it was simply the supplies needed to keep the Blue Palace running. *Either way, it's a way in.* It might not work against an observant guard, but it was his best bet.

He ambled down the street, hat pulled low to shield as much of his skin from prying eyes as possible, following one of the servants to a cart piled with crates. It was the work of a moment to grab one for himself, and as he followed the other back to the palace, he consciously tried to adopt the disinterested and leisurely shuffle that seemed to typify the workman who knew full well that finishing a job early wasn't worth the extra effort.

As the guard came into view, Velandryn suddenly realized how horrifically wrong this could go. *If Ulfric Stormcloak killed the king in this very palace, then shouldn't they be on their guard?* Surely the Solitude Guard would be watching any and all entrances like hawks, which was to say nothing of the Legion.

If they were, however, they hid it well. The guard laughed at something one of the women had said, and Velandryn dropped his head as he passed. And, just like that, he was in.

*Well, I hope nobody's trying to assassinate the jarl, because that was a pathetic attempt at security.* Once past the door, he placed the crates with several others, and ducked into a hallway. He wasn't entirely certain where the Pelagius Wing was, but he figured somebody around here had to know. *I wonder if they'd believe me if I told them the truth of why I want to find it?*

He was clearly in some sort of servants' area, judging by the hustle and bustle around him. Men and women—for he had yet to see a single mer within the Blue Palace—were hurrying about and quite ignoring him. He wondered idly if it was because they were actually too busy, or if he was simply an obvious outsider that nobody wanted to have to confront. *Either way, I can use this.*

He spied a young woman—he was getting less terrible at figuring out their ages—sitting in a corner and eating some sort of pastry. He sat himself across from her, and waited for her to swallow.

He had intended to open with a pleasantry, but she beat him to it. "Are you my gallant hero, come to whisk me away to a life of adventure and romance?" She smiled at him and batted her eyes.

*What?* "Ah, no, no, I'm afraid I'm not." He was too startled by her bizarre opening to think of anything cleverer.

She didn't seem terribly disappointed by that, and merely shrugged. "Ah, well, someday, then. You have the look of the road about you, so what brings you down here?"

He tried out a smile. "I was looking for the Pelagius, Wing, actually—"

She laughed. "Well, you're on the wrong side of the palace, not that it'd do you any good! It's all locked up, you know. What'd you even want there anyways?"

He blinked, breaking down her torrent of words. "I needed…no, first, you said it's locked?" that didn't sound good. *In fact, it sounds like trouble.*

The maid was nodding. "Yeah, and Falk's the only one who says you can go in. We have to clean in there once a year, and," she shuddered, "it's creepy."
Velandryn frankly couldn't care less about how clean it was in there. He had a name, and that meant he had a bluff. "Well, do you have a key? Falk said it was important."

She hopped to her feet. "This is for the steward? Oh, I'm so sorry! Come on, I'll show you where we keep the keys!" Despite the fact that his story would crumble like dust in rain at the slightest inquiry, she didn't seem to care. *Either she had the skepticism trained out of her, or she never had it to begin with.*

The maid brought him to a broad board studded with nails, each with keys hanging from it. *Magnificent security, truly.* A few minutes and a few lies later, Velandryn was walking away with a key to the Pelagius Wing and directions to its location. He might actually return the key when all of this was over; the maid had been a great help, and he felt just the tiniest twinge of guilt at the amount of trouble she was liable to get in. *Well, we'll see.*

From behind, the maid shouted after him, "Be careful, and come right back!" *Unlikely, but you never know.*

The door to the Pelagius wing was exactly where he'd been told, though it was somewhat less grand than the vision he'd imagined. Hearing the maid talk about it, he'd been hoping for a creaking portal into ancient mysteries rather than the simple double doors that faced him. Still, the key fit, and as soon as he checked to make sure the hallway was clear, he slipped inside.

The maids might clean in here from time to time, but Velandryn saw little evidence of that. Everything was dark and dusty, and something that might have been a rat scuttled away as he summoned a light to hover over his head. *Delightful.* There was absolutely no sign of anybody waiting for him.

Pulling the hipbone from his pouch — *and this was necessary for what reason exactly?* — he walked through the rooms, looking for some indication of whoever he was seeking. All he found was more cobwebs, and suddenly he wondered if it had been a bad idea to trust a mad beggar who'd given him a *hipbone* and scampered away. If he'd broken into the Blue Palace for no reason at all, then this entire day had been a monumental waste of time.

He amended that thought as he climbed a stairway, testing each step to make sure the wood beneath his feet was solid. If nothing else, this had been informative. As he crested the stairs and started down a hallway into which sunlight was streaming through a series of tall windows, he wondered about the rest of the palace. This wing had been grand once, and he wouldn't mind seeing what the rest of it looked like. The architectural style was more Imperial than he'd seen anywhere else in Skyrim, and —

The ground *squished* beneath his feet, and Velandryn suddenly realized that he was standing on a patch of misty ground. He spun, but there was only more fog and damp earth behind. *Impossible!* There had been no magicka, no detectable energy expended. He must still be in the Blue Palace, then, despite the evidence around him. He took a step forward, testing the ground and air. They certainly felt real. If this was an illusion, it was a damned good one.

The mist rolled back suddenly, and Velandryn found himself facing nearly the last thing he could have expected. *What in Oblivion?*

It was a table laden with food of all types, and with two men sitting across from one another, seemingly oblivious to both their visitor and the oddness of their situation. Neither seemed to have noticed him, though the conversation they were having seemed just the tiniest bit… *off.*

"More tea, Pelly my dear?" The first speaker was a human with white hair and a pointed little
beard, dressed in a garish coat that was purple on one side and orange on the other. He had an accent Velandryn couldn't place, but something about this one's manner of speaking put him on edge.

"Oh, I couldn't. It goes right through me. Besides, I have so much to do!" Velandryn tuned out the nonsense coming from the second speaker and focused on the man himself. He was a dark-skinned Imperial, with light hair and an oddly stilted way of speaking. There was something about him that seemed almost familiar to Velandryn, but once again, it was more feeling than certainty.

The first man responded, laughing, but Velandryn wasn't listening to the words anymore. Something about these two was wrong. That one or both of them was an immensely powerful mage was possible, he supposed, but those well-versed in the arcane arts often had a sense about them, a subtle aura derived from the enchantments and spells usually in effect around any master mage. Neither of these two, however, felt anything like that. The Imperial felt more or less mundane, but the other…

The other was the source of the wrongness, Velandryn was sure of it. He had been in the presence of a Dremora only a few times, but the pressure was similar. A Daedra? Is that possible?

The strange not-human finished whatever he was saying and snapped his fingers, whereupon the Imperial vanished. He then turned, and gave Velandryn a huge smile. "How rude! Couldn't even be bothered to host an old friend for a decade or two!"

Velandryn did not take his eyes off of the strange man. There was something about the clothes that seemed impossibly familiar. Have I heard of them of them before? For the life of him, though, he couldn't place it.

He stood there, somewhat awkwardly, and bowed slightly. "I believe I have been sent to retrieve you, my lord." Certainly this was the most…unique…individual he had encountered in some time. 'My lord' was an acceptably universal term of respect, and, frankly, he had absolutely no idea what was going on here.

The other guffawed. "Have ya?" He swung an arm to indicate the empty chair across from him. "Why don't you have yourself a seat, then?"

Velandryn sat, every inch of his body tingling with warning. "Where are we, exactly?"

The other laughed, and took a bite of cheese. "Why, we're in the mind of Pelagius Septim!" he waved a hand at the spread before them. "Eat!"

Velandryn carefully took an unfamiliar fruit from a plate before him, and dug a nail into the rind. He peeled it back, and removed a single section of the bright orange meat beneath. This was so far beyond anything he'd encountered that he was beginning to lose all sense of perspective. He recited a mantra to clear his head, and focused on the other. His clothing was so familiar…

He swallowed the sweet orange fruit and looked across at the man, who was watching him in return. Velandryn was getting better at recognizing human expressions, but he didn't have a clue as to what this man was thinking.

They watched each other for another long moment, and then the strange man smiled and picked up a piece of cheese, waving it as he spoke. "So what brings you to my little corner of it all? And at this time of year, no less!"

"I'm looking for somebody. I have a message for him." He let his gaze linger on the man's finery.
"A lord. I was given a hipbone and sent to the Pelagius Wing.

The bearded man smiled. "Really? A message? What kind of message? A song? A summons?" His eyes lit up in a way no human could manage. "Wait, I know! A death threat written on the back of an Argonian concubine! Those are my favorite!" Without even pausing for breath, his entire demeanor changed, and his next words were an angry bark, spoken with a subtly different accent. "Well? Spit it out, mortal! I don't have all day!" Then, just as fast, he was chuckling again, speaking as though they were the oldest of friends. "Actually, I do! Little joke, you know."

What is he? Velandryn was missing something important, but he couldn't quite figure out what. As he thought, though, he figured it was best to answer this lunatic's question. That this was the individual he had been sent to find was no longer in question. "I was sent to tell you that you need to go home. A mad…"

It was the shirt. Although his aspect in Morrowind had never worn it, Velandryn had read old accounts of outlanders coming into contact with him, and those who could still form coherent sentences after their encounter often mentioned his penchant for duality. Madness, after all, was a beast of two kinds. But we aren't in Morrowind, are we? In Skyrim, there was no Covenant and no Triune House, and the Daedra were free to do as they pleased.

Finally, far too late, Velandryn truly understood. He was in the mind of Pelagius Septim, the Mad Emperor, who had been dead for a thousand years. This wasn't a mage, or any other form of mortal. The reason he felt so unnerved was doubtless the same feeling a scrib got when it looked up at Great Fane. How do you comprehend something so much more than you could ever be? He looked across the table at Sheogorath Madgod, and knew what it was to be nothing.

Fortunately, Velandryn was no outlander. "I greet you with threefold courtesies, Lord of the Never-There, and say I am Velandryn Savani of the Temple and the Covenant. At the altar of Padhome, in the House three-sided and four-cornered, I bid you walk past me, and I shall walk past you." His Daedric was rusty, but he spoke slowly and deliberately, ensuring that he pronounced every syllable of the ancient greeting. The House of Troubles had a role to play in the fate of the Dunmer, but only a fool let down his guard in the presence of one who had harmed so many of his kin.

Sheogorath laughed. "Oh, we got a live one here! Don't get too many of you lot since that business with the moon, you know." He chuckled and took a huge bite of cheese, as if he hadn't just casually referenced an event wherein he had slaughtered tens of thousands of Velandryn's people. "Your Daedric is terrible, by the way. Sounds like a drunk Ogrim who spent too much time in The Pits." He waved a hand. "So, let's make a deal!"

Velandryn tensed. Making a deal with Sheogorath was a fool's game. The Prince of Madness was notorious for his unreliability, after all. However, this wasn't some cult trying to take advantage of a storm to pull his notice. Velandryn had been transported to the mind of a madman, and now faced the Mad Lord in a form of immense power. What happens if I say no?

So, with every fiber of his faith crying out in protest, he placed his hands on the table. "What exactly did you have in mind?" There were rules, after all, and for all of his capriciousness, Sheogorath had never violated the terms of the Covenant. The Madgod insisted only on honesty and courtesy, and promised both of those and protection besides in return. Protection as defined by the patron saint of lunatics, but protection nonetheless. It might be his only chance out of here. And all I need to do is outwit one of the craftiest beings in the Aurbis.

Sheogorath grinned. "So formal! We aren't in Morrowind, you know. I was invited here, and you forced your way in using some good old necromancy. Which bone was it, by the way?"
"The pelvis." He reached for it, and only then noticed that his clothes had changed completely. He patted himself down frantically, but all of his possessions were gone. Instead, he was wearing some gaudy collection of padded wools and silks that looked like—well, like a madman dressed me for a party.

"Were you looking for this?" Sheogorath was holding the hipbone, spinning it merrily on a finger. "I had a little peek through your things when you popped in. Everything else is all tucked in back at your room, but I figured I should hold onto this for safe-keeping. You wouldn't believe the kind of mischief somebody can get up to with bits of dead people." He shuddered theatrically. "No art at all, you mortals. You can't just wave a hand and make the dead walk; you've got to take the time and build yourself a proper monstrosity! Have you ever seen my Gatekeeper?"

Velandryn ignored the nonsense and forged ahead. "You mentioned a deal. I've delivered my message, and so my business here is done."

"No, you delivered half of a message, and then you started spouting Dunmer garbage! I was hoping for a fun one, but instead I got you!" Sheogorath laughed. "So, who was it? A Molag? Little Tim, the toymaker's son? The ghost of good King Lysander? Or was it...yes! Stanley, that talking grapefruit from Passwall!"

Velandryn sighed, and then froze in shock and horror. Of all the emotions he'd imagined when coming face-to-face with a Daedric prince, exasperation had never been one of them. And he had me sighing and my mind wandering within five minutes of our meeting. He focused on Sheogorath. The Madgod was an enemy to the Dunmer, and to him. "None of them. Your servant, out in Solitude, asks you to come home."

"See, was that so hard?" He thought for a moment. "Still, my answer is no! No! I like being on vacation, and I'm a little curious to see what happens when—" He cut himself off and smiled. "No need to go spoiling it for you, hmm?"

Velandryn's mind spun. Something is coming. Whatever Sheogorath was anticipating, it likely wasn't good for him. "What's going to happen?"

The Daedra's eyes widened. "You mean...you don't know? You came into the mind of Pelagius Septim and had a snack with Uncle Sheo, and you don't even know?" He gave that laugh again. "That's just too good! Oh my, you are in for some fun. Almost makes me wish I was back there, wearing a mortals' skin again."

Velandryn ignored that, though the Madgod wearing a mortal's skin—probably like a cape—seemed in keeping with the stories. "Why are you here, Sheogorath? Isn't there something else you should be doing?"

"Well la-di-dah! Don't tell me how to do my job mortal, or I'll turn you into a crumpet! Or maybe a strumpet. Much more fun, strumpets!" Sheogorath giggled to himself. "Anywhoo, I'm right where I want to be. Are you not?"

Velandryn considered that for a moment. Sheogorath could turn even the slightest doubt into terrifying uncertainty in the mind of his victim, but Velandryn couldn't afford to lie. Never lie to a Prince of Oblivion. That rule was just common sense, for the most part, but went double when honesty was the only thing keeping the being opposite you from using your entrails as an after-dinner snack. Especially when you're alone in their realm. The thought of being here without the Covenant defending him was more unpleasant than he cared to consider. So, he shrugged. "I haven't decided yet."
"Well, you'd best make up your mind, or somebody else'll do it for ya!" Sheogorath snorted. "That's the problem with you Dunmer. You let somebody else do all your thinking! You need to learn to think for yourself, Vel my boy!"

Velandryn froze. Was it coincidence that Sheogorath and Jordis had used the nickname so close together, or did the Madgod have some secret way of knowing things he shouldn't? Foolish question, that. Even if Sheogorath didn't have eyes and ears in the Mundus, Velandryn should assume that his every thought and secret was bare before a Daedric Prince. So, he carefully nodded. "Many thanks for the advice."

"Don't mention it, lad! Uncle Sheo's always happy to lend a hand to young folk in need!" He leaned over the table. "Now, let's get cracking! I'm enjoying my vacation here, and you won't leave until I do! How about we make a deal, and then we can both be happy?"

Velandryn had been afraid of that. "Before I agree to anything, what's the catch?" No deal with the Madgod was ever straightforward, after all.

Sheogorath howled with laughter. "I love it when the mortals know they're being tricked!" He began assembling a tower of cheese and crackers that soon stood as high as his head. "All you need to do...is help my friend Pelagius...sort out his thoughts, so to speak." His brows came together and the Madgod assumed an air of great worry. "He's ever so troubled, you know."

_I'd wager his having been dead for a few hundred years and Sheogorath squatting in his mind can't have helped! _"And how would I go about doing this, provided I agree?"

"Oh, just straighten up in here, set a few things in order. You can do that, can't you?"

Velandryn's studies had come back the moment he realized who it was he faced, and now he rifled through them, seeking anything that could help. The Four Corners of the House of Troubles were not of a single kind, the Temple taught, and each had their own brand of misfortune to bring down on the faithful.

Mehrunes Dagon was as much a force of nature as a being of desire. His calamities surrounded the Dunmer at all times, but they could be overcome with effort. The Lord of Change was dangerous, but negotiations with his minions and servants were typically straightforward in their adversarial nature. _Dagon isn't on our side, ever._ He could be pointed at other foes, but should never be taken as ally.

Molag Bal was the darkest of the four, a twisted reflection of the grace of the Three filtered through the cruel lens of Coldharbour. He demanded unconditional subjugation, and sought dominion without love. His machinations struck at the soul of the Dunmer, and of the four, it was he who was most violently opposed by the faithful of the Temple. Velandryn was beyond grateful it was not the King of Rape he had stumbled upon today.

Malacath was simple enough, in his way. He was weak and twisted, and sought vengeance on the Chimer for perceived wrongs. His oaths were strong, and his followers loyal, and he had his own dark brand of honor, though Velandryn would never admit that to an outlander.

And, finally, there was Sheogorath. Dangerous, mercurial, utterly without mercy, but not evil. In fact, there were those who suggested that the Madgod could be reasoned with in good faith, and that negotiations with his representatives would arrive at a place of mutual benefit. Those opinions were generally considered dangerous at best, and despite the fact that Sheogorath _would_ often aid supplicants without condition or betrayal, it was considered the height of foolishness to trust in his goodwill.
Velandryn, however, was between a rock and a hard place. Sheogorath was beyond dangerous, but according to the terms of the Covenant, he could not inflict violence upon Velandryn without provocation. *Of course, it's easy to provoke a madman...*

Velandryn realized he'd been silent for too long when Sheogorath clapped and shouted, *"Bored now!"*

With a snap, a Dremora appeared in the clearing, staggering forward and looking confused. Sheogorath pointed at Velandryn, and shouted something in some dialect of Daedric. He understood the words "kill" and "mortal." *Well, damn.*

Roaring, the Daedra—*am I being a pedantic f'ghan by saying Daedroth, even in my own mind?*—drew a pair of axes and charged. Velandryn raised a hand and focused his magicka, only to find that no power flowed forth. *Impossible!*

Sheogorath laughed, and the Dremora froze in place, eyes bulging as it strained against whatever invisible bonds held it. *"Oh! Forgot to mention! Magic is cheating!"*

Velandryn studied the Prince of Madness and his frozen foe. *Well-named, this one.* *"So, you unfreeze him and I die, is that it? Surely there are easier ways to kill me?"

"So rude! Do you want a weapon or not?"

I...what?" Velandryn suddenly felt beyond foolish, having neglected a basic tenet of dealing with the Corners. Each had their quirks, and those defined them. The Madgod, for instance, did not take without giving. *Lose magic, get a weapon.* It was a twisted logic, but it fit with the lunatic deity before him. *I need to pull myself together.*

"Do. You. Want. A. Weapon?" Sheogorath wrote out the words in burning letters with his finger as he spoke. "I swear, you mortals are so slow it's embarrassing. Do try to keep up, hmm? Either you accept my gracious gift, or Malthanar here disembowels you and I get a new elf-skin rug!"

"Well, in that case I suppose I will take the weapon."

"Good choice!" Suddenly, there was a staff in Velandryn's hands. *"Now, fight!"

The Daedra was charging again, eyes fixed on his own, and Velandryn acted without thinking. He raised the staff as quickly as he could and sent his magicka through the core, triggering the effect contained within.

He'd expected fire, or ice, or lightning. Elemental staves were somewhat common, and could well be called "weapons." He had not expected a burst of crimson light and a puff of smoke that put him oddly in mind of...*butterflies*, a sound not unlike the beating of far-off wings, and the immediate transformation of the Dremora called Malthanar into a..."Sweetroll! Mine!" Sheogorath darted forward and snatched the pastry off of the ground. *"My favorite! Well done!"* He took a bite and chewed with visible pleasure, and Velandryn was left hoping dearly that the staff had merely switched locations rather than...well, he would hope that Sheogorath wasn't actually eating one of his own underlings. *Not least because that doesn't bode well for me.*

As the shock of what he saw receded enough for thought to return, he glanced down at the staff in his hands. *Alteration powerful enough to transform a Dremora into a sweetroll is the provenance of...*his eyes took in the intricate carvings under his hands, and the faces that made up the crown. He didn't even have to look to know that they would be similar but not identical. One would be
frozen in a maniacal laughing song, one in a horrified scream, and the last in a furious spasm of rage. The Faces of Madness was a powerful motif of Sheogorath, after all, and his greatest tool was crowned with his sign. "Is this…"

"The Wabbajack!" Sheogorath sounded delighted, and not at all as though he'd just given Velandryn one of the most powerful tools of chaos ever created. "Hold onto it for now! Much better than boring swords and magic, don't you think?"

A part of Velandryn was tempted to throw it down and reject this insanity, but he knew better. The House of Troubles was not evil, but he wasn't foolish enough to think The Corners were anything but foes. If his hand left the Wabbajack, he would have acted discourteously by refusing an offered gift, and neither would be bound by the ancient rules of the Covenant. And then I'm dead faster than I can blink.

Instead, he simply held the staff in both hands, making sure to not even hint at rejecting it. "You mentioned a task for me? Something about Pelagius?"

"Right you are! Just poke around his mind here and see what you find. If you feel like afflicting him with a bout of temporary sanity, well, it might encourage me to leave. No fun hanging around in a place with nothing to do, you know! Keep the Wabbajack with you, though; it might come in handy! Ta-ta!" Waving, Sheogorath pointed, and a section of mist pulled back to reveal a path. Grimacing, Velandryn gripped the Wabbajack tightly and walked forward into the mind of a madman.

Legate Rikke found the general where she'd known she would, locked away in his office poring over a stack of reports. She would have been informed if anything important had come in, meaning that he was simply trying to glean some new hint of information from old news. A fool's game, that. Of course, he knew that better than her.

The one person in Skyrim who outranked her glanced up when he heard the door open, and his features settled into the scowl he wore more and more often of late. "Legate. Time for this ridiculous party, I assume?" General Saul Tullius knew full well the importance of diplomacy and could bring it to bear when needed, but in private he didn't bother hiding his opinions. As his most trusted advisor and, she suspected, the closest thing he had to a friend in this province, Rikke was permitted long periods of exposure to his true feelings. And the fact that I haven't run off to join the Stormcloaks should put me in line for a damned medal! Immediately, she regretted that thought. The general might be too brash on occasion—or slightly more often than that—but she would never betray the Empire or the general.

Not a hint of her thoughts reached her face. Diplomacy was a game that two could play. "Yes sir. You don't need to arrive early, but you should be seen to arrive before sundown. Any later, and there will be whispers that the Empire's support of Jarl Elisif is flagging."

"And we can't have that." Despite his sour words, though, General Tullius rose and headed for the door. "Gods forbid somebody in Solitude not take her seriously."

Rikke sighed internally. She didn't think Jarl Elisif was terribly effective either, but it wasn't good for General Tullius to be so dismissive. His disdain for the Imperial-allied jarls was already an open secret, and the last thing the Empire needed was some new snippet fanning the flames. At least he only talks this way to me. Well, most of the time.

Rikke was a Whiterun woman born and raised, though, so there was no personal ire behind the thought. Tullius might not like Jarl Balgruuf, but at least he respects him. She personally wanted
nothing more than to see her hold brought back to the fold, but for now, the neutral jarl wasn't her concern.

The general's office was next to his rooms, so he needed to waste no time going from sleep or what passed for relaxation to work. *And if that doesn't sum up the man, what does?*

Any modesty between them was completely pointless, due to Rikke's Nord disregard for nudity and the fact that Tullius had never seen a woman he liked more than the Legion. So, she studied some reports she'd commissioned from Solitude while he washed himself, and helped him into the gilded armor that he'd be wearing tonight. As a legate, she had a much less ornate getup, and privately sympathized with his dislike of the absurd costume. *Imperial dignity is one thing, but armor that offers no protection is pointless!*

Tullius glanced over her shoulder, and snorted when he saw what she was reading. "So, found your precious Dragonborn yet?"

Legate Rikke had failed to convince General Tullius that the Dragonborn was an important asset for the Empire to acquire, but at least he hadn't stopped her from conducting her own investigation. Unfortunately, the trail had gone quite cold. "No sir. We show him arriving at the Solitude Docks from Morthal three weeks ago, but past that we only have rumors. We think he left the city in a small fishing boat the following day, but we can't find the ship or its captain to question."

"So, you've narrowed down his location to places that connect to Solitude by sea." He pulled on his jerkin and gave her a severe look. "If you end this investigation by telling me he's joined the damned Stormcloaks, I'm not going to be amused!"

She consulted her notes, more to avoid making a face at his comment than to read what she already knew was written there. "Unlikely, sir. He's a Morrowind Dunmer, we think, and Dark Elves don't much care for Ulfric or his rebellion."

"Don't much care for the Empire either, do they?" Still, Tullius was engaging the issue, which she appreciated. He might not understand the import of a Dragonborn— some Colovians and Heartland Imperials seemed to consider it vaguely unpatriotic to give the Dragonborn any sort of importance, given that the current Emperor wasn't of the Dragon Blood—but he at least trusted her enough to give her pet projects credence.

"One more thing, sir. Ambassador Elenwen has sent a note indicating that she will be attending Jarl Elisif's banquet tonight. She hopes that the evening finds you well, and extends an invitation to speak with her should you encounter each other during the festivities."

The general glared at her. "Legate, if you make sure I *don't* encounter the Ambassador, I'll give you any resources you need for your Dragonborn hunt." Since the debacle at Helgen, he'd managed to evade every single one of Elenwen's communications, but their excuses were running out. She understood her superior's position, but it did put her in an uncomfortable position.

*Good thing I hate that Thalmor witch as much as he does.* "I'll do my best, sir."

He muttered to himself as she helped him affix his breastplate, "Thinks she can order me around, does she? Her own damned Justicars not stirring up enough trouble, so she wants the Empire bowing and scraping too?"

She held her tongue, since he neither wanted nor cared about her agreement. Sometime Tullius needed to complain, and that was all there was to it. He was considered a guarded and impassive commander by the Legion at large, and he tried consciously to cultivate that exact impression.
Therefore, the number of people at whom he could complain was limited to one. Still, it was nice to be reminded that the general wasn't secretly an elf-lover.

The final touch to his formal regalia was the red cape, sewn of red velvet and fasted at the shoulders. It was an absurd touch that ensured the already ornamental armor was without any threat of practicality, but it did make Tullius stand out in a crowd.

The general sighed. "Ready, Rikke?"

"It's a party, sir. Maybe try to have fun?"

He looked at her as if she'd started speaking Daedric. "Are you planning on it?"

"No sir, but I figured maybe one of us should."

Her general chuckled. "Come on. Let's go show our support. Poor girl needs it."

Nodding her assent, Rikke opened the door and followed the general out of the room. She hadn't joined the Legion to dine with jarls and she knew for a fact that Tullius would rather be facing Stormcloaks than dealing with diplomacy, but life was funny like that. Get good enough at being a soldier, and they moved you as far from the battlefield as they could. I guess I should be happy I'm not stuck in an office in Cyrodiil.

The castle was bustling with quiet efficiency as they descended. The sight of the Imperial Legion performing the thousand tiny tasks that ensured it could run smoothly always pleased her. We will prevail. After all, wasn't the Empire the greatest force for peace in the history of Tamriel? No matter what Ulfric might think, they would win this war because they had to.

And if that means going to a fancy dinner party, then so be it. She'd do her job, like always. That's what it meant, being in the Legion.

"Over the hills and into the fire,
'Gainst man or mer or Daedra's ire,
Hear the horns and we'll obey,
Over the hills and far away!"

The old troopers' song rose unbidden in her head, and she smiled to herself at the memories it brought back. She wouldn't trade this life for anything. Even the parties.

Besides, there was a chance they'd serve the blackened crab legs with wasabi. She adored crab legs with wasabi.

"Legate?"

"Sir?"

"You're humming."

"So I am, sir." She continued, enjoying the tune.

He snorted, and she laughed. They walked down the hall together, and every single soldier snapped to attention and saluted as they passed.

They'd earned that much, at least.
Velandryn ducked under a bolt of lightning, and thrust the Wabbajack into the Storm Atronach's face. With a *pop*, the Daedric creation turned upside down, and collapsed into a heap of buzzing stones. Velandryn sprinted down the path before it could right itself, Sheogorath's laughter ringing in his ears.

He'd lost track of time, but the list of things that needed to be done to set Pelagius' mind to order seemed endless. He'd defeated monsters that represented childhood fears, hunted some sort of ever-changing beast through a frigid fog that the Madgod was insistent represented a lost love, and now was on his way to what Sheogorath had described as a "fun little look at his family situation." Velandryn didn't like the sound of that. *Putting aside the arena, the business with campfire was more than a little unnerving, and I'd wager he's saving the nastiest of these for last. Whether this next one was the last he didn't know, but he could hope.*

The atronachs kept coming, and his blasts from the Wabbajack seemed to do little more than delay them. For each that vanished in a puff of incandescent butterflies or turned into a chicken and flew away screaming filthy words, another would grow in size or split apart into a swarm of smaller copies of the original, and none at all were transformed into sweetrolls. *Which seems more than a little unfair.*

He took a moment to realize what thought he'd just had. *Are these the Madgod's claws in my mind?*

A rumble was all the warning that he had before he felt something pushing upward under his feet. He threw himself to one side, landing hard on hand as knees, as a pair of creatures with impossibly long and spindle-like limbs pushed out from below. They turned their open mouths this way and that, long tongues tasting the air and slipping between sharp and protruding teeth.

*Hungers!* Most of their kind served Boethiah, but Sheogorath had long been infamous for poaching servants from other Princes. They were exceedingly rare in Morrowind, since to the best of Velandryn's knowledge none had crossed over from Oblivion since Dagon's incursion. However, Anointed were required to know the servant races of the Triune and Corners, and Velandryn had been nothing if not assiduous in his studies. So, he knew that they were lethal within the span of their arms, but lacked the ability to cast spells or use any weapon beyond its own body. So long as he kept well away from their mouths and claws, he should be fine. Velandryn pointed the Wabbajack dead center on the nearer, and let fly.

The Hunger shrieked as lightning coursed over its body, but staggered onward regardless. Velandryn fired again, and this time the Hunger twitched once before turning into a chicken. *Well, alright then.*

Now Velandryn just had to deal with the second Hunger, and that one was lurching closer in an ungainly but shockingly fast run. By the time he'd brought the Wabbajack up, it was upon him, and he barely managed to jab the end of the staff at the creature, keeping it at bay.

The Hunger reached out one long arm, and Velandryn drove the Wabbajack down onto the elbow. The Hunger hissed and jerked its arm back, but Velandryn had spun the staff and gripped it solidly with both hands. He swung it like a battle-axe, and the three faces of Madness slammed into the side of the Daedra's head. It recoiled for an instant before lashing back with arms and tongue, but Velandryn had thrown himself to the ground, and the attacks passed overhead.

*The Hunger longs for the taste of mortals.* Four thousand years of dealing with Daedra had given the Dunmer maxims and snippets of wisdom beyond measure, and now Velandryn sought to recall all that pertained to these creatures. More so that other Daedra, they seemed to be driven by a *need* to grasp and consume their foes. *So it keeps coming, I can use that.*
As the Daedra's arms passed overhead, Velandryn raised the Wabbajack and fired a magical bolt right into the creature's chest. It hissed at him, but none of the staff's chaotic effects seemed to come into play. Damn!

Before he could fire again, the Hunger's long fingers were coiled around the Wabbajack, and Velandryn found himself wrestling with the Daedra for control of the artifact. I thought they only wanted to consume mortals! But he supposed that even a Hunger could covet the Wabbajack.

Well, he can't have it! With a growl, Valendryn kneed the Hunger square in the gut—is it still called a gut if it's thinner than the rest of him?—and used the moment of space to pull the staff mostly free. He snapped two of the creature's fingers by wrenching the Wabbajack in a circle, and leveled the head squarely at its ugly face.

"Taste madness, wretch."

Scholars had long been unable to arrive at a consensus as to whether or not Daedra understood pain in the same way that mortals did. For mortals, the sensation heralded danger and the possibility of death. For Daedra, however, the worst they ever had to fear was banishment back to Oblivion. So, the theory ran, while they clearly experienced something unpleasant while wounded, it likely lacked the horrific intensity of pain as mortals understood it. Actually asking a Daedra about this seemed to reinforce the theory, as Dremora especially were scornful of any who would alter a course of action based on a desire to avoid discomfort or pain.

Whether or not Hungers experienced pain as Velandryn did, this one was hissing and screaming enough to put even the loudest Nord to shame. He couldn't tell what the Wabbajack had done, but it didn't appear pleasant.

Finally, the body vanished in a puff of red smoke, and Velandryn relaxed. Two good ones in a row. That's lucky.

He'd spoken too soon. From the smoke emerged a familiar figure holding a pair of axes. When it saw Velandryn, its eyes narrowed.

Oh, fetch it all. He bowed. "Malthanar. Well met." Courtesy was valued by the Dremora, although the fact that Velandryn had turned this particular Daedra into a sweetroll a little while ago probably meant there wasn't going to be much goodwill no matter how polite he was.

And indeed, the Daedra was already fuming. "You will end your brief existence with agony unimaginable, mortal." He was pacing back and forth, gesticulating grandly with his axes. "I will slice your flesh apart and carve the thousand words of my eternal name upon your bones while you still live! I will bind your soul to a gem woven from your own blood, and deny you the release of your single and pitiful death. You will mewl for your—"

Velandryn sighed. This isn't something I can talk myself out of. He glanced down at the Wabbajack, and had a moment of clarity as he understood how neatly Sheogorath had maneuvered him into a position where he had no choice but to use this poisoned gift.

The blast took Malthanar full in the chest, but nothing else happened. The Daedra looked down at the smoking remnant of the blast, then back up to glare at Velandryn. Slowly, his lips curled into a cruel smile, and he began laughing with lunatic abandon as he stepped forward. "I'm going to enjoy this."

What game are you playing, Madgod? Velandryn fired off another blast, but again there was no sign of damage. Malthanar had slowed however, and his laughter faded. "I will tear you apart! I
will bathe in your entrails, and violate the holes I make in your flesh!" His face was scrunched up with rage unlike anything Valendryn had ever seen, and suddenly he understood. *Mirth, Rage, and Fear.* So went the ancient hymn, and so proceeded the faces carved into the Wabbajack.

*There's only one Face of Madness left.* Valendryn aimed the Wabbajack at the Dremora, now shifting forward and clearly intending to charge, and let fly the red light once more.


This had to be the Face of Terror, and Valendryn felt a moment of pity. This Daedra was Sheogorath's plaything every bit as much as Valendryn, after all. However, recalling the comments the Dremora had made even before being afflicted with rage, Valendryn decided he didn't feel too bad about Malthanar being terrified.

He was now huddled on the ground, trembling and murmuring softly to himself. Valendryn had never heard of one of this arrogant and eternal race being so reduced, and a part of him felt a perverse joy at being witness to such a thing. Another bit of him, however, was a tiny bit sad at seeing him brought so low. Daedra, after all, were the superior ancestors—spiritually if not always through lines of strict descent—of the Dunmer people. They shouldn't act like this.

Valendryn turned away, not wishing to see any more of this spectacle. He left Malthanar there, and pushed on. *What was it Sheogorath said? Something about family?*

Valendryn didn't remember too much about Pelagius other than the bits that had made it into jokes and a few smug essays on why the mad Emperor was proof that absolute dynastic authority was a critically flawed system, but he was fairly certain that what lay before him was not an accurate representation of the man's family life. A herd of children and animals ran this way and that, consumed with a dozen pointless tasks. Over them all stood a woman, twenty feet tall at least. From time to time she would reach down and pick up a child or animal, tear them open and scatter their innards on the ground, then toss the pieces left down where the destroyed creature would reassemble itself and continue its meaningless activity.

*And they say the Dunmer are strange.* He readied the Wabbajack; this damnable staff had to be the key here, after all. He'd noticed the pattern to everything he'd had to face, and finally understood the maxim that Sheogorath adored rules, but hated letting anyone else know what they were. *He gave me the Wabbajack, so he expects me to use it.*

His first attempt was a direct attack against the enormous woman, but it failed to do anything at all. The light simply glanced off of her, and she stooped to wrap thick fingers around the neck of a screaming girl with long red hair.

He hadn't had high expectations, but his failure still annoyed him, and the child's screams of agony were strangely upsetting as he considered other options. *I suppose some things are too deeply rooted to ignore, after all.* This might be the illusion of a mad mind and the children were obviously only facsimiles, but even the idea of harming children made his stomach roil.

The Dunmer were not a populous race, and in the aftermath of the Red Year every child was recognized as the vanguard of the future. All violence against a child was recognized as abhorrent, and anyone who sanctioned any sort of assassination or torture that would harm a young Dunmer would soon find themselves undergoing agony beyond imagining.

Valendryn could tell himself this and recognize that it was an ingrained cultural response all that he wanted, but he still felt the urge to vomit as the woman swung the little girl's spine—and the bits of
her that remained attached—this way and that.

Barely thinking, he pointed the Wabbajack again, and let fly. This time, however, his target was not the woman.

The remains of the child began to smoke, and twisted upon themselves as if caught in an invisible flame. The familiar red smoke began billowing out, and the woman finally paused her carnage to stare at the thing in her hand. *I wonder what'll be there once the smoke clears?* The only thing he knew for certain was that it wouldn't be boring.

And, indeed, a familiar roar of anger brought Velandryn almost to laughter. *You poor bastard.* He wasn't sure if the thought was directed at the giant woman, or the Dremora she held.

She screamed and opened her hand, but Malthanar had already managed to bury both axes in her chest, and he climbed the enormous woman with astonishing dexterity. When he reached her shoulders he used one axe to hack into her neck with furious purpose, and in seconds she was reeling this way and that, black blood gushing from the wound while her head flopped about on the bits of muscle and bone that still held.

Curiously, Velandryn found that this grisly spectacle didn't bother him in the slightest. *It is either an illusion or an aberrant creation of Sheogorath.*

Finally, the woman toppled and fell, and Malthanar jumped free. The Daedra landed heavily while still holding both of his axes, and grinned wickedly at Velandryn. "You again."

"You seem more composed than the last time we met." Velandryn knew it wasn't the wisest thing to say, but he wasn't at his best right now. "Keep your distance if you want to stay that way." *That* had been calculated, and he waited for Malthanar's response.

Dremora regarded communication as necessitating answer, and to ignore an insult was to make it as though it had not happened. Of course, the essay he'd read on the subject had studied a clan that followed Mehrunes Dagon; he had no way of knowing if Malthanar held to the same tenets.

However, the Dremora's response—turning away and vanishing into the mist—seemed to reinforce his belief. *Never thought I'd be intimidating a Dremora!* Of course, it had mostly been the staff, but still, it was a nice feeling.

The field was now bare as the bodies and children had evaporated into nothingness, with the gloomy sky overhead and mist all around. Velandryn raised his voice. "What next, Sheogorath? What else in here needs curing?" That last word he'd chosen on the spur of the moment. *Again, not my wisest decision.*

The Madgod's voice came from every direction. "Fear! You need to get rid of it!" The mist drew in close around him. "Have fun!"

Velandryn spun, pointing the Wabbajack into the mist. *What did Pelagius fear?* That was a dumb question. The mad Emperor had feared just about everything—

Sheogorath's voice broke in "He feared pumpernickel! And once he tried to have a rainbow executed!"

*And now the Madgod is reading my mind.*

Once more the voice came from nowhere and everywhere, mocking in its cheer. "I'm not reading your mind! Your thoughts are just obvious!" He laughed for far too long. "Or maybe I am, because
you've goooone maaaaad!" Those last two words were in a voice that was bizarre even by the Prince's standards, and after another bout of laughter, Sheogorath fell silent.

Velandryn sighed, and scanned the fog as he waited for something to happen. *What is pumpernickel, anyway?*

Sheogorath's voice sounded again, as serious as it had yet been. "Oh, and one more thing." The fog swirled, and overhead, the sky took on a tone of red. Velandryn glanced up, and saw something up there. *A star?* It was a tiny patch of darkness against the crimson sky. "This isn't Pelagius' fear." Sheogorath's voice was full of joy, and the speck was getting larger, moving with impossible speed. "It's yours!"

Velandryn's body froze, and he stared upward in dawning horror. The dark thing was rushing closer, and as he stared transfixed at its approaching form, he understood. *Baar Dau.*

Why Sheogorath had ripped Lie Rock from the Void and hurled it at Morrowind, none now living knew. However, Vivec had frozen it with a wave of his hand and given the Dunmer his greatest ultimatum. *Worship Me, and this stone shall hang above My city for all time, a testament of My Love.* For thousands of years it had remained over Vivec City, and the Ordinators had carved their Ministry of Truth into its very stone.

*Forget Me, or turn away, and it shall fall as though I had never intervened.* And so it had. When Vivec and his power had vanished, so too had the impossible magic that held a rogue moon in place. Baar Dau had fallen despite the best efforts of Dunmer wizards, and the resulting impact had completamente annihilated the city of Vivec and triggered the chain of events that had led to the Red Year.

It was a psychic scar on every Dunmer who held fast to the culture of their homeland, and it was bearing down on him at this very moment. He could no more move out of the way than he could have…

Could have…

Thought was failing him. His feet were rooted, eyes wide as he watched his doom bear down upon him.

*How many died?*

They'd never been able to come up with a final number for the dead, but it numbered somewhere between one hundred-fifty and two hundred thousand souls, most of them innocent Dunmer. Vivec had been utterly annihilated, Balmora had been ravaged by earthquakes that eventually buried most of the city, Ald'ruhn had vanished under a river of lava ten miles wide that had overwhelmed the foyadas as it made its way from Red Mountain to the sea. The Mage-Lords of the Telvanni had mostly saved themselves, but left the vast majority of their people to live or die at the mercy of Vvardenfell and the nightmare that consumed it. *How many villages, how many Ashland clans, wiped from existence with no hint left behind?*

Lives, history, culture, all snuffed out. Many had perished in the blink of an eye. *The lucky ones.* Others had died slowly, unable even to scream, choking on ash too thick even for the lungs of a Dunmer and cut off from any help by a land that had changed around them. Some had been cut down by their fellow mer, desperate survivors turning on each other in an attempt to scrounge enough food or clean water to make it through one more scorching night or sunless day.

They'd cleaned those parts up for the histories. *There were acts of heroism aplenty during the Red Year.*
Year, no need to remind us how many starved to death while digging frantically through the ash for the bodies of their loved ones. But the records remained, hidden behind doors of ebony and bone deep in Great Fane. The Ordinators-Repentant—the first of their order, for they had sworn new oaths upon seeing the horror that their blind obedience had unleashed—combed through the ashes to recover the remains of the dead and inter some part of them in keeping with the faith. Even today, each Ordinator and Anointed spent a year of their training on Vvardenfell, working to restore the land or raise new structures. It was the penance of each and every Dunmer who claimed to know the will of the Triune.

Through adversity we are strengthened. The Red Year was a piece of history, to be studied and understood. It had shaped the Dunmer, but even those who lived through it spoke of it with a detachment that made clear the impossible pain it had caused them.

And now it's here. Baar Dau had caused it all, caused it all by falling, just like now.

Velandryn realized he had fallen to his knees, eyes closed as tears trickled down his cheeks. The air was fire around him, the ground beneath him rocking as through it were water. Overhead, the rock too was wreathed in flame as it ignited the air with the force of its passing. *Blessed Triune, save me!*

Save me…

His head bowed, even as he made the prayer that he knew was in vain. The Triune would not save him, this was the realm of the Madgod, and any who came here were at the mercy of Sheogorath.

No!

The voice had been too long quiet, and its return came with a stab of pain through his temples. *Not at his mercy!* Velandryn screamed, but the cacophony of Baar Dau's fall drowned out any noise he could make.

Long days on the march had brought Dov and Joor to a kind of peace, where his determination came from within, and its source mattered little. Whether it was a dragon's fury at the temerity of some degenerate clan of filthy Daedric spawn trying to kill him, or a Dunmer's stubborn determination not to give a bunch of vampire bastards the satisfaction of causing his death, his goal had been the same.

Not anymore.

Now, everything that was Dunmer in him was shutting down. Had he been prepared, he could have steelied his mind against this event, but the rules here had caught him off-guard. *So I have to rise to the challenge.*

*Dov* had no patience for ancestral trauma. Enemies were enemies, and whether they were natural disasters or Daedric vengeance, it made no difference to *Dov.* Shutting down was admitting defeat, and the Dragonborn did not admit defeat!

He raised his eyes, staring holes into the rock. It was huge now, taking up most of the sky. He glared at it, *hating* it for what it would do. *Kill so many.*

But through death came rebirth. *The survivors found purpose.* For the first time since the First Era, the children of Veloth were following his teachings as a single nation. Great Fane rang with prayer and spellcraft, and Necrom with the songs of the dead. Nobles schemed, children fought, fools fell in love too quickly and old mer laughed at terrible jokes told by drunken Acolytes.
Dov roared approval as he stood, and he knew that his voice would echo with the power he still barely understood.

"FUS!"

It erupted from his throat, once more pushing the very air—no, the Creatia, he could see the strands of almost-magicka as they hummed in the Thu'um's wake—aside as it roared upward.

It won't be enough. Baar Dau was still falling, and that was only a small push. His Thu'um was unformed, and—

Instantly, without any sound or flash, Baar Dau was gone and Velandryn was standing in a familiar clearing. Sheogorath beamed at him from his chair at the laden table. "Good show! Better than making my toes fight each other to see who gets to itch my leg!"

He nearly collapsed but managed to keep his feet, trembling all over. "That was…"

"Oh, just a little party trick! Good for clearing the room when you want to signal that it's time to leave." He looked over his shoulder and raised his voice. "You hear that, Maxus? Get out of my damned Isles before I tell your boss what you really get up to with the Mazken! HEY! I'M TALKING TO YOU!" There was no response, and Sheogorath turned back and shrugged. "Oh well, doesn't always work. You're still here, after all."

Velandryn's head was still spinning, but he managed to pull his way into a chair. "Why did you do it?"

"Oh, I thought you deserved a change of pace after spending so long working with Pelagius!" He grinned. "Only problem is, you aren't mad just yet, so I had to go with an old standby. My big smashing rock always gets the Dunmer! Smashing!" He giggled insanely and leaned in. "You did better than most, if you must know. Less screaming and not nearly as much dying! Must be the Dragon bits. Dragons don't take any shit from rocks, you know. Famous for it, actually."

Velandryn shook his head. The Madgod's words were water on stones; they washed over him without sinking in. "Why send it in the first place? Why torment us with Baar Dau? You're Madness, so there's no reason—"

"I'm Madness, like you said! I don't need a reason!" Sheogorath snapped his fingers, then grew serious again. "But, I did have one. I was answering a request, if you must know."

"Whose?"

"Vivec's." The single word, spoken with none of Sheogorath's usual teasing joy or playful anger, dropped ice into Velandryn's stomach. Oh, gods.

"He called it. He brought down…" Velandryn couldn't finish the sentence. The False Tribunal had been thieves and murderers, to be sure, but only ever for power. What they had done was foul murder, but even foul murder was almost understandable when one stood to gain immortality and divine power. They had fallen from grace, but this was an entirely new level of atrocity. If Vivec summoned Baar Dau to hold over our heads…

"Well, not in so many words, but that's his own fault!" Sheogorath spread his hands. "Comes to me asking for help making sure his people love him. What am I supposed to do?"
"Not send a giant rock to destroy us!"

"Destroy you? I held up my end of the deal." Sheogorath grinned. "You want to blame someone, how about that two-faced god of yours. He could have turned it into butterflies or pudding or simply banished the damn thing, but he let it hang up there until he had to pop out, and then it fell! That's not my fault!"

Impossible. If Vivec had truly summoned Baar Dau, then… "Why should I believe you? You're one of the…" He realized what he was about to say as Sheogorath laughed.

"That's right! I'm the big scary Daedra that goes quack in the night, but I have to play by the rules! The Covenant binds us both, Dragonborn! I can't lie to you, or it gets," he shuddered, "political. The last thing I want is another spat with Boethiah. No sense of humor, that one, and it ends with mountains of corpses on the rug! Takes decades to get the smell out."

He was right. So long as the he held to the terms of the Covenant—and Velandryn had by some miracle, even in his outburst, refrained from violating any of the tenets—Sheogorath would never lie to a faithful of the Temple of the Triune Faith. And if he's telling the truth...

"The Corners, some of the dissident texts say it was the Tribunal you opposed, not the Dunmer." He looked the Madgod square in the eyes. "Is that true?"

Sheogorath shrugged. "You lot are too serious by half, so it's fun to open up your minds a bit" He grinned. "Sometimes with a thought, sometimes with an axe."

"Before, before the Tribunal, in the days of the Chimer, what were you?" The scholar in Velandryn couldn't let this chance go, even as the priest was terrified of what he might learn. "Were there more Daedra who worked with the Velothi?" Just how much of our own history did the Tribunal steal away?

But Sheogorath was laughing, and shaking his head. "No, not even a little bit! Malacath's hated you lot since he lost his old name, and Dagon and the Lord High Rapemaster have their own histories with you, the kind that go a lot deeper than who shat out who." He stuck a quill pen into a piece of fruit, which began wailing in what sounded horribly like pain. With each bite he took, the sound grew quieter, until the fruit was gone and the glade was silent. "You must try the screamfruit! Nothing brings out tartness like a bit of existential horror!"

Velandryn didn't want to think about insane fruit right now, and demurred with a wave of his hand. "And you?"

"I play my games, find my favorite mortals, and do a bit of helping every now and then. Not a bad way to spend eternity, you know."

Velandryn knew of Sheogorath's 'help.' He'd seen the ruins it left behind. "And the Dunmer? The Tribunal?"

"If you want to make me an enemy, fine! I can play along. Plus, somebody who hates me is so much more fun that somebody who doesn't care!"

All of this raised as many questions as it answered. "And now? The Tribunal is gone."

"Are they? All of them, you say?" Sheogorath peered at him, voice losing all of its humor. "If you're going to be playing games with us, there's a lot you need to learn. And gone is such a...mortal word.." He shrugged. "Besides, I've my own house to put in order. I had a terrible houseguest a while back. Left crystals everywhere! I've no time to go dealing with mortal
problems! Try some cheese, it's the good stuff!"

_Time enough to loiter around waiting for me, though._ With a sigh, Velandryn picked up a piece of cheese, and tried a corner. _Not bad._ "So, that's it, then? Just minding your own business, are you? No more moons sent to kill us, just your usual brand of chaos?"

Sheogorath bowed theatrically. "I've been hard at work on some farmers in Gna Fell! They'll be dancing like crabs in a fortnight!"

Velandryn almost wanted to chuckle at that, but he swallowed that impulse. _Let the Madgod play his games. The Dunmer will prevail._ Then, he thought back over all that had happened. "You wanted me here. You know too much about me for it to be coincidence. But why?"

"Not too many Dragonborn around these days. I watched the last one go up in a puff of Akatosh, thought I'd see what you're made of." He grinned. "Maybe even blow your mortal mind with some hard truths about things." His face become tremendously sad. "I was hoping for more tears, or gnashing of teeth."

Velandryn shrugged. "I was born after the Tribunal fell from grace. My gods are the Triune, not the Three Thieves." In truth, he was still shaken, but he hadn't lied. Then something occurred to him. "You mentioned the last Dragonborn before me. Who was it? A _puff of Akatosh_? "Martin Septim?"

"Got it in one! Good lad, exceptionally bright, wonderful taste in draperies. Shame he had to go." The Madgod jabbed a finger in Velandryn's direction. "Life lesson for you: kill your enemies the first time, so they can't summon Mehrunes Dagon. It all goes downhill from there."

"I'll keep that in mind." He knew something of Dagon's Incursion in Cyrodiil, and had to wonder. "I never heard of the Madgod's involvement in the Crisis."

"Well, I wasn't me yet, silly! I mean, I was, but also not." Sheogorath tapped his chest. "Family tradition, you know. Pass the title down from me to myself every so often!"

Something he'd said earlier came back now. "You were mortal?"

"I was, and am, Sheogorath the Inconfoundable! Or was it Unconfoundable? Either way, I'm me! Whatever else I was. Or wasn't. You know how it goes."

_I'm starting to doubt that very much._ The strangeness of this all was still held slightly at bay, but Velandryn wasn't sure how much longer he wanted to linger here. Bound by the Covenant they both might be, but dealing with Sheogorath was perhaps the single quickest way to lose your mind. Grunting slightly as bruised limbs protested, Velandryn rose. "I have done as you wanted, and now I ask of you, will you return to your servant?"

"Oh, all right." The Prince of Madness stood, and stretched his arms above his head. For a moment, he was frozen like in that position, and then something _shifted_. His arms were in front of him and behind him at once, and Velandryn had the unnerving experience of seeing Sheogorath from angels he hadn't even known existed. _Dov_ stirred within him, and Velandryn had a surge of satisfaction that some lie was being undone.

Then, instantly, the moment was gone. Sheogorath again looked like nothing more than a white-bearded old man with a cane.

Velandryn realized he had pushed back from the table and raised his hands defensively. The Madgod grinned at him. "Saw that, did you? A bit of power in you after all."
"Was that—"

"You're the one who restored Pelagius' sanity, mortal. Don't blame me if things start to get a bit… unstable in here. Well, for a bit at least. He never manages these things for long! So don't worry, he'll be back to declaring war on the snowfall in no time!"

"So, you're leaving."

"Impatient impatient impatient! Let me just make sure I have everything." He began patting himself down. "Pockets, check! Beard, check! Luggage?" He looked around. "Now where did I leave my luggage?"

With the now-familiar blur that portended a Daedric portal in this place, the mad beggar from before appeared. He fell to his knees and began crawling towards the Daedric Prince who was now dancing around, loudly counting his thoughts to make sure they were all there.

The beggar reached Sheogorath's feet, and began weeping. "My Lord! You've come back to me! I knew you would, even—"

"Bored now!" Sheogorath clapped his hands, and the beggar disappeared. "All right, only one last thing." He pointed at Velandryn. "I'll be having what's mine, now! You're not nearly fun enough to walk off with my Wabbajack!"

Velandryn tensed, and reached for his magic before he remembered he didn't have it here. The emptiness inside him was a mocking song, one that he hated with every fiber of his being. He'd managed to suppress the feeling by focusing on the madness around him, but now he was brought face to face with it.

*Without magic, what am I?* Velandryn Savani had been studying the arcane for his entire life, and right now, not a drop of that could help him. *Dov* stirred then, and Velandryn twitched as something woke inside. *I'm the Dragonborn.*

Sheogorath grinned at him toothily. "Well, hand over the Wabbajack, mortal! Playtime's over, and I don't have all day!" He winked. "Actually, I do. Little joke."

Velandryn didn't budge. "A gift freely given, in accordance with the Covenant. You cannot demand it back, Sheogorath."

The smile had shrunk a bit, but Sheogorath was still grinning at him. "You wouldn't tell a Khajiit how to lick its own ballsack, and you'd best not think you can try and teach me how to screw someone out of a deal, laddo. That weapon's part of the game, and now that game's done. The staff's mine."

Velandryn shook his head. *I know this one.* "The task is done, but the game isn't, is it? You set me a trial and I accomplished it, by your own admission." The Corners might be adversarial, but they still tested the Dunmer. There were rules, after all, and one of the most ancient was that any challenge—be it physical, mental, spiritual or philosophical—personally overseen by any Prince who had acceded to the Covenant of Veloth must be rewarded. *I don't much want the Wabbajack, but Sheogorath has to have something worthwhile tucked away in that ugly suit of his! Some small voice was screaming at him that trying to outwit the Madgod was folly, but he didn't care. I let the staff go for nothing, the Covenant of Veloth is broken. Plus, he wanted a real reward. Maybe a lot of gold."

Fortunately, the Madgod seemed amused rather than enraged by Velandryn's defiance. "You know
what happens if you try and use my friend Wabba without my permission? You think it's chance that chooses what happens when you point that staff?"

Velandryn gave him his most practiced smile. "I don't want the Wabbajack, Madgod, but I won't give it away for nothing."

"Haha! That's the spirit, you scamp!" He snapped his fingers. "Here's my deal! Three gifts, one for each face of your precious Triune. A secret, a weapon, and an open door. Each of Daedric potency, but double-edged and razor-sharp!"

Velandryn studied the white-haired Prince. Don't think I'll get a better deal than this. He nodded. "What are you offering?"

"Breaks from reality, mostly, but I have a special on limitless dread for a limited time." Sheogorath licked his lips. "Or did you mean the gifts?" A small chuckle. "Well, you are mortal, so I'd best hurry up before you die or something." He held out a hand. "First, the staff." When Velandryn still hesitated, the Madgod laughed loudly. "Have no fear, I'm not going to cross your Triune. Don't want spiders in my basement again!" He sobered. "Ihez vaato nubal, I swear it."

That oath was older even than Saint Veloth the Prophet; carved upon the first faces of the Walking Wheels, or so it was said. Even Sheogorath wouldn't dare risk the ire of the Three so openly. Velandryn opened his hand, and the Wabbajack evaporated from sight.

The Madgod vanished, and appeared only inches in front of him. "Nicely done, little mortal! Now, for your reward..."

Velandryn reached down, reveling in his magicka once more. Dov roared approval, and flames sprang into being around his hands and wreathed his clothing in a burning embrace. That's better. "What is your offer, Madgod?"

"Madsong, Madgod, Lord of the Dancing Way!" Sheogorath sang loudly and off-key, and every glass on the table hummed in harmony. "I offer a weapon you dare not wield, a secret you cannot understand, and a key to a door you don't know is closed!"

Velandryn considered for all of half a heartbeat. Anything to be out of here with all of my parts and mind intact. Besides, these gifts sounded interesting."Deal."

"Alrighty then! Catch!" Sheogorath threw something at Velandryn's head, and the Dragonborn's hand snapped up to catch it.

A ring? It was a simple band of some silvery metal that deformed slightly when pressed, though it returned to its original shape the moment the pressure was released. Velandryn had never seen its like.

"Put that on when you're in a pinch! It'll be hilarious!" The words were hardly reassuring, but Velandryn would have been a fool to expect a gift that wasn't in some way a threat to the user.

Velandryn carefully tucked the ring away, making sure he knew exactly which pocket held the item. I'm not about to use a gift from Sheogorath until I can test it out.

The Madgod smiled at him again. "Now, for that secret. You ready?"

No. "Yes."

"You suuuure you're ready? It's a doozy!"
Velandryn sighed. "If I say no, do I get the staff back?"

"Nope, I'll just tell you how many butterflies I can fit into the Chamber of Zero instead! It'll haunt your dreams, I promise!"

Velandryn didn't know if it was actually possible to get anything into a room that didn't exist outside of metaphysical speculation, but he had the feeling that the answer wouldn't do his sanity any favors. "What's the secret?"

"We're watching you."

"What?"

"It's mostly political, but the fact that there's a Dragonborn running around can't be ignored." There was no hint of madness in Sheogorath's' voice, though he still sounded intolerably amused. "Princes are taking notice, you know. Thought they'd seen the last of you lot when Dagon did his business, but here you are! And with dragons too! That's the scary part!"

"Why? Why would dragons scare the Princes?" Velandryn needed to ask the right questions, but couldn't afford to get too deep into the implications of what the Madgod was saying. Not yet, at least. He needed a clear head here.

Sheogorath wagged a finger. "That'd be telling, you know. A whole different secret, that one! But, you'd best keep on your toes. Things are going all different this time around, and nobody's sure why." Sheogorath leaned in so close that Velandryn could feel his breath. "The Dragon is spinning, and that's never happened before." He grasped Velandryn by the shoulders. "You think the Thalmor are coincidence? Aka's broken something fierce, and nobody can put it back together! You break the dragon, it breaks both ways!" A finger jabbed into his chest. "You got some of it in you. One and one isn't two, it's one! Add another and another and another, it's always one! That's why they're afraid!" Each word now was accompanied by flecks of spittle. "Every game, the pieces go back in the box! Different places next time, but there aren't new pieces. Except not this time! Anu and Padhome, they're not the sides anymore, but you're stuck right in the middle. Time isn't linear, but it marches on! Who knows when everything goes back in? You get me?"

Velandryn's head was spinning. "Not in the slightest. What does it mean, my being Dragonborn?"

"Not you! You don't matter!" Sheogorath sounded as though Velandryn was personally insulting him with his lack of understanding. "There needed to be a Dragonborn, but nobody cares if it's you."

"So, what? I was convenient?"

"Or inconvenient! I don't know why it does what it does."

"It?" It sounded as though Sheogorath knew something more about what had made him Dragonborn.

"Aka! The big guy! The one that's so completely mad that it's trying to save the world and end it at the same time!" Sheogorath let out a huge breath and chuckled. "I've done that one before, you know. Fun, but tiring." A shrug. "Easier when you're in pieces though."

Aka. Velandryn knew the word. A governing principle said to overlay the various cultural incarnations of the Time Imperials had Akatosh and the Altmer had old Auri-El—plus the Khajiit and Nords had other versions of it too, if he remembered correctly—but they were simply culture gods who'd tapped into a primal force, not unlike the Dark Brotherhood and their degenerate
reverence of Sithis-as-Void. "So...you're saying I was chosen as Dragonborn by...Aka?" As well say I was chosen by dead Lorkhan! Gods on that level sere not conscious as mortals understood it. Or, are they?

Sheogorath shook his head. "Not that simple! You can't understand yet! Wait! Just remember that there's a bigger game going on! A dragon's no more a big lizard than I'm an old man, you get me?"

Shockingly, Velandryn did, and that worried him. "Why tell me this though? What's the point of it? Why is there a Dragonborn at all?"

"Because there needs to be one! You're them, but opposed. A counterbalance, for the other side."

"Sides? What sides? You keep saying that word, but who are you talking about?" Aka didn't have the consciousness to pick a side...did he? Only the Daedra...

Sheogorath's eyes opened wide. "No time, no time! That's all you get, so sorry so sad! Take the door on your right, and you can't go wrong! Well, you can, but you won't. Probably. Ta-ta!"

With a blur, Velandryn found himself back in a dark room, head spinning. What in Oblivion? He raised a hand and let lights float around the chamber, confirming that he was indeed back in the Pelagius Wing.

Is this another trick? Sheogorath had sent him off so quickly, and there'd been a strange feeling in the air at the end there...

No matter. Accepted doctrine was reflection and meditation after an encounter with any Daedra, and that went double for one of the Corners. And the Madgod, well, I'd be better off sequestering myself for a week until I'm sure he didn't plant his hooks in my mind! That entire conversation had been a whirlwind, and Velandryn was still trying to figure out what exactly Sheogorath had been saying. Are the dragons related to Aka somehow? Akatosh and Auri-El manifested as dragons, to be sure, but neither of them was flying around Skyrim right now. Are they?

He felt like he was missing something, as though there were an obvious piece of the puzzle that he lacked. Something that he could find or remember that would make all Sheogorath's ramblings fall into place.

A noise from the other side of the wall drew his attention, and the thoughts fled. Maybe not just this instant, though. He was still in the Blue Palace, after all, and he hadn't exactly been invited, Jordis notwithstanding. He'd do well to get out of here before anyone realized that they had the Dragonborn not only in Solitude, but in the residence of the jarl herself. Whether Jarl's guards or Imperial troops, I don't need them hunting me down.

He'd locked the door to the Pelagius Wing behind himself, but fortunately, a key could work from either side. He reached to his belt...which was when he realized that he was still wearing the clothes the Madgod had given him.

No! He patted himself down, panic rising in his throat, but there was no key to be found. Desperately he scanned the room, but could spy nothing that looked to hold to the key. No no no!

He could blast through the door or try to unlock it with magic, of course, but somehow he figured that wouldn't do him any favors with his goal of not fleeing from here with half the Legion on his heels. Besides the fact that he was a little more rattled than was ideal for spellcasting, he could feel the presence of old spells in the wood that would resist any magic he might send against it. Any door so enchanted generally had nasty surprises waiting for anybody foolish enough to try and
force their way through. *Fitting, considering Pelagius' paranoia.* So, that left him with the option of looking for another way out, unless he wanted to obliterate the door and take his chances with the guard. *Not likely.*

A quick glance out the window confirmed that the portion of the Pelagius Wing in which he was currently stuck was several stories off of the ground, and none of the windows opened. Most of the windows looked out over gardens now bathed in the last rays of the dying sun—*how long was I in that place?*—but a few simply overlooked a several-hundred-foot drop to the waves below. *Best leave that as a last resort.* He could shatter the windows and use Slowfall to deposit him on the ground below, but he wasn't foolish enough to believe that nobody would see an elf jump three stories down out of the Blue Palace. *And then I end up with that whole running out of the city half a step in front of the guard scenario again.*

Fortunately, the next room he entered had another door, and this one, puzzlingly, stood slightly ajar. Velandryn studied it, wondering why the Pelagius Wing wouldn't be sealed off. Then, in one ear, he heard a familiar chuckle.

"I told you there was an open door, lad." Sheogorath's voice was a friendly whisper. "Have fun!"

As Velandryn approached, he heard the sound of music and conversation on the other side, and cursed silently. *The banquet!* With this, his odds of sneaking out undetected had gone down precipitously.

Then, he glanced down. He didn't know much about high fashion, but his clothes looked presentable enough, if somewhat unconventional. He supposed it was the price one paid for being dressed by the Madgod. *Might be I can avoid notice long enough to escape the Palace.* It wasn't as though he had many other choices. So, sighing quietly to himself, he pushed open the door and slipped through, hoping against hope that whatever he faced wouldn't be his end.

*Quite the gift, Madgod.*

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Sheogorath sat in his chair, watching the Dragonborn walk through the door. "How rude! Couldn't even be bothered to thank me for opening it!"

His other uninvited guest smiled, inasmuch as something with a mouth like that *could* smile. "Does the Madgod now covet gratitude?" It was a question, though the tone barely conveyed it as such. Most beings would have been unable to discern speech at all.

Sheogorath huffed. "If you're going to be nice to mortals, they'd best kriffing appreciate it!"

The other tilted the thing that might be called a head. "I do not know this word."

"I made it up! Shouldn't you lot be able to figure that out?"

"A meaningless profanity. That you conjured it from nothing is typical for one such as you."

"Another of those smiles. Any mortal that saw it would probably lose their lunch and a few nights' sleep. "Why did you help him?"

"Had to. He passed my little game, don't you know." Sheogorath grinned and shrugged. "Terms of the Covenant and all that."

"Do not seek to dissemble. Had you wished it, his mind would be in splinters and his power broken. Yet he walks from here free of harm."
"I liked the cut of his jib, you know. A rare thing, having a jib like that! Thought the poor lad could use a break."

"You sent him from this place when you became aware of my presence. You gave him pieces, but failed to mention Alduin World-Eater; the path is broken and dark and you have given him half a candle." The other one leaned in, until they were face-to-face. "If you covet a mad mortal, find one of lesser consequence. The Dragonborn is not yours to do with as you please, Madgod."

Sheogorath's expression hardened. "Run back to your master and tell him he can come here himself if he wants to try and order me around." He smiled again, sudden and swift as sunlight through clouds. "I'll have a nice big pot of soup waiting for him!" Just like that, the smile was gone. "Bigger fish than Hermaeus Mora are swimming around Skyrim these days."

"All covet power. To have and to hold are not the same. Much that is, will not be." The Seeker did not turn, did not shift, and did not move. It was there one instant, and gone the next.

Sheogorath stood there for a moment longer, humming softly, before frowning. "Bloody Mora!" Then, he sat down in his chair before vanishing as well.

The table remained, alone, on a misty field. The fog rolled in, and all was lost from view.

Velandryn's resolve not to get caught up in the flow of the banquet lasted all of twenty-five seconds. When a server offered a silver tray with some sort of pastries arranged in a decorative pattern, he had politely refused. He had avoided the jovial Redguard with the enormous gut who had tried to rope him in to a discussion about trade—*do they take me for a merchant then?*—and ducked away from the elderly Nord woman who had proclaimed him 'a scrumptious little morsel.' However, when he saw a statue of a dragon made entirely out of ice, he had no other choice but to pause and admire the craftsmanship. The unknown sculptor had clearly never seen one of the beasts, but it was a valiant effort.

With that little pause, Velandryn was forced to acknowledge the festivities around him, and admit that they looked more than a little fun. Imperials and Bretons in intricately tailored suits and gowns spoke and laughed with Nords in costumes ranging from Imperial finery to what must have been traditional war-garb. One bearded fellow wore the pelt of a bear, his head emerging from between its jaws. *A striking look, as though he's being eaten.* He wondered if that was what the human had been going for.

Every room he passed was filled with people enjoying themselves mightily, but he couldn't fall prey to that. *I'm looking around, but there's too much at stake to get lost in here.* Still, it did look inviting, and the enormous variety of odd foods *was* tempting…

A few minutes later, chewing thoughtfully on a shrimp coated in a sort of crispy batter, he wandered the halls, content to observe the festivities. He wondered how long it would take somebody to figure out that he wasn't supposed to be here. *I open my mouth and I bet I can do it in five seconds or less.*

Fortunately, being in the Palace seemed to carry with it an assumption that you were *allowed* in the Palace. *And somehow they failed to protect their High King. Shocking!* He just hoped that they were doing a better job keeping watch over Jarl Elisif, or they'd need to go scrounging for another one before too much longer.

Chuckling, Velandryn headed down a hallway at random, hoping to see something interesting. Instead, he spotted a familiar flash of crimson, and ducked around a corner. *Legionary!* After a
moment, he forced himself to walk nonchalantly past the man, who was flirting with a Nord woman at least half a foot taller than himself. *Shouldn't be surprised to see the Legion here, hiding just makes me look suspicious.* After all, this was an Imperial city, so naturally some of their officers would be at the party.

The next room was also full of people, as was the one after that. No matter where he went, he was surrounded, and soon he found the indirect pressure of so many unfamiliar presences intolerable. He had grown up with crowds, but those were Dunmer, and he could understand where each of them fell in the intricate web that made up life in Morrowind. Each of these was an unknown, and while he would have relished the chance to unravel the connections and plots at play among these groups under different circumstances, right now he just wanted to get *out.*

A gust of wind brushed his face, and he turned to see from where it had come. Right now, an open window or a balcony sounded *wonderful.* A trickle of magicka let him follow its path, and soon he was pushing through a crowd milling about a massive hall, weaving around people where he could and moving them out of his way with gentle—and sometimes not-so-gentle—taps and nudges.

By the time he reached the glass windows that stretched from ceiling to floor, he was more than ready to be done with crowds for the evening. His head still pounded faintly, and a part of him was worried that some of the chattering voices he heard sounded an awful lot like Sheogorath. So, when he saw the doors—ever so slightly ajar—leading outside, he pushed through them and stepped out onto the balcony without conscious thought.

It was as though he stood at the edge of the world. Before him, the arch of Solitude fell away into nothingness, where inky water was broken only by the lights of the docks hundreds of feet below. Beyond that, the marshes of the Hjaal stretched eastward into apparent infinity. Masser and Secunda were both far from full, and neither offered enough light to do more than give hints of shape to the lands below. Here and there were pinpricks of light and color amongst the marshes, but they were tiny things, and those few signs of civilization only served to make the blackness the more ominous. *If I'd been able to see the path from Castle Volkihar this clearly, I might have given up in despair.*

The view to the south, however, was more comforting. These Nords might not be masters of architecture—Whiterun, Morthal, and even cosmopolitan Solitude had showed him little in the way of truly inspired design—but the lights of the Solitude docks and the fires that marked the vast Imperial camp on the gently sloping hills below the city served as a reminder that not *everything* in Skyrim was wilderness. *Though I can't help but be jealous of Lydia!* His housecarl, at least, was in a place with some real civilization, and he envied her that.

North showed him naught but sea and a few mountains of floating ice, but Velandryn didn't mind that. This view had become something of a mediation during his weeks in the Haafingar wilds, and seeing it again gave him a feeling not unlike pleasure. At that thought, he shook his head. His time alone must have done more damage that he thought. *Doubt I can blame that one on Sheogorath!*

Pushing thoughts of the Madgod from his mind, he looked out over Skyrim, trying neither to let his mind wander too fully nor delve too deeply. He needed the calm, the contemplative moment that let him pause and *breathe* for a moment. Closing his eyes, he inhaled, and the scent of smoke that marked any Nord city mingled with the cool salt breeze off the sea. There was something else there, too, a sharp scent that he couldn't exactly place, except that it felt oddly familiar…

His eyes snapped open, and he peered eastward as though his eyes could pierce the blackness. The scent wasn't a smell, it seemed, but something deeper. And he knew what was causing it…

Almost without thinking, he pulled on night-eye and enhanced his vision, though the minor spell
had absolutely no effect at these massive ranges. *Even magic has its limits.* And yet, he continued to channel it, as though he could *will* his power to expand, and show him the dragon whose presence had come to him on the nighttime wind.

Soon, however, he was forced to admit that the hint of draconic power he had felt was too remote to come again, and he might as well just enjoy the view. And so he did, letting his night-eye fall away and simply basking in the cold air. He closed his eyes—it wasn't as though they were doing him too much good here anyway—and focused on the tangible experience of the Skyrim night.

For a moment, the chill threatened to overwhelm him, but now he found himself almost welcoming that razor-edged feeling in his extremities. He inhaled and pulled his magicka out to circulate through his blood, bringing with it the warmth of a fondly-remembered room in the libraries of Great Fane.

It was, technically speaking, dangerous to use magicka to warm your body directly, but Velandryn had been doing it for—*how long, two weeks?*—out in the wilds, and by now it was second nature. Without having to worry about the cold, he found this vista magnificent, and was able to enjoy it in comfort. *When you remove the Nords and the cold, Skyrim is lovely!* He chuckled.

From behind, there came the *click* of the doors opening, and he tensed instinctively. *I'm not doing anything wrong, just standing here.* A footfall, and he could feel the presence of somebody behind him. He just stood there. *Let them come to me.*

Whoever it was didn't move, but he could *feel* them. It wasn't their magicka, exactly, but somehow their breath gave them away. *That's new.* Nothing like this had ever happened before, and he wondered if it was his newfound control of his magic or something to do with being Dragonborn that gave him this gift. *Either way, it's damn useful.* He continued looking out into the blackness. *Project confidence.*

Whoever it was that stood behind him, they seemed to have the same idea. Instead of speaking, they just stood there, and soon Velandryn was itching to turn around. Unfortunately, he'd left it too long, and to turn now would be seen as bizarre. *Wouldn't it?*

Frozen, he simply stood there, hoping against hope that the other person would do *something* to give him an out. *What in Oblivion was I thinking?* He'd been trying for some sort of power play, but this other person was not only unknown to him, but didn't even know that he was the Dragonborn. *And so I stand here like an imbecile.*

Someone leaned on the railing to his left, and he had to resist the urge to crane his neck to see who it was. From the corner of his eye he could make out flashes of green and white, but little more. *Why am I even doing this?* He'd come too far now to give up on this moronic charade, however, and so he only shifted his shoulders to open his chest and let himself breathe deeply.

Still the presence to his side said nothing. He *thought* that whoever it was had red hair, and he shifted his head ever so slightly to confirm. Lighter than his, and hiding the face of his uninvited guest. *Damn it all.* He could see that whoever this was wore some sort of fancy dress; most likely they were actually supposed to be at this party. He had an odd wish for Jordis to come busting in and disrupt everything, but sadly this little stand-off remained undisturbed.

He couldn't have said how long they stood like that, but it felt like hours. Finally, just as he was about to give it up and turn his head, the other spoke.

"I was wondering what had you so entranced." It was a melodious voice, a hint of a Skyrim accent not marring its beauty in the slightest. Educated, a bit amused, female, and clearly belonging to
someone of noble birth. *I just can't seem to stay away from them, can I?*

He almost gasped with relief at having her be the one to make the first move. Happily, he turned—

And froze, reply catching—along with his breath—in his throat. He'd expected another Nord noble, perhaps in the vein of Jordis or one of the women of Clan Battle-Born or Grey-Mane that he'd met while in Whiterun. He'd expected a handsome strength, and prepared himself for either scorn or naïve curiosity in dull human eyes. He hadn't been ready for *her*.

He'd been correct about the color of her hair, though he'd underestimated its volume. Waves of the stuff fell past her shoulders, a cascade of red that put him in mind of the dawn. It complemented her eyes—the long-suffering poet in him wondered if that shade was blue or green or something else entirely—which were watching him with something undefinable in those depths. The rest of her face was pleasant enough—he'd never learned the purpose of those *freckles* certain humans developed, but this woman had a dusting of them atop her cheeks—and her gown was an interesting blend of Imperial and Nord sensibilities—he was no connoisseur of fashion, but he doubted that Cyrodiil embraced wolf-pelts about the shoulders any more than Skyrim did flowing skirts—but nothing could rival those eyes.

It was the eyes that held him, with the look in them he couldn't identify. It wasn't rare for him to be unable to read a human's eyes, but that was because they were so often muddled and dull. *Hard to pull diamonds from the mud.* Now, though, he had the feeling that he simply couldn't understand what it was she felt. *She's lived.* She was young, he thought, but far from innocent. No innocent had eyes like that.

He realized he was staring, and blinked. Casting his mind back, he seized on her words. "Skyrim is out there, and that's quite enough to hold me." He spoke honestly, though he couldn't for the life of him say why. "Just now, though it was your eyes."

Elisif sighed as the words washed over her. *Nothing original in all the world, is there?*

The Breton, Erelus—*Count* Erelus of Gelnumbra, as he was fond of reminding anybody who would listen—was mangling Frond the Bard's *Ode to the Lady Jonilla* in a vain effort to impress her; the poor man could boast a most impressive pedigree but not, apparently, any bardic talent. The fact that 'Jonilla' and 'Elisif' both had three syllables seemed to have inspired him to try and insert her name in place of the Second Era warrior jarl, despite the differing emphasis on their names completely destroying the meter of the poem. Still, she stood there with what she hoped was a pleasant expression, listening to him butcher a piece that she had once thought was quite lovely.

Idly, she wondered if he'd known she was fond of the poem, and if so, how he'd found out. Of course, it was also possible that the would-be Consort of Solitude had simply gotten his hands on a copy of *Love Amongst the Snows* and chosen this piece from the first chapter. Most foreigners got about that far before deciding they understood how best to woo a Nord. *If I have to hear The Flower Blooming in Spring one more time, I'm going to ban that damn book from Solitude!*

"If my lady is displeased with this simpering fool's attempts at romance, might I have a word?" Jako Seen, Redguard and one-time pirate captain, had managed to sidle his way into her personal space without her noticing, and she had to resist the urge to flinch away. "My lord and master, the most noble Prince Gerion, would never dream of offering you such a…flaccid expression of affection. Were you to grace his court with your beauteous presence, he would show you the wonders of Hammerfell such that you would wish never to leave!"

*At least this time he didn't mention how adept the Prince is at 'swordplay.'* She might simply be a
barbaric Nord, but she was of the opinion that if someone was going to try and seduce her, they should probably make the trip themselves rather than send a flunky. Of course, that might interfere with his other dalliances. She knew for a fact that he was in Wayrest trying to ensnare one of the Ladies Cumberland, and she had no desire to be his back-up plan.

"I thank you for your valiant attempt at poetry, Count Erelus, but I must take my leave." Ignoring the Redguard for a moment, she cut the Breton off mid-word, and turned to Jako Seen. "Your lord and master, as ever, has my thanks for his most gracious offer. Now, however, I must attend to my other guests." She turned and strode off with Bolgeir Bearclaw as her ever-present shadow, hoping to get away before either of the two could formulate a response.

These two were obnoxious, to be sure, but foreign suitors were far from the worst she had to deal with. A war, the blasted Concordat, and now dragons! Maybe Torygg's better off in Sovengarde; he always did hate the hard part of ruling! Thoughts of her husband were less painful now; she had been quite fond of him, but they hadn't known each other long enough to truly fall in love, and maybe that was for the best.

At least some of her suitors had skipped the banquet; if she'd had to deal with every one of the hopeful nobles who'd come crawling out of the woodwork—how many Redguard princes can there be?—she would have had time to do little else.

As she maneuvered through the crowd, a familiar face swam into view, and Elisif braced herself for the inevitable confrontation. Thane Erikur wasn't enough of a fool to make a scene, but the guard had just seized a crew trying to remove crates from the East Empire Company, and she didn't doubt for a minute that the unscrupulous thane was behind the attempt. Whether he would be foolish enough to directly mention it remained to be seen, but surely he'd find some way to make her life difficult as retaliation.

"Elly!" The shout came from the side, and Elisif grunted as she was hugged—hard—by somebody familiar.

Smiling, she turned to see Jordis standing there in something that looked like—is that an armored dress?—grinning broadly. She'd rather deal with her friend than Erikur any day, so she nodded at Bolgeir, who moved between her and the thane, and led Jordis to the side of the room. "You're back! Did the Young Wolves save Skyrim from the evil of Wolfskull Cave?"

Uncharacteristically, Jordis looked around to make sure they were somewhat alone before launching into whatever story she was about to recount. "You won't believe what we found, Elly! Necromancers! Swear by Shor, a whole clan of them, trying to summon Potema! The Wolves and I—and Vel, oh, you have to meet him, he'd better be here! We took them down, the whole coven!" Her friend was flushed with excitement—or perhaps with wine—and her words were bubbling over each other in an attempt to escape.

Elisif chuckled appreciatively. "Not bad, Jordis." Her friend had once convinced her that there was a ghost living in the attic of Proudspire Manor, and for two weeks a young Elisif had refused to be alone in her friend's house. Now, however, she knew to take Jordis' gift for spinning tales as the blessing it was. "I'll hear the rest of it later, but for now I do have to greet a few more people." No doubt it would be more entertaining than whatever had actually happened down in that cave; Jordis knew how to spin a tale.

She separated herself from her protesting friend, and dove back into the crowd, bowing and smiling and greasing the wheels of diplomacy that ensured she remained pleasantly benign. I don't have the luxury of making enemies.
Elisif knew that most of the city—and probably the rest of Skyrim—considered her little more than a figurehead, but she took her duties seriously. She ruled and served the people of Haafingar, and needed to be able to advocate on their behalf to Imperial, noble, and foreigner alike. And that meant not offending anybody, and smiling at every suitor.

*Speaking of that particular plague...* she spotted Lord Perrik and Lady Imre of Bruma making their way in her direction. Both sought her hand, and while neither was repulsive, she felt nothing for either one. *Is it too much to ask to not have to worry about marriage on top of everything else?* Not for the first time she wished that the rest of the Empire could adopt Skyrim's understanding that she didn't need a spouse right now.

Sighing, she looked around for someone or something to give her an out, when she saw something odd. A figure in outrageous finery cutting through the crowd, a lanky figure with unmistakable skin…

*A Dunmer?* The ill-fated Dark Elves were rare in Solitude, and almost all of those within the city wore an Imperial uniform. She'd greeted the Legion contingent earlier this evening, and none of them had been this man. Even if there had been one of sufficient stature in the city, she didn't dare offend the Thalmor by inviting the elves they hated above all others. So, this one was here…*why exactly?*

Elisif had always been fascinated by the Dunmer, though she'd never admit that to anyone. The long history between their two peoples meant that stories of the savage grey-skinned demons from the east were the fare of many a song or epic poem, and Elisif had grown up listening to the students and masters of the Bard's College. Like many of her friends, she'd thumbed through cheaply-printed romances, and many of those prominently featured Dunmer. Whether it be the tortured and brooding mercenary who found love in the arms of a noble Nord maiden or the cruel necromancer who captured a farmgirl only to fall for her innocent kindness, Elisif had read every sort.

Now, she knew those stories for the drivel that they were, but even when she'd studied history and philosophy, something about their story stuck with her. Isolationist and fiercely proud, they had occupied a place in her heart, and a part of her had always found their plight, well, *moving*. That they were wicked was beyond doubt—worship of Daedra was wrong, after all—but surely they did not all need to suffer?

Unfortunately, the elf was gone before she could do any more than wonder at his presence, and now the amorous—or just ambitious?—Imperials were upon her. It took her a good five minutes to extricate herself from them, and then she saw First Emissary Elenwen bearing down on her, and braced for the worst.

Fortunately, the Thalmor wanted only to congratulate Elisif on the banquet, though she managed to make every compliment so condescending that a straight insult might have been kinder. Finally, after one more cutting remark—"I've never been so glad to be proven wrong! I thought Nords were incapable of properly utilizing interior space!"—the High Elf ambassador floated away, and Elisif was free again.

After that, she saw several more people she needed to acknowledge, which she did with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Vittoria Vici might not be the kindest person she'd ever met and she knew the other woman considered her hopelessly naïve, but the East Empire Company brought in more wealth than any other three trading interests combined, and so they embraced and made small talk over glasses of a potent Gold Coast vintage.

Once she had met everyone in view who required her attention, she started heading for the eastern
gallery, where she would have to do it all over again. *I remember when these parties were a chance to have some fun.* Now, though, they meant work. But if that was what it meant to be the jarl, then that was what she would do. *I won't let you down, Torygg.*

As she passed one of the balconies overlooking the eastern drop-off, she noticed that someone was standing out there, and she paused. *Why would anyone…*

The only reason people came to these events was to see and be seen; going out alone completely defeated the purpose. *What's he up to?* Just then, however, she was jovially accosted by old Thane Hennir, who insisted on telling her about the new book his chef had purchased, and how she simply *had* to try the Gourmet's new recipes.

Though the thane tended to prattle on, she couldn't get annoyed at him. He'd been a fine friend of her parents, Arkay bless their souls, and had never once tried to tell how she should be running Solitude. True friends were rare these days, and Hennir, for all that the only weapon he'd held in years was a dagger for slicing his meat, was a good and loyal man. *Even if he needs to watch his waistline.* Telling him that would only wound his pride, though, so she simply smiled and laughed where appropriate, until he patted her arm and told her to go have fun. *If only.* She watched him go, and then scanned the room to see whom she should engage next. However, her eyes drifted back to the eastern windows, where that lone figure still stood. *What in Oblivion is he doing?*

Before she knew it, she realized she was standing before the door to the balcony, just watching. It was the Dark Elf from before, she realized, though his earlier unease had apparently passed. Where before he had been moving with something that almost resembled furtiveness, now he stood tall, hands clasped behind his back, looking out to the east. *What does he see?*

She glanced over at Bolgeir, who looked as impassive as ever. "I'm going to go out there, Bolgeir. Stay here."

The big man was unimpressed. "Elves are not to be trusted, my jarl." Bolgeir was a capable bodyguard, but very much a Nord.

"It wasn't an elf who killed my husband." At that, her housecarl simply bowed his head, and she opened the door. She'd come to the decision not too long ago that she wouldn't let *anyone* else tell her how to live her life, and that included her housecarl. She'd take advice, but at the end of the day she would make up her own mind. *And so I have.*

It was chilly, even for her, out on the balcony. Skyrim's nights were nothing to be scorned, and she wondered for an instant how the elf mush feel. If he was cold, though, he gave no sign.

She studied him, not bothering to hide her scrutiny. *Not like he has eyes on the back of his head.*

Her initial certainty that he wasn't just another guest was carried through by the strangeness of his clothing. He was wearing some sort of finery at least, though it looked as though it had fallen in
from some mad noble's wardrobe. There were Nord-style quilted wool sleeves on a garish silk doublet, and the pants seemed an amalgam of about three different Imperial and Breton tailoring styles. And the hat... she thought it must be from the Somerset Isles, but surely nobody had worn it with feathers since the Second Era? And yet, though she couldn't say how, it all worked. Change one little thing and it would be a disaster, but as it stood he almost looked... dashing.

She stepped forward and leaned on the railing, but the elf did nothing. She glanced over, but he was staring intently out onto the darkness. Curious, she peered out as well, but couldn't see anything but the darkness. The view of the docks to the south, but nothing to warrant such intense scrutiny where he was looking. Especially when someone else is standing right here!

Finally, she could take it no longer. "I was wondering what had you so entranced." She tried her hardest to make sure she didn't sound annoyed, but the elf gave a tiny jerk as she spoke, suggesting that he had been focusing deeply on something.

He turned to look at her, and she was pinned by his gaze. Those eyes! Red and angry, to be sure, but deep. This wasn't some guard or adventurer who'd snuck his way in, unless she missed her guess. In fact, he had a bearing that almost seemed noble. His face was perfectly still, and she recalled the stories that Dunmer from Morrowind did not use facial expressions as did the other races, instead letting their eyes convey what they felt.

If this one was displaying some expression with his red eyes, it was lost on her. She found herself just looking deeper, admiring the depth of the color and the subtle shifts within. For the first time in—weeks, months?—she wasn't worried about politics or anything of great import from a new acquaintance. I like those eyes.

"Skyrim is out there, and that's quite enough to hold me." It took her a moment to realize that he'd spoken, and another to hear beyond his voice and process what he was saying. Each word was delivered with precision, in tones that seemed to resonate in her bones. It reminded her of something, but she couldn't place it. His red eyes were brighter now, and his gaze never left her face. "Just now, though, it was your eyes."

Elisif felt the blood rush to her face. She'd been wined and dined by a wide assortment of hopeful fools, and over the course of the last year she had heard more tired lines about her beauty than any woman should have to bear, but somehow this was different. Perhaps it was his voice, which lacked any hint of jest or mockery, or maybe it was the steady gaze of his eyes, but she believed him. Impossibly, she had the feeling that he'd just told her the truth.

She didn't smile. Faced with his grave face, she didn't feel it was proper. I am going to have some fun, though. "Oh? I do hope you found your way out."

He didn't smile either. Of course. To her shock, however, he gave a larger than normal puff of air from his nose in what have been some sort of laugh. "I'm all tangled up, I fear." He arched an eyebrow. "Not very kind, though, saying nothing's out there. This is your land, after all."

She chuckled. "I said I was wondering what had you so entranced. Perhaps I simply thought that Skyrim's charms would be lost on an elf."

The Dunmer did not smile, but something changed in his eyes. "A month ago I would have agreed with you. Now? Now, I am unsure." One hand came out from behind his back, and he ran fingers through that dark hair. The color of wine. Or blood. "And you? What brings such eminence out to my lonely vigil?"

"Curiosity." She smiled at him. "I hope the party didn't bore you so much you fled out here."
"Not in the slightest." He seemed to finally relax, leaning against one wall and closing his eyes. "Sometimes, though, some quiet is nice. Even if it does come with the cold." He held out a hand, and something seemed to flow along it, before it burst into flames.

Elisif stumbled back, and he laughed. "I will never not find that amusing."

She glared at him, though her heart wasn't in it. "Using magic to scare people?"

"Nords." He was still chuckling. "You act like I'm raising the dead every time I so much as warm myself." A flick of his wrist, and the fire was gone.

She tried to get a better look at the hand without being too obvious. "So what brings an elf with such a…unique…sense of humor to the Hearthfire Celebration?"

"Would you believe that I was invited?"

She wished she could read his face; this could easily be a joke. "Not by the jarl, I don't think."

Clearly, he had no idea who she was.

He shrugged. "I wouldn't want to go dropping names, or someone might get in trouble." Was that a glimmer of laughter in his eyes?

She had to laugh, at least. "Well, you don't seem to be causing too much of a ruckus, and I suppose there's enough food for one more." A part of her cautioned that she should be wary of this strange Dunmer, but she was actually having fun, and she had missed that. "It can be our little secret."

He smiled at that, and she wanted to believe it was real. "You know what they say about secrets."

He leaned forward, and she did the same. "Three can keep one, if two are dead." That last was said in an ominous whisper, and she jerked back, alarmed.

Then, she saw the light in his eyes. "I do hope you're having your fun."

He spread his arms. "Whatever are you talking about? Now I have to throw myself from this castle, to keep the secret." He looked over the railing. "Not that I relish the fall."

She snorted. "I think you've misunderstood the spirit of that saying."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Truly?"

After that, the talk lapsed to things of little consequence. He'd spent time in Cyrodiil, and happily answered her questions about the province. "I never got far enough south to see the city, though I wish I had."

She gave him a disbelieving look. "You're traveling through the Imperial Province, and don't bother to go to the greatest city in the world?"

His dry chuckle was like the earth shifting beneath her feet. "I regret it still, but I didn't..." he trailed off, then cocked his head before continuing. "I came to Skyrim somewhat against my will. Had I known I'd be dragged into the province fully, I'd have made sure to see the city well beforehand." Another smile. "Someday I'll go back, see if it lives up to the stories." He fell silent then, and looked out over the sea.

Elisif studied him again, wondering what he was thinking. It was beyond nice simply to talk with someone who wasn't a friend from before. Jordis, Falk, Sybille, and all the rest meant well, but they knew her history and walked on eggshells around her. None of them, for instance, would have
made that joke about leaping from the ledge given her history. And true, it had stung a bit, thinking of death, but she was glad he'd done it. I can't pretend it didn't happen.

Something she'd been meaning to ask came to mind then. "So, what's your name?"

He turned, eyes still bright. "Isn't it considered courteous to offer your own name before asking for another's?"

She smiled sweetly. "In Solitude, a lady never offers her name first." That was an utter lie, but she didn't want to reveal that she was the jarl just yet.

Something in his eyes made her think he was on to her. "Well, then, as we are in Solitude..." He paused, though whether for effect or some other reason she could not say. "My name is Velandryn Savani."

Instantly, she understood everything. She might not be General Tullius, but Legate Rikke had sent her copies of the reports she'd compiled. Nords understood the importance of the Dragonborn, after all. And here he stands.

She thought hard about what her next words would be. "So..."

"You can just say it, you know. He knows. As time went on, his name would be as good as his title; he had to recognize that he couldn't be anonymous for much longer.

"You're the Dragonborn?"

She'd expected either protestation or preening, but instead he seemed amused. "That depends. Is it treason to lie to a jarl?"

Oh. She wondered when he'd figured it out. Still, she forced a smile. "Only a very little bit."

"Then I am only a very little bit not the Dragonborn." He smiled back, though she was sure that it was as fake as hers. "Truthfully, I was enjoying being just another Dunmer. Of late, it's a rare luxury."

She understood that, better than he might know. "Well, then, would you like to enjoy this moment, just the two of us, no Dragonborn or jarl needed?"

"You, know, I very much think I would." He thrust his hands into pockets in his cape, and looked out over the ledge. "Tell me, is it always this blasted cold?"

"We're at a gathering meant to celebrate the end of the warm season. It only gets worse from here."

He huffed, breath misting in the air. "Salat venkh. So it goes."

She knew a little Aldmeris, but didn't recognize that. "Was that Dunmeris?"

"Daedric. No better language for cursing."

"Oh." She shouldn't have been surprised, she guessed. "What do your gods say, about you being Dragonborn?"

"I thought we agreed not to talk about that." Still, he seemed amused and willing to answer. "There's no sacrifice, if that's what you're asking. The Triune aren't in the habit of policing in our actions; they show us the way and it's up to us to walk it." A shrug. "I hold to the Virtues, keep vigil at dawn when I can, and so far no Dremora have shown up to kill me." He paused. "Well,
only one, and that was mostly unrelated."

"Mostly?" She wanted to hear that story, but he didn't take the bait.

"My turn." His humor faded. "What do your Divines say about my being Dragonborn?"

"It's not the gods you need to worry about. Plenty of Nords are beyond unhappy that a Dark Elf is Dragonborn."

He snorted. "Let them. I had no choice in the matter, why should they?"

It had almost sounded as if… "Do you wish you weren't? Dragonborn, I mean?"

"Does it matter?" Velandryn sounded almost angry. "I am, and that is the truth. No regret or desire will make it anything other than so."

Elisif almost apologized, but thought better of it. She recognized that anger. It wasn't directed at her, not really. It was the same she felt when people congratulated her on doing such a good job ruling Solitude. It might be kindly meant, but she'd never asked for the honor. "It's a heavy burden."

He understood, she saw. "And yet it's ours. If not us, then someone else, after all."

*Well, that nonsense killed the moment.* "Was that supposed to be reassuring?"

He looked vaguely uncomfortable; she'd known a few Dunmer before, and once you got used to the eyes they weren't that difficult to figure out. "Perhaps it's different for you, but knowing that it's me who has the burden is comforting. Solitude needs a jarl, as I believe a Dragonborn is necessary at this moment. I would rather shoulder that responsibility myself than trust it to be faithfully executed by another."

He wasn't wrong, she admitted. It had been terrible, what had happened, but the people of Solitude needed her. "Better us than some other fool?"

He nodded, stone-faced. "No better fools than we, *cor da ke*?"

She had to chuckle at that. "Still, though, it's a great honor, being Dragonborn. Do you feel any of that, or just the burden?" For her part, the honor and the duty were one and the same.

No response for a moment, then a long sigh. "It's there, but buried." His voice was low, contemplative and slow. "It's not me they're honoring, after all. There had to be a Dragonborn, you know."

That was the second time he'd said that. "What do you mean, had to? We were fortunate enough to have you in Whiterun—"

He was already shaking his head. "I've been…told…that there *needed* to be a Dragonborn, and I'm inclined to believe it. I was…convenient, nothing more. A piece in a larger game." He was looking away again, eyes cast down and out into the blackness.

*Is he moping?* "You don't get it, do you?" He turned his head, eyes narrowed. "It didn't happen by accident! Kyne *chose* you to be Dragonborn!"

"Kyne? The Wind Goddess?" He spoke as though he were reciting something off of a page.

"She taught Nords to use the Thu'um, back during the Dragon Wars! She gave us the weapons to
defeat the dragons the first time, of course she'd do it now!" Did he really not know this? "Haven't they told you anything about our history?"

"They went light on the religion. Probably worried I'd take offense." Velandryn smiled. "Truthfully, I think everyone wanted to make the Greybeards deal with educating the heathen mer." His face returned to stern rest. "You think that I was chosen? I would like to believe that's true."

"It surely is. Kyne wouldn't let just anyone take up this role!" Politics of race and culture aside, the Dragonborn was meant to defeat the dragons, as the ancient stories told. Whoever held that duty had to be worthy. Anything less was unthinkable.

Velandryn sighed again. "I hope you're right." Blinking, he seemed to come to a decision. "We've done a miserable job of not being Dragonborn and jarl, hmm?"

Elisif found herself laughing. "It's hard to stop, isn't it?"

He gave her another of those piercing looks. "It's been, what, a year, since you took the throne? How long until you feel like a mer—like a human again, instead of the warm body that's been perched up there?"

"I'll let you know once I do." It was almost shocking to talk with somebody who understood her position. He would, wouldn't he? He had to feel much the same.

"We have to make it ours." He spoke softly, eyes dark, staring out into the dark once more. "Either we are used by our positions, or we choose to control them."

She moved to stand beside him again, gazing out as well. The moons were little more than slivers, but their reflections on the water still held the same beauty as ever. "It's not that easy." She spoke softly, full of memory. "Maybe you can take control, but—"

At that moment, with a distant crackle, the skies above them opened up, and an aurora burst into being, ribbons of light snapping back and forth. The breath fled her lungs as she gaped upwards, marveling at its suddenness. It was far from rare to see them in Solitude, but usually they were a little more...gradual.

Glancing over, she saw Velandryn gazing upwards as well, eyes glowing from what almost looked like the reflection of the lights above. "We don't see them in Morrowind. Not often, at least. It's a shame." He fell silent then, and they watched the lights dance.

She'd seen the aurora more times than she could possibly hope to count, but it was still marvelous. This time, though, she was as focused on the elf beside her as the lights above. Dragonborn. It sounded like something out of a ballad, but he stood before her, every inch the real thing. He's afraid. It was obvious, and why wouldn't he be? He had the weight of the world on his shoulders, and he knew it.

And yet, he was here. Why she couldn't say, but she refused to believe that chance alone had brought him here. Was this your doing, Kyne Warrior-Wife? Did you send him to guide my way? She couldn't even remember the last time she'd felt like this, and she didn't want it to end.

In what seemed only a few minutes the lights began to fade, and she heard Velandryn take a deep breath from beside her. "It's a strange place, Skyrim, but it has its moments."

She turned to make a joke, but stopped when she saw his face. He was still looking upward, eyes alight with the last remnant of the aurora, mouth open ever so slightly. The play of light from the
windows and the sky cast him in odd shadows, and she had no trouble believing him Dragonborn. Her jests died on her lips, and she just nodded mutely, knowing that he wouldn't see.

A moment later, something else occurred to her. "When did you figure out who I was?"

He held up a single finger. "You have a housecarl waiting indoors, speak with obvious education and wit, and are dressed to make an impression. Clearly, you are noble, and of a kind that requires protection. From what I've seen, relatively few of you have housecarls, so you're someone who matters." A second finger. "You spoke with the authority of a host, meaning that you likely had a hand in the organization of this event. 'Not by the jarl', you said, when I mentioned I may have been invited. Nothing definite, but when added to," he held up a third finger "eyes that speak of an experience I cannot comprehend, I had a fairly good guess as to who you were." He gave a tiny shrug. "The way I asked the question, it left me room for error. I would say I suspected—strongly—that you were Jarl Elisif, but I wasn't certain." He smiled. "Chance is not without a sense of humor, however, and so here we are."

She thought about it for a moment, and then nodded. "Nicely done. But, my eyes? I know you Dunmer put a lot of power in eyes, but that's what gave me away?"

He looked at her for another long moment, and then nodded. "Yes. We don't…read eyes, exactly, but it's where our emotion sits. Ever since…well, since we became Dunmer, our eyes came alive, and everything we needed to see was in them. Humans are harder, but I've spent enough time among you to know the big ones. Anger, joy, sadness. It's like glimpsing a gem in murky water, but it can be done." He bowed his head, as if in thought. "You…there's more in there than I can tackle. I've met a few Nord nobles, and they don't seem the type to stymie me. You're different." He held out a hand in a vague sort of wave. "I took a guess, and here we are."

_and you did it in the heartbeat between my asking if you were Dragonborn and your response. "A good guess, it seems."

He made no response at that, save for a hint of something in his eyes. _I must learn to understand those eyes._

Velandryn hadn't felt like this in…well, perhaps forever.

Before becoming Dragonborn, it had been easy to connect with others. Dunmer made sense, and he had friends aplenty back in Morrowind. Even after leaving, he'd been able to find points of commonality with the outlanders; for a day or the span of a journey, there was enough in common to let him—and them—mostly understand where the other stood.

Since Mirmulnir, however, it had been different. Not because of the knowledge _Dov_ provided, but simply the fact that it existed at all. He was, so far as he was aware, unique among living mortals, and that wasn't an easy thing. He felt unprepared and thrust into a world beyond his abilities, so it was wonderful to speak with Elisif and see that she too was doing her best to conquer her new circumstances.

She was mocking the suitors who were in the city for the sole purpose of marrying her, and the increasingly desperate tactics they were willing to try. "And then Lord Immersol and Count Feryad ran into each other on the balcony! The Palace Guard had to drag them off of each other before they could be kicked out of the city."

Velandryn chuckled; although he'd never met either man, certain things transcended cultures, and the idiocy of courtship was one such. "Forgive me asking, but why is it so many from so far away
pursue you? You are beautiful, charming, and clearly of keen wit to be sure, but you also hold a somewhat precarious position. Would not anyone who married you be dragged into this rebellion?"

Red had risen in her cheeks, though what purpose it served Velandryn could not say. "These are mostly second children or terribly minor lords. They'd be thanes at best in Skyrim, and Solitude is the richest city in the province. Even if they have to deal with a war, the prize is worth it."

He noticed she hadn't mentioned herself there. "Is that how you feel? That you are a prize to be won?"

One of her fur-covered shoulders rose in a tiny shrug, and she wouldn't meet his eyes. "Hard not to, isn't it? Or are people lining up to speak with Velandryn Savani, rather than the Dragonborn."

"I see your point." He leaned against the rail again, thinking. "How then do we keep ourselves from falling into the…scale of our titles?"

When he looked over at her, she was staring into his eyes. For a long moment, neither spoke. Finally, she broke the silence. "What, was that all you were going to say? Don't you have an answer?"

He was startled into laughter. "I'm a priest, not a litigator! I'm allowed to ask questions to which I don't know the answer!"

That got a puzzled look from her. "You're a priest? Of…Daedra?"

He let that question sit for a moment while he thought. "Do you want to discuss the intricacies of the Triune Temple, or shall we sit here and mope about how important we are?"

Elisif's laughter was a sound Velandryn had decided he quite liked. "Well, when you put it that way, we sound a little ungrateful, don't we?"

He shrugged. "Gratitude means wanting it in the first place. We're making do, and I'd say we're not doing too poor a job of it."

Elisif, however, didn't look entirely mollified. "Maybe you aren't, but it can be hard to make any progress here. General Tullius on one side, the nobles on the other, and that damn Ulfri Stormcloak lurking in the east. They all think I'm either an obstacle or a useless child, and I'm sick of it!" She fell silent, clearly thinking over what she'd just said. "I mean, I know I'm young, but—"

Velandryn cut her off without thinking, but he couldn't keep quiet any longer. "Of course you are; you're human! If you want power, you have to take it!" he couldn't have said if that was Dov talking or the Dunmer. Maybe a bit of both.

She blinked at him. "Take it? Just like that? Look, you might be a hero out of legend, but I'm just the widow of a weak High King." She paused to swallow, her expression inscrutable. "Let's not pretend I actually hold much in the way of real power. I do what I can for my people, but the Empire's in charge here and everyone knows it." She gave him a look that he figured was probably some sort of annoyance. "How would I go about taking power, hmm?"

He wondered if the question was supposed to be rhetorical. "Start by eliminating a low-level nuisance. One of the nobles you mentioned. Is there someone who is unpopular both among the Nord nobility and the Empire?"

"Wait, are you…serious?" He could make out disgust on Elisif's face, but he almost thought she
looked interested as well. "Didn't you say you were a priest?"

"A priest of the Triune, not your Divines. Anyone who studies Mephala or Boethiah for any length of time learns a little bit about political subterfuge."

The jarl sighed, and Velandryn was struck by how the bodice of her dress rose and fell as she did so. "Okay, so, assuming we were to go through with this mad plan of yours, you need an unpopular noble? Erikur would fit the bill. Man's a criminal and a lowlife. So I kill him?"

"No! We can't have him die yet! You need to set the pieces up first." He was enjoying this mental exercise, though he knew little about Solitude politics. "A criminal is easy. Expose something he's done that's directly harmed the Legion, and another that damages you. If you can find something true go with that, but otherwise just falsify something." He shrugged. "Hire some Orcs, set them up to take the fall, plant a trail of evidence. You don't have to make it stick, but make sure that everyone hears about it. General Tullius can't act, since the Legion wouldn't dare remove a Nord noble." He grinned. "Then, poor Erikur dies. Poison's good, and botched summonings are always popular, but that might not work so well here. It needs to be unpleasant, but no way to trace it to you."

He could see in her eyes that she understood. "So, everyone knows someone killed Erikur, and the Legion knows it wasn't them…"

"Exactly! Suddenly, you and the other major power in Solitude are a little bit more equal. Tullius and his underlings can't prove anything, and they don't really want to, since nobody's mourning poor dead Erikur."

Elisif cut in then, voice dry. "And the fact that I murdered one of my subjects?"

"Irrelevant, and that's the beautiful part! You're viewed as harmless by most, and only the Legion higher-ups will even suspect you! I'd bet sovereigns against septims that most of the nobles and commoners—and every enlisted man in Imperial red—winds up thinking it was a left-hand tactic by the Empire to send a message."

"So, General Tullius thinks I killed Erikur, and everyone else just magically falls in line?"

"I mean, it's not quite that simple, but in essence, yes. Once the Legion leadership recognizes you as a legitimate power player, the effect will bleed over into the nobility. If General Tullius is treating you as an equal, is Lord Proud-Spire really going to talk down to you when he meets you at," he waved his hand in an exaggerated manner—"the anniversary of Norald Hairy-Bottom vanquishing the baby Falmer?"

He was certain that she was concealing a smile now. "Well, if Aldur"—that must be Jordis' father—"weren't already one of my staunchest supporters, you'd have quite the point. As it is though, most Nords won't fall into line behind a suspected murderer."

"And yet, Ulfric Stormcloak has quite the following." The moment the words left his mouth, he wondered if he'd gone too far.

Elisif's mouth was twisted in something that was not a smile. "Oh, there's no 'suspected' there. That monster marched into Solitude and murdered my husband in full view of the entire court. That seems Nords will follow a murderer just fine, so long as he says the right damn words!" That last was half a sob, half a shout.

Velandryn was struck by an uncomfortable urge; he wanted to comfort her. He wanted to comfort a
Nord jarl. What in Oblivion is the world coming to? "You were there? I'm sorry."

She was laughing now, though there was more than a little crying in there as well. "He never stood a chance! He was younger than me, did they tell you that? A whole year! Just a child!"

"I know little about High King Torygg, I admit." In truth, he was more a point of conflict than a person to Velandryn. "I am sorry for your loss, however."

"Thank you." That response seemed more diplomatic then genuine, but her façade cracked just after. "He wasn't ready for any of this; he was just born to the wrong family."

"Wrong family? Most would say being the High King is a fairly good inheritance."

He'd said it more because it would help with the flow of conversation than because he truly believed, but Elisif was more than happy to keep up her end of the discussion. "He was a child who thought life was a story! Do you know how many times he told me he wished that he'd been alive during the Great War? He hated elves—" she looked, at, him a little abashed, and he motioned her to continue. "He hated the Thalmor and wanted to make Skyrim and the Empire free! He would have joined Ulfric, but instead he died! Why? So that…that monster could feed his own lust for power!"

Well, that's new. He'd heard speculation aplenty about the late ruler, but not that Torygg would have joined Ulfric. "You know this for a fact. The High King would have supported the Stormcloak cause?"

"He was young, and looked up to Ulfric. Thought he was a hero of the Nords. If he'd asked my husband to join him instead, he might well have done it. But no, Ulfric only wants one thing, and that's for Ulfric Stormcloak to be High King!"

Something in her tone struck him as odd, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. "You think Ulfric doesn't care about the Concordat as he claims?"

She smiled at him. Velandryn had nothing against Lydia and her towering ilk, but he did like spending time with people who were a little closer to his own height, and Elisif had maybe an inch on him, if that. "What do you know about Talos?"

He'd play along if she wanted to lecture him, but he was going to give the Dunmer view of things too. Ask me about gods, will you? "Hero-god of the Empire. Supposedly the title given to Tiber Septim when he ascended to godhood. Three primary cults of worship in the Nibenay Valley, two in the Imperial Heartland and Colovian Highlands."

Elisif blinked. "I thought elves didn't care about Talos. And you won't make many friends in Skyrim saying he 'supposedly' ascended. Weren't your Tribunal once mortals as well?"

He snorted. "Not the best argument you could make. They …stole their divinity, you might say, and I very much doubt Tiber Septim had access to their methods." There was the possibility that he'd found another path of achieving godhood, but the idea of a mere human doing so was absurd. Few enough mortals achieve divinity; and I've never heard of a human doing it. More reasonable is that the most successful human in history gets a cult based around him. "I don't think he's a god, but I spent enough time in Cyrodiil to learn the basics. What were you going to say about him?"

"Do you know anything about his status in Skyrim?"

Truth be told, Velandryn didn't. "No." Only after a moment did he realize how odd that was. "Wait, he's not even in your pantheon, is he?" He didn't know that much about the human religions, but
Talos was Imperial, not Nord. *Why didn't I see it before?* "Why in Oblivion is Ulfric Stormcloak—"

"Because people hate the Concordat! It's humiliating, being told you can't worship as you please."

"So Nords only care about Talos because they were told they *couldn't* worship him?"

Elisif made a small motion with her hand. "It's not that simple, but the Concordat made Talos-worship the focal point of the conflict between the traditionalists and the Empire. Most of the eastern holds are more traditional anyway, so Talos the Emperor never really caught on. To them, Talos is a grim warrior who killed a lot of elves." She smiled apologetically. "I think it was the only way the Imperial Cult could make much headway there. The way I hear it, nobody cared that much about Talos—"

"Until the moment the Dominion said otherwise," Velandryn finished her thought as his mind raced. "So Ulfric makes it an issue, and suddenly he's the champion of humanity." He considered that for instant. "So, it's all an act?"

Elisif was shaking her head before he'd finished his thought. "No, people do love Talos over there, but from what I've heard, they only got so loud about it once Ulfric did."

It made sense, he had to admit. Still... "So what do you think of the Concordat?"

Instantly, her face assumed a mask of expressionless serenity. "As jarl of Solitude—"

He made a chopping motion with his hand and leaned in. "Don't insult me! I know you have an opinion, and you can be pretty damn sure I'm not working for those lunatics in Alinor." He forced himself to smile through his annoyance. *Treat me as if I'm just some nosy nobody, will you?*

She might be human, but her glare managed to convey all the fury of any Dunmer. "Look, I don't care if you are Dragonborn, that's *not* something you just ask about! Religion's personal, and Talos-worship is a crime!"

*That* took him aback, until he realized his error. *Of course.* In the Temple, matters of worship were discussed openly. Anything that needed to be hidden was the responsibility of the one hiding it, and no inquiry was considered indecorous. *Not so with Nords.* Looking at her, especially her, who had lost her husband to this question, he understood why she'd be

He stretched out a hand, palm upturned in Dunmer a gesture of contrition. *Alai tuhae nauan, fer'yen belle.* "I spoke without thought, and harm was done." She had said she knew Aldmeris, and no language was better for formal apology.

Instead of making the counter-gesture, she put her hand into his, fingers pressing slightly in his palm. *Sel nauanne dia tebaare all siin.* "There is no wound when words are softly meant."

He smiled. He might not be a true scholar of Aldmeris, but even he recognized a bit of Aldoriah's *Courtships* when he heard it. "Untrue, I think, but I'm glad you think so."

She was smiling too, though there was something odd deep in her eyes. "I won't pretend to understand you, Velandryn Savani, but I think we work better as friends than enemies."

*This* was Elisif, he suddenly realized. A peacemaker and a diplomat, something he'd never been but always admired. The one who made rough-hewn riverboat captains genuflect in respect and had a city eager to see her happy. She was up against forces that could destroy her utterly, and yet she was holding her own. *Who am I, next to her?* A friend, she'd said, and somehow that seemed an
even finer prospect than being Dragonborn.

He opened his mouth to respond, but movement over her shoulder caught his eye. When he saw who it was, he released her hand and stepped back involuntarily, extending his fingers should he need to summon fire or his blade.

That shade of red, worn by the Empire. That face, burned into his memory with dragon's fire. Different armor this time, but there was no mistaking who was coming onto the balcony. Behind him, a woman in Legion armor was confronting the huge Nord who had to be Elisif's housecarl, but Velandryn couldn't pull his eyes away from the supreme commander of the Imperial Legion in Skyrim.

This should be fun.

When the Dragonborn had asked about her own relationship to Talos, Elisif hadn't responded well, she knew. It wasn't his fault, even. He'd simply asked the same question as so many others, each of them thinking they were being ever so clever. Now, all it did was infuriate her. So, when he'd bullied through her attempt to brush him off, she'd let him have her ire.

His response, however, had taken her aback. Instead of matching temper with temper, he'd visibly considered what he'd said then apologized. In Aldmeris no less! Not many in Skyrim spoke the ancient tongue, and she was glad that her parents had insisted she have a classical education. She wasn't sure why he put his hand out; perhaps he intended her to take it?

She did so, putting her hand in his in the Imperial style—the thought of him kissing it like some southern lord amused her—and responding with a phrase she knew she could say without tripping over pronunciation. Fortunately, Aldmeris was a wonderful language for flowery apologies, and when she saw the recognition in his eyes, she knew that he was pleased.

His smile, though possibly faked for her benefit, still warmed her, and she spoke truly when she said they should be friends. The political sense of allying herself with the Dragonborn aside, she'd never met anyone quite like Velandryn Savani, ruthless and clever and strangely gentle all at once. She wasn't certain if he was serious with some of his more…outlandish suggestions, but he had certainly gotten her thinking, and there were few enough who managed to do that these days.

She found herself suddenly wishing that he didn't have to leave, despite how childish that thought was. It would have been nice, though, having someone like him at court. A friend.

Then, she realized that he was looking behind her, and turned as well. What she saw made her sigh. "General Tullius. I hope the evening finds you well."

The Imperial commander, as ever, didn't bother with much in the way of courtesy. "Well enough, though I wasn't expecting to see you again." That last was directed at Velandryn, who was either worried or angry.

Or both.

So, the Dragonborn knew the General. It didn't really surprise her. "The Dragonborn and I—"

"Dragonborn? This elf's Dragonborn?" General Tullius jabbed a finger in Velandryn's direction. "What lies have you been telling her, Savani?"

Velandryn raised an eyebrow. "You remember my name? Impressive. And the fact that you recall my face; I admit I wasn't expecting that."

Now, Elisif was beyond confused. "Where did you two meet before?"
It was the general who answered. "Helgen." He glared at Velandryn. "Dragonborn, eh? Head on the block and suddenly a dragon appears, is that the way of it? Got a lot of good people dead because of that beast."

Velandryn's eyes were dark with what she presumed was anger, and he nearly spat out his response. "Only an Imperial could order me executed without trial or appeal, and then have the temerity to accuse me of...what, summoning a dragon?" He chuckled. "Accuse me of that when I manage to escape with my life."

Tullius shrugged. "I made a call, and I don't regret it. Last I saw, you were helping Ulfric Stormcloak escape. You know what happens to people who do that around here?"

Elisif felt her heart drop into her stomach. No. The Dragonborn couldn't be working with the Stormcloaks. Velandryn wouldn't do that! Or would he? It wasn't as if she actually knew anything about him. Maybe she was just a foolish girl, taken in by the lies of a smooth-talking Stormcloak agent. Is he even Dragonborn?

Velandryn's lips curled up in a thin smile. "Yes, I saw your handiwork at the gates. But tell me, General, in which direction should I have run? Towards your soldiers, who had just ordered my death? I made a call, as you said, and as I am here talking to you, I don't regret it. Knowing then what I do now I might have been tempted to plant a dagger in Ulfric Stormcloak's gut, but somehow I doubt his followers would have appreciated that."

Elisif decided she'd had enough. "Both of you, explain this!" She locked eyes with Velandryn. "Why were you with the Stormcloaks?" She had heard what had happened at Helgen, and there was no reason for him to be there, unless...No! She didn't want to believe he was one of them.

Instead of answering her, though, Velandryn just started laughing. "And there we have it! Tullius, take notes! Before executing a Dunmer for being a Nord zealot, maybe you should try asking them why they're there!" His breath stood out against the cold as he exhaled. "To answer your question, I was picked up by the Empire crossing the border from Cyrodiil. They'd laid a trap for the Stormcloaks, and seemed to think I was one of them." He glared at the general, and Elisif realized that it had to be for her benefit—or to make a point to General Tullius. "For 'The most disciplined and effective military force in history,' this last sounded as though he was quoting something and was simply dripping with sarcasm, "they never bothered to ask if I was a Stormcloak or not."

General Tullius just rubbed his chin. "They might have asked, but bringing you to Helgen was the correct course of action. You could well have been lying, and if they'd let you go, there's no telling what could have happened."

The Imperial was pacing now, gesturing as he spoke. "My orders were to operate under parameters of absolute secrecy. Those hills were—probably still are—full of Stormcloak camps, and if they got even a whiff of what we were about, there went our best chance to get our hands on Ulfric. Anybody, regardless of race, who wasn't part of the operation had to be seized. There was that horsethief, too, I think. You just had bad luck."


For the first time, the general looked uncomfortable. "That was...not my decision. The local garrison commander made the decision to execute all non-vital prisoners to—"

Elisif broke in. "And you did not intervene? These are imperial citizens, General! They had been accused of no crime, and to take their lives is—"
"Enough!" The general's bark was harsh, and she was shocked into silence. *I interrupted General Tullius!* She'd never even dreamed of doing such a thing before. "I won't sit here and be—" he caught himself, and sighed. "You're not wrong, either of you. Truth is, I'd just gotten new orders, and I was trying to figure out what in Oblivion they meant."

Velandryn, from the tone of his voice, was as confused as Elsiif. "New orders? From who, I thought you were—"

"In command? So did I." it was a bad habit of the general's, to interrupt when he knew how a sentence was going to end. A token of his days as a soldier, it was said. "However, there were orders, signed and sealed by the High Command in Cyrodiil."

"And they said?" Elsiif couldn't have stopped the question coming out if she'd wanted to.

"Can't tell you that. You don't begin to have authority to even know those orders exist, either of you, but," he shrugged, "I figured you deserve a bit of an explanation."

Elsiif, however, wasn't done. "He deserves more than that!" She knew a righteous cause when she saw one, and she was going to stand up for Velandryn! "He's an Imperial citizen, and you almost killed him! The people have rights, you know!"

For some reason, however, General Tullius was laughing at her response. "Imperial citizen?" he turned to Velandryn. "Well, Master Savani? Are you a citizen of the Empire?"

Velandryn glanced over at her, and she thought she saw something almost like an apology in his eyes. "The Great Council's official position is that there are no treaties binding the sovereign nation of Resdayn-Morrowind to any other state." He placed his hands behind his back, looking for all the world as though he were giving a report. "While the Council makes no claim as to any continuity or lack thereof between the Septim and Mede dynasties, all previous treaties were negotiated by representatives of the False Tribunal, who currently hold neither legal nor spiritual authority over the people and laws of Morrowind."

Elsiif could only gape. She'd known the Dunmer were hardly model Imperial citizens, but this was far beyond anything she could have imagined. *They don't even think they're part of the Empire!* She turned to see the general grimacing, and realized that he'd been expecting this. "Is this…do we…does everyone but me know?"

Velandryn only shrugged at her, but General Tullius looked faintly embarrassed. "It's not something the Empire advertises. Dark Elves don't make a big deal out of it, no reason that we should."

Velandryn nodded. "The current arrangement is fine. The Empire can write whatever they please on their maps; the Council doesn't much care what goes on beyond our borders anyway."

Something about this seemed wrong to Elsiif. "But…diplomats, and emissaries? Is the Empire treating you as a member state or a sovereign nation?" There were Imperial dignitaries even in Alinor; the Dominion might not be a friendly power, but there had to be communication.

Velandryn shrugged again. "I've never given it much thought. I'd assume we have some way to communicate with the Empire."

This time, it was Tullius with the answers. "You'd be surprised. Last I heard, the Imperial embassy in Blacklight was in a state of disrepair, staffed by incompetents and wash-ups." He shrugged. "It's nobody's top priority."
A sudden laugh from Velandryn. "I didn't even know there was an Imperial embassy!"

The general snorted. "So, tell me again about all of the rights he has?"

Elisif, however, had no intention of letting this one go. "The Empire doesn't work that way! We don't choose who gets rights based on birth or status! The founding principle of the Empire, the guiding light that gives us the authority to rule, is that we all have value! You don't get to pretend that just because he was born somewhere else that Velandryn's life doesn't matter!" She could feel tears welling up in her eyes and wanted to wipe them away, but she wouldn't let them see her cry. *Never let them see you hurt.*

The general, however, only snorted again. "You aren't wrong, but you're painfully naïve. You keep your pretty ideals, I'll win your damn war." He jabbed a finger at Velandryn. "I don't much give a damn if you are this Dragonborn the Nords are ranting about, you'd best not cause any trouble in my city or I'll throw you in the dungeons until even you grow old."

The Dark Elf inclined his head ever so slightly, eyes dark. "And your soldiers on the gate? The ones questioning Dunmer?" Another of those thin humorless smiles. "Should I not worry about them?"

"That'd be Legate Rikke's doing. She's convinced you'd make a fine ally." He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "If you want to try and work out something official with the Legion, talk to her. I'm not wasting resources on half-baked legends."

"And I wouldn't want to get dragged down with you as your Empire collapses." Velandryn sketched out a small bow, mockery etched in every motion.

Elisif felt her heart drop down into her stomach again. *If the Dragonborn were to join the Stormcloaks...*  

She put a hand on Velandryn's arm, not even caring about the implied intimacy. *He can't join the Stormcloaks! *"I know the Empire isn't perfect, but the Stormcloaks would tear this land apart!"

"Why does it have to be one or the other?" If he saw how distressed she he didn't show it. Instead, he placed one of his hands over hers, pressing briefly for a moment before releasing. "I may...disagree...with the Empire on a great many things, but I have no desire to fan the flames of a pointless war."

She pulled her hand back, blood rushing to her cheeks. *Why did I do that? And why had he put his hand there. Gods, I'm a fool!* She'd just wanted to convey sincerity, and he'd taken it as...*what? Flirtation?*

Whatever he was feeling, it apparently wasn't love for the Stormcloaks, at least. *Though given how his people have been treated in their territory, that's hardly surprising*. The plight of the Dark Elves in Windhelm was well-known across Skyrim, and she couldn't see Velandryn just letting that go. *Not to mention they seem to go out of their way to mention how much they hate elves, from what I heard.*

The three of them stood there for a moment longer, before the general sighed. "You'd best not be trouble, Savani. I've no orders to bring you in, but there's a few down in the Province who are none too keen on an elf running around claiming to be Dragonborn."

Velandryn only nodded, though his eyes had lightened considerably. "Duly noted. I'll do my best to kill anyone who looks to be from Cyrodiil."
Elisif laughed, but the general did not appear amused. "You're lucky I have such a delightful sense of humor, Savani, or we'd have trouble." With that, he turned to return inside. Then, he paused for just an instant. "Jarl Elisif, we will need to discuss the disposition of the guard for the coming seasons. I'll summon your steward tomorrow."

Just now, however, she didn't feel much like letting other people rule in her stead. "I will be there at noon, General Tullius." She paused as a perfectly wicked thought occurred to her. "We can discuss it over lunch." There was no better place to use etiquette as a weapon against the general and whatever staff he would bring. "Falk and I would be more than happy to hear your proposals."

General Tullius had frozen, before giving her one of the stiffest bows she'd ever seen. "As you say, my lady." And then, he was gone, swinging the door open and striding off with the other Imperial in tow.

Velandryn hardly waited for the door to close before bursting out laughing. This was no chuckle or dry appreciation of wit, but a full-throated belly laugh like she'd never heard from an elf. It's a nice sound, though.

She moved back to stand beside him. With Tullius gone, there was no need for distance. "Something you find amusing, Dragonborn?" She was still a little amazed at how easily they were speaking with each other. She was good with people, to be sure, but this was something else. It was madness, but she wanted to keep him here. He'd be a fine ally to have…

"I considered your idea about how to take power, but I'm no Dark Elf. I'll do it my way." She thought perhaps it had been her attempt to take control from the general that had amused him, but he only shook his head. "I get that, but that's not why I'm laughing."

"Care to share the joke?" She asked again, keeping her tone light.

Velandryn, however, was shaking his head. "Just something I realized. A minor mystery, but one I now understand."

"And that is?"

"Oh, no." His eyes were bright. "This is mine and mine alone."

"Very well." There was no way she was letting him off of this balcony without knowing what it was he'd been laughing about, but she was smart enough to pick her battles.

She studied him again. His face wasn't as long as an Altmer's, but he had some of that same angular beauty. His red eyes and dark skin were harsh at first, but even a little while with him had let her see what was going on in his head. He's not nearly as hard as he appears. She studied him for a moment more, and then his eyes flicked to hers, and she quickly looked away.

"You aren't what I expected." His voice was gentle, but there might have been a bit of humor in there.

"How so?"

"They think you weak." She knew exactly what he meant, but it still hurt to hear. "I'd assumed you were either hapless or a puerile puppet. You aren't."

"No, and thanks for noticing." She should have been more annoyed, but it wasn't as though he was
the only person to feel that way. Or even say it to my face. Not to mention, most of them hadn't
gone as far as deciding that she wasn't completely useless. "You aren't what I expected from a
Dunmer either."

"Oh? Do tell?"

She wondered if this would offend him, but he'd just given her a very backhanded complement, so
she figured he could live with it. "You're…normal, I guess? I'd expected a Dunmer to be full of
rage, or else contempt. But you…" She trailed off, not sure how to put it into words.

He didn't smile, but she could see that he'd liked hearing that. "You should have seen me when I
first left Morrowind. I've…had my eyes…opened, I suppose."

Somehow, she doubted it had been that simple. "Well, I'm glad you did. Skyrim needs you."

He nodded slowly. "So it would seem."

She had so many questions for him, but one took precedence over all the others. "You can really
Shout, can't you? What's it like, using Thu'um?" She'd never forget what it was like seeing the
Voice be used, but she had to know. How does it feel, to wield that power?

"It's like nothing else I've ever known." He spoke slowly, seeming to taste each word as he said it.
"I'd thought it was a form of magic, some ancient Nord trick to funnel magicka through speech, but
it isn't." He shook his head, apparently thinking as he spoke. "I could more easily describe what it
isn't, but all I can say is that it's power." That last word was almost a growl, and she shivered. "The
Tongues conquered my homeland and enslaved my people, and some sick part of me understands
why. Each time I use it, there's…" He looked up from his reverie to gaze into her eyes, blinked
once, and gave her a smile that almost managed to be convincing. "It's nothing. A strange power I
don't yet understand. Part of the reason I need to go see the Greybeards, I think."

She wasn't sure she understood, but one thing was certain. He's no Ulfric. She couldn't see that
monster of a man seeking to understand the roots of such power, or being so contemplative in its
use. "So, you're off to High Hrothgar after this?"

"That is my plan, though I seem to keep finding myself farther and farther afield." She wondered if
it was a quality of the Thu'um to give those who could use it such strength in their voices; Ulfric
too had a way of speaking that could turn heads from across the room. Velandryn, however,
seemed to slip in and out of it without knowing. Despite that, she no longer had even the slightest
shred of doubt that the elf before was, in every way, Dragonborn. Even if I'm not entirely sure what
all that entails.

And speaking of Dragonborn... "Did...have you felt any...guidance?"

"Guidance? As in people trying to tell me what to do?" He smiled. "A few. Jarls, mostly, and one
very opinionated housecarl." He began ticking points off on his fingers. "Also some vampires, a
werewolf, and a Daedra."

"Did they all walk into a tavern together?" She smiled at his joke, before realizing that maybe he
hadn't been. "Wait, did they really—"

He waved off the question before she'd even finished asking it. "I've had a very odd few weeks.
Now what did you actually mean by guidance?"

"I mean...the voice of the Divines—of Kyne." She almost felt foolish saying it, but she had to
know. Did you send him to me, Mother of Men?
"Two months ago I would have puffed up in righteous outrage at the question, you know."
Velandryn's voice now was free of any emotion save wry amusement, and he rubbed his head contemplatively. "Now, though, I'll just say that no deity, be it Divine, Daedric, or of any other sort, has—" he cut himself off. "Well, Kyne hasn't, at least."

She gaped. "So some other god has? Who?"

He waved a hand again. "Like I said, it's been an odd few weeks. I had a…run-in with some—well, I wouldn't want to worry you."

She'd heard that one before, usually from some older man who'd decided that the little lady Elisif couldn't handle the important matters being discussed. "Don't worry, you won't. I can handle big scary things, and I don't really appreciate being told I can't."

She hadn't tried to hide her anger. However, instead of mocking her or getting his back up at her indignation, Velandryn only studied her for a long moment. "All right. If you have any mages of skill, I would recommend placing detection wards on the Pelagius Wing. I encountered a…Daedric presence in there."

She could tell he was keeping something back—a calm face didn't make his voice any less obvious when he decided not to tell her something—but she was too busy processing what he'd just said. "You found Daedra in my palace?"

"Not so much in the palace as…look, location gets fuzzy when dealing with Oblivion. Just don't let anyone go wandering through that part of the palace until you've had someone competent take a look at it." He shrugged. "I think he left though."

"You know, most of the time when someone says they don't want to worry me, they're being patronizing. You weren't, were you?"

He leaned in again, and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Jarl Elisif, believe me when I say that some of the things I've dealt with, I wish I could avoid being worried by." He let her go, and shrugged. "Sadly, I don't think that's a luxury we get. Our burden is to know these things, and worry."

*And worry we do.* He still hadn't really answered her question, though. "So Kyne's told you nothing?"

For once, his voice held something that might have been annoyance. "No, and why does it matter?"

"Kyne gave mankind the Thu'um, so that we could defeat the dragons. Didn't you know this?"

"I read the books, but no god has spoken to me." He laughed. "She'd probably just be telling me to get my worthless hide to High Hrothgar already."

Elisif didn't join in his mirth. "I…see." **Kyne gave the power to learn Thu'um to Ulfric Stormcloak, and he killed Torygg and plunged us into war. Shouldn't she at least guide the Dragonborn as well?** It was no easy thing, to doubt a god, but there had been many doubts of late. **Kyne is good and wants only the best for us, of course, but…**

Velandryn must have noticed her sadness, because his next words were back to being gentle. "Is there anything I could do? I know we just met, but…" he trailed off, then took a breath and continued. "I think we can and should help each other, and I'd like for us to be honest with each other."
That she hadn't expected. "The Dunmer is telling the Nord that we need to be open and honest?"

He rubbed his neck, eyes just the tiniest bit bright. "The world is all awry, I agree, but we gain nothing by working against each other. I badly need allies who aren't actively scheming to use me, and if that encounter with the general was typical of your relationship, having a Nord culture-hero in your corner could only help."

She should have just smiled and accepted, but something about him made her want to tease. "And how do you know I won't just use you as well to advance my own position?"

"Oh, please. What would betraying the Dragonborn get you besides the scorn of the traditionalists, who I'd wager are the exact ones you most need to court?" He was right, but the speed with which he was figuring out the politics of Solitude was a little unnerving. "Face it. We're both far too pathetic to be able to get much of value by breaking down the other."

*He could have been a bit more diplomatic, but he's not wrong.*

For the next little while, they spoke of things of small consequence. It seemed he knew Jordis, though he demurred from telling that story, saying that he wouldn't want to deprive the Young Wolves from telling it "in what I am sure will be a delightfully excessive fashion."

"It was Wolfskull Cave, wasn't it? Was there actually something in there?"

"I told you, you'll have to wait until…Sopha, was that her name?" She thought he might be referring to Sophie, but let him continue. "The bard was composing an 'epic ballad,' she called it." Something suspiciously like a smile tugged at his lips. "I'll have to listen as well, and learn about all of the heroic things I did."

Just then, there came a knock at the glass, and she turned to see Falk Firebeard standing there. He pushed open the door and bowed. "My jarl, I am glad to have found you. There are several people who wish a word with you, and some are of sufficient import that they should not be kept waiting much longer." He bowed again and closed the door, but stood just beyond the glass, waiting.

Elisif turned to Velandryn apologetically, but he was already waving her off. "Go. You need to do this; it's your party after all."

"I…" suddenly, she realized she had no idea what to say. How did you say farewell to someone you'd just met, but who you desperately wanted to stay with? *What is he to me?* She had no answer, so she made do with one of the standard courtesies drilled into her by her parents. "This has been a pleasure, Master Savani."

He inclined his head, bright eyes never leaving hers. "It has, my lady." He smiled then, and she decided to believe that it was real. "Before you go, I owe you an answer."

"To what?"

"Why I was laughing before." His smile looked real enough that she could almost fool herself into believing it. "I couldn't understand why in Oblivion all of these nobles would come up to Solitude to court you. Now, I do."

She knew she was blushing, but she didn't care. If she'd thought for an instant that he was using some sort of ruse or attempting to flatter with lies, she would have been done then and there, but somehow she got nothing but sincerity from his words. Still, she couldn't resist teasing him a little. "Oh, why's that?" She batted her eyes.
He smiled again. "Love." What? Before she could even start to respond, he continued. "You love this city and its people, and even the Empire that thinks you only another piece in its game." He took a step forward, but made no attempt to reach out or pressure her with his movements. I won't pretend to love this land as you do, but it is a powerful thing to see." He gave her the smallest of salutes, one finger rising to tap his chest. "I don't know how many beautiful women there are across Tamriel, but I've never met one quite like you." He turned then, and gazed back out over the ocean.

She was quite glad he was looking away, because she had no idea how to respond. She had to be as red as his eyes, and speech failed her. I have to focus! Trying her utmost to put his words from her mind, she turned and opened the doors.

Falk bustled her towards a dignitary from Markarth, who would doubtless be begging for aid against the Reachmen within half a minute of opening his mouth. As he did, though, he glanced back. "Who was that? I didn't recognize him."

"A…friend. He's…" She realized she had no idea how to finish that sentence.

He's not at all what I expected, and I've never been so happy to be wrong.

Velandryn stared fixedly out into the blackness, not moving an inch until he heard the doors click shut, and then only relaxing the tiniest bit until a full minute had passed. He was so out of sorts, he doubted he could even get the control over his magicka needed to try and detect life. I must be alone now, right? She had to be gone.

Why did I say that? When he'd first had the thought, it had been because he'd heard her arguing so passionately for his rights. She clearly felt that the Empire was worth something, and wasn't going to let up until it conformed to her beliefs. Give her power, and she'd make a fine High Queen.

Then, seeing her about to leave, he'd just wanted to let her know. Why? Had he been trying to impress her with his insight? Why am I acting this way?

Have you heard the voices of any gods? Elisif had meant to ask if he'd been given revelation by Kyne or whoever else was keeping tabs on the Dragonborn, but all he'd heard was, Is Sheogorath still in your head?

Are you there, Madgod? There was no answer, which left him with two options.

Either the Shivering Sovereign made me spout that nonsense, or I did it all on my own. He wasn't certain which was more worrying, the fact that he actually felt that way notwithstanding. I don't tell Nords how I'm really feeling!

And yet, he had. Something about Elisif had cut through his barriers and carefully constructed layers of deception. He'd come to within a hair's breadth of telling her that Sheogorath had been taking up residence in her Palace, and if she'd pressed him he might well have told her about the vampire and werewolf. How did she do that?

It wasn't that she was beautiful, or charming—though she is both of those things and more. He'd been completely honest when he'd been talking about her love for Solitude. Even a few minutes in her presence made it clear that she wasn't the shrinking child others thought. He wondered if that truly was why the other lords were seeking her hand, or if they really were simply after the questionable bounty of Solitude. Well, it's no concern of mine.
He shook his head. This line of thought was all well and good, but he needed to get back to some warmth. He'd managed to ignore the cold while with Elisif, but he could feel the familiar ache of magical exertion deep inside. And there's no way in Oblivion I'm facing this night without magic!

Thankfully, the hall was empty when he stepped back indoors, and by sticking to smaller and less ornate corridors, he seemed to avoid most of the guests. A couple of people gave him second glances, but he had long since mastered the art of avoiding conversation through body language alone. Soon enough, he was entering a large chamber, empty but for him. And where am I now?

He'd come through a small wooden door, but the room in which he found himself was anything but plain. Tall windows high above showed the night sky, and a floor of fine tile stretched from an ornate throne at the head of the room to a broad stairway that descended out of his view. So, this is Jarl Elisif's throne room.

He began moving towards the stairwell, but something gave him pause. In the middle of the room, he could feel a lingering echo, and he couldn't just walk away. It was nothing he could see or smell, but something was there.

Eyes closed, he shuffled his feet and positioned himself in a place that, for whatever reason, felt right. Again, there was no change in anything perceptible, but he knew he was standing in the correct spot.

Opening his eyes, he looked at the throne. He was standing about ten paces away, facing the seat squarely, and the knowledge rose. This is where Ulfric Stormcloak Shouted King Torygg to death.

Thu'um wasn't magic; he knew that without question. Magic manipulated the magicka that permeated the Aurbis, but Thu'um…

Thu'um affects it on a deeper level. He'd begun to see that, when Fus had pushed aside threads of magicka and Daedric Creatia alike, forcing them aside in a way that shouldn't have been possible. There were rules to what magic could do, and not even the strongest mages could overcome them. He was beginning to suspect that Thu'um did. How fortunate that I'm going to see the Greybeards.

"Not a good place to be standing, Savani." The voice of General Tullius made him turn, and he saw the two Imperials from before. The woman—Legate Rikke—looked at him as though she were trying to figure something out. Either I'm getting good at reading humans, or my imagination is growing in potency.

"Oh? Don't like mer in your throne rooms?" His inability to stop antagonizing human authority figures might be something he should work on, he'd realized, but it seemed this wasn't when he finally would.

Instead of the general, Legate Rikke responded. "Given what you've experienced, Dragonborn, I can understand your anger towards the Empire, but we are on the same side." She gestured, and they moved into a smaller chamber. Some privacy, but for what?

"Are we?" Velandryn had little experience with diplomacy, but he knew about lies. "In what way?"

"Dragons." With one word, the legate reduced him to speechlessness. Oh, right. The Dragonborn was supposed to be doing something about the dragons, presumably.

Velandryn inclined his head the smallest amount that he felt he could get away with while still displaying courtesy. "Very well. What is it you came to propose?"

The general studied him for a long moment. "Officially, the Legion does not recognize you as
Dragonborn. Unofficially, I am willing to offer you unrestricted freedom of movement through Imperial territory in Skyrim and permission to join any Imperial operations against dragons."

"So, no authority or actual help, but they can use me as they please? "And how has the Empire been faring against the dragons?"

It was the legate who responded. "We've yet to confirm a kill, but we can generally drive them away from populated areas."

Somehow, he doubted it was as simple as all of that. "And how many brave legionaries die each time?"

Now General Tullius broke in. "A few, but less than you'd like, Savani. We're moving battlemages into troop rotations, and even dragons flee when the ballistae start firing."

"You've made use of your engineers, then." From what he understood, the Empire was in a far better position than most Nord holdings to combat dragons. Magic and siege engines, just like Balgruuf and I talked about back in Whiterun. "I need to leave for High Hrothgar, and I can't really be putting on Imperial colors if I'm travelling through Stormcloak lands, but I'll be glad to work with Imperial command to combat dragons if the opportunity arises." He still didn't have much love for the Empire, but he'd be a fool to reject this deal out of hand. "I'm not swearing any oaths, however."

Tullius laughed. "And I wouldn't trust any oath you gave, Savani. You've made your opinion on the Empire quite clear."

That rankled. "Rest assured, General, that when I give my word, it holds. Dunmer are cunning, not honorless." In truth, oaths given to outlanders were somewhat less sacred than those sworn to the Three, but Velandryn didn't think the general knew that. And I'll be damned if I let his racism tar my good name! "We do not execute our prisoners without cause!" Well, most of the time.

The legate stepped forward then, hands raised. "Dragonborn, you have the apologies of the Legion for that incident. Now, however, we have to work together to defeat the greater threat. Are we agreed?"

Wordlessly, Velandryn nodded. "We are."

"Good." Tullius clapped his hands. "Despite what you think, Savani, the Empire doesn't bear you any ill will. Work with us, and you might just find us the best friends you've ever had."

"Oh, I doubt that very much." Perhaps." He raised a fist to his chest, tapping lightly as he'd seen the Imperials do. "I hope we can work well together."

The legate nodded. "Given the situation with the Stormcloaks and the likelihood of," her mouth twisted, "traitors within our command structures, any large-scale orders to all Imperial forces are considered compromised. A general command to aid you would probably just paint a target on your back for the Stormcloaks, so the most I'll do is add your name to the lists of persons to pass unmolested. It won't get you special treatment or equipment, but you can rest at our camps and garrisons if need be."

He nodded, with genuine gratitude this time. "Thank you."

The general leaned in. "And the next you see Jarl Balgruuf, tell him to get his act together and help us put down Ulfric before more Nords have to die. Whiterun's intransigence does nobody any favors!"
Considering that Velandryn actually liked Balgruuf, he doubted he'd be phrasing it like that. "I'll mention it when next I'm at Dragonsreach." The idea of denying that he held position within Whiterun was too patently absurd to even give thought. *I won't insult Imperial spies like that.*

Velandryn saluted, and both Imperials returned the gesture. The legate held out a hand, smiling. "I saw old Shield-Thane Kongir use Thu'um at Tall Pines. Broke the Thalmor lines singlehanded, and saved six hundred good men and women from capture or death. I hope you find what you need atop the Throat of the World, Velandryn Savani."

He clasped her arm, smiling back. "And, for what it's worth, I'd rather have the Empire in charge in Skyrim than Ulfric Stormcloak." At the general's disbelieving look, he had to laugh. "I might not like you too much, but how long do you think Skyrim would stay at peace with Morrowind without the Empire keeping them in line? Call it self-interest, but the thought of an independent Skyrim would make many of my people very nervous."

Tullius grunted. "Well, I'll take it over nothing." A brief smile. "Alliances have been built on less." He turned to Rikke. "Come on. We're getting out of here before Elenwen finds me."

There was one more thing, however, that Velandryn just couldn't let go. "The security here is terrible."

"Excuse me?" Rikke was more polite than Tullius, at least, who had simply given him an unamused stare.

"The Blue Palace is guarded by layabouts and incompetents. I snuck in far too easily. You need to do a better job protecting the jarl."

The general, however, did not seem concerned. "I've offered, but she says she wants her own people doing it. Besides, not like anyone really wants her dead."

"She's the leader of the Imperial jarls, isn't she?"

Tullius gave a bark of laughter. "She's a little pup! Wants to do good, but it's not like killing her would make a drop of difference. Only thing you'd accomplish is infuriating the entirety of Solitude." He shrugged. "They love her, you know, and I don't think even Ulfric's stupid enough to miss that." With a shake of his head, Tullius turned away. "The Queen's in no danger, and if she thinks she's in danger she can just swallow her pride and ask for help." With that, the Imperials departed, leaving Velandryn alone with his thoughts.

He nodded bitterly, considering Elisif's position. It made sense, in a cold kind of way. *Her death might even strengthen the Empire's position here. Going by how the people feel, there'd be a mob signing up to take down whoever did it.*

He left the room and headed down the steps, eager to be quit of the Palace. *Legion, Nords, Daedra, and probably the Thalmor as well; this place is too crowded for comfort.* At the main doors, he briefly worried about guards, but they only glanced over him as he left. *No reason to keep people in.* Still, he worried for Elisif.

The Blue District of Solitude was as beautiful in the predawn light—*did I spend the entire night in there?—* as it had been in yesterday's afternoon glow. The broad streets lined with flowers and the high-roofed manors looming overhead made even Nords look small, and Velandryn wondered what had changed to make him appreciate it so much more now than he had yesterday.

*So, what comes next?* He had, if not the formal support, then at least the assistance of the Legion,
which was a load off his mind. The jarl seemed receptive for some sort of informal alliance, and he had a suspicion that Jordis would be more than happy to help out with small favors in the region. *Insofar as the cities of Skyrim go, Solitude has more for me than most.*

Wandering down the street, he found his mind wandering as well to distant companions. Lydia, unless something had gone tragically wrong, should already be in Ivarstead, doubtless growing ever angrier with him for being so late. He'd considered sending her a message by courier, but he couldn't take that risk. For one, she might not even be there to get the letter, though he fervently hoped that was not the case. For another, he didn't trust this courier system to actually keep his message secure, and he'd rather make Lydia wait than risk some enemy getting their hands on his letter. *She swore an oath, and I told her to wait.* She would do it, and she'd probably slap their guards into shape as well. *Really, I'm doing that town a favor.*

Then, there was the matter of Serana. He sighed; thoughts of the vampire never failed to pull him out of whatever good mood he was in. He knew he shouldn't be so concerned for her welfare, but he couldn't shake off those feelings. *When I have to put her down, can I do it?* In pitched battle he would wager he could face her without remorse, but if he had to steel his heart and end her life—well, *unlife*—he wasn't certain he could do it. *Not the time for this.* He tugged his collar up a bit against the cold, and headed back towards the inn. He might say farewell to Jordis, but he really needed to start preparing to leave. *Get my things from the inn, go to the bank and retrieve what I left there, and figure out the best way to Ivarstead.*

The way he saw it, he could go by either land or sea. While he might get lucky and find another ship bound for Morrowind, most likely he'd have to route through Morthal, and then either take the shorter route through the no-man's-land to the east or the path past the ancient ruins at Labyrinthian and through Whiterun Hold. *Might be longer, but less likely to run into soldiers or bandits that way.* Of course, he'd only studied the maps, so it was possible that the Labyrinthian road was more dangerous than he gave it credit for. However, Jarl Idgrod Ravenscrone had assumed he'd used that road before, meaning it saw at least some traffic. *My best bet might be to find a caravan in Morthal and trust to numbers.* Failing that, it would be more cold and miserable days on the road. *Followed by climbing an enormous mountain as winter approaches.* He sighed again. *Why couldn't the Greybeards have summoned me to their holy sauna of meditation? At least I'd be warm.*

Either way, he'd reach the Greybeards, and then he'd learn more about what it meant to be Dragonborn. He suspected that his use of *Fus* was only the merest bit of what he could accomplish, though if the Greybeards weren't themselves Dragonborn he wondered how much they could teach him about the aspects of his—*title? Condition?*—that didn't involve Thu'um. *Well, only way to find out.*

It was odd, all things considered, how optimistic he'd become. Dunmer weren't known for their cheery disposition, and even the idealists among his people generally tempered it with a healthy dose of cynicism. He'd never thought himself particularly downcast, but since this whole Dragonborn business began, he'd found himself looking forward to tomorrows with only the smallest amounts of certainty that *something* would go wrong. *Might need to rein myself in, before I start dancing in the streets.*

Solitude was far from deserted even at this early hour. It appeared that certain prominent citizens and public houses had been observing the Hearthfire in their own ways, and now the drunken celebrants were staggering home. He stepped over a woman snoring in a bush. *Or to the nearest gutter.* Some stereotypes about Nords were true—they loved drinking—and some were not—more than a few, it seemed, were not so adept at holding their drink.
Upon reaching the inn, he made his way through the reveling Nords and outlanders—don’t these people ever sleep?—and reached his room with a minimum of fuss. He was fairly certain that someone had grabbed at his crotch in the press, but he’d thrown an elbow by reflex and heard a satisfying grunt of pain, so he was willing to call the matter settled.

Inside, he found the things he’d taken to the Blue Palace arranged on his bed, neatly folded and topped with what was unmistakably a human skull. When he'd shut the door, the unmistakable voice of Sheogorath echoed throughout the room. "Had a good night, did you? Enjoyed being free from the confines of sanity for a bit?"

I knew it! "So you did alter my mind, Madgod."

The skull began chattering madly, teeth clicking in an unnerving staccato. "Nope! But you thought I did! Never would have said half that stuff otherwise, eh? Did you a favor, really!"

Velandryn sighed, and collapsed into a chair. "Is this what having the favor of Sheogorath feels like? If so, I think I could do without it."

The skull chattered again. "Hah! This isn't my favor, mortal! This is the bare minimum! This is me making sure that you're not so horrifically boring that I have to deck my halls with your blood!"

"And why would you care? I know some mer who make me look positively giddy by comparison. Why haven't you paid them a visit yet?" What I wouldn't give to see Prelate Ilvan deal with this insanity!

"Dragonborn!" Sheogorath nearly sang that word, and the skull rose from his things. It began spinning madly, and then vanished in a flash of purple smoke. A singly butterfly flitted out of the cloud and alighted on Velandryn's nose. It flapped its wings once, tickling his eyes, and then made for the window. It passed through the thick glass with a shimmer, and vanished into the night.

Suddenly, he was exhausted. It's been a long day, and an even longer night. He was going to sleep, and sleep for a long time.

When he woke, it was still dark. No, he realized as he saw a line of golden light to the west, it's dark again. He'd managed to sleep an entire day away, and now he had another night to burn before he could leave. Ah, well, there's a few ways I can pass the time. One person in particular still needed to be…repaid.

There was no Dunmer on the gates this time, and the road down from the arch to the water ran straight and true. As he descended, he passed the shopkeepers opening for the morning, and the homes that were just now beginning to stir. Dawn will be here soon. He should really find a quiet place to observe it; after the madness of the previous night, some quiet would do him good. Right after I settle my last debt in Haafingar.

It occurred to him that he might have to leave the city rather quickly after this, but he quickly dismissed that thought. I've fought necromancers, vampires, dragons, and Daedra. I can handle a single treacherous sailor without alerting the guard. He briefly considered not performing a criminal act so soon after meeting the jarl and the general, but quickly dismissed that as absurd. What was it Malthanar said, carve every letter of my name on his bones? I'll do that one. One name for each day I was walking through the wilderness.

And if he tries to die on me, I'll heal him back up and keep going.

The docks and quays along the Karth were so extensive that it was nearly impossible to
comprehend them all at once. Baan Malur might be a slightly larger city, but the Nords conducted far more trade by sea, and their dockyards were significantly more expansive. Well, at least our harbor's better-defended.

Not for the first time, he pitied those with poor memories; it would have been a nightmare to find anything here for anyone who didn't know where they were going. Fortunately, he recalled the exact place the boat had been docked. And with the Empire in charge, I'd bet sovereigns to scribes that you can't just stuff your ship anywhere.

The docks were actually less busy than he'd expected; perhaps he had the harsh Skyrim nights to thank for that. Though if I can make do with some magicka, Nords should have no trouble. More likely, he realized, was that the Hearthfire celebrations—they were still ongoing, as it seemed one night wasn't enough to contain all of the revels—meant this wouldn't be an early morning for many hung-over workers. Whatever the reason, he was able to make good time along the waterfront and soon enough the berth that had held Jolf—Gods, even his name is wretched!—and his miserable ship came into view. And there they are.

The boat was much the same as it had been, a single-masted little craft of some ten feet in length. More interesting than the ship, though, was the figure hunched over it, working with what looked like almost feverish concentration. As Velandryn approached, he expected the Nord to notice, but the human only continued working.

Finally, Velandryn was standing directly behind the man, waiting to be noticed. You're going to see this coming, s'wit. As he stood there, breath misting before him, he took in the state of the ship and its sole sailor. The ship looked much the same, but Jolf...

Before, Jolf had been a man of strength, a proud and hearty sailor who'd taken no lip from his passengers and been more than willing to call out someone who'd conjured an open flame on his ship. Velandryn was going to kill him slowly for abandoning him in the wilderness, of course, but the man had been no coward.

Now, Velandryn had to take a moment to make sure he had the right man. The Nord before him was huddled over something, with bony elbows jutting out of clothing that floated on a rail-thin frame. Still unnoticed, Velandryn leaned over to see what the Nord was working on so intently.

He was scrubbing a bench, and doing it so hard that the wood was peeling under his brush. What in Oblivion?

"It is good to see you again, Jolf." He tried to keep his voice calm, relishing the moment where the Nord realized who'd come back for him. Still, he was worried that some of his anticipation might have slipped into his words. Look at me, you bastard!

The Nord gave a violent jerk, and began trembling so violently Velandryn wondered if he was having some kind of fit. His eyes traced up to Velandryn's own, and the human recoiled back into a corner of the boat. "No! I did as she asked! No more!" Then came the tears, great sobs that racked his body as he gripped himself and rocked gently. "No more! No more!"

He's broken. All at once, the thought of revenge, of tormenting this man, felt like bile in Velandryn's mouth. He'd kept himself going through the wilderness at the thought of confronting the Nord who'd abandoned him, but he'd never imagined...this. He'd fantasized about the sailor angrily decrying him as an elf or an ally of vampires, and striking him down in righteous fury. He would be the hero, dealing vengeful justice upon the unworthy and treacherous. But this? This felt wrong, felt...sick. As though he were the monster, preying on the wretched man.
"Could it be an act? If it was, Jolf had missed his calling as a bard or a trouper, for this was masterfully done.

"Hey!" Velandryn turned to see an Legion guard, who followed up his exclamation by grabbing Velandryn's arm. "Don't harass the poor man!"

Though he had the momentary desire to incinerate this fool's skull for laying a hand on him uninvited, he quickly bit back that response. "What happened to him?"

"You know Jolf?" At Velandryn's nod, the guard sighed. "Poor bastard's been like this since he got back."

Suddenly, Velandryn had a sinking feeling in his stomach. "And when was that, exactly?" I thought it was so simple; the Nord betrays the mer.

The guard, unheeding of the Dunmer's sudden terror, scratched at his stubble. "Yesterday evening, I think. Nobody saw him come in, but he was here when I started my watch."

I was so ready to hate him for betraying me, I didn't see the obvious. They'd taken a boat, and Serana had even remarked that she hoped they weren't taking someone else's way back.

So what happens when a coven of vampires gets their hand on a sailor with a boat out of Solitude? Harkon hadn't struck him as the type to leave the comfort of his citadel without a damned good reason, but clearly he had no compunctions about using lackeys to do his dirty work. And a bloodless wretch who's terrified of his own shadow shows up in the night.

Velandryn was no vampire hunter, but he figured a city like Solitude was exactly the sort of place they'd love. So, what do I do now? Go find Elisif or Tullius, raise the alarm and hope for the best? However, it might be better to let the Volkihar do as they would. Let them think they have us fooled, and they grow careless. If they made contact with Jolf, for instance, he could well—

"Velandryn?"

He knew who was speaking—there was no way he could forget that voice, the subtle accent that turned his name into something unique—and would have given anything not to have met her here, but it seemed that his heart was not to be spared. I'd hoped I would have more time.

He began to turn, but she'd already stepped in front of him. Golden eyes blinked at him, and she pulled down the scarf that hid the lower half of her pale face. She was wearing her old armor and cape, but she had her hood down and a crown of white flowers was woven into her hair. He had forgotten how beautiful she—No, let's not lie. He hadn't forgotten one bit. He'd just tried to ignore his thoughts of her. And clearly I did a wonderful job.

Serana smiled at him, wider than she ever had before, dark lips parting to reveal the merest hints of pointed teeth. "Hey."
How terrible, I think, to be a vampire.

Rightly do we revile them, for they are a monstrous and parasitic race capable only of eking out a pale imitation of life by stealing the very blood and soul of others.

And yet, I cannot help but pity them as well, those unfortunate souls who find themselves trapped in the cruel vice of Molag Bal. Either they feed upon the living, and maintain their sanity at the cost of those around them, or they abstain, and degenerate further into corruption. They cannot even take their own lives, for their souls belong to Molag Bal, and who would willingly consign themselves to Coldharbour for eternity?

And so, when I slay one of them, I try not to hate. I cannot tell what path brought them to my blade, what agonizing choices they made. Perhaps they are evil or perhaps they are innocents who fell prey to that same evil.

Nonetheless, I slay each and every one of them. For though it must be terrible to be a vampire, we cannot suffer them to live.

Sindal Loan, Chapter Master of the Knights of the Circle, Shornhelm

Her father leaned in close enough that she could feel his breath when he spoke. "You have been away a long time, Serana, and I will not fault you for having become…unfocused…in your time abroad. It is easy to forget our place, or even to feel some misguided sympathy for the cattle, I know. However, now you are returned." His soft words became more insistent. "It is time for you to feed."

"Of course, Father." As the court watched, she bowed her head and drank.

Serana sat at her father's side, watching the court in all of its dark glory. For so long she'd been forced to hide who and what she was, to walk among the mortals as though she were of their kind. And now, I'm home. She could be herself again.

And who is that? She'd been asking herself that question since she'd woken up, and she was still floundering for an answer. After everything that happened, she should have felt more…

More what? Her home hadn't been a place to truly relax, at least not since the ritual. Even now, she felt the tension in the room, as the court assessed this new piece in the games they were doubtless playing. Everyone wants to know where I stand. Well, so did she.

Her father rose, and all fell silent. The cattle stood dumbly or lay motionless; she could see Jolf stretched out on a table down at the far end of the hall.

"Enjoy tonight, my children!" His voice was commanding, but Lord Harkon clearly had eyes only
for the scroll on the table before him. "My daughter is returned, and our family is once more complete!"

Funny how my mother doesn't seem to be a part of our family anymore. She watched her father stare down at the scroll, clearly considering something.

He leaned over to her, and spoke in an authoritative whisper. "Your chambers have been left prepared for you; go there and once you are settled, come to see me." He studied her for a long moment. "I will be in my study; I trust you recall the way." Finally, there was the hint of a smile, and a tiny piece of her old father broke through. "You are home now, Serana, and all will be well."

Once her father left the hall, Elder Scroll in tow, the court resumed their feasting and chatter, and if the volume seemed slightly louder, the laughter slightly less forced, she supposed that was to be expected of underlings once their lord had left. None of them are of the royal blood, after all.

But I am. She glanced over at Vingalmo, who was studying her with an inscrutable expression on his long face. He had always been a sharp one, if too cautious to be much of a power player, and she found herself wondering how he really felt about her return.

The High Elf rose, and moved to sit beside her. "My lady, if your father is awaiting you, it would be wise to go to him."

Well, he's certainly mastered the art of sycophancy. Then again, perhaps that was why Vingalmo was still here after so many centuries. Lord Harkon brooked no challengers in his court, and that blend of shrewdness and servitude would have appealed to their lord.

She surveyed the room, eyes momentarily arrested by Jolf but quickly passing him over. "Of course. Thank you, Vingalmo." She gave him a smile. "You've always served us well."

He froze for a nearly imperceptible moment before returning her smile. "You do me too much honor, my lady."

She left the hall to its revels, following a well-remembered path to her rooms. My rooms! After all this time! The thought brought with it the strangest blend of nostalgia and regret; she was going back to a place she loved, but there was no way to go back to the years she'd loved.

No. She shook her head. I am what I am, and there's no sense in regret. Childhoods had to end, and she wouldn't get anywhere by mourning years long gone.

That resolve lasted for exactly as long as it took for her reach the door to her chambers. There, below the handle, was a crack in the wood. Trembling, she stretched out a finger, tracing the edges of the gash.

All at once, she was standing in front of her door, lips trembling as she swung her prize to keep it out of her father's grasp. "You said I got a reward!"

Harkon was trying to be stern, but she could see the smile threatening to break out on his face. "I meant you could have a sweetroll, love, not a sword. Now give it here!"

"No!" She raised the weapon as he grabbed for it, but its weight, too heavy for such a small child, sent her tumbling over backwards while the blade spun out of her hands.

"Serana!" Her father's voice was a harsh scream, and his arms were around her as she sprawled on the ground, clutching her knee. She glanced up, and saw the sword she'd taken from her father's trophy case stuck in her door. The pain from where she'd scraped herself on the stone floor warred
with indignation at being held like this. I'm not a baby anymore!

I couldn't have been more than five. Her father had been so quick to run to her, making sure she hadn't harmed herself with the sword, forgetting even to reprimand her. Mother was furious, though. Valerica had felt her husband's childcare left something to be desired, and had let them both know that in no uncertain terms. And yet they gave me a wooden sword just the next week.

She sighed and pushed open the door. No sense dwelling on the past, is there?

And yet, the moment she saw her drawing-room, the memories threatened to overwhelm her. The window, where she'd sit and watch the clouds roll by. Sometimes ships would come from the villages that her father ruled, commoners and adventurers coming to pay tribute and feast at his table. In those days you could see the shore. Now, there was only the fog beyond her windows—windows with great heavy curtains to block out the sun—protection and isolation all in one. It does make things lonely, though. She remembered the bustle of Solitude, and sighed again. Maybe, once I've spent some time here, I'll go back, see some more of this new world.

As she ran her hand over a lounging-couch—I hid candies in the cushions so I could eat them late at night—it occurred to her that everything was unnaturally well-preserved. A lack of dust she could understand, but shouldn't four thousand years have faded the tapestries, or set the cushions to rotting?

She stretched out her magicka, and immediately felt the spells of preservation woven into—they put them in the stone itself? When she'd left, her mother's handiwork had protected a few key locations within the citadel, but this expansion meant that the entire castle was all but immune to the ravages of time. Centuries could pass here unnoticed. It must have taken a tremendous amount of magicka to enchant the entire castle. Or a truly fantastic number of souls. That was a less pleasant thought.

As she pushed open the door to her room, she recalled one thing that had changed. Where, in childhood her bed had rested, a great coffin now lay propped against the wall. She'd never taken to the coffins as much as her parents had, but that might have been because she hated the dreams, and so avoided sleep until she'd been able to put it off no longer. Vampires could not stay awake forever, but by pushing it for as long as she could, she was generally too exhausted to remember much of her dreams. Even we must sleep the sleep of the dead, and dream the dreams of our master, her mother had told her, and so she did. I'll have to sleep again, but not now.

Her lute was gone, though she could not remember to where, and she felt its loss. How long since last I sang? It was improper, however, for a lady of the Volkihar to do anything as mortal and crass as sing or strum at a lute. We have bards for that, her father had said. And we did, for a time. She couldn't help but notice, however, that there hadn't been any music in the hall tonight. Maybe I can change that, now that I'm back. The thought of all the songs that must have been written almost made four thousand years of sleep seem a good bargain.

Finally, she turned to the eastern corner of the room, a well-worn chair the testament to long hours she'd spent awake here after the transformation. From floor to ceiling stretched shelves lined with books, and even now she could name almost all of them. How many times did I read Morgain's Seasons or the Travels of Torval the Pilot? Even now, she could still recall entire passages of For the Honor of the Queen, a particularly salacious Aldmeri romance she'd read until it literally fell apart. I never did manage to recover the pages where Lord Merial bedded the princess the first time, no matter how much I looked. And I'd changed by then; it wouldn't have been proper for a vampire princess to go looking for another copy. She sighed. Childish things to be put behind her, she supposed, but she did adore a good romance.
Still, as her hand closed around the spine of *Beneath the Halls of the Ancestors*, she was seized by a sudden desire to just curl up and read. To shut away everything that had happened, and lose herself in the adventures of intrepid Ayleids and villainous Yokudans from beyond the far seas of the west. To ignore the summons, the Elder Scroll and whatever he had planned for it, and just be alone here. *I could be home.*

But, she knew that wasn't an option. Her father had told her to attend to him, and so she would. She checked herself in the mirror to make sure she was composed—Lydia had asked her, during a rare moment of companionship from the other woman, if it was true that vampires didn't show up in mirrors, which had been good for a laugh—and headed out the door.

Lord Harkon's study, in contrast to her rooms, was all but unrecognizable save for its location. Lord Harkon seemed to have embraced fully the trappings of vampirism, and so crimson and black paintings adorned the walls and the furniture was dark wood and stone. *Very imposing, I'd imagine.* Serana, though, had eyes only for the lord of her clan and her bloodline, the progenitor of Volkihar and guardian of the promise of Molag Bal. *Or so he says.* She didn't doubt that he had her lord's favor, of course, but that last one had always seemed a bit dramatic. Not that she'd ever tell him that.

Her father was standing over a table strewn with books, one hand closed in a vicelike grip on the Elder Scroll. He raised his head when he heard her enter, and smiled. "Serana. Come in, close the door. We have much to discuss."

*I'll bet we do.* She did as he bade her, standing beside him and looking down at the papers and books strewn before them. "What are you looking at?"

"Our future." He'd always had a flair for the dramatic, but she knew him well enough to recognize the real excitement in his voice. "Despite your mother's…treachery" his voice fairly spat venom, "we are once more on our way to victory over our most ancient foe."

"Who?"

Her father placed a hand on her shoulder, squeezing slightly. "The most virulent enemy of our kind. *Think,* Serana. What has always opposed us, preventing us from our rightful dominion of Tamriel?"

His eyes flicked to the heavy wooden shutters, dabbed with thick pitch, that obscured the window, and she understood.

"The sun," she breathed, scarcely able to believe it. *If we didn't fear the daylight, what could we accomplish?* She could watch a sunrise, walk the streets of Solitude or Whiterun—or even the White-Gold City!—with crowds swirling around her, all without fear of pain or revealing her true nature. *I can…*

Something of what she was feeling must have made its way to her face, and her father tightened his grip, smiling with a fervor she'd not seen from him in…*well, not in four thousand years, I guess, but even before that.* Since the ritual, her family had grown apart—not like we could pretend everything was fine after that—and Lord Harkon's smile, for all that it should have carried warmth, somehow chilled her. "Serana, there is a prophecy. *Our* prophecy, one that will spell the end of the tyranny of the sun." Those last four words were spoken with a strange emphasis, and he squeezed her shoulder so hard she had to bite back a wince of pain.

"Well, okay, then." Serana, as she always had, deflected her father with blithe pleasantries.*The last time I saw him like this, he was kneeling before the altar, drenched in blood.* Shuddering, she pushed those thoughts away. "What exactly does it say?"
Harkon—*Lord Harkon*frowned. "I worry at your tone, Serana. These are grave matters before us." He sighed. "But, you are only recently returned, and so I shall be patient." He patted her shoulder. "There is a prophecy and a ritual, spread across three Elder Scrolls, that speaks of how we may blind Magnus, turning the very sun dark and letting us walk free."

She felt a stab of disappointment. *It wouldn't let us walk free, it would just turn day to night.* A moment's reflection made it clear how advantageous that would be for vampires, but still...*I would have liked to see a sunrise.* Not to mention, the thought of vampires—all vampires—wreaking havoc on the world was a little disquieting. She remembered Movarth, after all. *Not everyone's as nice as I am.*

Instead of letting her worries show, however, she only smiled at her father. "So, how do we start?" Clearly, he wanted her to be a part of this, and it was her duty to obey. "Just go hunt down two more Elder Scrolls?"

Lord Harkon's smile vanished as quickly as it had come. "No. Your traitor of a mother took the second of the Scrolls when she betrayed me, and the secrets held within. Until we find her—or her rotting corpse—we can only prepare." He stepped away, and indicated a map of Skyrim marked with numerous X marks and circles. "The third Scroll lies somewhere in Skyrim, I know, but we cannot find it." He hissed in irritation. "My hope is that with the dragons' return, the scroll that shares their name will surface."

Serana's stomach roiled at the thought of dragons—and Velandryn. "Shares their name?"

"The prophecy spoke of three scrolls. Sun, Blood, and Dragon. We found the first two long ago, but the third has eluded me for all these years."

"And it has to be these three?" Honestly, Serana hadn't even known they could be distinguished from one another. *I'd always though they were just Elder Scrolls. Do they all have names?*

Her father shot her a look she knew well, one that told her to remember her place. "Yes!" Then, he visibly calmed himself, and indicated a small shelf that held a few slim tomes. "There isn't much written on the Elder Scrolls, but I've found that the Moth Priests often name them."

Serana frowned, thinking. "So, there's a single scroll you need, and you know it's in Skyrim? Surely someone knows where it is."

He scowled again. "You think I haven't considered that? The libraries in Markarth and Solitude have nothing of any use to me, and those skilled enough in magic to help are also beyond my reach." He paused. "For now, at least. But for the moment, the only sure way to find an Elder Scroll is to seek enlightenment from another." Another pause. "Or, so say the Moth Priests."

Serana frowned. She was getting confused, and wanted to clear things up. "Hold on. So, what exactly do we know? Not speculation, not something you're fairly certain is true, but can confirm."

Lord Harkon only patted her shoulder, smiling. "Do not worry yourself, my child." His earlier irritation seemed to have passed. "Go, and enjoy being among us once more. I will send for you when I have a plan."

She clasped his hand. *How long since he last touched me as a father, to show affection?* Before her sleep, it must have been years. "Let me help you. I've been out there, I can—"

"When the time is right, my dear." He patted her gently. "Go! See the castle; meet some of the others. They will be pleased to know you." He smiled. "Or at least they will pretend to be. They all
scheme, as ever, but do not let it concern you. You are blood of my blood, as they can never be.”

She rose, recognizing that she'd get nothing further from her father right now. Even this much was extraordinary for him; he'd never exactly sought out her counsel. Still...

"Father?"

"Hmm?" He had already returned to his desk, and the tone of his response made it clear that their familial moment was done.

"Why did you offer the pure blood to Velandryn?" She had expected her father to make him a vampire, true, but the magnitude of his offer had been shocking. Lord Harkon had always jealously guarded what he called their royal gift, and even the highest of their court had not been offered such.

"The elf? He succeeded where so many of my own had failed, empowered by nothing more than a mortal's determination. Imagine what he could do if elevated to our level." He gestured at the desk. "Now, with you and the Scroll returned to me, we can begin to move towards our ultimate victory. I will need an agent unsullied by the politics of the court, one who serves none but me. He would have been an admirable servant, and empowered as we are, none could have stood in his way." He sighed. "A shame he was so foolish, but he has chosen his fate."

"Are you going to hunt him down?" The question almost caught in her throat, but she got it out with stammering. What would I do if he sent out a hunting party?

"No. He could be anywhere, and we must focus on our plans."

"But—" she bit back what she had been about to say. He's Dragonborn, and he has a map to our location. Either one of those would likely set her father hunting Velandryn, and both would certainly spell doom for her friend. My friend? She didn't know where that word had come from, but she wanted to believe it was true. I haven't had a friend in a long time. So, she held her tongue.

"Serana, you will have your part to play, but I won't risk you running errands across the province. He would have been at once powerful and expendable. The strongest of our pieces, but nothing more." He waved at the door. "Like all of them out there. They are more than mortals, but they are not family."

She bowed her head. "Of course, Father." As she left, she wondered if what he'd said was true. Why would he lie to me? And yet, she had the feeling that was keeping things from her, and not just so that she could go and see the castle.

Well, whatever it is, I'll learn in time. After all, she was home.

"My lady, it is a pleasure to see you in my humble workshop. If there is any aid I can render, rest assured it is yours." Feran Sadri had been Dunmer once, and the vampire still had skin that put her painfully in mind of Velandryn. His manner, however, while similarly courteous, was far more servile than the Dragonborn had ever been to her.
She smiled back at him. "I'm just getting to know the important people of the castle; I've been away for too long. You handle potions for us, I've heard?"

"Indeed. Just about every kind you need, though before you ask I've nothing that will keep us safe beneath the sun. I can give you the potions themselves or ingredients if you'd care to try your hand at crafting." He smiled—"I wonder if it's just Velandryn who has to think about them, or if this one's had practice?" "I usually charge a small fee to make sure the others aren't abusing my stocks, but you need only ask."

Unlike lesser Volkihar, Serana wouldn't die from being out in sunlight, though it was tremendously unpleasant. Right now, though, she had something else in mind. "I heard you don't play politics, so I figured you'd be a good one to ask about how things stand in the court. Like I said, I've been away too long." Both Vingalmo and her father's other top lackey—no, I have to call them advisers—Orthjolf had expressed little in the way of an opinion on Feran Sadri, which led her to believe that he wasn't much of a power player. And I don't want to start mucking around in court intrigues. In order to avoid them, though, she had to know how things stood.

Feran, though, just shrugged. "I know Vingalmo and Orthjolf hate each other, but I don't much worry about what others are doing. I have my work and I go raiding; that's enough for me. Ask Garan if you really want to know something. I keep out of politics 'cause I don't care, but he's got a finger on the pulse—pardon the pun, my lady—of the court."

"Garan?" She'd heard Vinglamo mention him, but nothing more than the name.

"Garan Mareghi. Mostly keeps to himself, doing research on whatever it is Lord Harkon wants. Only other Dunmer in the castle, you know." He scratched at his neck. "He's the one that turned me, you know. Came into a cave my crew was holed up, told me later he was looking for some magic ring. Good man, him, and not one to stab in the back." He grinned. "Strange, right? Dunmer from the homeland like him, you'd think he was one of those crazy ones like that friend of yours. Garan's all right though."

Serana was curious about this Garan Mareghi, so she made her farewells to Feran, who just shrugged and turned back to his work. A rough one, but loyal.

She found Garan Mareghi in a spacious chamber at the back of the laboratory and magical workshops. He was seated on a cushion amongst numerous tomes and scrolls, reading with an air of languid unconcern. He rose as she entered, bowing slightly. "Lady Serana."

She smiled at him, bowing back. "Master Mareghi. It is an honor to meet you."

Garan Mareghi made Velandryn look plump, so cadaverous was the vampire. Like Feran, his harsh Dunmeri features were distorted by the ridges that creased his brows and nose, proclaiming him a Volkihar of middling blood. Serana was long past finding the look repulsive, but she still gave thanks that her… purity… let her keep the face with which she'd been born. He wore deep blue robes of some shimmering material that seemed to steal and release the light as they flowed around him, and each of his fingers bore at least one ring. When he genuflected, his upraised hand glimmered in a half-dozen colors. "Please, my lady, just Garan will suffice. You are our princess, after all, and the honor is mine. How may I ease your return to our sanctuary?"

"I had some questions." She gave a little chuckle that was only half-faked. He certainly knew how to flatter. "I've got a lot of catching up to do."

Garan pulled himself up to his full height—perhaps an inch or two shorter than Velandryn—and gestured grandly about him. "As you can see, I've many answers. I hope some of them will be to
your liking."

She didn't know if he had the answers she wanted, but he did have plenty of **things**. The walls were covered in shelves, and there was scarcely an open square inch to be seen. Books, scrolls, soul gems, one shelf of what looked to be urns and funerary containers, and more sat surrounded them. In one corner, she saw a cabinet of ebony bolted with a heavy silver chain, and the doors one either side of the way she’d entered suggested there was more beyond. "Tell me about yourself, first." **Courtesies.**

It seemed to have worked, for though his face did not change, she could see that he was pleased. "I saw your traveling companion so I surmise you are familiar with the Dunmer of Morrowind, but I wonder if you are familiar with the…unique place our race occupies. If I recall correctly, you…left us before the Battle of Red Mountain."

She nodded. "Velandryn told me about your history, and the tragedies and rebirth you underwent." She had chosen her words carefully, not wanting to offend. However, Garan just gave a scornful laugh. "His name is Velandryn? The one who brought you here has the blood of Ashland scum? Just as well Lord Harkon did not favor him with the gift; degenerates like **him** would only sully our home." He snorted. "I'd not trust three words from filth like that."

"He was a priest of the Temple, he said, and never acted without courtesy and grace." She might not know as much about Velandryn's past as she might like, but she wasn't going to let him be insulted!

Garan laughed again. "Forgive me my disrespect, my lady, but your…forgive me, was he a thrall or an unwitting fool? Whichever he was, he was of ignoble and debased stock, and I would not take anything he said as true." He waved a hand, and a thick book drifted off one of the shelves. "I can give you some information on my kind, if you would prefer truth to whatever lies he told you." He settled back on his cushions, and waved at a pile across from him for her to do the same.

She gave it a try, liking the softness but feeling somewhat discomfited by the lack of support. "Is this how Dunmer sit, then?"

He laughed. "The crossed legs, yes, but not the cushions. Truth be told, I stole this idea from another of our clan who…fell afoul of an internal upheaval a few hundred years ago. He hailed from the Bangkorai lowlands, originally, and brought this fashion with him. I find it relaxing."

Serana wasn't so sure, but her mother had been fond of telling her that she should try everything once, so she let herself try to relax. "So, tell me more about Garan Marethi, and why everyone seems to think I should meet him."

"Ah, if only that were true!" He snapped his fingers, and one of the curtains stirred. "I'm afraid I'm just another member of the court, albeit," he grinned wickedly, "one with an interest in vampiric history and absolutely no stake in the idiotic games Vingalmo and Orthjolf have been playing for the past thousand years. Before that it was Aanitur—Vingalmo killed him with fire, you know, it was quite the scandal for a while— and Jasha, who usurped Kron the Bloody and then made the mistake of trusting big dumb Orthjolf. Let them scheme and squabble; I have made myself invaluable to Lord Harkon. And that is why they want you to meet me, so they cannot be accused of trying to seduce you to their own side." He licked his lips. "But talk makes me thirsty. Would you care for some refreshment?"

Knowing what was to come, she simply nodded. "Yes, thank you." I'll need to get used to this
again.

He snapped again, and a golden-skinned elf stepped gracefully out from behind the curtains. Her hair fell free around her, reaching almost to her waist in a cascade of sun-gold locks. A few scraps of black silk theoretically concealed her modesty, but it took little imagination to visualize her body in all of its glory. She knelt between them, her beautiful silver eyes dull and lifeless, and waited.

Serana had seen a couple of the High Elves since waking; Velandryn claimed they attempted to imitate the vanished Aldmer in every way, and if Serana hadn't known the First Elves were extinct, she would have thought it was one of them before her now.

Garan ran a finger down her cheek, tucking a bit of hair behind her ear. "Some may enjoy the thrill of breaking new blood-cattle, but I have had Mintuile here for two hundred years, and I tell you truly, there is no comparison." He raised her wrist to his mouth, turning it palm up and licking it with a dark tongue. "I have shaped every bit of her to my desires, and I pity those without the patience to make themselves a slave like this."

He bit, and the sharp scent of blood permeated the air. Serana went rigid, wanting to drain this woman dry. Marethi hadn't been lying; whatever magics and training he'd used on this High Elf had turned her into a blood slave as fine as any she'd ever seen. Plus, she's gorgeous. It was all she could do not to take the other wrist and bite in.

The Dunmer lifted his head to study her. "Is something amiss, my lady? I had thought her prepared to the finest tastes, but if your time away has given you a different proclivity, I can procure—"

"No!" She quickly grasped the other arm; the High Elf let herself be pulled without any emotion. "She's exquisite, and I was just..." She trailed off, trying to find a good reason to explain her reticence. "I've been too long away to feed without worrying about others."

Garan smiled again, blood dripping from his lips. "Of course, my lady, and I thank you for accepting my humble offering."

Among the Volkihar—Serana had no idea if it was true for other vampires as well—to share a meal was a sign of trust, if not intimacy. She recalled that it had been a way to declare feuds and schisms over and done; to have the two parties drink together from a blood slave. She had no reason to distrust Garan Marethi, and she got the feeling he would be a good...ally to have.

From the moment her fangs pierced the golden flesh and hot blood spurted into her mouth, she was in bliss. Oh, Lord! It was all she could do not to collapse backwards onto the cushions, and she had to restrain herself from draining the woman dry. She raised her eyes to Garan. "I salute you. She is magnificent." There was a voice far back in her head that wondered how the poor elf felt about being so described, but she suppressed it. They are mortals, the cattle meant to sate our hunger.

The Dunmer chuckled. "Isn't she? There is something delightful about using one of the ever-so-superior Altmer in such a manner. Every time I take her, I wonder at how many generations of breeding for purity were needed to make her." He raised her lips to his, and bit into one, licking away the bead of blood that formed. "It is unfortunate that I was forced to destroy her mind."

Serana squashed an off-putting feeling in her stomach. "Her mind?"

"Oh, she struggled mightily. I had to expend tremendous magicka to keep her under control. Once her husband and children were drained dry and their bones added to the undercarts, I had hoped that she would break, but her resolve only grew."

"So, I took more drastic steps. Now, she is perfectly obedient, though at times I regret losing that...
'The look of pure hatred in her eyes as I fed was a delightful counterpoint to the flavor of her blood.' He sighed. 'Forgive me, I'm getting sentimental. Did you have more questions?'

She was glad to change the subject, and found her thirst quite abated. 'Tell me about the work you do for my father.'

As he drank, Garan pointed out some of his more interesting relics. He was on the trail of something he called the Bloodstone Chalice, and he made her promise to inquire with Lord Harkon to see if any of his agents had followed up on Garan's lead. As he explained, 'I don't leave the castle much these days, and the age-old issue with sending proxies is that you can't control them yourself.' He sighed. 'Your mother had some interesting theories on the direct control of thralls, but her journals... I am almost tempted to ask him to let me examine the old tower, but...'

He stroked his slave's cheek, and a shudder ran through her golden skin. 'I have grown fond of this one, and the last time I suggested following up on Lady Valerica's work...'

"So, I'm guessing things never got patched up between my parents." She was still deeply curious about what had happened to her mother, but she'd also noticed the ruin of the door that had once led to her mother's tower and courtyard. I can wait to ask Father about it until he's in an excellent mood.

"I'm afraid I cannot speak to that. I came to the Volkihar long after your departure, and by then Lady Valerica was little more than an epithet in the mouth of the court. It was my good fortune to find some of her notes in the library below, and your father graciously permitted me to continue some of her work." He inclined his head in what might have been meant to be a sitting bow. "There is much that remains sealed in her tower, however, and Lord Harkon is adamant that none shall go there." He lowered his voice. "Vingalmo claims that she has cursed the tower, and any of the Volkihar who set foot within its halls will die in a most horrible fashion."

Knowing her mother, Serana suspected that it was more likely to be a set of traps and gargoyles, but it certainly didn't sound fun. "And Father won't let you get her journals?" Some of her spells had clearly made their way into the wider world—Movarth came to mind, using that shield—but Valerica had a passion for experimentation, and her rooms atop the eastern tower were likely a treasure trove of knowledge.

Garan shook his head. "Perhaps you can impress upon Lord Harkon the opportunity afforded us."

Serana smiled at him. "I'll see what I can do."

He nodded. "In that case, my lady, let me welcome you back once again with even more enthusiasm. Having gotten to know you, my wishes for your happiness are no less sincere, but my hopes for the future are higher than ever before."

She laughed. "You do have a gift for flattery, Master Marethi."

He rose, dismissing the High Elf as he did so. She retreated silently behind the curtains, dull-eyed and emotionless. "Not a gift so much as an acquired skill, my lady. My time in House Dres made me a practiced courtier, even as it brought me to loathe politics. Now, I simply enjoy a bit of flattery every now and then and then to ensure my tongue hasn't withered from lack of use."

She laughed again, though her gaze was drawn to where the High Elf—her name is Mintuile!—was waiting behind the curtain. She watched her family die, and then served as a plaything until her very mind was taken from her. She was only a mortal, true, but it was at times like this that Serana wondered if she wasn't a very good vampire.
Such thoughts, however, were of no use to her right now. "Thank you again for everything, but I
would like to see what else of the castle has changed while I was away."

Garan bowed deeply. "Of course, my lady."

She left him then, and descended the stairs, deep in thought.

Is it just that I was away so long? She'd seen hundreds of blood slaves come and go, so there was
no reason they should be affecting her like this. First Jolf, now Mintuile. I need to pull myself
together!

There were others in the castle who she met over the next few days, but few made much of an
impression. Most were simple underlings, vampires who, despite her father's claims of having the
only pure court in Skyrim, probably had more in common with the scattered Volkihar out beyond
the castle's walls than with her or her family. I guess we work with what we can get.

Of the inner circle, however, there was more to unpack. She was fairly certain that Garan was
exactly what he appeared to be: a powerful old wizard who genuinely only wanted to serve her
father and be left alone. Vingalmo and Orthjolf, however, could be trouble. Both advised her father,
though it seemed at times as though they were primarily interested in tearing down each other
rather than building anything constructive. Finally, there was Fura Bloodmouth, who commanded
her father's warrior host, consisting of some eighty or so vampires trained in arms.

Feran had some sort of seniority, but he seemed content to serve under Garan, and so had
effectively removed himself from the larger power structure. Somehow, she didn't think it was a
coincidence that the two Dunmer—one of whom had turned the other, no less—stuck together, and
she imagined Velandryn would find it appropriate. Well, assuming he didn't die of indignation first.
Feran Sadri seemed to have no interest in the gods of his people, but Garan had made a few
comments that made Serana think he had at one point been somewhat devout.

Other than that, there was the thrallmaster, in whose company she spent as little time as possible,
and his wretched flock. She had seen Jolf now and then, but tried not to think about him too much.

To make it easier to avoid dwelling on unpleasant matters, she had access to the library, and Garan
had done a good job of keeping it stocked. She was burning through the history of the empires, and
found the entire thing fascinating. Velandryn hadn't been wrong about how much had changed, and
part of her mourned missing so much history. But I'm here now.

In between reading, she had time to think, and to worry. I'm home, so shouldn't I be at ease? The
entire time she'd traveled here, there had been that unspoken truth, that things would be better once
she was home. That the wrenching uncertainty that lodged in her gut would be wiped away, either
by her family together once more or simply by falling back into her old life, as though she had
never left.

But I can't even do that, can I? She wasn't sure if her time away had changed her or if Castle
Volkihar was simply different after so long, but things were bothering her that she'd never noticed
before. For one, the cattle. They shouldn't have been anything more than furniture. True, she'd
never relished having to feed on them, but this visceral unease when she saw them was something
she'd overcome long ago.

That High Elf, Mintuile, in Garan's room also preyed heavily on her mind. She didn't doubt that the
Dunmer used his possession for sexual pleasure as well as nourishment, but that should have been
his own business. Not everyone had her…history, so it made sense that Garan would want to use
the slave for that. She was beautiful, after all, and simply a mortal besides. The laws of her father and their lord were clear, and she had no grounds to object.

Still, it feels wrong. She didn't like thinking about that woman sitting up there, waiting to be used. She can't think, but her soul is still in there, isn't it? When she died, would all that had happened come back to her, or would she be spared the centuries she'd spent as a plaything?

Shivering, she closed her book and curled up in her chair. Her rooms were feeling like home again, but…

What would Velandryn do, if he were here?

If the Dragonborn had joined them, had been turned, and then had faced Garan Marethi and Mintuile, she had the feeling that one of the Dunmer would be dead right now. He might not strike at Marethi's face, but he'd know that what the vampire had done was evil, and take action. She still wondered about Garan's hatred of Velandryn's Ashlander blood, but she didn't feel like going back to that room. I'll always have time later.

Always…

She might be here at Castle Volkihar for a very long time, she recognized, and it did her no good to try and place an end date for her stay. When Father wants to let me go out, he will.

She still couldn't figure out why Mother had stolen away with her. The first she'd known of it was when she'd woken to Valerica's urgent voice, and even now she was still trying to piece together what had happened between her parents. Could it have something to do with the prophecy? Her mother had never put much stock in the stuff, but that was no reason to take such drastic action.

Was there some reason she didn't want the prophecy to be fulfilled? That might make sense, especially considering she'd taken both of the Scrolls they'd possessed. But blotting out the sun…

It was such a monumental idea that Serana wasn't entirely sure she could fully grasp it. Eternal night? It would change everything, and the thought of that was a little terrifying.

But she didn't know enough. Father was keeping his secrets, and she had to live with that.

For now, she just had to wait.

And worry.

Serana had rather given up on hearing more of her father's plans in the immediate future—or even seeing much of him, for that matter—so it came as something of a shock when Vingalmo knocked on her door. One of benefits of being Lord Harkon's daughter, as it turned out, was that people announced themselves unprompted after knocking. She liked that.

She'd been staring out of her window at the fog-shrouded sea, but quickly pulled the heavy drapes closed. It wasn't wrong to have windows open, but it was seen as somewhat odd, and the last thing she needed was for people to know how much time she spent thinking about the outside world. The castle is all well and good, but there's a whole world out there, and I've been asleep for so long. She realized she was structuring an argument she'd never use, and abandoned that train of thought. Rising, she called out for Vingalmo to enter.

The old vampire bowed deeply. "Lord Harkon would speak with you before dinner. He is in the Sanctum."
She froze. The Sanctum. She hadn't been back there of her own free will since—no, don't think about it. But if her father was summoning her, and he was there…

"I will attend to him immediately. Thank you, Vingalmo." That one of the most senior vampires of the castle was being used as an errand boy was something neither of them acknowledged. It was an unspoken truth that, for all of the political maneuvering about the court, there were two true ranks in Castle Volkihar. There was Lord Harkon, and then there was everyone else. The past week had seen many people trying to figure out if Serana fit into that second category, or if she was, like her father, above them all. And I'd kind of like to know as well.

As she drew closer to the heavy black door that marked the Sanctum at the castle's heart, she could feel the beating of her heart, and tasted something bitter in her mouth. It's just a room. Just the room where…she shut that thought down before her mind could snap back to that day. She took a deep breath and focused on trivial things. Tiber Septim was the first Emperor of his line. He was succeeded by his son Pelagius, who was succeeded by his sister Kintyra. Pelagius's sister, not Tiber's. Next came Uriel the First, who was followed by his son of the same name. Next—

With a start, she realized she had reached her destination. The doors were, as ever, closed, with a relief of the face of Molag Bal staring balefully down at her. Nothing to be afraid of.

The doors of the Sanctum were not intended to be opened quietly, and their echoing screech put her hair on end. The room within was cast in shadows, as what few windows there were had long since been sealed shut. This is not a place for light.

Serana's eyes let her see clearly, however, and she could easily make out what lay within. A broad hall with a depressed floor flanked by rows of rising steps, and at the far end…

I will be brave. She stepped in, and the doors slammed shut behind her, moving seemingly of their own will. But no, they serve my father, as does all in this castle.

That wasn't entirely true, she amended. In here, in this pit hallowed by atrocity, even Lord Harkon bowed before another.

Today, however, he was not bowing. He stood at the far end of the Sanctum, looking away from her at a great stained-glass window with the image of their god etched in black and red. That window was the only place in the entire keep where sunlight was permitted to shine, and she knew that it was enchanted to remove any hint of Magnus' Aetherial fire. So far as she knew, it was the only one if its type in the entire world, and her mother had needed the souls of over one hundred sacrifices to give it the necessary strength. The sun opposes us always.

Her father turned as she approached, and as he did so she saw the altar beyond. Her legs went rigid, and she almost fell. Her mouth filled with iron and fire, and her head began to spin.

The flesh tore, and she screamed. Her father moaned, and her mother, tears streaming down her face, clutched her hand so hard that the pain almost matched the agony below. Another thrust, and this time the burning became a stabbing—

No! She tried to force the thoughts away, but being here was too much. You Are Mine, Now And Forever. The voice had been like nothing she could imagine, and even now, the memory made her want to do nothing more than return to her rooms and hide. Curl up in my bed, and just wait for it all to pass. But she wasn't a child anymore, and she had no bed save the coffin that marked her as Volkihar. I can do this.

She focused, and the room swam back into focus. I'm stronger than you! She didn't quite know
who she was talking to, but the affirmation gave her strength.

"—paying attention, Serana?" Her father's voice was far away, and she realized he'd been talking to her.

Focus! "Yes, Father. I was...nevermind. You sent for me?"

Lord Harkon waved at her to join him, which she did reluctantly. Every step towards the low stone altar and the jagged fountain looming behind it pulled at her like a weight in her stomach.

Standing beside him, she looked down at the altar, and tried her hardest not to think. I am more than my past. I am Volkihar!

"Does it trouble you, my daughter?" Her father's voice was soft, and when she turned to look at him, his face was almost sad.

She didn't have to ask what he meant. He knelt as well, in the end. "Less than it did."

He nodded. "Remember, we must give honor always to our Lord, who gave us our gifts." He extended a hand. "Pray with me."

The greater court did nothing like this, and she'd never known her father to be particularly pious, but she closed her eyes and bowed her head. As long as she didn't have to look at the altar and dreadful fountain, she should be okay. I'm stronger than this.

"Lord, hear our supplication. We who are nothing will do your bidding, and seek to bring all of Tamriel under your domination. Bless us with your favor, Prince of Rage, and let us become your holy will."

Serana couldn't suppress a shiver, though she kept her eyes tightly closed. The substance in the fountain black and thick and easily mistaken for blood, stunk of iron and fire. She thought she could hear the sounds of whispers, and a faint cold breeze put her unavoidably in mind of heavy shackles binding her hands and feet. Never again!

"Lord of Rape, King of Brutality, give us your favor in the days and years to come! We beseech you as worms before the black sun of Coldharbour to look favorably on our endeavors!"

Worms, are we? Serana wasn't so sure he wanted to be lumped in like that. And what is Father even doing? He'd never been the type to grovel, and if he was trying to curry favor with Molag Bal, a little bit of supplication wasn't going to cut it. So what's going on?

Her father had fallen silent, and she opened her eyes to sneak a glance. He was gazing forward, face stern. He turned his head slightly, and she was struck by the darkness in his eyes.

Lord Harkon had always been a hard man, and since they had first begun to dabble with Molag Bal, he had undertaken actions that many would call cruel or reprehensible. And yet...he was the same man who had her coffin lined with the sheets and stuffing of her old bed. The one who sat with Mother and me that first day, when the dreams came.

It was hard to reconcile those memories with the man who stood beside her, who looked at her with eyes that almost seemed not to recognize her. For the first time since her return, Serana felt truly afraid of Lord Harkon. Why exactly did Mother take me away? She tried to suppress the chill running down her spine, but failed.

Then, the moment passed and it was just her father standing there. "For momentous action, we
should hope our patron is watching, no?" He smiled down at her, but she still wasn't mollified.

*Is that why you were calling yourself a worm before him? What game are you playing? "Of course, Father." She looked at the fountain, and managed to keep her face still. "What is it you wanted?"

"A ship was sighted to the North. It flies the flag of the Dragon, the Empire in Cyrodiil. Garan tells me you've been reading of them?"

She nodded. *Guess I should have known he was keeping watch on me. "I've been gone a long time."

Her father cocked his head to one side. "Has it fazed you? I had assumed—"

"I'm fine." It was part of being a vampire, seeing the world change around you. *I just had it happen a little faster, is all.

He nodded. "Good. This ship left from Jehanna, and is bound for Solitude. One of our court is in that city, and reported a chest being moved under heavy guard."

She shrugged, momentarily forgetting where they were. "So? You think it has something to do with us?"

Harkon produced a scrap of paper with a drawing of a—*is that a butterfly? No, she saw. "A moth?"

Then, she understood. "The Elder Scrolls."

Lord Harkon nodded. "The chest bears the seal of the Moth Priests. What is within or why they chose to move it thusly I cannot say, but this is a stroke of good fortune we cannot ignore. You will accompany Feran Sadri and his team to retrieve the chest, and ensure that it returns to me undamaged."

Serana thought for a moment. "Why would you be sending Feran? Fura commands your host, and Vingalmo and Orthjolf stand higher in your court."

Her father turned to face her fully. "Fura, while loyal, has little in the way of subtlety. Were I to send her, I have no doubt that she would retrieve the chest, but it would necessitate the capture or destruction of the ship and all aboard." He pursed his lips. "While that would provide us with new cattle, there are Imperial dignitaries on board, including several bearing the arms of the Cumberlands of Wayrest." Shaking his head, Lord Harkon turned away to stare off at nothing. "Missing cargo or a few people disappearing is one thing, but the loss of a vessel entire won't go unnoticed. The last thing we need is for the Empire to start wondering if there is something more than raiders on these seas."

Serana nodded. "So we'll be going in quietly, then?" It made sense.

Her father nodded. "There will be an accident onboard to cover our trail, but I want that ship to reach Solitude."

She considered that. "And you're sending me and Feran instead of Vingalmo or Orthjolf because you can't trust them?"

His eyes narrowed. "Your time away has given you a spirit you previously lacked. This is good, but ensure you do not turn it against your master. You are going because I have commanded it." He softened then, and even smiled a bit. "It is not a lack of trust, but I do not know what lies in that chest. Both would try to learn what is inside to use against the other, and I refuse to gamble my plans on their willingness to set their rivalry aside. Feran has been raiding on my behalf for three
centuries, and, just as importantly, he has followed his sire's example and remained aloof from matters political. In the days to come, loyalty will be as important as ability for those who serve us."

"Us?" It had been a long time since her father had named any other than himself as leader of the Volkihar.

"Of course, Serana. You are my blood, and a Daughter of Coldharbour besides." He smiled. "Did you think you were like the ones without, needing to scheme and scrabble for position? No, your destiny is written in the Elder Scrolls! You, my daughter, shall help me bring about the ultimate victory of our kind!"

Serana could feel a blush creeping upon her cheeks. How long has it been since he spoke like this to me? Lord Harkon was not a man to gush with affection, and she decided she likes this new behavior. Now all I have to do is not let him down.

Cirran opened the thick door to find the sky above the Golden Glory shrouded in thick fog. Damn it all. He marched down the stairs nonetheless, heavy footsteps from behind signaling that Ozgrub was doing the same. As soon as they reached the deck he sighed. Fog surrounded them, so thick that he could barely make out the lantern hanging from the bowsprit.

Makeld saluted with just a little too much enthusiasm. I would too if it meant I was coming off of my shift instead of starting it. "You have the watch, then?"

Cirran returned the salute. "Aye. Anything I should note?"

She chuckled and waved at the fog. "Nah. None of the Puffers want to come drink this soup when there's Milto's brew down below." It had been Cirran who'd noted how the Cumberland bankers puffed up like the fish he'd caught as a child when anyone didn't jump to obey them, but it was Makeld and Tuyrian who'd started using the term whenever the selfsame bankers were out of earshot. "Nobody else's even stuck their noses out in hours, and the sailors are off getting drunk belowdecks."

"Soldiers get the good cabins, at least. You ever served as ship's crew?" He'd earned his sea legs helping his mother run goods along the Hammer Coast, though this was his first posting at sea since joining the Legion. Probably thought if they put a Redguard from Stros M'kai on the sea, my pirate blood would take over. Well, the joke was on them. His family had smugglers in it, not pirates. Except for Uncle Jespin, I suppose. And that one time that fat Dominion trade-galley was just sitting there. He realized he'd got lost in reminiscing, and focused on Makeld, waiting for an answer.

The Nord shook her head. "Not a whole lot of sea near Bruma. Why?"

Cirran pointed up. "Weather like this, they'll be keeping the pace slow so they don't hit any ice. Means they need lookouts and not much else. Not so common down on the Hegathan Sea, but any time fog did roll in meant we'd all get proper thrashed." He smiled fondly, remembering. "Any excuse to drink at sea."

The blonde woman laughed. "It's cold! That's reason enough for me!"

Cirran had been transferred aboard in Evermore along with the other Legionaries, and their little squad had been assembled specifically for this mission. While he didn't know any of them well, Makeld at least was easy to talk to. He'd rather have her on watch with him than—he glanced over
his shoulder at the bulk of his partner—Ozgrub.

With a grin, Makeld tapped her fist on the Orc's chestplate. "Take it easy, big guy."

Ozgrub grunted in response. He must be in a good mood. The Orc wore a full-face helm, and Cirran had never heard more than four or five words from him at a time. Most often, he answered attempts at conversation with stony silence.

Makeld waved at Juane Gessil. "Come on! There's ale and soup below."

"Don't remind me.," Cirran grumbled, and Makeld laughed. Blowing him a kiss, she followed Juane Gessil, the smallest Breton he'd ever seen and a perfect counterpoint to those of his kin who grumbled about 'tricky manner,' over to the hatch. With a slam, they were gone.

Cirran blew air out through his nose, watching it steam in the cold. "Damn chilly." Damn Sea of Ghosts. Damn Skyrim. Damn Reachmen making the roads too damn dangerous.

Ozgrub said nothing, only moved to the opposite railing and stared out into the mist. At first Cirran had thought the Orc shunned him because Cirran was a Redguard, and their two peoples had never gotten along. Now, he understood that the big soldier just hated everyone. Probably why he was given this shit assignment.

Cirran was under no illusion about the nature of their little squad, or the vital import of their mission. A team thrown together from whatever dregs they had stinking up the Bangkorai, assigned to safeguard a pack of bankers and a chest that, if it was actually important, would have real soldiers guarding it. Instead, it had them.

There was Ozgrub, strong as anything but without even the slightest desire to cooperate. Makes you wonder why he joined up in the first place.

Makeld, who was capable enough while on duty but far too good-natured to make much of a warrior—and given that it's been more than thirty seconds since she got off duty, she's probably already half-drunk and shedding clothes faster than a scrubhopper does scales.

He had never met anyone who rivaled Juane Gessil for a complete lack of appreciable combat skills, and the fact that the little Breton tried far harder than any three other people he'd ever met didn't make her fumbling any better.

Their mage, Tuyrian, had been born under the sign of the Atronach, and therefore couldn't regenerate magicka. Or so he said. Why someone like that becomes a mage is beyond me. Of course, why anyone would meddle in that stuff was beyond him, but he supposed someone had to.

As for their intrepid leader, Sergeant Isselian, the less said about that drunken sot the better. If the Legion was actually at war, one of our own would have stuck a knife in his kidneys long ago and done us all a favor.

And then there's me. He was good with a blade, better with a harpoon, and could wing a gull from eighty paces with a stone. However, he had what his mother called a free spirit, although the disciplinary officer had termed it 'severe problems with authority.' The way he saw it, it was their own damn fault for trying to do his job for him. They say watch the bridge, who cares if I'm in the guard tower while I'm doing it? And anyone yelling in his face should have known that punch was coming. And even if the Lieutenant didn't see the first one, she should have been ready for the second!

Still, he could admit to himself that there were a few rough edges to smooth out. Maybe it's for the
best I'm stuck up here in the frozen bunghole of nowhere. After this, he'd suck it up and hold his tongue, just so long as he never had to travel north of the Iliac Bay ever again!

A thump from over the edge drew his attention, and he poked his head over the gunwale to see. The fog was so thick that he couldn't even see the water, but something made him think all wasn't well. What bumps into a ship in the middle of the ocean?

"Hey, Ozgrub, you hear something?"

Feran steered their little craft with confidence, and Serana watch the ship in the distance drift closer. A Volkaihar's gaze couldn't pierce all mist, but the fog conjured from Valerica's arts parted when seen through their eyes. She glanced back at the five other vampires on board, each wreathed in grey and black, ready to raid or kill on Feran's orders. Or mine. It had been made clear to all of them that she stood outside the chain of command on this mission, and could order any of them, including Feran, as she pleased. I suppose Father wouldn't have it any other way. She couldn't help but wonder if any of those in the ship resented her for this, but she put that from her mind. If they do, they'd be fools to show it, and Feran wouldn't bring fools on a mission as important as this.

As they drew near the rear of the huge vessel, Feran gestured, and two of the vampires leapt into the water. They swam with effortless grace, and in moments were scaling the wood. They would find an ingress, then lower ropes for the rest. How many times have they done this? Feran had told her the plan as though it were beyond routine, and none of his team so much as paused before swinging into motion.

The vampires' boat was made fast with iron-tipped claws that bit into the Imperial ship, and moments later a rope dropped onto the deck. Feran pointed, and the rest of the team began climbing. Serana was second up, with Feran bringing up the rear. They scrambled through an opened porthole and just like that, they were in. Well, that was easy.

"Hey!" The shout came from the end of the hall, where a man in Imperial armor stood swaying. "Who the—BRAAP—fuck are you?" His words were punctuated by an enormous belch, and he stood there swaying. "I'm a—hic —sergeant of the Legion and I demand you—"

A vampire charged down the hall with superhuman speed, wrapping hands around the human's neck and twisting. With a sickening crack, the Imperial's head jerked to an angle it was never intended, and the new-made carcass went limp.

Serana felt sick to her stomach. He's just a mortal, she reminded herself, but still…

She turned to Feran. "That was unavoidable, but I want deaths kept to a minimum. We're keeping a low profile."

The Dark Elf grinned. "Don't worry, my lady. My raiders have been doing this since the Third Era; we know what we're about." The vampire who'd killed the Imperial dragged the body down the hall, while two more crept along the walls, checking each door. "The accident we have planned will mangle the body just fine, and we aren't using blades. Nobody will know the difference."

She nodded. "Let's be quick about this."

Feran handed her a potion. "Drink up." He emptied his own bottle, and gradually faded from view.

Serana grimaced. Chameleon spells always felt like her skin was trying to crawl off of her bones. At least I'll be able to open doors. Unlike invisibility, which she could cast with ease and gave her no side effects, chameleon allowed those affected to interact with the world around them.
She tested a door, and, finding it unlocked, looked at the room beyond. It was empty save for some nondescript boxes, and she moved on. Some rooms had people sleeping in hammocks and one had a pair of Nords playing cards on a barrel, but she quickly ducked out before she could make a sound that might draw their notice.

She climbed up a set of stairs, finding herself in a better-lit portion of the ship. More danger, but more likely to be near the chest. A Nord in rough clothing turned a corner and strode down the hall, humming, and she retreated into a corner, holding as still as she could. Don't let him look too closely. Chameleon was not perfect, and the telltale shimmer could be seen by the observant.

Fortunately, this one was more than a little inebriated, judging by the sway in his step, and far from perceptive. He stumbled past, and Serana stalked onward. Hearing voices, she peered around a doorway, and bit back a curse.

It was a larger room, well-lit, and in one corner sat a heavy chest of pale wood, bound in dark metal and inset with a heavy lock and thick bronze plate on which was etched an unmistakable symbol of a moth.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the only thing in the room. A pair of women, a Nord and a Breton by the look of them, were seated at a small table, talking in low voices. Serana focused, and their words swam into audibility.

"—just saying, you should go for it." That was the Nord, with a voice that sounded more than a little like Lydia, though her accent wasn't like any Serana had ever heard. "I'd bet you can pass the tests, become a battlemage!"

"Do you really think so?" The other voice was a light and piping thing, somewhere between songbird and cloying candy.

The Nord pounded the table. "Of course! You can do anything if you believe in yourself." Ah, so she's drunk. If the slur in her words wasn't enough of a clue, Serana had never heard anyone spout such nonsense sober. Is anybody on this ship not drinking themselves into a stupor?

Still, as heartwarming as these two were, Serana had a job to do. Quietly, she began to make her way along the wall, doing her best to stay out of their line of sight. Fortunately, I'd wager these two are a little too far in their cups to notice. Now that she was looking for it, the keg off to one side had a tap in it, and there were a couple of mugs on the table. She glanced at their clothing, which had more than a little red on the legs. Off-duty Imperials?

"Hey!" Serana froze as the Nords voice rang out, and she turned her head to see the tall woman peering in her direction. "Thought I saw something moving."

No no no! She could kill these two easily, of course; simple soldiers, especially drunken ones, were no match for a Volkihar. However, she didn't want any more bodies. No more killing. She could tell herself it was to keep things quiet, but she might as well be honest with herself: these two didn't need to die, and the thought of killing them made her stomach roil.

Still, she might not have much choice. The Nord was rising, and if this woman saw her, there would be bloodshed. She moved as quickly as she dared towards one of the corners, but the Nord was stumbling in her direction, eyes narrowed.

"Makeld, come on and sit down. You need to say more nice things to me!" The Breton's voice turned the Nord's—Makeld's—head, which in conjunction with her walking nearly sent the big woman to the floor.
"Whoa, Juane! You don't see it? It was right…" Makeld turned back, staring at the place where Serana had stood a moment ago, "there?"

By now, Serana was several feet away, pressed into a corner. *No more killing tonight, please!* With any luck, the Nord would write it off as a drunken imagining, and she could put them to sleep or remove their senses with an illusion.

Unfortunately, it seemed that a little more than a week with her family had made her forget just how…well, *Nord*… Nords could be. This Makeld was stomping around the room, muttering and waving her arms in something between drunken ranting and what appeared to be a genuine attempt to root out any unseen intruders. *Unfortunately for me.*

Still, even if she didn't want to fight them, there was no way she'd let their plan go down in flames. She raised a hand and concentrated, surrounding the room in her spell of silence, so that any sound made in here wouldn't travel to the rest of the ship. *Now, you two can't ruin our plans.*

Instantly, the Breton stiffened. "Magic!"

Makeld laughed loudly, still waving her arms around. "You hear that? We're on to you!"

The Breton—Juane, was it?—grabbed Makeld's arm. "I'm going to get the others!" She started for the door, but as Serana raised a hand to do…what? *Stop her somehow*…the smaller woman's foot caught on something, sending her sprawling.

Makeld spun again, and Serana knew it was now or never. *I can't be seen.* She sent a spell of calming, one used to incapacitate mortals before a feeding, towards the downed Breton, and the woman's body relaxed as she simply lay there. *And it all comes back.* Two weeks ago, it had been a half-remembered incantation, but her time in Castle Volkihar, among the trappings and knowledge of her clan, meant that much was returning to her. *If only Velandryn could see me now.*

Makeld knelt beside the Breton, shaking her to no avail, and Serana readied another calming. Agitated souls were more difficult to render into a stupor, but this spell was her mother's creation, and Lady Valerica had taken no chances when it came to her magic. This spell might operate on the age-old principles of calming magic used by healers and sneak-thieves alike, but it was more dragon than dragonfly. It would take a mighty soul indeed to resist its effects, and this Makeld, for all that she had sharp eyes, would go down in moments.

"What in Oblivion?" The shout came from—Damn it all! An Altmer in red robes slashed with blue had come into the room. He glanced around, and then approached the two women.

The Nord looked up at him. "Tuyrian! Thank the Nine you've come! There's something wrong," The High Eld, however, did not seem to share her alarm. "Were it not for the spell of silence on this room, I'd assume this was nothing more than another drunken binge, one that has unfortunately drawn Miss Gessil into your sordid world. However, clearly something else is at work, as neither of you have even the slightest talent for the arcane." He arched an eyebrow. "Was it a scroll? Are you even literate, Makeld?" Somehow, that sounded almost…affectionate? Serana crept closer to the chest. *As long as they keep talking, they aren't looking for me.*

Makeld laughed, then grew serious again. "But seriously, something happened! Juane isn't responding, and there's dark magic afoot!" Serana paused, holding very still. That other human was a mage, and he might well be able to find her. *If he thinks to try and detect undead, this become bloody.* It sounded like the others hadn't been detected, at least. *I wish I had some way to contact them.* As quickly as the thought came, however, she pushed it away. *I am Serana of Clan Volkihar,*
Chosen of the Lord! She would complete this mission, and no mortals could stop her. I will make Father proud!

The mage, however, looked as though he were finally taking Makeld seriously, and that wasn't good. He reached into his robes, and Serana decided it was time to act. Pulling on another of her mother's spells, she let her mind fall into a hypnotic trance, and stared at the two mortals who had yet to be knocked unconscious. *No mortal soul may stand before our power.*

And so, it seemed, they could not. Both slumped over – Makeld landed heavily on Juane, and Serana had a moment of absurd worry that the little Breton would be hurt by the weight across her legs. *Not my problem.*

In a way, it was almost unfair, pitting these mortals against Clan Volkihar. *At least these ones don't have to die.* She knew it wasn't a thought worthy of the Volkihar, but she liked the idea of doing this as bloodlessly as possible.

"Nice work, my lady." She spun, biting back a gasp of shock, but it was only Feran, the chameleonic effect of his potion fading away as he swallowed the counter-reagent. "I have to admit I wasn't sure if you'd be a liability on this mission." He grinned, and waved at the chest. "You have my apologies."

"None are needed, Feran." She smile back at him, glad to see someone she didn't have to worry about incapacitating. "Any problems to report?"

The Dunmer grimaced, and rubbed the back of his head. "Only one, and that's my fault." His face contorted into a grimace, and she was at once put in mind of Velandryn—*red eyes on dark skin*—and reminded of how far her onetime companion was—*now it's vampires who keep my counsel.* "I forgot to give you a signal stone." He held up a small smooth rock. "Could have been bad if you'd gotten stuck somewhere."

"Well, it's all right now." Something occurred to her then, and she gave Feran a studying look. "How did you know where to find me?"

He handed her a small bottle. "Here. Counter-reagent I prepared earlier. The crew's guarding the hall, so we should be fine, but sometimes the effect wears off piecemeal if left to its own devices." He chuckled. "Not everyone likes floating bits of themselves bobbing around."

She gulped down the bitter potion, and felt the chameleon roll off of her. "Thanks, but you didn't answer my question."

He looked… *embarrassed, is he?* "I don't suppose we could simply chalk it up to luck?"

"Do you need to be reminded of who I am, Feran?" She knew her father would tolerate no disobedience from his court, and she would do no less. "Are you keeping secrets from me?" She put her parents' steel into her voice. "I won't insult either of us by pretending to believe your lies."

"No! No, of course not, my princess." He bowed deeply. "It's a bit of a secret, but I'd be happy to —"

"Now." She waved a hand, and another field of silence sprang up around just the two of them. "You will have no secrets from me." In truth she was more curious than upset, but this tone of voice worked wonders for her father, and she needed to establish her place in the Volkihar court. *I can't use my father's authority forever.*

"Alright, alright." He glanced over his shoulder. "I make the potions, right? Been refining my
chameleon for a hundred, hundred-fifty years. Part of that, well…” he licked his lips, clearly thinking hard. "My chameleon's effective, but I put an…exception in. Anyone who knows the formula can take a potion—"

"And then you can see right through it." It made sense, letting the ones concealed see each other. "But you keep it only for yourself."

Feran looked away for a moment. "You don't last long, in the court or as a bandit, unless you have something up your sleeve."

She could understand that, at least. "Well, the next time I'm with you, prepare a second dose for me."

He bobbed his head in assent. It wasn't quite a bow, but the meaning was clear. "I serve, my lady."

"Glad to hear it. Now let's finish this up. Load the chest and set the spell." She glanced at the small pile of unconscious Imperials. We might just pull this off after all.

"See? That's a boat."

Ozgrub, looking down over the ship's railing despite the nausea swirling in his gut, only grunted. Of course it's a boat. The question, of course, was what a tiny boat was doing in the middle of the Sea of Ghosts.

"The question is, what's it doing all the way out here? Too small for raiders this far out." He knew that the Redguard had been some sort of smuggler or pirate before joining the Legion—criminal scum—and he probably knew a thing or two about raiders. Too bad he never learned to shut up.

The human, however, had missed the most important part, and now Ozgrub was going to have to explain it. "Boat's empty."

"Well, obviously, I mean—" Cirran's voice cut off abruptly, and Ozgrub was pleased to see that even a thinskin could see the obvious if it was dangled in front of them long enough. "We're boarded?"

Obviously. His grandfather had taught him to think three times and speak once. Nobody knows a foolish thought, but everyone remembers an Orc's foolish words.

Ozgrub only turned, pulling the long-axe from his back. He could cleave a man in two with this thing. Well, probably. He'd certainly ruined enough training dummies, and left more than a few logs in pieces back home. How hard can it be to bring down a raider? He realized that it might be hard to swing the weapon—five feet of wise-grown elm topped by an axe-head of Orichalc and cold steel—in the cramped ships' corridors, but he'd already drawn it. If I put it away so soon, I'll look a fool. Perhaps he could do so quietly. Let Cirran step in front of me.

This was part of why he hated dealing with anyone who wasn't kin. He got so caught up in his own head, so afraid of looking foolish and reinforcing what they thought about Orcs. It was enough to make him wish he'd listened to his sister and courted Maga instead of running off with his tail between his legs. I'd be hunting game for the hearth, living a good life in Orsinium or Gortwog's Fast. Maybe have a kid on the way. Could teach the little whelp how to swing an axe, clean a kill.

But no, he'd wanted to go off and have adventures, to see the world. And they stick me on a ship! With humans! He didn't know which was worse, Cirran's incessant chatter and stories about his time running on the wrong side of the law, Makeld's bizarre friendliness that left him confused and
uncomfortable, Juane's mixture of awe and awkward caution, the sergeant's drunken scorn, or Tuyrian's snide jokes.

Nobody likes the Orc. He'd been learning that the hard way. Well, at least now he had some raiders to fight. I wonder if I can kill them. He'd only ever killed for food before. And deer don't try and kill you back. Bears did, but they were even stupider than the humans thought he was. Think I'm deaf too, way they whisper about me.

He was brought out his thoughts by a rumble. Cirran looked down. "What was that?"

And then his world became fire and light.

Serana looked back guiltily. The ship was blazing in the night; their 'accident' had done its job well by the look of things. She'd dragged the bodies behind some crates, and hopefully they wouldn't die. It had been foolish and sentimental and she'd made sure that everyone else had cleared out before doing it, but she wouldn't just murder three unconscious people. They were just…living. They hadn't done anything wrong.

Glancing down at the chest in the center of the boat, she noticed again the moth on the chest. "What do you think's inside?"

Feran shrugged. "Lord Harkon'll tell us if we need to know." He nudged at the heavy black lock with his foot. "This gives me hope it's something good. Last time we grabbed a shipment with the moth on it, we just got a bunch of clothes."

"So, you've gone after the Moth Priests before?" It would make sense, she supposed, but it also risked the Empire's notice.

Feran, however, shook his head in a negative. "Not on purpose, but Lord Harkon's had standing orders for centuries, way I hear it. We see something with the moth, we bring it back. Garan knows more, but I don't need to." He shrugged. "I know my place in the court; you can tell Lord Harkon that."

And so even the loyal ones play their games. If Feran wasn't an idiot, he did know more, but also understood that her father might not be overjoyed at having that knowledge resting with a lowly raider. "Your understanding does your credit, Feran Sadri." She glanced over her shoulder again. "They will reach Solitude, and suspect nothing?"

He nodded. "We erased all traces, and the bodies should be badly mangled enough to dissuade too close of inspection. The worst that could happen is they file it as an unexplained tragedy, and there are more than enough of those near here." He smiled. "Such a cold and lonely place, the Sea of Ghosts. So easy for a mage to go mad."

Serana, however, had stopped listening. Her heart was in her throat, sheer horror filling her. I dragged them behind the crates. She'd saved their lives, and one of them was the mage. Four bodies weren't the same thing as a single body and three confused humans. They wouldn't be able to tell their superiors anything, of course, but it was possible that foul play would be suspected.

Then, she thought about it, and managed to regain some composure. Of course, it's unlikely they'll think it was a band of vampires after any information on the Elder Scrolls. Even she was having a little bit of trouble believing it. When Feran looked at her, she even managed a smile. "Father will be pleased with us."

The Dark Elf chuckled. "Damn right. We did good work, my lady."
Lord Harkon scowled. "Nothing! Worthless ledgers, clothes, religious icons! We launch a midnight
raid on an Imperial vessel, and all we have to show for it is luggage!" He kicked the empty chest,
sending it flying across the room and smashing to bits against the wall.

Serana watched his rage mutely. She knew better than to interfere, but she did find the…intensity
of his anger somewhat odd. *We've got an eternity to find what we need.*

Some of the books were piled on a table not too far from her, and she picked one up. "So there's
nothing in these at all?" Her father had had a few hours to look over them, and it was unlikely he'd
missed anything vital, but…

Another scowl crossed his bearded face. "Inventories for food, bedding, and seeds. If I was
interested in the minutiae of life at the Chorrol hermitage, this would have been a profitable raid.
As it is? Not a single damned *page* on the Elder Scrolls!"

Serana leafed through the book in her hands. If she'd been interested in how many carts of potatoes
the Moth Cult had purchased from Zehar Tuun in First Seed, she'd have a good read on her hands.
*Kind of worthless given what we're looking for, though.* She put the book back on the table. "So
what now?"

She received no response. Her father was pacing, head down, and Serana knew she wasn't really
part of this meeting anymore. *I might be more than the rest of the court, but that doesn't make me
an equal.* Silently, she opened the door and let herself out.

In the hall, she found Vingalmo, who bowed deeply at her approach. "Lady Serana, I am overjoyed
to hear of the success of your mission. Is Lord Harkon available to receive me?"

She shrugged. *I'm just ready to be done with all of this.* "Maybe. Go in and find out."

The High Elf gave her a tight smile. "You jest, my lady. I shall meet with him later." He fell into
step beside her as she set off down the hall.

Serana said nothing, but Vingalmo hardly let them get ten paces before speaking. "In the future,
my lady, you might be interested to know that several of those who serve me are well-suited for
missions of the sort you undertook. I have no doubt that they would be of immeasurable
assistance."

Serana took a moment to respond, not wanting to give offense but having no desire to fall into
political traps. "I'm afraid you think I'm doing more than I am, Vingalmo. I serve my father—"

"As do we all, of course," the Altmer interjected smoothly before falling silent again.

"*As I was saying*, I serve my father, nothing more. Bring the matter before him if you think he
should change the composition of his raiding parties." Being Lord Harkon's daughter cut both
ways, and not even Vingalmo would dare suggest such a thing to their master's face.

And, by the look on his face, the advisor knew it. "As you say, my lady." Still, he couldn't resist
one more remark. "I would be careful, though. You may not know it, having slept for so long, but
the Dunmer are a treacherous people, and while certainly those of our court who come from that
bloodline would never fall prey to such base tendencies, it might not be unwise to familiarize
yourself with their wicked ways."

She smiled at him, barely even bothering to disguise her annoyance. "*I am* capable of forming my
own judgements, Vingalmo." *And I like Velandryn a lot more than I like you.*
He bowed again. "I seek only to offer counsel, my lady. The world has changed much since you went to sleep, and I wish only to see you take your rightful place."

She shot him a look. "And this has nothing to do with gaining an advantage over Orthjolf, does it?"

Vingalmo, to his credit, only smiled. "I make no secret of the fact that such a brute is completely unsuited to serve in such a high position. If you see things the same way, so much the better." He bowed once more, and then gestured at a hallway leading to the undercrofts. "I'm afraid I must leave you now, my lady. I have a gift I mean to give your father at the evening meal, and while you are welcome to come and see it…"

Serana waved him off. "I'll see it tonight, I'm sure." It was almost sunrise, and she supposed she'd better get to sleep. *Well, to my room at least.* Sleep, well…she'd see about sleep. After tonight, she didn't want dreams.

When she reached her rooms, she very deliberately sat as far from her coffin as possible. She didn't get *tired* like she had when she was human, but there was a *thin* feeling, not entirely dissimilar to blood-hunger, and the only cure was to sleep. *And dream.*

Shuddering at the thought, she pulled a book from underneath the cushions of her chair and sat down, opening it to the bookmark and continuing from where she'd left off. It was a slim tome, with the title *A Dark Elf Primer.* It was a recent book and assumed that readers would have some knowledge she did not—*Exactly what happened at the end of the Oblivion Crisis?*—but it served as a decent overview of the Dunmer from an Imperial perspective. It was a little amusing contrasting the views in this book with what she'd learned from Velandryn. *I wonder if he'd appreciate being called paranoid.*

A knock sounded at the door only moments later, and she sighed. *I guess duty calls.* She wasn't planning to sleep, of course, but it was considered a bit rude to call on another during daylight hours. Given her…unique status, there was only person who would send for her with the sun almost risen. *I suppose we should see what Father wants.*

What Lord Harkon had wanted, it turned out, was to see if she'd noticed anything else on the ship that might be related to the Elder Scrolls. It was beyond odd, he had decided, for a chest full of valueless junk to be transported in such a manner. Serana agreed with him, but nothing had struck her as out of place. A few bored soldiers, some sailors, nothing out of the ordinary.

Her father was apparently satisfied, and dismissed her with a wave of his hand. Serana returned to her rooms, and read until the sun went down. She finished the primer on the Dark Elves quickly, and returned to a book of Falmer poetry she'd been thumbing through since she'd received it on her eighth birthday. *A controversial gift, if I recall correctly.* Some of her father's men had thought it improper for a Nord to have anything to do with the Snow Elves, but she'd found the imagery delightful, and her parents had quietly acquiesced. *Who gave it to me?* It saddened her to realize she could no longer remember.

She couldn't have said exactly how long it was before the knock came, but she was half-expecting it when it did. *Dinnertime.*

The main hall, as ever, was full of noise and dark glee. Vampires feasted, laughed, and generally enjoyed themselves while their army of helpless mortals stood by and served in whatever way their masters pleased. Serana gave herself a little shake as she felt the direction her thoughts were taking. *None of that, now.* She wasn't here to help the mortals. *They are the prey, we the hunters; that is the way of things.* So, when a thrall knelt before her and offered its neck, she bent her head and
drank. Adequate blood. Still, the memory of Velandryn remained. How sweet would his blood have been?

"My Lord!" Vingalmo, whose absence she had completely failed to notice, now entered from the far doors. "I have a gift for you!"

"Oh?" Her father was still in something of a dark mood, it seemed; his smile failed to reach his eyes. "Bring it here, then."

Vingalmo bowed deeply. "Not it, my lord, but them!" He threw an arm out, and another door swung open. From the gloom beyond came—

No. Serana could feel the bile rising in her throat. God, no. Don't ask this of me, my Lord. Don't do this, Father!

The children, five of them in a single-file line, had not been fully enthralled. They walked with the jerky movements of those trying to resist their body's command, and their eyes were flitting this way and that, alive with fear. No! She remembered the little ghost from Morthal. What had been done to her was monstrous. We aren't' monsters, are we? The Volkihar made use of mortals, it was true, but this—

Lord Harkon—Father—was speaking. "A most generous gift, Vingalmo." He wasn't outraged, it would seem. No, look at him; he's not even surprised.

She didn't know whether her father had known that children would be part of the meal tonight, or if he simply couldn't muster the simple human decency to care. This isn't who we are. Her parents had made the pact with Molag Bal so that they could transcend the limits of humanity, to be more than mortal and achieve the greatness they deserved. That was our promise, our purpose! Not this!

Her father, unheeding, gestured at the foremost child. "And how did you procure these delicacies, Vingalmo?"

Serana wanted to cry, to run out of here—I don't want to see this! She knew she couldn't, however. Father already worries I sympathize too much with the mortals. Still, a wicked voice deep inside whispered, children. Do you eat children now, Serana?

She could barely make out a coherent thought. One of those presented was a little Nord girl, no more than nine or ten years old. So pretty. Golden-haired, slender—and big blue eyes wide open in mute terror at the scene around her. Does she know what's going to happen to her?

Feeding on children had to be done delicately—their little bodies didn't hold enough blood to tolerate losing much. She knew that some of her brethren claimed they had a milder, more refined flavor, but she honestly couldn't tell the difference. It had always bothered her, and she'd never done more than reluctantly partake so as not to appear rude. I don't think I can, now.

She saw a little ghost in Morthal, scared and alone. But that was Movarth's work. He was evil. We're—

Her father knelt before the little blonde girl. He stretched out a hand, pushing her hair away from her neck. No, Father, please. You can't.

But, of course, he did. Or at least, she assumed he did. Serana's eyes were shut tight, though she didn't remember closing them. They felt warm, and wet. Am I…weeping? She hadn't shed tears since her transformation. I swore I was done with weakness.
Never again, she had sworn, but here she was. A different kind of weakness, but she had to overcome it. I am Volkihar!

The first thing she saw upon opening her eyes was her father, holding the little girl as he drank. Oh God. She forced herself not to look away. This is real.

Finally, after an interminable moment, Lord Harkon raised his head. A single bead of blood escaped his lips, but his tongue flicked out to catch it. The girl, swaying, would have fallen had not one of the thralls held her fast.

"Delicious." Her father's words were coming from very far away. She forced herself to focus, to not think about what was happening. I'm one of them.

Fura Bloodmouth, laughing, grabbed a boy who was even smaller than the girl and looked, if possible, perhaps more terrified. "Let's feast!"

When Feran Sadri rose, she felt a pang of hope. Maybe he'd denounce them, call this out for the wickedness it was and demand they stop at once. But then, as one of his raiders grabbed a dark-skinned girl and dragged her back to the where his raiders waited, she felt the strength go out of her. He isn't like me. Looking around, she got the horrific feeling that she was the only one who saw something wrong with this.

She heard a yelp, and turned to see a vampire pushed aside by another in more ornate armor. Between them stood another child, and the higher-ranked vampire dragged it away, licking its lips as it did so. Is this what we are? Is this what I am?

But it wasn't. She knew it wasn't, and even sitting her was impossible. She pushed herself up, fully aware that some at the high table had turned to watch her curiously. Her father, down there amongst the children, had not yet noticed.

With movements that felt like they belonged to someone else, barely noticing the halls and chambers along the way, she stumbled to her room, only fully regaining herself as her hand left the latch of her door. Her push had been forceful, and the heavy wooden portal slammed shut with an echoing thud. She collapsed onto her couch, shaking.

This was all wrong. They fed on children. She'd known they did, of course, but…

But what? Was it how casual they'd been about it? She couldn't break down exactly why she was so upset, but something about seeing those children—

No more. She was a pure-blooded Volkihar, given her gift from Molag Bal himself. I can't hide in here while they feast. She could return, confront the court—

And then what? Her father would never allow his daughter to challenge him openly, and she had no real allies. And even if I did win, what would my victory gain me? They don't feed on children anymore, or they just make sure to do it when I'm not around?

She didn't understand how it would have come to this. They had fed on children before, of course, but never with that kind of casual disregard. How did they go so wrong?

Then, she felt like a fool for not realizing it sooner. I've been gone for a very long time. Was it really so shocking that the court had changed? And how naïve was I to think they wouldn't? Still, the fervor in their eyes at the sight of the young meal sickened her. Would I be like that, if I'd stayed? Was I like that, before I left, and I just can't recall?
She exhaled, hard. *Where do I go from here?* Did she walk back out there and—her stomach roiled once more at the very thought of it—*join* them? She tried to imagine lowering her mouth to one of the—no, no she couldn't do it. Even the image was revolting. *How in Oblivion did I ever feed from a child?*

She saw, more clearly than ever, the gulf between herself and the life she'd lived before. *We are the predators, they the prey.* Once, that maxim had frightened her, when she was newly turned. Then, it had become no more than the obvious truth. *And what is it now?* That she was a predator, there could be no doubt, but she was growing less and less certain how she should behave. *I just can't imagine them all being prey.* Velandryn, if no one else, certainly deserved more. Grudgingly she admitted that Lydia as well probably deserved some recognition. *She might not like me, but she has honor.***

There was no knock when Lord Harkon entered, and Serana braced herself for his displeasure. He had never raised a hand against her in anger, but he had on occasion used physical discipline—she had been an unruly child, after all—and the look on his face put her in mind of those times.

She rose, bowing deeply once shed done so. "Father, forgive my—"

"*Your what, Serana? Your rudeness? Your impudence? Your bald-faced repudiation of your lord?*" That last was almost a shout. "*Your absence was not of your doing and you have faced no punishment for abandoning your people, but I will not allow you to continue to act in a manner unbefitting of your status!*"

"*Abandoning my people?*" Serana knew that raising her voice to her father was a mistake, but she was past caring. "*I spent four thousand years locked away from the world because you and Mother had a damn fight!*" His eyes narrowed in warning, but she didn't dare stop now. *I back down, I'll never be able to say this again.* As it was, only her rage over seeing what had happened to the children gave her the resolve to go on in the face of Lord Harkon's ire. "I suppose you all went and decided that *playing with your food,*" she took a certain satisfaction in using the phrase he'd used to chide her when she'd been reluctant to feed, "*is okay so long as it's tormenting some children. Is that it?*" She could feel a sob rising in her throat, but she choked it down. "*Did you all just become evil while I was gone?*"

In an instant, Lord Harkon's face softened, and he was her father again. "*No, my dear, but...*" he sighed, sitting on the edge of the couch but making no move to come closer. Serana saw, truly saw then, her father, the man who'd loved her so much that he cheated death itself rather than leave her alone in this world. "*They aren't...real, you know. It took me so long to understand that, and yet I keep forgetting that you haven't yet learned.*"

She knew what he was saying. "*The mortals?*"

He nodded. "*Just so. Those lives are...torchbugs, beautiful in their way buy ultimately meaningless. When you are immersed in their world, it is easy to see them as full beings, but that is a trap.*" He shook his head, eyes downcast. "*I confess, Serana, that in the beginning it was a fear of death that led me to seek out these gifts. I through immortality was no more than the elongation of life.*"

She chuckled. "*Well, that's the definition, isn't it?*"

Her father laughed as well. "*Yes, I suppose it is. You are like Valerica in that way; I never had her cleverness with words.*" A brief smile stole over his face; it was the first time since her return he hadn't grown wrathful at the thought of her mother. "*In time, you shall see it as we do.*" With a last clasp of her shoulder, he turned and left, though he stopped in the doorway and looked back. "*Give
it time, child. Soon, you'll be back in full."

She sat up all night and long into the day, thinking. Father wasn't wrong, she knew. In a month, she'd doubtless be able to feign being all right with every depraved thing the court did. A year, and she'd join in, no matter how reluctantly. And in a decade, or a century, it will be as though I never walked outside at all.

\textit{That} was immortality, she realized. \textit{No matter what I do, I'll never escape them.}

Except that wasn't true. Her mother had. Lady Valerica might be missing, perhaps even dead, but one thing she wasn't was \textit{here}. \textit{So those are my options? Join the court forever or run?} If she ran, she would be alone. \textit{I know two people in this time, and the one who didn't hate me before probably does now.}

Thoughts of Velandryn, as ever, led her to recall their parting. \textit{Not my proudest moment.} The look in his eyes, something she'd never seen their before, came to her sometimes. When it did, it was usually

She sometimes found herself wondering what spell or craft he'd used to vanish so suddenly; she'd never seen a teleportation achieved without an incantation.

Then, she usually remembered how long four thousand years really was. \textit{By the Lord, I've missed so much.}

But, she'd been given an opportunity as well. \textit{I can see what they can't.} Those outside, those born of this time, missed the threads stretching back through the millennia, and the Volkihar of the court lacked even the slightest sympathy for the outside world. \textit{It has to mean something.} Surely she could use her perspective to…

\textit{To what?} Her father wouldn't set aside four thousand years of planning and isolation because she'd met some mortals who'd been willing to work with her. \textit{He'd have killed Velandryn in an instant, and Velandryn would happily return the favor.}

Sighing, she slid into her coffin. \textit{I'll just...stay away from the others for now.} Maybe things would be clearer if she spent some time alone.

The moment she let her head fall against the cushions, however, she felt something else. \textit{Damn, I'm tired.} She'd let her guard down after days and nights of avoiding sleep, and now it was inevitable. She halfheartedly tried to lift herself from the soft bedding, but she could tell that it wasn't happening. \textit{Damn it all.} She didn't want to dream.

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She was barefoot, and the stone beneath was burning cold. She rubbed at her arms—\textit{they're bare too}. She looked down, and saw nothing but pale flesh. Shockingly pale, in fact. Her skin had never looked like that indoors. \textit{Where in Oblivion am I exactly?} She wasn't in her room, it seemed. Oddly, she had no memory of how she had come to be—well, wherever she was.

Finally, slowly, with a heaviness that seemed to come from nowhere, she looked up, and the reality of her surroundings overwhelmed any concerns about her nakedness. \textit{In Oblivion wasn't far off!}

She stood on a cliff, sheer black walls plunging down hundreds of feet into roiling seas. The stone was black and had no sheen, but the waters seemed to glow from deep beneath their surface. Behind her stretched through a forest of pale grey trees, out of which rose black and jagged peaks. The sky was pale as well, though its light seemed not to come from the sun, but rather an absence of darkness. Thin black clouds moved with impossible speed, veils whose shadows flitted over this
strange and blasphemous earth. *Am I allowed to call something blasphemous if I worship a Daedra?*

Over the sea, a pair of moons squatted low in the sky; one was a great bloated void that drank in the light around it, and the other was a vibrant thing of blue and white, colors swirling, mixing and clashing on its ragged and irregular face.

There could be no doubt where she was. A vampire’s dreams belonged to one and one alone, and Lord Molag Bal’s realm, the Coldharbour, was said to be a twisted shadow of Tamriel. *Guess I’m overdue for a visit.* One could only go so long without a vampire dream, and she’d put hers off for a few thousand years.

Something rose out of the waves, a great black chain that hissed and moaned as it rose. Each link was taller than she, the metal thicker than her arm. It rose to the pale heavens, climbing and climbing into the clouds. She watched with bemusement, slightly relieved that this oddity was all she faced.

Then she felt the ground give way beneath her feet, and she tumbled forward. She fell, black sea and blacker cliffs spinning around. She squeezed her eyes shut. *It's just a dream, it's just a dream, I am a Daughter of Coldharbour, and no evil can touch me in the night.* It wasn’t true, of course, but her mother’s words— *We are Daughters of Coldharbour, and no evil will ever faze us again* —calmed her a bit. *When I open my eyes, I won’t be falling anymore.*

And indeed, she was not. As her eyes slowly opened, she found herself seated at the head of a long table. A table seating, save for her, only corpses. On her left was the great draugr from the crypt where she’d awoken, the light in its eyes dull. She recognized bandits from the road and vampires’ thralls from Morthal. Alva was slumped some ten feet away; her innards spilled out from a ragged gash down her nude torso and red eyes stared sightlessly upwards.

Shivering, Serana rose. *The Feast of Blood.* It was another dream vampires could expect, though it wasn’t usually quite so… *personal.* She wondered why these people—Velandryn had been the one to kill Alva, after all—should appear just now.

Walking the length of the table, she made herself study each face. Some of them could have been anyone, but some few she knew she could never forget. Movarth sat rigid in a high-backed chair, his pale features twisted in a hateful sneer, the regal image marred only slightly by the fact that his head was placed on a silver platter before him. *Charming.*

Next up was—*no.* She squeezed her eyes shut. *No!*

The body of Helgi was not seated at the table. Given its state, perhaps it was a minor miracle that it was even recognizable as human remains. The ghost of the little girl sat huddled over the wreck of her flesh, sobbing. When Serana tried to reach out, her hand passed through the ghost, and she found her voice was silent, so she could speak no word of comfort. She had no choice but to leave the little girl there. *It wasn’t my fault.* Of course, that didn't make it better.

Sitting next to Helgi was someone who must have been a thrall or one of the more pathetic bandits, as she couldn't recollect anything about him, not even if she'd truly seen him before. He was oozing blood from a thin line that began over his eyes and ran down his face and neck. *If I killed you, I'm sorry, I guess.*

After Helgi, she just wanted out. These dreams were never exactly pleasant, but she was terrified of what might come next. One face in particular haunted her thoughts, and the idea of seeing him—
And there he was. Seated at the far end of the table, directly across from her—how could she not have seen him before?—was Velandryn Savani, elven features somber as he gazed into space. His eyes were open but stared without sight, and there was no wound upon him. And yet…

Everything went black, and it took her a moment to realize that she had woken back up. Then, what she'd seen at the table came back to her, and she felt her chest rise and fall, distress forcing her body to take gulps of air that it no longer needed.

She thrust an arm out and sent the lid of her coffin clattering to the floor. She gripped the rim of the wooden box, pushing herself out and stumbling to one of her bookshelves. He had no wound. Wasn't it possible that he wasn't dead? But then why would he have been there? She ran a hand along the spines until she found what she was looking for.

So far as she knew, only one copy of this book had ever been made. It had no title, and in truth, it would be of little use to anyone who wasn't interested in one very specific topic. For almost three years, she and her mother had painstakingly compiled the dreams of every member of the Volkihar Clan they could get their hands on, even going so far as to accost them early in the evenings with demands that they recount the visions of their sleep. The result—aside from a number of people who learned to avoid the Daughters of Coldharbour in increasingly inventive ways—was at the time the most complete work on the topic anywhere in the world. Or so we thought, she admitted to herself. Vampires didn't share knowledge easily, after all, and it was possible another had done the same thing. Still, this should be enough to answer the question she wanted.

Collapsing into a chair, she rifled through the pages until she came to the section titled The Red Feast. Her mother's strong hand filled the pages, and Serana's sketches and annotations sprawled here and there. Order and chaos. Valerica had apportioned sections of each page for Serana's use, and the younger vampire had done her best to recreate the images described to her as well as those from her own experience. Right now, however, she only wanted one piece of information.

There. She ran her finger under the words, the archaic script coming to her more easily than the new Imperial styles used in this age. 'One aspect of the Feast that makes it unique among the dreams experienced by the Volkihar is how it reflects the mind of the dreamer. Guilt, or feelings of intense sorrow and conflict, have been shown to affect those who sit at the table. In many cases, the newly turned report seeing the loved ones they left behind. Some have even seen those they killed, although this seems only to occur when they feel remorse for the killing. Regardless, this dream should be viewed as nothing more than simple reflection, as Lord Molag Bal only rarely makes a presence, and little of import is likely to occur.'

The breath left her in a rush, and Serana collapsed back. She could feel her eyes growing hot. I will not cry! But still, he wasn't dead. No, he might not be dead. Some dreams, after all, were just dreams. And I'll never know.

No, that wasn't entirely true. If her father's plan came to pass, there was no way in Oblivion that Velandryn Savani would stand by and let it happen. So maybe I see him one more time. If that happened, she knew for a certainty that only one of them could walk away.

That thought wouldn't go away. How many of them could I kill? She tried to imagine plunging a blade through Lydia's chest, of snapping the neck of the Redguard sailor woman and standing on the docks of Solitude as her kin turned them into an orgy of violence and death. Of Solitude, full of screams instead of life and commerce, and of Morthal, the old jarl sitting helpless as her city fell around her. And, finally, of looking into Velandryn's eyes as the life went out of them.

She couldn't do it. She began to pace, trying to think of anything other than death and pain.
She stood at the window, tempted to throw the curtains aside and let the sun do its worst. *We'd block it out. No more dawns, no more dusks. That would break Velandryn's heart. What was it he'd said? 'I very much like the dawn.'*

Was this her father's endgame? The world made dark? *Is it even possible?* Even without the sun, Velandryn knew of their location now. *He has the map.* Lydia had a copy too, and he'd sent her away to who knew where. *If he tells the Empire, they could attack us here.* But, in eternal night, the Volkihar might well prevail. *And every clan across Tamriel would rise up as well.* It would take a very long time, but they were, after all, immortal.

She could see the future now. A world of darkness, peopled by vampires and those they let live to provide them the sustenance they craved. *Even without the sun, the hunger remains.* There was no way the court would embrace asceticism. *And every mortal becomes cattle, or a fugitive.* She wondered if they would be a commodity. *As the Ayleids did, we could trade in manflesh.* There would be wars, of course—nothing about vampirism changed *that* part of human nature—and it would be ruinous. *How long until Clan Cyrodiil comes knocking, or Father decides to extend his dominion into lands some other lord thinks should be his?* There would be more violence, more war, and the only difference would be that this time it would be the mortals who kept to the shadows, hoping for their chance to wrest power away from those who ruled.

It was exhausting, thinking like this. *That future…it was so bleak, so…meaningless. It might not be that way.* Perhaps Lord Harkon would hold dominion over all, ushering in the Age of Volkihar, where she ruled as a Queen over some land given to her. *Maybe I could keep some mortals, let them live their lives.* She could be merciful, she knew, and surely they would see that she kept them safe—

*And then what?* That Altmer woman, up in Garan's room, she was *kept safe.* The cattle downstairs were as well, and the children, for as long as they lasted. *That's not who I am, though.* Even as the thought came to her, she dismissed it. *How many years before I become that?* How long could she remain herself, if the mortals were nothing more than livestock. *How long before I don't even regret losing that part of my soul?* That thought frightened her the most, she decided.

*I would, though.* In time, she'd become just like them. There was nothing special about her, nothing to stop her falling prey to their follies. *I've just been away.* And now she was back.

*Sick.* She felt almost physically ill, thinking like this. *That's not who I am.* She didn't want that. *Father would put the whole world in chains.* She wanted to see the Whiterun that Lydia had sometimes described, a city where trade and the chaos of mortal life went hand in hand. *I want to see Yokudans—Redguards, I mean—in their own lands.* *I want to meet a Maormer and the deserts of the Khajiit-land, and see the rings of White-Gold.* She wanted Velandryn to lead her through Morrowind, the land of Daedra and ruin. *I want to see the cities of the Dwemer, and…I want to see dragons, and know the secret of their return.*

She *wanted* things. She wanted to find new things to want, dreams and fantasies she couldn't even imagine. *The mysteries, the secrets, the little stories of every life.* There was a world out there, and she could almost taste it waiting for her.

And she understood. At long last, she knew where she stood. *I want the world.* Not like her father did; she didn't want it kneeling before her. No, she wanted it teeming with life. She wanted Solitude like she'd seen, a city so much larger than her that she could vanish into its streets for a lifetime, learn a thousand secrets and walk away with countless more undiscovered.

*I want the world to tell its stories, and I want to live them.* And if her father was going to end that world…well…
She remembered Velandryn's parting words, and the look in his eyes. It hadn't been fear, but neither had it been hatred or revulsion. He'd seen the beast that lurked in her blood, and he hadn't turned away. *He said I was better.* Better than her father, better than the clan.

*I'm not better than anyone, but at least I know where I stand.*

It didn't come all at once, the decision to leave. Once she'd realized she opposed her father's plan—and, by extension, the larger goals of the court—she first considered trying to change their minds. That idea, however, had lasted for only as long as it took for her to imagine how the court would take it. *Badly. The answer would be, badly.*

Then, she'd wondered if it was possible to sabotage the prophecy, stop her father from getting his hands on the other two Elder Scrolls without directly confronting anyone. However, that would require her to be at least one step ahead of Lord Harkon and whichever of the Court were in on his plans, and she had even less idea than they did about where to find Elder Scrolls. *Maybe the College of Winterhold?* If they were still around, they might know something, but she doubted that even a pure-blooded vampire flying by night could make it to Winterhold and back before someone noticed she was missing.

*Which leaves me with...leaving.* Honestly, she was a little surprised it had taken her this long to seriously consider it. The certainty of everyone in the court that she belonged here had taken root, she supposed. However, once she began to entertain the idea of leaving Castle Volkihar a second time, the pieces fell into place with surprising ease. A week after the incident with the children, she had thought things through as far as she could, and was ready to take action.

She spent the better part of a day with Feran and Garan, buttering up the Dunmer with flattery and asking them a few innocuous but vital questions. By the time the sun began to rise Feran had shown her how to make a tincture that gave vampires a deep and dreamless sleep, and Garan was more than happy to bring down some works on the nature of dragons that had found their way to his library. He considered it a foolish field of study, as he was more than happy to tell her, but that only meant that he had no qualms handing them over to her. *"If you want to read that drivel, go right ahead. I mean no offense, my lady, but lizards, even flying ones, are never going to matter much in the grand scheme of things."*

At that, she had to quirk an eyebrow. "They're older than we are, and it looks like they're coming back from the dead. I'd think you would be a little interested in that, at least."

Garan snorted. "I could show you a hundred ways to bring a corpse back." He tapped one of the tomes he'd given her. *"Look up what Sanivel has to say about the Dragon Cult. They had magic capable of large-scale necromancy, and I wouldn't be surprised if they'd treated the bodies to be resurrected. Fanatics do things like that, you know, and then one mad mage later, a dragon's returned."* He shrugged. *"Or it's a mockery, built from bones and spellcraft. There are dragon graves all over Skyrim, and if you gave me a few nights and some decent tools I could show you all the flying terror you'd ever need."

Serana kept her face as still as possible. *Somehow I don't think that's what's happening.* "Truly, you've opened my eyes," Garan was so pleased with outwitting Nord superstitions that he took her praise at face value, and cheerfully walked her out with the books.

*If Velandryn is alive and free, these might help me get into his good graces.* She had the feeling that, even with their many, many, disagreements, Velandryn might be her best bet for an ally beyond the walls of Castle Volkihar. And if he wasn't, well, there were still the dragons. *And if I'm the one who got the Dragonborn killed, I'll probably need to chip in to help finish his work.*
Upon returning to her room, she carefully tucked the books into her pack. The rucksack she'd chosen was a good one, heavy leather treated in oil and enchanted by Garan for resistance to fire, frost, and the elements. It was of a kind with those used by Feran's raiders, and was more than adequate for her needs. And he was so flattered when I complimented the thing, he practically begged me to take it.

All in all, things were progressing faster and more smoothly than she'd dared hope. One final test remained, however.

When she fed that night, it was from an old and sickly slave, one she'd long since noticed the Court considered distinctly undesirable. She'd quietly changed out his water down in the kennels earlier; the old man was far past being able to do anything more than the most basic functions required of a blood slave. *He can't even speak.* And yet, he served his function admirably.

By the time she went to sleep, she could feel Feran's concoction at work. She closed her eyes, only to open them with the realization that it was night again, and she had no recollection of the sleep she'd, presumably, just had. *Perfect.* It seemed that the potion could be transferred through the blood of mortals. *And they don't even feel it.*

Over the next two days, she managed to gather enough ingredients to prepare nearly a dozen full doses of the potion. The concoction had made the blood taste somewhat…*off,* and she figured that it would need to be diluted somewhat. I *doubt it'll get them all, but some is better than none.* She might be a pureblood and able to travel by day, but it would be far easier to escape without a horde of furious hunters dogging her footsteps. *And so if they sleep just a bit deeper than usual, well, so much the better.*

Those chosen to tend the mortals were not cleverest of the court, nor the most ferocious. When their lady visited them, as she'd deliberately started doing some days before, they were more than happy to give her what she wanted. And if the lady was displeased with the taste of the thralls and wished their water changed, well, they would of course comply. Serana even kindly brought them barrels of fresh snowmelt, which they poured into the drinking tubs with assurances that the slaves—all of the slaves, as she'd requested—would no longer drink the sewage they had been.

*And then I wait.* She didn't feed at dinner, but she made sure everyone else did. Nobody looked amiss, though she noted that as the meal progressed, some of the court were quieter than they usually were. Breath bated, she retired to her rooms, and waited for two long hours that felt like an eternity.

Castle Volkihar was all but deserted during the day. Most of the court lacked the ability of the purebloods to work day and night without pause, and so used the time when the hateful sun was in the sky to sleep. *And so I go to work.*

Her first stop, and the quickest, was the armory. One of the great Death Hounds—she couldn't even remember the name of the vampire who'd first bred them back after their turning, or what long and impressive titles he'd given them—turned to regard her, but made no other move. Other than that, the room was deserted, and in no time at all she'd taken her armor and sword from where they rested in a place of honor on the back wall. *Perks of being the Lord's daughter, I guess.* Both were in superb condition, and as she belted the sword around her waist, a feeling of *rightness* came to her. *I wasn't meant for lounging around a castle.*

From here, things got more dangerous. She moved as quietly as she could and slunk as surreptitiously as she dared; none went armed and armored inside the castle, and she'd have to answer awkward questions if she was seen. *At best.*
As she skirted the westernmost courtyard, she heard footsteps, and ducked into a corner. As she pressed herself into the stone, she heard the steps pause, and then resume. Fortunately, now they seemed to be receding. Still, she waited until they had faded to nothingness before continuing. She wasn't pleased that there was someone else about, but hopefully it was only a thrall. *Or someone going off to bed.* The sun was barely risen, after all.

It might be atmospheric to make an escape by night, but Serana was counting on the day. *Every moment of sunlight is time they can't spend following me.* She had two more stops to make before she could leave, and time was wasting.

Lord Harkon's chambers were the most secure in the castle, and Serana found herself wishing that her plan could have ended with only her departure. Unfortunately, if she was going to do something she would do it right, and she couldn't leave an Elder Scroll in the hands of her father.

Fortunately, Harkon—*a title doesn't matter after what I'm about to do*—had more faith in gargoyles, death hounds, and enchantment than thralls or underlings, and so his door was warded with guardians who failed to stop Serana. *Well, it seems something good came out of Mother's failure to make a spell that could distinguish between the three of us.* Then, with a lurch, she wondered if it really had been a failure. *How long was she planning her betrayal?* All she knew for certain was that the night of their escape—no daytime flight would do for the Lady Valerica—none of the guardian statues had even so much as trembled as they passed. *And so they don't for me.*

Her father's study adjoined his rooms, and Serana could only hope that he'd since retired for the day. *I saw him drink, he has to be asleep.* After all, she'd fallen deep into slumber after a comparable amount. *I'm okay. Right?*

Despite her worries, it seemed that she wouldn't be facing her father now. The study was empty, and a long case of dark wood on the back wall was the last place she'd seen Harkon deposit the scroll. Hardly daring to breathe, she eased the case open, making sure that her fingers avoided the tiny etchings that would stun her and likely alert her father to an intruder's presence. *Four thousand years, and he still uses Mother's designs.*

His complacency was her edge, however, and the case swung open to reveal…

*My Scroll.* She didn't know where it had come from or even what it really was, but that ornate case and faint but insistent feeling of pressure that came from looking at it for too long were unmistakable, and she'd made up her mind. A part of it was that she couldn't risk her father getting all three and going through with this prophecy of his, but there was something else at play. She'd been denying it all through her planning, but facing the Scroll now, she could no longer let it be. *I deserve this.* For some reason, her mother had locked her away with this…thing…for thousands of years. *It sent me to this time, and I'm not going to let anyone else have it!* She'd always had a possessive streak, and it was with no little satisfaction that she slid the case into its place on her back and exited the office.

The hall was still clear, and it was with renewed confidence that she made her way to the thralls' stables. *One more wrong to right.* The blood cattle barely even looked up as she passed, and she felt a pang of guilt as she walked by the empty cells that had briefly held children. *None of them even lasted a week.*

The one she'd come to see stirred as she stood over him, and managed a wince as she pulled him upright. Jolf looked as though he could be the father of the man who'd brought them to Castle Volkihar, with thin arms and a lined face that spoke of days spent motionless and nights serving as blood cattle. He gazed at her with dull eyes, and it might only have been her own desperate hope
that showed her the tiniest glimmer of recognition.

*I can't make everything right, but at least I can do this!* She put a hand to the Nord's forehead, and concentrated. Slowly, taking care not to delve into the truth of his mind, she peeled away layers of enchantment with a surety born of having known these spells from the moment of their inception. There were a few differences from the designs of Lady Valerica, and during one particularly changed bit of the spell she felt Jolf spasm under her hand and worried that he might not exactly have all of his faculties once she was done, but she couldn't stop now. *I have to make this right, at least!*

Jolf gave one final shudder, and then his eyes opened again. This time, however, the dullness was gone, replaced with a look Serana recognized all too well. He opened his mouth, but she clamped her hand over it with inhuman speed. "Listen! You can escape, but you must do as I say! Your boat is docked outside the castle. You need to…" Something occurred to her then, but she shook it off. "You're going to follow me and…" This time, the voice in her head was more insistent. "Follow me and keep quiet! Can you do that?" He nodded against her hand, and she released him, not missing the look in his eyes. "Hate me all you want, but do it later. I'm the one saving you, and this could all go wrong very fast."

Jolf seemed more or less returned to his senses, and Serana gave silent thanks that Clan Volkihar didn't rely on seduction as the vampires in Morthal had. Brute magic was a quick and easy method to create low-level slaves, but it could be undone, and the victims would be themselves again. *If he'd been taken by Alva or Movarth, he might well have tried to turn me in out of some misguided love. Love, false love, and hate. The vampire's gifts.*

He also seemed able to follow well enough, though Serana suspected that once the terror and desire to be free wore off, he'd be an absolute mess. *Right now, though, I need him to sail.*

First, though, there was that voice in her head to take care of. *It wasn't my fault,* she tried to tell herself, but she couldn't just let it be. Sighing, she turned towards the laboratory and library, and the rooms of Garan Marethi.

Feran was nowhere to be seen, and Garan's coffin was tightly shut. With a small shudder of relief, Serana drew back the curtain that hid the far corner of the room, as well as her target.

"Mintuile." She wasn't certain if was her name or Serana's voice that did it, but the Altmer looked up with smooth nonchalance. She was still dressed in those wispy silks, though now she had a chain of silvery metal around her neck, just tight enough to dig ever so slightly into that smooth skin. The effect was horrifically erotic, and Serana forced herself to stop thinking in such a way. *She's been turned into a piece of meat for Garan, and she needs my sympathy, not my lust!*

In truth, lust had been a scare emotion in her since the night of the ritual, but even the faint stirring she felt here seemed a betrayal of the Altmer. She was here to help this poor woman. *The only way I can.*

There was no chance of removing the shackles on Mintuile's mind as she had for Jolf. Garan had spent somewhere between decades and centuries turning her into a tool without even a glimmer of defiance, and Serana doubted that there was anything left of the true Mintuile in there. *I'm doing her a kindness.* She brushed a strand of hair out of those gold eyes, so different from her own, and placed a gentle kiss on her unlined brow. *May your soul find joy in the realms beyond.*

Mintuile's neck was slender, and Serana had little difficulty closing her hands around it. Only the slightest pressure was needed to close off the Altmer's airway, and when Serana tightened her hands ever so slightly, the mortal's golden flesh took on a reddish pallor. *Make it quick.* A twitch of
her wrists, and a *snap* as her neck broke, and Mintuile's body went limp. Serana released it, and the woman who had for so long been a slave slumped to the ground. *It's done.*

She remembered Jolf, standing mutely behind her, just as the Nord's eyes widened and he opened his mouth once more. She slammed her hand back into place, barely remembering not to use her full strength lest she smear him against the bookshelves. "Scream, and we're both dead!" Her voice was a harsh whisper.

She dragged him into the hall, and spun him around. "Hate me later! We're going to your boat, now! Can you sail?"

He nodded, eyes wide, and she let him go. "Follow me, and for the love of your Divines, keep quiet."

She led him through more shadowed corridors, shuttered against the sun outside. *We're almost there.* There would be a thrall in the main entrance and perhaps one of the Volkihar Guard, but there was a small door leading from one of the storerooms to under the bridge, only able to be opened from within, that she was counting on. *It was here when my father took the castle, and I'd wager most of the court doesn't know—*

"Lady Serana." There, in the storeroom, stood Feran Sadri, hand on the hilt of his sword. His eyes were bright, but his face was twisted with a scowl. "I had hoped it would be another I found here."

Serana froze, all of her plans skidding to a halt. She couldn't move for trying to figure some way out of this situation. Jolf too seemed paralyzed, though she suspected that he was simply terrified to budge. She had to get them out of here, and hope against hope that Feran hadn't alerted anyone else.

She forced a smile. "How'd you know I'd be here?"

"You think I wouldn't recognize the taste of my own concoction? Clever, filtering it through the cattle like that. Took me months to think of using it that way." A grin, through gritted teeth. "Put an enemy to sleep, and in goes the knife."

*Keep him talking.* "I thought you and Garan didn't play politics." She strolled casually towards a table pushed against one wall. *Keep him looking at me.* Hopefully Jolf would be clever enough to get clear. There was no way she could subdue him if she had to keep a mortal safe as well. *Not when we're all stuck in here.*

It seemed to work, as Feran snarled and turned away from Jolf to glare at her. *"He* might have that luxury, but *I* wasn't *given* anything! Captain of the raiders, you think that was a gift for good behavior? Master of Alchemy, just handed to me? Princess Serana might get what she wants just by asking, but I've scraped and schemed for every ounce of my status!"

She smiled at him, trying to make it as smug and infuriating as possible. She was a bit hurt that he hadn't really thought her a friend, but it was her own fault for forgetting what kind of place this was. *No friends in the court, just allies and everyone else.*

"And?" She stepped closer while Jolf, finally catching on, leaned towards the door and very carefully took a single step. *"What's next for Feran Sadri?"*

He chuckled. *"I'd thought you'd be my path to better things. No allies, could have used you."

A shrug. *"Shame you're a traitor. Still, I'll need to keep you alive. Might look bad if I present Lord Harkon with his daughter's corpse."

A smile, eerily similar to one of Velandryn's practiced grins,
stretched across his face, and he licked his lips. "Think he'll let me have a taste before he throws you in a cell for stealing his Elder Scroll?"

Serana pushed aside emotion. *Now or never.* Feran's pride and desire to be the one to bring her in could be his undoing, but she had to do this perfectly. *Can't reach for my sword; I'll have to do it bare-handed.* She'd have to take him out with a single blow, but he was probably expecting that. *I'm a pureblood, but he's been fighting for centuries.*

Feran had apparently tired of leering at her. "Nothing to say? Come on then. Go quietly and Lord Harkon might even let you see the stars again someday. You—"

She lunged, as fast as she could, straight towards him. To his credit, he had his hand on his sword and had half-drawn it in the quarter of a second it took her to close the gap and drive her fist into his throat. His head snapped back, and had he been mortal the impact would doubtless have killed him. However, a Volkihar would only be dazed. Her second blow was a kick to his gut that sent him into the wall so hard that the stone around him became a spider's web of cracks. He staggered forward, reeling, and Serana hit him one time more, a final blow with the weight of her whole body that sent him to the ground, and this time he stayed.

It was over within two seconds, and Serana was seized with a sudden desire to end Feran where he lay. *Make sure he can't come after me.* But there had been enough death tonight, and so she simply left him lying there, beaten but not near as broken as he could have been. "Give thanks I'm not you, Feran. And tell my father I'm done with this place." Jolf emerged from the doorway, face pale and drawn, and she opened the secret passage—which, apparently, quite a few people knew about—and motioned him in. *And hopefully nobody else was as observant as Feran.*

Feran coughed, blood spattering the floor. "Leave, you're damned forever." Each word sent more red flecks to the floor. "The Scroll—"

"Is mine!" She knew she had to go, but she wanted this heard. "You want it, come and take it from me." She leaned over him, making sure he could hear. "What's happening here is wrong, and I won't be a part of it." She kicked him once more, and this time she heard the breaking of bones beneath her boot. *That was for the children.*

"You'll," he coughed again, and Serana had no doubt that he was in excruciating pain, "fail." It was almost admirable, how doggedly he kept on speaking. Were he mortal, he would already have succumbed to his wounds. "Our time comes, and you...cannot stand against us."

*You're better than this.* She smiled down at him. "I'm not the one on the floor." She slid into the passage, shutting the door behind her. *Time to be gone.*

The sunlight was tempered by clouds overhead, but it was still unpleasant, and she pulled her hood up over her head as she stepped out from under the bridge. *Not the worst sacrifice I'll have to make, I'm sure.* Jolf was on the ship and she wondered how long he would have waited before sailing away without her. Fortunately, she didn't need to find out, and hefted her pack onto the boat before jumping aboard herself. "Go!"

The Nord didn't need to be told twice, and soon they were skimming through the fog. No magic stopped people from leaving Castle Volkihar, and Jolf needed no help heading east. Still, she felt the need to gesture onwards, perhaps just to feel slightly less useless. "Solitude, I think." She tried a chuckle. "No doubt you'll be happy to be back."

She wanted to bite back those words the moment they came out, and Jolf shuddered. "They can't find us, can they?" His voice was desperation and rage and impossible pain. "They can't...he was
"You'll be safe." She wasn't lying, so far as she knew. They might want to hunt down and kill Jolf for seeing their castle and escaping, but she doubted they'd be able to find him in Solitude. And they're probably going to be looking for me with a lot more vigor. "Just maybe don't go on the North Sea for a while." She chuckled again, though it wasn't funny. What's wrong with me?

Jolf shuddered again, arms over his chest. "What they did...what you did..."

She sighed, and sank onto one of the benches. "We're vampires. You were enchanted, made to feed us. I'm...I'm sorry. Truly. I didn't think it would happen. You were supposed to take Velandryn back with you, and...I didn't mean for it to go like this."

"Why'd you kill the other elf? The one who came with you?" Jolf didn't sound accusatory, but rather as though he was trying to puzzle something out.

Serana, however, was honestly confused. "Who? Feran? He tried to stop us. And I didn't kill him. Maybe I should have, but I don't want another death on my conscience."

"No, Velan. That was him back there right? The Dark Elf."

"No, Velandryn escaped." She tried to figure out why he was getting the two Dunmer mixed up. "I don't know where he is." Then, she realized something about the unworldly Nord. "Do they look the same to you?"

Jolf shrugged. "Grey skin, weird eyes. Does it matter?"

Serana bit back a sharp retort; mindful of who she was talking to. He's not at his best right now. Instead, she looked out into the fog. "Velandryn teleported away. I don't know to where."

Jolf only shuddered again. "Glad he got away. Worse than dying, being there." He managed to glare at her, but there was too much pain in his eyes for it to bite the way he intended. Instead, he only managed to send her into another spiral of guilt.

He did as I asked, and his reward was to have his mind ripped out of his control. Instead of his home, he got to be a slave. I freed him, but how far behind does that make me?

No matter what Velandryn had said, she wasn't good. They all hate and fear vampires, and they're right, aren't they? Everything we touch becomes monstrous.

But he hadn't said good. She realized. You're better than this. She wasn't certain that he was right, but still. It's a lower bar, if nothing else.

As the day wore on and they passed from fog to clear sky, she thought on that word. Better. It was obvious what he'd meant by it—your father is a literal monster who's about to try and forcibly drain the blood from my body, and you manage to not be quite as terrible as he is—but the words had stuck with her, and she wanted to understand why.

I'm better than this. The way she saw it, this was everything around her at Castle Volkihar. She was better than them, than Garan and Feran and her father, and that meant something. That's where I can start. She was running away from the only people in Tamriel who were like her, and she knew why. I can't accept what they've done, can't support their evil.

I'm better.
She still didn't fully believe it, but that was an issue for later. Jolf was nodding off even where he stood—either she hadn't quite managed to purge his system of every spell laid upon him, or the stress of their escape was a bit fatiguing—and she wasn't much in the mood to make port and let the Volkihar catch up to them. So, she got a quick lesson on how best to keep the boat headed more or less east, and sent him to the back of the little craft top get some shuteye. Night would be here soon enough, and she wanted him well-rested for the time when the Volkihar could conceivably hunt them down.

Suddenly, she regretted not having taken the time to sabotage her clan's other ships in some way. Feran's raiders or Fura's guards might well be on their tail already; no doubt they could move in some limited capacity even by daylight. *We have to keep moving.* Once they reached Solitude they should be okay, but for now they were terribly vulnerable. So, she held the till as Jolf had told her, and kept the setting sun just to the right of their stern until it vanished, and then pointed the prow so that the distant shore stayed just barely in view.

As Jolf slept, she considered his fate. He might well be hunted if he came face-to-face with one of the Volkihar, but, as she'd thought earlier, it was unlikely that any would care enough to actually track him down. *When we reach Solitude, I can let him go.*

*And then what?* Her treacherous conscience, it seemed, wasn't quite done with her. You dragged him north, let him get captured and enslaved, fed on him—we can't forget that you did that, can we? —and now you just want to set him free to wrestle with nightmares and terror for the rest of his life? He's a tool to you, just like he was to your father.

The sad thing was, Serana wasn't entirely sure that voice was wrong. She wanted so badly to see Jolf to Solitude and walk away, secure in the knowledge that she'd done the right thing. *Get on with my life, and leave him to his.*

Her tutors had taught her the classic ethical paradigms, of course, but she didn't much feel like trying to reason her way to a conclusion right now. *I just want to know that I'm doing the right thing.* If she was being honest, she wanted someone to tell her that. *Tell me that I'm a good person, that all of the horrible things in my past don't matter because I helped out this one poor fool.*

*Right.* No matter what she wanted, she was a monster. *Mustn't forget that.* She had, for a while, when traveling with Velandryn. *And back at the castle, I almost fell into their way of thinking.* But she'd avoided that temptation.

*And here's my reward.* Stuck on a boat with a half-broken Nord who despised her. Not to mention a mind as full of doubts as it had ever been, and the near certainty that she had at most one person in the world who might be willing to help her. *And if Velandryn's dead...* well, she just had to hope he wasn't. *Or else I'm looking at a long and lonely road, keeping the Scroll out of my father's hands.*

She'd given some thought to what she could do if, as she feared, Velandryn was either dead or unwilling to help her. *And that second one's not unlikely, especially given how we parted.* She wasn't certain if she should approach someone powerful—*perhaps the Moth Cult?*—for aid, or if she'd be better off to vanishing into some remote village in Cyrodiil or Hammerfell where the Volkihar would never find her or the scroll. *And I'd just have to keep it up forever.* That was the problem with outwaiting immortals.

Jolf awoke, taking the tiller again, and Serana wrapped her arms around herself as she considered the future. *It might be for the best, vanishing.* She hurt people when she was around them, and some dim and inhospitable cave would make sure she never put anyone else in danger again.

*And how many more children die because the court wanted a celebration?* If she was going to
hide, she had to acknowledge that she'd be letting her family so as they pleased. *Even if Father's plan doesn't come to fruition, they'll still be there.*

It seemed as though she was between a hammer and an anvil, and the pounding of her thoughts was almost more than she could bear. *First, get to Solitude.* Once Jolf was safely ashore, and she'd done what she could to atone for... what her family had done, then she could worry about the future.

Over the next two days, she tried to follow her own advice. She studied sky and sea at night, admiring the Aurora overhead and spying on the distant shore to the south. There was no sign of anyone following them, though she admitted to herself that they might well simply be too far behind to see. Jolf dragged a line through the water and pulled up a fish every now and again, which he ate raw, and once he even offered her a piece, though she demurred. He would not, however, meet her eyes even once through all that time.

When she saw the lighthouse where she'd told Velandryn the history of Haafingar, and he'd laughed with her about what it must feel like to walk in her boots, she felt a lump in her throat that hadn't been there a moment before. *He isn't dead.* She simply couldn't believe that Velandryn Savani, who'd apparently planned out not only how to return a vampire to her clan but also how to leave them all looking like fools as he teleported away, would just go and die. *He's bound for High Hrothgar, as he said he would be.* When she found him—

*What?* She couldn't think past that point. She'd have to talk fast, no doubt, lest he attack her or denounce her as a vampire to any who might be nearby. *He probably hates me.* Velandryn had an agile mind and was capable of great kindness and perception, but he also had tremendous passion and a temper to match. There was no way he'd just accept her walking back up to him and asking for his help, not with the way they'd parted.

*I can figure that out once I reach Solitude.* One thing at a time, after all. She gazed up at the magnificent lights that had erupted above them, and sighed. Once she was done with Jolf, she could worry about her onetime travelling companion, and how best to get back into his good graces. *For now, though, nothing to do but sail.*

Approaching Solitude from the north was very different than it was from the south, though no less impressive. Rather than endless dockyards, it was sheer cliffs and fortifications that rose out of the afternoon fog. Jolf too, though somewhat groggy after four days of intermittent sleep at sea, stared upward, though Serana was forced to admit he might simply be glad to be home.

As they approached the vast archway that would lead them to the endless docks below the city, a ship resolved itself from the mist and pulled alongside. Long, slender, crewed by a dozen or so men pulling at oars and fussing over a furled sail, it bore an Imperial banner atop its mast as well as a wolf pennant that had to represent the jarl of Solitude. Aboard, six soldiers watched them, and one raised a hand in greeting.

"Welcome back! Not much of a catch, by the look of things!"

*Of course, they think we were fishing.* They had to look ragged enough, Serana having hidden her armor under layers of tattered grey cloth. Just because she didn't get cold didn't mean she had to advertise that fact, and she'd rather not answer questions about her style of armor if she could help it.

Jolf nodded, grunting, and the guards passed them by. For a moment, Serana wondered at the lax security, but a moment's reflection made it clear. *Even if we were Stormcloaks, it's more trouble than it's worth to try and search every boat coming in.* She'd seen the docks below Solitude, and
there was no way that two agents, no matter how dedicated, could make much of a difference in that chaos. *I'd wager the palaces up over the arch are a different story, though.* That Solitude had palaces beyond count, she did not question. It was simply a fact, and she decided then and there that the first thing she'd do once she'd seen Jolf off was head up into the city. *One quick look at the... Blue, I think that river-captain called it, and then I can be on my way.* She'd dreamed of this city since it was barely more than a war camp; she could take a day to walk its streets.

The docks were well lit in the evening light, and music drifted out over the water. Serana could make out shapes that looked as if they were dancing farther up, and too many buildings were festooned with torches for a normal night. *What are they up to?*

The moment their ship pulled into a berth, tension bled out of Jolf and Serana saw, for the first time, the man she'd met in Solitude. *Still wary, still angry, but he might be okay.*

The look he gave her, however, was not one of strength. "Thank you for helping me, but I never want to see you again." His accent couldn't disguise the fear in his words, nor could his downcast eyes conceal their pain. *He's terrified.* She had a hard time blaming him, however.

She reached out a hand, though she didn't know exactly what she was going to do with it. "I believe there's some money you're owed—"

"Just go!" He had flinched back as though her hand would burn him, and she withdrew, unsure of what to say. Finally, after a long moment, she turned away. *If there's nothing I can say, maybe I should just go.*

She had left everything—except the Elder Scroll, of course, which was wrapped and strapped in place on her back, just like before—in the storage compartment of the boat, and she hadn't intended to do anything more than give him a moment alone before returning to make her final amends and departure. However, the lights and sounds from farther in had caught her attention, and she was wandering away before she even realized what she'd done. *I'll be back in a moment.* A festival in Solitude was something out of a dream, and she just wanted to see what was around the corner.

*I'll only be a minute...*

Serana had lost track of both time and place, so caught up was she in the revels. Someone had told her that this was the Feast of Hearthfire, and then pressed a comically large mug of mead into her hand. She had little taste for alcohol, but didn't want to appear rude, so she sipped and made appreciative noises as the man told her about how they celebrated the coming winter each year, and how the jarl had given her blessing for the city to feast and be merry even in this trying time. "She's a fine one, is Jarl Elisif. Up there in her palace, never forgetting about the common folk."

Serana nodded—based on what she'd heard, the woman's heart was likely in the right place if nothing else—but made her farewells when the man took a little too keen an interest in her. She didn't mind saying she was new to the city, but anything beyond that made her acutely uncomfortable. So she made her farewells, and headed up the hill, hoping to see more new things. *Nothing standing in my way now!*

"Wow, you're pretty!"

The voice was high-pitched enough that Serana turned with a smile rather than a scowl for whatever man was trying to catch her interest, and indeed, it was a little girl, no older than seven or eight, who stood looking at her from a doorstep. "Thank you so much." She turned to go, but the girl's next words stopped her in her tracks.
"My momma's weaving flower crowns! You should buy one!"

Flower crowns? No story of idyllic country life was complete without one, but she'd never considered that they might be real. *Mother wasn't exactly the sort to make them, and the cold meant the commoners never had flowers in abundance.* Now, though, faced with the imminent prospect of actually having one of her own, she couldn't resist.

Three minutes later, she was the proud owner of a wreath of white flowers, and the little girl's smile as she placed it on her head—the child has insisted it had to be white, since "your hair is so black!"—sent a strange feeling through Serana. Suddenly, this girl was standing before her father, and Lord Harkon's pale hand reached out to stroke the girl's cheek—

Serana only realized that she'd moved when the girl gave a cry of shock. The wreath hung over her eyes, and she was standing now, a good ten feet behind where she'd been kneeling. *I'm not in the castle. This little girl was in no danger. This is the Hearthfire Festival, and nobody's going to harm her.*

Smiling, she reached out to the girl, who forgave her in an instant and ran up to her, laughing and asking how she'd moved so fast. Her mother, fortunately, was busy convincing a man to weave flowers into his beard, and didn't seem to have noticed anything. Serana pressed a few coins—she'd made sure to bring along coinage from this age when she fled—into the child's palm, and made her promise to be safe. The girl agreed happily, and moments later Serana was surrounded once again by strangers.

A trumpet sounded nearby, and when she turned she saw two dark-skinned Redguards dancing and whirling around each other as a watching crowd cheered. Each man bore a curved sword in one hand, and the dance seemed to involve getting a blade as close as possible to the other without actually striking. After a moment, Serana realized that she wasn't sure if it was a choreographed dance or a genuine contest. The crowds was treating it as a fine show, but the air between the two held the tension of battle.

Watching them, she wondered at the history of their people. *When I left, the Yokudans were far away, barely more than legends.* It was strange to think of their descendants living among other humans. *Well, times change, I suppose.*

She watched for a moment longer, but left before anything could go wrong. *No need to tarnish this night with blood.* Besides, she wasn't sure she wanted to be around the stuff right now. *It might be a while before I can feed again.* That was yet another part of her plan that she hadn't fully thought through. *Maybe I can find someone who'll do it willingly.* That was a long shot, however. *First things first.* She needed to get back to the ship, gather her things, and bid a final farewell to Jolf.

She got a sidetracked a few more times on her way back to the docks. Once, a cat-man—*They're called Khajiit, remember?*—offered to let her play a game in which she could 'win all the coin your heart desires!' Somehow, she doubted that was true. More than one group offered to let her join them, apparently offended at seeing her walking alone. If any were put out by her eyes or skin, both of which she had no doubt were verging on luminescent under the night sky, they hit it well.

She refused every offer—*I really need to get back to Jolf*—but when she heard the sound of familiar music coming from one tavern, she had to turn to see if her ears were playing a trick one her. *No, that's definitely The Dragonborn Comes.* Even when she was alive, the song had been ancient, and she supposed that given the current climate it wasn't shocking that people would want to hear it. She drifted closer, listening.

"*It's an end to the evil, of all Skyrim's foes!*" The singer had a decent voice, but her lute playing
was… off, somehow. What's she doing wrong? Serana pushed through the crowd for a closer look, and peered at the bard with a keen eye. She'd spent quite a long time learning to play the—

**What in Oblivion?** The lute had *eight* strings on a neck with fretting unlike any she'd ever seen, and the body was *fluted*, though whether the adornment was purely cosmetic she couldn't tell. Regardless, she was fairly itching to snatch the instrument out of the mortal's hands. *Easy, Serana.* Clearly someone had designed a new kind of lute in the last four thousand years, and even though she had plenty of other things to worry about, this seemed a lot more fun.

"*Beware, beware the Dragonborn comes!*" that last line was shouted back to the singer by two dozen or so patrons who seemed to think that enthusiasm was the better part of musical ability. *Here and now, they might be right.* Her old tutors would have had fits at their singing, but this crowd was enjoying itself tremendously.

With that, she was lost. The next songs were unfamiliar to her, but seemingly favorites of the crowd. One was some sort of Imperial anthem, all about killing Ulfric and driving out the Stormcloaks; while the next was a love song just like a hundred others she'd heard. The one after that, though, was a ballad of the classical style, some twenty stanzas long, telling the tale of a Jarl Aldra who'd beaten back a Dunmer invasion. Or, as the bard put it, "*Broke the tide of Dark Elf rage upon her shield-wall.*"

Serana loved books for what they were, but music would always be in her soul. Listening now, she felt the years falling away, and stood with Aldra and her shield-thanes at the shattered gates of Morvunskar. She could see the vicious Dunmer, who'd written profane devotions to their Daedric masters on their armor with the blood of the fallen.

"*See their war-banners whip, hear their battle-Thu'um break, see the brave sons of Skyrim, see them fight 'gainst the fire!*" The major chords evoked heroism and desperation, and the bard's voice soared as she sang the part of the jarl. "*Onward my brothers, my sisters and sons! We are all of Atmora, and we cannot fall!*" Serana was glad to see that the ancient style of heroic poem hadn't gone out of style, as both alliteration and the meter that altered itself to convey the mood brought her back to the bards of her youth. *And none of that rhyming nonsense.* It might be fine for a romantic piece, but a story had no need of it.

"*With the Dunmer defeated, still some stood in the gate,!*" The minor keys had a resonance that Serana knew wasn't possible with an old four-stringer lute and was damned hard to create with six; she resolved to get her hands on an eight-stringed instrument as soon as it was feasible. "*Clothed in robes as red as the dawn. Their eyes alight with lust for blood, hunger drove them to remain.*" The note evoking the Jarl entered the mix then, cutting through the eerie tones denoting the Dark Elf champions. "*Aldra drew steel, her black blade Granat. With her war-kin beside her, arrayed for glory, they faced the grim grey of the East.*"

For a fleeting moment, Serana wondered how Velandryn would have felt, hearing this account. *I bet the Dunmer tell it a little differently.* Although she could see him taking a perverse pleasure in being called an 'ash-sworn heathen, cursed to hate and burn.'

By the time she was done trying to imagine what similar epithets he'd attach to Jarl Aldra and her heroic band, the bard was fully into the climactic clash, where one Dunmer slew Morunn, father of Aldra's sons, and where the Jarl's bed-thane—*wait, really? In my day we just called them mistresses*—gave her life to slay a wizard who had called forth a mighty monster of Oblivion. Sadly the bard's descriptions were more flowery than useful, but Serana thought it might have been a Daedroth.

Whatever it had been, it fell before the might of the Nords, thought as Aldra slew the last of the
Dunmer, a warrior called 'the savage son of Red Oran,' she was nicked with a poisoned blade. *The last of her thanes was fair Meytris, of Cyrod flesh but true Nord blood. She brought her then, to watch the dawn, and feel kyne's kiss upon her cheeks.* And there, in the gate of the fortress she had held, watching reinforcement pour in from the Rift and Winterhold, Jarl Aldra died.

"And still she stands, in spirit and stone, watching for foes from afar. And on the day when the dread Dunmer stir, once more shall her Thu'um ring forth!" She had to admit the ending was powerful, accompanied by the music as it was.

Serana wasn't sure if she felt quite as strongly as most of the crowd; more than a few were sniffing or had wet eyes as the bard rose to thunderous applause. However, she had enjoyed herself immensely, even if she hadn't had as much alcohol as the rest of the audience. For a moment she considered approaching the bard, but when she saw how many others were doing so, she just pushed through the mass of people into the night beyond. *I still have business to finish, no matter how many songs are playing.*

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I can enjoy myself once I'm done with Jolf. She had to get her final closure, make this last thing right. *Somehow.* Reluctantly, she left the lute player and the warmth of the tavern behind and set her path for the docks below.

She managed to reach the edge of the docks without getting further sidetracked—*if I only spent a moment seeing what smelled so nice, it doesn't count! Besides, that biscuit was delicious*—and was pleased to see that Jolf's ship was more or less where she'd left it. With everything that had happened and her family after them, it was nice to see nothing had gone horribly wrong.

However, as she drew closer, she noticed more that there was than one person on the ship. Not good. She's only been gone a few hours, but all sorts of things could have happened in that time. She glanced up, and saw a reddish light in the east. *I was gone...all night?* She'd lost track of time, to be sure, but that was...

That was completely understandable. She'd lost days before, deep in thought and untroubled by the hunger, thirst, or fatigue that afflicted mortals. *And tonight it was music and companionship.* Focusing, she brought her mind back to the here and now, and crept towards Jolf's little craft. *If the Volkihar found me...*

Except it wasn't them, not in the slightest. One, speaking loudly, was nothing but a soldier. It was in every word. *Imperial.* He was gesturing at the other who was—

*No.* She breathed more out of habit than necessity, but the poets' talk of being left breathless still managed to apply to her in times of great shock. As it would, when Velandryn Savani was standing on her boat.

She couldn't see anything more than his outline, bundled up as he was, but there was no mistaking him. His voice resonated on levels that she doubted mortals could hear, and the blood of dragons infected the air around him with its intoxicating scent. *He's here.* He wasn't dead, wasn't lost, wasn't far away in Morrowind or Cyrodiil or Oblivion. *I can make things right.*

The guard was already leaving as she pushed past him, desperate to reach her friend. Then, as her foot fell on the planks of the boat, she realized how foolish this well might be. *The last time I saw him, my family tried to kill him.* She hadn't even seen his face yet. *What if I'm wrong?* It might be someone else, or his time might have changed him. *Or he just decided that I'm like all the rest of them.* She wasn't a good person, after all. *What if he sees what I've done when he looks at me?* He'd be able to see the ship, the children, *Mintuile.* He would see it in her eyes, and she would be damned. *He'll kill me, and I'll deserve it.*
His back was still to her—clearly Jolf held his attention, and she couldn't blame him for that—and the thought of drawing the Dunmer's notice was strangely terrifying. *I defied my father, stole an Elder Scroll, and likely insured that I'll be hunted by my kin for the rest of my life. Why am I scared to face him?*

Because, she knew, she'd found the strength to do those things from the knowledge that it was possible to have a life beyond the court. Because Velandryn's parting words—"You're better than this"—wouldn't leave her mind, and she's wanted so badly to believe that he was right. *But what if he wasn't?*

If he turned, and saw only another vampire, then she would have no one. She would have abandoned her family, abandoned her blood and her four thousand year sleep, for nothing.

*No.* Even if he rejected her, even if he condemned and cast her aside, she had done the right thing. *I'm not doing this because of him, I'm doing it so that my father's mad plan never comes to pass!* She might not ever be good—*I am what I am. I am what...I became, and nothing will ever change that—but maybe she could be better.*

*I was better than them. I can be better than who I was.* The moment she left Castle Volkihar, she became better. *When I saved Jolf, when I...saved...Mintuile, I wasn't good.* She didn't have to be good. *Maybe better is enough.*

"Velandryn." The name sounded odd on her tongue, as words did when they'd lived only in her head for too long. When he turned, it was almost a shock to see that angular face, those red eyes alive with inhuman fire.

Those eyes knew her, and as Velandryn Savani stared at her, a terrible weight lifted itself from her body. She couldn't have said what he was seeing, but all at once, she was back. She was on the boat with him again, just like before. They'd spoken of what it was like, being Dragonborn and being a vampire, and somehow they'd found common ground. And now, she could see his eyes.

In Morthal, when they'd been dealing Movarth and his minions, Velandryn had fought with a passion spurred by disgust. She knew that his gods abhorred Molag Bal, and that killing vampires was practically a religious act. She'd seen the hate behind his eyes and felt the intensity of his presence when he killed Alva, even more so when he faced Movarth down in that cave. And now, in his eyes, she saw none of that potent rage. *Maybe there's a chance for me after all.*

She smiled, feeling lighter than she had in a very, very, long time. "Hey."

*I might not be good, but better's not a bad place to start.*

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*I have often pondered, in the small hours of the morning, why it was that Rona and I were chosen for this fate. It was not an easy path for me to accept my nature, and I will forever grieve that she could not. As I write these words, the pain of my beloved's passing is still more than I can bear, and I fear that if a century has not been enough time to mend my heart, that it shall remain broken forevermore.

And yet, of late I come to my writing with a curious sort of joy, especially when I review the older journals I have filled and long since filed away. The passage of time has given me insight that, if I may be so arrogant here in my own accounts, far surpasses that of mortal men. And, I fancy, my age has made the stability of my rule unmatched among my peers. I have watch six generations of the noble House Umbranox attempt to control Anvil and the Gold Coast, and perhaps vampirism is worth it so long as I need never entrust my rule to whichever of my children appears least*
incompetent!

Skingrad prospers, and all evidence points to my condition being of no concern to my people. I feed only on those of my subjects who come to me willingly, of course, offering blood as a sort of macabre tax. I have been told that it is considered an honor to give to the Count, and the notion of a noble who is truly sustained by his populace stirs some romantic remnant deep in my heart.

Vampire and Count. The terms seem almost incompatible, but I have made them work. It is not an easy road to walk, but I would no more give away one that the other. I am at peace, and hope to remain so for as long as…inhumanly possible.

—From the private writings of Janus Hassildor
Allies

Chapter Summary

“Coming back to where you started is not the same as never leaving.” - Terry Pratchett

A day like any other

Arngeir rose first, so early that not even the keenest eye could spy sunlight to the east. Oldest and most in tune with the teachings of Paarthurnax, he was the closest thing to a leader among the Nords of High Hrothgar, and moved with deliberate grace. He preferred to meditate in darkness and gaze upon the stars as he contemplated the gifts of Kyne.

Borri was the next to wake. His way was to walk the halls of High Hrothgar in the predawn grey, stopping at each window to reflect upon the shifting light and shadow upon the snow and rocks without.

Wulfarth was out of his bed before Einarth this morning, but that was happenstance rather than design. Neither of them relished rising early, but the example of their fellows made it seem an unworthy thing not to be about their day by the time the sun peeked over the distant peaks beyond Riften.

The Greybeards ate simply and little, and what was not given by the people below was grown in modest gardens sheltered by the bulk of their monastery. Wulfarth was not unskilled in the arts of plants and vegetables, and on this morning he stooped to study a batch of radishes that seemed almost ready for harvest. In the end, however, he let them be. They had not had a delivery from below in some time, but their stores were far from depleted. It would hurt nothing to allow the little ones a bit more time to grow.

Einarth was the youngest, and since that day when the Dragonborn's Thu'um had echoed across the plains of Whiterun, his contemplations and duties had often brought him to gaze upon the path below. Tradition held that there were seven thousand steps leading to the threshold of High Hrothgar, and Einarth was determined to be the first to see the Dragonborn's approach.

It had been nearly two months since the Greybeards had shouted Dovahkiin, and yet none had come to claim the title. Those few pilgrims who came to High Hrothgar only left offerings or bowed their heads before the statue of Talos below the great doors, and so the Greybeards waited.

Once, their order had been many, and the halls had rung with song and the whispers of voices empowered by the Song of Kyne. Five hundred years ago, the Emperor Cephorus had come to the Greybeards, seeking their blessings and their wisdom in the battle against his sister Potema. He had knelt on the stones of High Hrothgar, and the Greybeards had gazed down upon him. But that was then. Now, four old men lived on a mountain, forgotten by all but a few who kept to the old ways.

But the winds of Kyne were ever-changing, and the sound of Thu'um came once more upon them. Great Paarthurnax counseled that none who kept to the Way of the Voice should let pride steer
their actions, but each of the Greybeards had felt a small stirring of unworthy hope. Perhaps now, it said. Now, with the dragons upon us, we will once more be as we were.

After all, it was known that the Dragonborn would come to High Hrothgar. Whosoever Akatosh had chosen for this momentous task, it would be the duty of the Greybeards to train them. Man or woman, great or humble, they shall come, and our teachings shall go with them.

It was not done, to long for glory. That had been the way of the War-Chiefs, of the misguided Tongues who had used Thu'um to carve their names in blood and stone. But still, as they went about their days, the Greybeards had new thoughts of the world below, thoughts that had not dwelt in High Hrothgar for an age.

And atop the mountain, Paarthurnax too was waiting. Dovahkiin. An old word. Old things come again.

They Greybeards spoke little, as those who have lived too long together had no need for words. Each knew what the others would say as they went about their business, and so there was no need to waste Kyne's holy breath on trivialities. The Greybeards spoke only in True Need, and that time was not yet now.

But still, the silences that filled the halls of High Hrothgar were pregnant with possibilities. Old things come again. The world was changing, and the Dragonborn would come.

Jolf's reaction upon seeing Velandryn and Serana together was less than ideal. The Nord stiffened, and doubtless would have screamed had not both the Dunmer and the vampire stepped forward at the same time.

"Don't!" Serana wasn't positive which of them had spoken the word first, but the effect was to transform the sailor's panic into mute terror.

Velandryn sighed. "Your people's doing, I take it?"

Serana winced. Not the best greeting I could have hoped for. Still, he wasn't wrong. "They grabbed him a little after we left. I…helped him escape."

A quirked eyebrow told her that Velandryn not only wanted to know more, he wanted her to know that he was curious. I'd forgotten about this part of him. He'd grown more confident, as well; he didn't even bother asking the obvious question. So, she sighed and gave him what he wanted. "My family and I…didn't see eye to eye. I left."

Velandryn glanced over at Jolf. "Now I almost feel bad for all of the curses I heaped on him." He shrugged. "I'm not feeling any magic now, so I guess this is just what happens after an extended stay with the family Volkihar?"

She winced again. He's not wrong. "He'll be alright, with time." She leaned down and put a hand on the Nord's shoulder. "We'll leave you be. Is there anything else you—"

"Just go!" It was more sob than speech. "Please! I never want—" His voice broke, and the rest came out a whisper, "never want to see you again."

She felt paralyzed, unsure of whether she was better off trying to do something for him, or respecting his wishes. I leave him, what happens?

"You won't convince him." Velandryn's voice was soft, pitched for her ears. "If you truly regret
what happened, return when it's not so raw. Right now you're the enemy, the same as the rest of
your kin." She looked up at him, and saw the faintest hint of light in his eyes. "An easy mistake to
make, I fear."

*Does that mean*—she cut off that line of thought before it could consume her. *First things first.* She
knelt, and placed a bag of coins on the bench. "It's yours, Jolf. And…I'm sorry." She was, more
than she quite knew how to explain. "I hope you…" she didn't know how to finish that sentence.
"Be well."

She retrieved her bag, and, forcing herself not to look back at the hunched Nord, headed to the dock
for what would hopefully be the last time. Velandryn was leaning against a warehouse wall, and it
annoyed her to no end how smug he looked. *At least, I bet that's what he's feeling.* She couldn't
always be sure with him. Still, though, it was better than hate, and his eyes were too light for that.

"So…" her voice trailed off as she realized she didn't know what to say next. *Do I ask for his help?
Offer to help him?* She'd never been in this situation before, and the songs usually glossed over this
bit. The heroes just learned of each other's problems somehow.

Velandryn looked up at the arch of the city overhead. "I have a room at a good inn. Warmth, food,
music." Another raised eyebrow. "And a place out of the sun. At least one of those must sound
good to you."

She smirked at him. "Well, if you're paying, sure." Then, as she realized what she'd just said, her
heart leapt into her throat. *This is no time to tease him!* He wasn't trying to kill her, but she had no
idea what had happened since last—

He chuckled, though, and her fear evaporated. "I'll pay, but it's an investment. You have the Scroll
again, and I'd bet there's a story to go with it."

They started to walk, and she adjusted the pack on her back. "And you're here, looking—" she
glanced up and down, taking in his eclectic attire "—like…I don't actually have words to describe
it. Should I even ask?"

He glanced down, and snorted. "I could have sworn I'd changed." That was more to himself than to
her, but he shrugged and glanced over. "What do you say to skipping the games?"

"The games?" She hadn't seen much in the way of games here, unless feasting and dancing
counted…

"Where we spar for tidbits of what the other one was doing since we parted." He smiled, and she
could easily have mistaken it for genuine. "I saw the way your father looked at that Scroll. That
you have it makes me very much doubt that you are his creature."

She shuddered. "Never again." She *would* stop Lord Harkon. Then, because she was an idiot who
couldn't stop herself from teasing her one ally in the world, she added, "Or we just made a fantastic
mockery, to fool you."

Another laugh. She'd missed that sound, she realized, and what it represented coming from
Velandryn. There had been little laughter in Castle Volkihar that was not at someone else's
expense. Velandryn, though, seemed to take cruelty and violence with deadly seriousness. When he
laughed, it was because he found something to appreciate. "I may not be a Moth Priest, but even I
know you can't fake the pressure that thing puts off!"

*Even you know?* Unless she missed her guess, he was better versed in the Elder Scrolls than every
Nord in Solitude combined. "You can feel it too, then?" She'd been aware of it, and pressure wasn't a bad word for the feeling.

He nodded. "Very faint, but I think I could close my eyes and point to it, if the need arose."

She chuckled. "A good party trick to do with an Elder Scroll."

The Dunmer snorted. "If that's the best party trick you can conjure with an Elder Scroll, then you aren't half the woman I thought you were."

She smiled to herself, and glanced around to make sure they weren't being followed. Force of habit, I suppose. It was so nice just walking and talking that she could almost forget how many things they had to worry about. "Not that I'm complaining, but I thought you'd be angrier, considering…"

"How I left?" He wasn't smiling now; he seemed almost lost in thought. "I had a lot of time to think out there, and you weren't the one who wronged me."

"But I was!" She was just full of things she shouldn't be saying today. "You never would have come to the castle if it wasn't for me!"

Velandryn started to say something, but stopped. She glanced over at him and saw he was looking at a pair of Imperial soldiers. For a moment she couldn't understand what it was that had caught his—oh.

One of the soldiers was a Dark Elf. Female, young by the look of her, and staring back at Velandryn with an expression that looked suspiciously like…joy? For some reason, this little one annoyed Serana, and she hoped the patrol would just make their way on down the road.

It was not to be, however, and the other elf approached them, eyes fixed on Velandryn. "One blood, brother!" She pressed a fist to her chest, and bowed, smiling widely.

The Dragonborn stiffened, and Serana wondered what the phrase meant. He cocked his head slightly, and studied the other elf. His eyes were dark, and she could almost feel his anger. "Are we, then? Mehn k'chall! Imperial n'wah rise above their station, it would seem."

The other elf looked mortified. "I'm sorry… I…" she bowed her head and hurried away, the other soldier shooting Velandryn a bewildered look before hurrying after her.

Velandryn watched her go, eyes hard and face stony, and Serana managed to wait for all of five seconds before she couldn't take it any longer. "What was that all about?"

Velandryn was still looking after the other elf. "It's something outland Dunmer say. Means we're all the same." He laughed, though there was no joy in the sound. "They run, and then they have the gall to claim…what? That they're as good as us, just because we share blood?" A snort. "Joins the Legion, then comes mewling around with that 'one blood' drivel. Beh Vekh! Disgraceful fetching s'wit." For a moment, she thought he was going to spit.

She'd seen him angry before, but this was different. Somehow, that little elf had inspired in him a contempt such as she'd never felt from the Dragonborn. What happened to your thoughtfulness? She hadn't witnessed this side of Velandryn before, and it put her uncomfortably in mind of the Volkihar.

No, that's not fair. Velandryn wasn't nearly that bad, but it was still unnerving to watch him behave this way. He's better than this.
They walked in silence for a minute more, until Serana just had to say something. "You do realize your anger's irrational, right?"

"Excuse me?" She almost had to admire that he'd managed to make those words sound at once calm and furious. *He's knows what he's doing with his voice.*

Still, she wouldn't back down. "You just attacked that poor girl for no reason!"

"You aren't Dunmer, you wouldn't—"

"Understand?" Now *she* felt that familiar irritation rise; he was *wrong*, and she wasn't going to let him get away with being so stupid. "I know what happened with your people, remember? There's no way in Oblivion that child was two hundred years old, and don't you say otherwise! Unless I'm missing something, she didn't have any say at all in where she was born!"

Velandryn paused for a second. "Still, she has no right to—"

"What? Grow up surrounded by humans? *Maybe* her parents are the ones you should hate, the ones who fled, but that is on *them!* So she hears stories of Morrowind, the land of her native blood, but she'll never see it, because they *hate* people like her!" The romantic in Serana was going full tilt now, and she doubted she could stop even if she'd wanted to. "So, she joins the Legion. Again, surrounded by humans. Assigned to Skyrim." She glanced around for effect. "Not a lot of elves here, are there?" She looked back to Velandryn, who she hoped was beginning to get the point. "And then, one morning as she's making her rounds, what does she see? Another elf, this one looking like he stepped out of a story about the Dunmer of Morrowind!" She was just making things up now, but Velandryn did have a look about him that none of the other Dunmer she'd seen could match. "And then, when she finally works up the courage to—"

"Alright, enough!" Velandryn seemed more annoyed than amused, but at least his anger had subsided somewhat. "I can't stand hearing about how I killed her pet dog as well as her parents when I called out her foolish little greeting."

"That's all it was! A foolish gesture! So why did you get so…bent out of shape over it?" She recalled an old saying. *Men, like metal, lose their worth when they lose their temper.* Somehow this elf had done what vampires, draugr, and dragons could not, and broken the temper of Velandryn Savani.

For a moment, she thought he would lash out again, but he only sighed. "We are our struggle, Serana. The first act that set us apart from the Aldmer was striking out to forge a new path. They ran from that, and then they—" He sighed again, and quickened his pace. "You know where I'm going with this. I don't begrudge her the hardships she's lived, but 'one blood' is a bit more than I can take."

Serana kept pace with him effortlessly; she *wasn't* letting this one go, no matter what little noises he made about understanding. "Velandryn Savani, you are better than this!"

At that, he stopped and turned to look at her. A long moment passed, and she felt the skin on her scalp begin to prickle. *What's he thinking?* His face, for once, was totally and truly inscrutable. Finally, he gave a short, sharp laugh. "That would be nice, wouldn't it? I could stretch out a hand and everyone who's ever been hurt can come flocking to me. I could give and give, without prejudice or favor, and all the ills of the world can at last be healed." A snort, and he tilted his head, seeming to regard her with new eyes. "I'm not a monster, Serana of the Volkihar, but I'm not going to cut myself into some limp-spined wretch just because you think I'm not nice enough!"
For a moment, words failed her. "This isn't about nice!" How can he be so blind? "This is about respect! She deserves that, the same as anyone else!"

"Then let her earn it!" She'd never seen him outraged before; every word burned in the air. "Let every one of them suffer, and then they can call me 'brother!'" He seemed to regain himself then, and Serana too realized that they were at the center of a circle of people, all watching wide-eyed.

Velandryn grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her down a tiny side street, away from the eyes of the Nords. As the buildings blocked the sun, she felt more strength fill her limbs, and her irritation flared as well. She yanked her arm away and shot him a glare—nobody grabbed her—but he was already pacing, eyes still blazing but now well within the limit of what she expected from him.

"You've suffered; how can it not incense you? I don't know what you went through to become," he waved a hand, "as you are, but surely some child clamoring to be called a," he glanced around, and lowered his voice still further, "vampire would be beyond the pale. I can't pretend to know, and I wouldn't claim to, but how can you not despise them for claiming your pain as their own?"

"I'm not going to insult them in public, if that's what you're intimating." Some mortal claiming to be a vampire might bother her, she knew, but the idea was so foolish that she hard time taking it seriously. Then, Serana understood. "It's not what she did, it's what she represents." She still thought he was wrong, but...I see where he's coming from.

Velandryn leaned against the wall behind him, seeming to choose his words carefully. "Thousands fled Morrowind when we were at our lowest. They abandoned the home of our people, the promise of Veloth, to save themselves. Those who stayed, did so with the knowledge that their own kin, their own blood, had left them to die so that they might be safe." He bowed his head. "Do not ask me to love them, Serana. That girl out there did not strike a blow against me, but I have walked the Ser'ruhn of Necrom. The bodies that could not be identified, lineages exterminated so completely that none remained to lay them in their ancestral tombs, these are the legacy of those who fled."

"But if every Dunmer had stayed, they might still have died." She'd picked up a little of what had happened in Morrowind. "Maybe more Dunmer live because of their actions."

Velandryn shrugged. "Perhaps. Or the wrong Dunmer live today, and my nation and my people would be the stronger had they perished. That is not for me to say."

He seemed willing to stop there. Serana, however, was ignoring the little voice that was telling her to let this go. "Who would you trade that girl's life for, hmm? You say the wrong Dunmer lived? That's her. She's the one who lived, so if you could walk up to her and slice her open, and in doing so bring back someone who perished, who would be worth it? Because we're talking about one soldier, not every Dunmer who ever fled from danger!"

"Why does this matter to you?" She'd expected more anger, but he sounded almost resigned. "You show up again with an Elder Scroll and a hunted look, and your first order of business is to make sure I'm being nice to random mer I meet on the street?"

"Because you're better than this!" She meant that, and if there was a bit more emotion in her voice than usual, well, such things happened. "You've a good heart, and I watched you fight Movarth because it was the right thing to do. You pretend to have contempt for Skyrim's people, but you shed blood in Morthal on their behalf." She had to smile at the memory of Velandryn and Lydia, disheveled and exhausted, helping her kill the master vampire. "You helped me get home even knowing what was waiting there. You tried to convince me that I was on the wrong side, and here I am!" It might have only been her imagination, but she thought his eyes had softened the tiniest bit. "You...you're not the sort of person who hates like that!"
Velandryn smiled with his eyes, and somehow she could see the sadness there. "For Dunmer, the hate isn't something you choose. We get it with our mother's milk, and it's nursed to vigor as we grow. If you think I'm better, then—"

"That's horseshit and you know it!" She tried to avoid cursing—it was crude and common, as her mother had said—but Velandryn was going too far. "I just left the only family I've ever known because I saw them for what they were. You're at least as smart as I am, so there's no way I'm buying that you're just some poor fool elf unable to think for himself! I thought Dunmer didn't leave Morrowind? Why are you here if you're so gods-damned helpless in the face of your beliefs?" he didn't respond, only stared off into space. "Velandryn!"

He blinked, only once, but it was enough. "I'm trying to think." If he was upset, his voice gave no hint of it. *Maybe a bit of tension there, but he has a handle on himself again.*

"About?"

"Whether you're right." She hadn't expected *that.*

"And?"

He gave her a look that was unmistakably unamused. "I haven't decided yet." He closed his eyes again, and Serana waited.

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**Damn that woman!** She'd been back in his life for less than an hour, and already Serana of the Volkihar was tying him in knots.

*Who would you trade that girl's life for?* He didn't have a good answer. And he had to be honest, with himself if with nobody else. His hatred hadn't been well-reasoned. It had been reflex, something that bypassed rational thought. True Dunmer had nothing but contempt for outlanders. *Obviously.* There were good reasons to be suspicious, to mistrust, as history had shown. *But hate?*

Hate, real hate, was strong. It had sustained him through the night at Gnaal Mur all those years ago, and even now he remembered the bitter taste in his mouth. What that poor stupid girl back there had conjured in him was little more than disdain.

*And why was I so adamant?* He knew he *should* despise her, but in light of all that he'd been through, a foolish word just wasn't worth the energy outrage would take. *She isn't wrong; I never would have left if I'd taken every lesson as intended.* Certainly, there were those in the Temple who viewed his trip abroad as betrayal.

He opened his eyes to see Serana looking at him. **Infuriating she may be, but…**

In truth, he didn't know how to finish that sentence. She'd changed since they'd parted ways, and the woman he'd met on Jolf's boat had clearly done some soul-searching. *I wonder whose it was.*

Jokes aside, the fact that she'd been willing to call him on his…well, *let's just call it an overreaction…*meant that travelling with her would be far more interesting than it had been. *I wonder if this is who's hiding under the vampire who wanted to go home.*

He realized that she was probably waiting for him to say something, but he couldn't think of anything. An apology or concession that she was right just wasn't going to happen, of course—he *hated* admitting he was wrong—but she deserved…

"So, this is the true Serana of the Volkihar who says these things?"
"What?" An odd redness—blush was the word—had bloomed in her cheeks, easy to see since her skin was so pale and clear. He'd noticed the same thing with Jarl Elisif the night before, and decided to figure out what it meant. A reflexive tell can be useful. That would have to wait, however.

"This." His wave was meant to take in all of her, and everything she'd done. "You're stronger than you were." Stronger. That was a good word for it. I got stronger out there in the wilderness. It seemed she had as well. "Before, you never would have had this argument."

The redness in her cheeks grew more intense. It's related to blood, isn't it? If so, it was curious that it could happen in vampires. She raised her chin to stare him down. "So? Are you going to admit I'm right?"

He shrugged. "I won't rule anything out." He paused, choosing his next words carefully. "It isn't…beyond the realm of possibility that I acted in haste." He turned. "Come on. I want to leave Solitude today."

The vampire walked close beside him, and pitched her voice low. "You know I'm right, though."

She doesn't know when to give up, does she? He ignored her, and turned towards the main gate into the city. Blighted vampire.

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Serana was mostly certain that she'd won the argument, but the pace of Velandryn's strides made her think right now might not be the best time to bring it up again. The elf was setting a blistering pace—when did he get the energy to move like this?—and if she'd been mortal, she might well have been winded by the time they reached the gates.

And what gates! In her preoccupation with the Dragonborn, it took her a moment to realize where they were, but as reality sunk in, her surroundings were all she could focus on. This wall, draped with red banners bearing diamond-shaped dragons and wolf-head sigils, had to be the border of Solitude. The real city. It was hard to believe that all of the bustle below and behind them was only the outskirts, but the scale of what lay before her left no doubt as to where the center of this activity lay. As they walked through, she had to keep from craning her neck to gape at the metal and stone above and around her. This could hold off…anything!

And yet, Velandryn seemed wholly unimpressed. He's seen this before, though. The Dark Elf wasn't being cold, exactly, but his manner made it clear he was in no mood for conversation. Then, they were through, and all thoughts of Velandryn Savani ceased. Solitude!

In her childhood, the city that ruled Haafingar had been something of a backwater. The jarls might bellow about the glory of the Wolf Kings, but everyone knew that any glory Solitude could claim was a result of its location, a windmill notable mostly for being a curiosity, and little else

Time makes fools of us all. It was abundantly clear to any and all that Solitude was, at the very least, a city assured of its own significance. The crowds on the city-like sprawl leading down to the water had been beyond impressive, but the scale of the marketplace through which Velandryn now led her nearly took her breath away. I saw the docks below, after all. And yet, it had been easy to view that mass of ships as something abstract, a symbol of this Empire out of Cyrodiil. This, now, around her, was wealth and commerce and power on a scale she'd never even imagined. A stall selling some sort of flatbread piled high with meat and vegetables sat cheek-to-jowl with a great stone building, two stories high and painted a dozen shades of blue, festooned with banners and a sign that proclaimed it 'The High Road.' Judging by the sounds coming from within, it was either a
tavern or a tremendously untalented music-hall.

With a start, she realized that she'd lost sight of Velandryn, and spun, panic rising in her throat. Then, she saw him, staring back at her with something in his eyes that might have been amusement.

"Quite the scene, isn't it?" His words could have been mocking, but his voice wasn't.

"It's...like nothing I've ever seen..." It hadn't even occurred to her to attempt deception. *Is this what we've—they've—made?* That mortals could turn Solitude into this...she didn't even have a word for it...was staggering. That they could do so while her own family lived holed up in a single icy keep was...troubling.

Velandryn cocked his head, ever so slightly. "You lived in the days of Alinor and the City of White-Gold, untainted by Alessian uprising." A tiny shake of his head. "And you would have lived and died on a tiny rock in the middle of the ocean."

"I'm here now, aren't I?" She'd left, and now she was going to see everything she'd only dreamed of. *Even if the Alessians did taint White-Gold.* From what she understood, though, that might just be his elven bias talking.

His nod was so small that she half-wondered if it was only her imagination. "So you are." He pointed. "We're here."

The sign over the door proclaimed this place the Karthview Inn, and Serana wondered why Velandryn had picked such an opulent-looking place to stay. *He doesn't seem the type to seek out luxury.* She might be wrong, however, as the Dunmer showed no hesitation in walking up to the doors and pushing them open.

Inside, he waved her to one of the tables, narrow but secluded, with a wonderful view of the square outside. "A better place to talk, isn't it?"

Well, she couldn't disagree with that. "Not a bad inn, all things considered."

He laughed. "And best of all's the part where I don't pay for a drake of it!" Then, his eyes regained their sharpness. "I did not expect to see you again so soon." He glanced down, and she knew he was looking at where the Elder Scroll sat on her back. "I'd rather expected..." he trailed off, and did not seem eager to continue.

Serana decided to help him out. "Let me guess. You thought I'd be at the head of a vampire army?" She kept her voice low, but nobody was paying them much mind anyways. "Well, sorry to disappoint but I think the only thing the Volkihar'll be doing with me is hunting me down."

Velandryn's eyes narrowed slightly. "I get the feeling there's quite the story there." His *need* to know was almost palpable.

She shrugged, pleased with the power she had over him. "Well, if you must know..."

She told him the story over the next hour or so. Well, she told him most of the story—there was no need to bring up her dream, Mintuile, or a few of the other things she'd seen and done, after all—and waited for his reaction.

She was not disappointed. "So you just walked into his rooms and *stole an Elder Scroll?*" He kept his voice low, which made the emphasis on his last words hiss out like steam.
She hoped she wasn't blushing. "I told you before, it's mine. I wasn't going to let him keep it."

She might have been imagining it, but she thought he might be looking at her with something akin to respect. "I confess, I didn't think you had it in you."

Instantly, the warm feeling was gone. "Thanks for believing in me."

He raised an eyebrow. "I believe my eyes, and the last I saw of you, rebellion was not foremost in your mind."

She knew she was scowling now, but she couldn't help it. "I'm here, aren't I? Do you want my help or not?"

"*Your* help, is it? And you need me not at all?"

*Oh, right, he's smart.* "I'd say we need each other. I don't have many friends at the moment, and you're lacking in the area of people who can slaughter master vampires with their bare hands."

Velandryn chuckled. "So it is." He shrugged, and looked as though he was going to say something else, but at that moment a matronly Nord woman bustled over.

"Master Savani! I was out, and just saw you'd returned! You left in such a hurry before I'd feared you run off and leave us entirely!" She placed a bulbous bottle in front of him, smiling broadly. "We don't get many Dunmer in here, Kyne knows, but I found a few bottles of sujamma in the back." She winked at him. "I need someone to tell me if it's any good though."

To her shock, Velandryn actually laughed. "Well, if it's in service to the greater good…" He made a show of cracking the seal on the bottle and raising it to his lips, swallowing what looked to be a generous gulp. His coughing and sputtering, however, seemed genuine.

"Don't tell me you can't handle your liquor, Velandryn." Serana could no more have danced naked in fire than refrained from teasing him at that moment.

"*Stakh ran!* Where'd you find this?" he turned the bottle in his hands, though Serana could see no label.

The Nord woman laughed. "That bad, eh?"

Velandryn shook the bottle thoughtfully. "I was expecting some watered-down swill. Didn't think I'd be getting raw trama grey." He placed the bottle gingerly on the table and rubbed his eyes. "You ever get more Dunmer in here, real Ashlanders, I mean, give them that." He smiled, and Serana knew it was purely for the other woman's benefit. "A little taste of home."

She snatched the bottle from the table before Velandryn could do anything else and took a small sip. She didn't have much liking for alcohol, but she was beyond curious at what this strange 'sujamma' tasted like.

Oh, God! She'd never tasted fire, but this couldn't be far off. Swallowing was agony, and she was momentarily grateful that breathing was a habit rather than a necessity.

"You drink that? On purpose?"

Velandryn chuckled. "That's not Great House brew. Ashlanders make it, and they're the only ones with a taste for the stuff." He tapped the bottle once more. "Leave this one, Alfa, but I think that'll be enough for now." He glanced over at Serana. "You want anything?"
The Nord woman—Alfa—smiled down at her, but the burning in Serana's throat left little room for any hunger or thirst. "I'm fine," was all she could manage, and even that was said in a worryingly raspy voice.

If the other woman noticed, however, she was kind enough not to say anything. "Just give a shout if you need anything."

With her departure, a tension that Serana hadn't noticed left her body, and she swallowed, testing her throat. *Only a little pain.* "I really can't believe you drink that." *It might explain his voice, though.*

"Only the Ashlanders, like I said." He picked the bottle up, looked at it for a moment, and then put it back down. "But I'm keeping this, if for no other reason than to make Lydia understand how I feel when someone brings out the mead."

*That* was an opening she could use. "So, Lydia." She met Velandryn's eyes, though the look there told her he knew exactly what the next words out of her mouth would be. "Where did she get off to, then?"

Velandryn shrugged slightly. "Would you believe me if I said I didn't know?"

"I thought we were done with games."

"So we are." He was silent for a moment. "I sent her to Morrowind, to make contact with some friends in my homeland. I hope that you were telling the truth about breaking bonds with your family, since she was carrying a copy of that map, and by now it's likely that the Temple has a copy."

"Oh." She recalled some of the things Garan had said about his people. "They don't like vampires very much, do they?"

"No." Velandryn didn't seem interested in sugarcoating anything. "They're unlikely to take immediate action so far beyond the borders of the homeland, but I was thinking in terms of contingencies. You should probably be more worried about the copies I sent to Jarl Balgruuf and the Dawnguard, to be honest."

*Oh.* For a moment, she felt a stab of rage that he'd abused her map in such a way. Then, reality set back in, and she realized what he was saying. "You didn't expect to come back, did you?"

He shook his head. "I didn't know." His eyes lit up, just the tiniest bit. "But, on the off-chance that…something went wrong, I wanted to ensure that the Volkihar were torn asunder by all the fury I could muster."

"And now?"

"I live." He intertwined his long fingers and rested them beneath his chin. "Castle Volkihar is likely too remote to be much a target for anyone in a position to act, but at least now the information is in the hands of those who can do something about it." He raised his eyes and looked at her, eyes sharp. "Or is your father's plan not contingent on that Scroll you have?"

"He said the only way to find one Elder Scroll was with another, and seemed fairly certain that he would need all three." She shrugged. "It's possible he was keeping things from me, but given what happened with the ship…"

He picked up where she'd trailed off. "He's grasping at anything that could help. Ancestors save us
if he ever gets his hands on both a Scroll and a Moth Scholar, then." He gazed away for a moment, lost in some reverie. "You said your mother had one as well? Can we assume it's secure, then?"

"Has." It was important. Her mother was not dead. She forced a little chuckle she didn't really feel. "Considering it took them four thousand years to find me and I wasn't even awake, I think we can count on Mother to elude their grasp a while longer."

Velandryn exhaled, eyes grim. "That won't be enough, Serana. You are immortal, all of you. There's only one way this can end."

I know. She'd known since she'd decided to leave, decided to tell her story to Velandryn Savani. She didn't respond, but then again, it hadn't been a statement that needed an answer.

She forced a smile. "There were Dunmer there, you know. Two of them."

"Oh?" He didn't exactly sound happy, but some of that grim dread was gone from the atmosphere. "I'm curious how you found them."

She rejected the easy joke. Just off the main hall. If she knew Velandryn, he was already aware of the language he'd used, and had a retort lined up."Very different from you." She fancied she saw a flicker of disappointment in his eyes. Didn't get to use your riposte, did you?

"I'm glad to hear it." A smile, exquisite in its artifice. He's getting worryingly good at those. "I'd quite like to keep the only Volkihar with whom I can claim commonality to be you." She didn't know what to say, but fortunately, he continued with only a small pause. "Tell me, who were these Dunmer?"

She told him a little bit about them, and then hesitated. How will he take what Garan said? He was so proud of his heritage…

Still, he'd wanted to know, and Garan's contempt had sat in her gut for weeks now. Nothing for it. "One of them, Garan, said you were…" she couldn't do it. She couldn't look him in the eyes and call him—

"Let me guess. Ashlander trash? Or did he call me men'gha?" She gaped at him, and the light in his eyes. "You said his name was Garan Marethi, no?" He chuckled. "And he claimed to be from House Dres? I'd be insulted if he didn't think my name made me an abomination!"

Her confusion must have shown on her face, since he quickly explained his amusement. "House Dres are traditionalists, slave-holders and perhaps the most disagreeable Dunmer you'll ever meet. They were hit hard during the period preceding the Reclamation, but they've never lost their contempt for 'lesser blood.'" His eyes darkened a bit. "That one of them finds me reprehensible is not shocking." He gazed down at the table. "They serve their purpose, but I confess that I have never loved the Dres."

She recalled Mintuile, naked and without agency, and a part of her rejoiced at the thought that Velandryn was nothing like Garan.

"I see." One thing, though, still nagged at her. "So that elf outside, what would Garan—"

He didn't cut her off with an outburst, though the fire in his eyes hinted that he was tempted. Instead, he overrode her with words that trickled out as though he were loath to let them go. "There's no need to finish that thought. I can see where you're going with it, and you aren't wrong."

Let it be, Serana. She could recognize wounded pride, and Velandryn was much calmer than he
had been before. *He has to know he was wrong.* She nodded. "Just admit you were out of line with what you said to her."

The Dragonborn leaned forward, elbows on the table. "Only when you admit you gleefully dove into a topic on which you have neither cultural nor historical context." He closed his eyes for a moment, and when he reopened them she almost felt as though he was smiling. "And she said something very stupid."

*Well, he isn't wrong.* "She's young."

Velandryn snorted. "Yes, I recall the story you spun for me. Alone in the world save for me, and I broke her fragile heart." He lapsed into silence then, and Serana joined him.

*Let it be, Serana.* This time, she did. "So, you'll help me keep the Scroll away from my father?"

Velandryn nodded. "I'd like to think so. Can you think of some reason why I shouldn't?"

"Well, you asking questions like that does make me wonder…" At the look in his eyes, however, she trailed off. It was disconcerting how quickly he could go from jovial to deathly serious.

And indeed, his words were heavy with sincerity. "I just declared war on your entire clan in no uncertain terms. I can understand that you and your father don't see eye to eye, but—"

"Is that what you think this is? Some family dispute?" She wanted to laugh, or maybe cry. "Velandryn, I watched them feed on children! There was an Altmer woman who'd been a plaything for centuries! Do you know what I did when I left? I snapped her neck, and she was so broken inside that I know I did her a kindness! They're monsters, and I won't let them inflict themselves on anybody else!" She furiously blinked away the tears threatening to form. "I've made my choice, and if you doubt that, there's nothing more to say."

"Then so be it." Velandryn sounded almost…gentle? She looked across to see him incline his head slightly. "For what it's worth, I didn't think you'd be here."

"You…what?"

"Like I said before, I was certain that the next time we met, you'd be one of your father's creatures." He rubbed at one of his eyes, suddenly looking very tired. "I saw your determination to get home, and misunderstood." New energy seemed to suffuse him then, and he met her eyes once more. "I haven't been so happy to be wrong in a long time."

*What is this?* She rather liked it when Velandryn said kind things to her. Smiling, she leaned in. "And I'm glad you aren't a frozen corpse out in the wilderness." *Wait, no.* That wasn't how you—damn it all! She'd been at Castle Volkihar so long that she'd completely forgotten how to talk to somebody she actually liked, and now she'd gone and said *that.*

"So am I, for that matter." His response was bone-dry and carried his mood perfectly, and Serana wanted to curse herself. That instant of odd tenderness was gone, and in its place was their usual standoffish camaraderie. At least we're not enemies anymore.

With the moment between them well and truly dead and not trusting herself to meet his eyes, she scanned the room, hoping to catch something happening that could spur the next conversation. Her eyes flitted over humans and a few elves, hoping to scope out—

"Is there anything I can get for you, sersho?" It wasn't Alfa this time, but a younger woman, pretty in a common way, with light hair and a nervous smile. Her eyes were fixed on Velandryn, who
looked slightly amused.

"Serjo." He corrected her with something that might almost have been a smile, and she wondered if even he knew he was doing it. "The final syllable mush have strength." He tapped his throat. "Voice it. Jo."

She blushed. "Serjo?"

Velandryn tapped his forehead with a pair of long fingers then waved them airily in her direction. "Ba vanat, sera. It is as though I were back in Ald Sura."

The other woman's skin turned redder than Velandryn's hair, and she bobbed her head and murmured thanks. *Dear Lord, just get it over with!*

Serana turned to Velandryn. "Did you need anything else?" She gave the girl a pointed look. "I could use some water. Cold."

The girl sniffed at her. "As you wish, *milady.*" She turned back to Velandryn. "Master Savani?"

Velandryn's head snapped to regard her with a motion that put Serana unsettledly in mind of a predator, and he studied her for a very long moment. *I didn't know red eyes could look that cold.* "I shall be fine. Leave us."

The girl looked confused, but Velandryn's unceasing stare got the better of her after only a moment, and she bowed her head and scurried away.

"You know, I'm not certain she's going to bring me water."

Velandryn actually laughed at that. "Well, it seems she found herself a spine in the worst way."

"What?" Clearly these two had met before. *And given her interest in Velandryn.* "Were you and she…" The words weren't coming to her, but even thinking about Velandryn and that woman—*bodies twined, his skin dark, hers light, both of them gasping in pleasure—No!* "What's your history?"

Velandryn snorted. "Last time I saw her she was hovering outside my room. Guess she decided she wanted to bed the savage Dunmer after all." He reached out and lifted the bottle of sujamma to his lips, then clearly thought better of it. "Though maybe I should have had her bring something else to drink before I snapped like that."

"Umm…so, why did you?" Just when she'd though she had him figured out, he went and did something like this. "You were being friendly enough with her before."

"She insulted you." She hadn't expected that, and metaphorical breath caught in her throat at the words. "You're one of mine now, and I won't stand for disrespect."

"One of yours, am I?" *Molag Bal might have something to say about that.*

He chuckled. "Forgive me, that came out more…possessive than I intended. *Guen helet bri am thil.* We are bound by purpose, though our goals may not be the same." He blinked. "Companions, maybe, or allies, though one is too broad, the other too impersonal." A shrug. "Either way, I won't stand to have my…" his mouth twisted slightly "…companion attacked." His eyes flashed a merry red. "I think we can provide all the strife we need perfectly fine without any outside assistance."

She had to laugh at that, and relaxed back into the chair. *Is this what it feels like, having someone on your side?*
Dunmeris was similar enough to Aldmeris that she picked up a bit of what he'd said there, and he wasn't wrong. *He needs to work on his phrasing though.* "Unless I missed something, we still haven't reached an agreement on how we're going to work together."

He leaned in, elbows on the table. "Tell me. In what realistic future do you leave Solitude alone, without me?"

She considered half a dozen scenarios before shaking her head. "Not unless you did something completely out of character."

"And I'm all but certain that you're sincere in your desire to keep yourself and the Scroll as far away from the Volkihar as possible." He stroked his chin. "We're together now, for better or for worse, and everything else is negotiation."

"Just like that?"

"Believe me, it's more than a little odd on my side as well, but when you yelled at me over that fool of an outlander, I knew?"

"How?"

He laughed. "Because if you were trying to lull me into complacency, calling me a bigot wasn't the wisest course of action." He tilted his head, ever so slightly. "I'm Dunmer, remember? I know a thing or two about righteous fury."

She had to smile at that. "Well, all right then." She leaned forward to match his pose. "Shall we… negotiate?"

Velandryn chuckled. "I'm going to High Hrothgar. You'll come with me, and once I know more about this entire Dragonborn business, we can figure out how to deal with your clan." A single finger, tapping at his lips. "I'm sympathetic to your goals, but I can't ignore the dragons any longer."

That was a fair enough offer, though it seemed that Velandryn had something of a gift for stumbling into distractions and detours, and so might never actually reach the Greybeards he'd spoken of. I could use that to my advantage. "We keep an ear out for any rumors, and an eye out for any Volkihar agents. We learn anything, we move to stop them."

Velandryn began to nod, but aborted the motion. "I'll help you clear them out of a cave or send warning to a Moth Priest, but I won't go gallivanting off to Daggerfall because you heard a whisper that someone smelled a vampire."

"Very well." It was a fair deal, and she was reasonably certain that if anything extraordinary came up she could talk him into helping her with that as well. *He's too curious for his own good.* She was the same way, which was probably why she was not in the least unhappy to be going to these odd monks who seemed to be all that were left of the Tongues of old.

She opened her mouth to say something more, but Velandryn had jerked upright in his seat, eyes locked on something behind her.

"Vel!" Velandryn winced, and Serana spun to see a blonde Nord waving at them from across the room, a huge grin plastered across her face. "I found you!" She strode towards them, only barely missing pushing several other patrons aside. She wasn't quite as big as Lydia and had already shown more good cheer in five heartbeats than the housecarl had in their entire time together, but she moved with a similar ease that made Serana wonder if this woman too was a warrior.
"And next comes Tullius, followed by the jarl, and the Madgod bringing up the rear…" Had Serana's hearing been as dull as a mortal's, she never would have heard Velandryn, though there was something about the angle at which he was holding his head that implied he wasn't as displeased to see this human as his tone might imply. And, indeed, when he raised his voice it was cordial, if somewhat dry. "Jordis. Should I bother offering you a seat, or are you going to take one regardless?"

"You couldn't stop me if you tried!" The new woman pulled one of the chairs back and slid in. "Plus, I paid for your rooms, so I'm pretty sure I own you now or something."

Velandryn only gave a bark of laughter. "Serana, meet Jordis Sword-Maiden. Jordis, Serana of…" he paused, and the look in his eye sent a playful shiver down her spine. If he's that pleased with himself, it won't end well for me.

There was no way she'd let him go through with whatever game he had planned. "Just Serana works fine for me. A pleasure, Jordis." She spoke quickly, not letting Velandryn share whatever quip or oh-so-clever title he'd thought up to mock or hint at her heritage.

"Any friend of Vel's is a friend of mine!" Whoever this Jordis Sword-Maiden was, she seemed friendly enough, and the way that the Dragonborn twitched every time she called him 'Vel' was simply delightful. The Nord turned to look at him now. "It's 'the Sword-Maiden,' though. You wouldn't want to go getting it wrong."

"Jordis, you call me Vel. You should be happy I'm playing along at all." He likes her! It was beyond odd to see, but it was obvious that Velandryn Savani was genuinely fond of this woman. Will wonders never cease? "Is there any particular reason you felt the need to hunt me down?" He scanned the room. "You're not one step ahead of Tullius, on his way to have me clapped in irons?"

"You wish." Jordis grinned at him. "You're just stuck with me." She looked over at Serana. "So, just Serana, how do you know Vel here?"

Serana was beginning to see why Velandryn had that air of amused exasperation around this woman. I wonder what's going on behind that grin, though. "He…helped me out a tight spot some time ago, and we just met up by chance." She tried out a smile on the Nord. "Might be we travel together for a bit."

Jordis paused, and glanced at Velandryn nervously. "Umm, I'm not sure how to say this…"

"She knows." Velandryn spoke with neither urgency nor concern. "Just Serana figured it out on her own, no Thu'um required."

If he keeps up with that stupid nickname, I'm going to call him Vel as often as I can. Serana blinked. Wait, so Jordis knows he's Dragonborn? Somehow, she'd imagined him being more careful with that fact. Not to mention she saw him Shout? "How exactly did you two meet?"

If Jordis was confused by the question coming out of nowhere, she hid it well. "We were clearing a cave of necromancers, and Vel found us." She leaned in. "They were summoning Potema. The Wolf Queen herself, and Vel sent her back to the dead!"

By the tone of her voice, Jordis clearly expected that Serana knew who this Wolf Queen was. She glanced over at Velandryn, who shrugged. "She's not wrong. They were some sort of cult, I'd wager. They'd cobbled together a binding ritual that was materializing something, though I still have my doubt that it was actually the Empress Potema." His fingers traced something on the table. "It was shoddy work, and I managed to pull it apart."
"Don't listen to him, he was a blessed hero!" Jordis seemed intent on recounting the story in her way, rather than Velandryn's more subdued retelling. "Standing in the middle of light and magic, wrestling with the demons from beyond the grave. He cast the Witch Queen back, and probably saved the city."

"We're calling her the Witch Queen now?" Velandryn sounded amused. "Should I be afraid that if I leave the city, I'll hear stories of us facing down Mannimarco and an army of Daedra by the time I return?"

Jordis slapped the table, laughing. "You should have thought of that before you joined up with the Young Wolves of Solitude! Glory follows us, and songs of our valor ring from here to Sovngarde!"

Serana's puzzlement must have shown on her face, because Velandryn quickly explained. "The band she leads. Would-be heroes, the lot of them." For a moment, he looked as though he wasn't done, but it passed and he turned to Jordis. "As appreciative as I am for your hospitality, we have to be on our way. Where would I find carriages for Morthal?"

"Morthal?" Jordis lowered her voice. "Aren't you going to High Hrothgar?" She gave Serana another sidelong glance and lowered her voice to barely a whisper. "When you said 'she knows,' you were talking about Dragonborn, right?"

Serana answered her, not bothering to whisper. "Yes, he was." She smiled at Jordis and Velandryn. "And my hearing's better than either of yours, so whispering just makes you look like a fool."

"That it is." If Velandryn was bothered by Jordis' attempt at secrecy or Serana's own barbed response, he hid it well. "Jordis, you're better off not trying to keep secrets from Serana." He glanced over at her, with something akin to amusement on his face. "She's rather good at ferreting them out."

Spoken by someone else, in another tone of voice, she would have taken it as an insult. She knew what he was really saying though, and felt the lips of her own mouth twitch upwards. "And without you even showing me your Thu'um. Should I be hurt?"

A heartbeat passed, and as realized what she'd said, Velandryn's eyes lit with wicked fire. "If you wanted to feel my Thu'um, you only had to ask."

She knew she was blushing, but responding would only encourage him. "Back to what he said, Jordis. Best way to Morthal?"

The human shrugged expansively. "Cart, maybe? Boat? Never been there myself." Her nose wrinkled, just a little. "Not much reason to go there when you've a real city all around you."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that, actually." Velandryn's voice was thoughtful. "The marshes had a feel about them. I'd not be shocked to learn that there are old things hidden in those mists. Vampires, perhaps, or even fouler things." He caught Serana's eye. "And every hero has to hone her teeth on an evil vampire."

How is this Velandryn Savani? He'd always had a humor about him, to be sure, but this was verging on geniality, and she'd never thought of him in that way. What happened since I left?
Imperial control, and two friends sitting at your table doesn't change that.

Not to mention the task ahead. For now, he just needed to focus on getting to High Hrothgar, and the first leg of that journey was Morthal. And for that...

Jordis was saying something to Serana about the flower crown woven into her black hair, and Velandryn returned his attention to his friends. *Friends, in Skyrim of all places.* It was a strange thought, but both of these women had proven themselves true allies and more besides. *A few more like them, and this province might almost be...livable.*

He only realized he'd gotten lost in his thoughts when Jordis said that damnable pet-name of hers again. "Vel?"

He fixed her with his gaze. "You have thoughts on how best to travel to Morthal?"

She showed him her teeth. *She smiles more than any human I've ever seen.* "Nope! I was saying you and Serana should spend a few more days here! If you're going to be stuck on a mountain with some old monks, you should at least make sure you have your fill of living beforehand. Hearthfire's in full swing! Get some more flowers for your hair!" She nudged Serana, who looked away. "Vel, I'm going to show you—"

"*Jordis.*" He spoke her name quietly, but it worked. *Thank you, Dov.* He couldn't always control it, the tone in his voice that gave words more than mortal weight, but when it succeeded, he could cut through conversation like the Razor through flesh. "You know who I am. *What* I am." Serana had felt it too; her golden stare was burning from his right. "I have tallied long enough."

She didn't look away, to her credit. "Aye." A smile—*just a little one.* "Admit it, though. You would have had the time of your lives."

"I would never doubt you, Sword-Maiden." He'd enjoyed being carefree, but that was a luxury beyond his ability to afford. He gave her a small smile, trusting that it was more comradely than grotesque. "If we stayed, I'd never find the strength to go back out into the wilderness." *That* wasn't true, but it wasn't wholly a lie either. Solitude was by far the most tolerable place he'd experienced since coming to Skyrim, and the thought of climbing a frozen mountain sounded distinctly unpleasant.

"You aren't kidding." Serana was a terrible example of a vampire princess, he'd come to realize. *Far too likable.* "Her idea does sound like it would be nice, *Vel.*"

*Oh, by the Corners!* He restrained himself from any of a dozen biting responses. Mentioning her vampirism or family would be unnecessarily cruel, and despite how obnoxious Jordis' little name for him was, he didn't want to truly hurt her. *And isn't that a shock.* Still partially in disbelief at the idea of sparing the feelings of a *vampire,* he contented himself with a glare. "You're doomed if I leave, Serana." As she began to scoff at him, he smiled with all of the mockery he could twist into that expression. "Or do you think you'd find someone else to argue with before you go mad from boredom?"

He saw the laugh coming before it bubbled out. "You may be right." She gave a little sigh and turned to face Jordis as well. "So, now that *Vel* has taken all of the fun out of my future, I think we'd best be on our way."

Jordis was looking at him with an expression Velandryn couldn't quite puzzle out. *Is something worrying her?* Finally, she shrugged. "Go by cart. I know you'd be on the mercy of the tides otherwise, and the captains tell me they're something fierce up the delta. If you leave here at the
worst possible time, it can take you a full two days to reach Morthal."

He supposed that someone in Jordis’ position would have to know something about commerce out of Solitude, but it wasn't a knowledge base he'd associated with the glory-hungry young woman. "My thanks, Jordis. You've been more help than I can repay—"

"Vel, you're Dragonborn!" She was grinning again. "I've half a mind to rally the Wolves and come with you. Who knows what you'll find on the road, and where better for a hero to be than travelling with you?"

Velandryn considered it for all of ten seconds. It would be inconvenient to have so many on the road, and Jordis was far better placed to be an asset in Solitude than just another sword. *Besides, there's nothing the Wolves could do that Serana couldn't do better.* Speaking of Serana, she wasn't doing much of a job hiding her displeasure at the idea of having more companions. *Not that I blame her.* He too had been looking forward to more conversations with the vampire, and a pack of rowdy Nord nobles didn't figure anywhere.

Fortunately, there were ways to dissuade her. "Jordis, if you want to help me there is no better place for you than Solitude."

The Nord blinked. "Really?" Another of those grins blossomed. "Because that kind of sounds like you're trying to get rid of me."

Velandryn chuckled. "In that case I'd just tell you that I sensed a dragon out in the hinterlands. I need someone I can trust in the city, and the Young Wolves could be a valuable asset in the months ahead."

Clearly Jordis hadn't thought of this. "You want us to what, recruit for you?"

Velandryn's laugh was genuine. "Nothing so definite. I don't know when I'll be back, but a force of friendly warriors is never a bad thing. You need to make sure that Solitude stays strong." He thought for a moment. "And if you absolutely have to sing those songs, try and throw one in about how elves aren't all monsters. I'd prefer friends to enemies, if it's all the same to you."

"Aye, we can do that." She almost sounded solemn. "You'd best stay safe, Dragonborn. You go and die without bringing me my glory, I'll have to drag you back from Sovngarde to finish the job!"

Another laugh. "I'll miss you too, Sword-Maiden." Velandryn rose. "I'm going to pack my things. I have some items in storage with the Cumberland Vaults—"

The Nord raised a hand to stop him. "There are rooms under Proudspire Manor that haven't been used since my grandparents' day. Say the word, and I'll have anything you want stored there."

*Even better than I'd hoped for.* He'd merely wanted to see if the Karthview could move his things, but Proudspire Manor might be just what he needed. *So long as I'm not storing anything irreplaceable.* It wasn't that he didn't trust Jordis. It was merely a question of competence. *She does mean well, though.*

While Velandryn went to gather those of his things he intended to bring with him, Serana was left in the front room with Jordis. Without the Dragonborn, neither of them quite seemed to know what to say. The Nord did seem to have something on her mind, however, if the looks she was giving Serana were any indication.

Finally, the vampire could stand it no longer. "Is there something you wanted to ask me, Sword-
Maiden?"

"Hmm? Oh, ah, well, nothing much." That she was embarrassed at having been found out after staring so openly said something about the woman, though Serana wasn't sure exactly what it was. "Just wondering if you've some elf blood in you. With eyes like that—"

Serana shook her head. "Just… I'm me." Words couldn't explain how little she wanted to do this right now. "I like you, and you've been kind to me. Can we leave it at that?" It was true, she realized with some shock. Whatever spell Velandryn had fallen under seemed to have claimed her as well. The Nord's obvious good faith and open friendliness had managed, in the span of a single conversation, to turn her into…is she a friend? Well, that might be going a bit far, but the thought of the blonde woman turning away in disgust or terror—or going for her sword—at the revelation of Serana's true nature twisted in her gut.

Her fear was for naught. "As you say, Serana." Jordis leaned in, smiling wickedly. "Did he say anything about Elly?"

Serana blinked. "Who?" No, he most certainly did not.

"Jarl Elisif. They met at the banquet, but I haven't been able to get a word out of her. Vel can snap shut faster than a clam when he's a mind to, so I'm coming to you."

_He met the Jarl? On the heels of that thought came another, even less pleasant. "What happened between them?"

"I know! It's killing me too! See what you can get out of him, no? If you're traveling with him, you can work him over. Any letter to Solitude addressed to," her mouth twisted, "Jordis Proud-Spire will reach me."

_He met the Jarl? And Jordis calls her Elly? She was still having trouble with that thought, but Jordis was clearly waiting for her assent. "I'll see what I can do."

Jordis grinned. _This woman does like smiling._ "You're a good one, Serana." She pushed her seat back and stood. "Tell Vel anything he leaves in the room I'll take care of, but he'll have to stop off with the Cumberland Vault to tell them his stuff is being transferred." She waved, and was gone.

Serana collapsed back into her chair, feeling winded. _That woman is a handful._ She saw Velandryn exit one of the halls, gesturing to someone out of sight, and headed over to meet him. He was in his travelling clothes, with a modest pack slung over one shoulder. The hilt of a sword peeked over one shoulder, and a pair of daggers rested on his belt. _He looks a proper adventurer._

He nodded in greeting, and she quickly relayed what Jordis had said. Not the bit about the jarl, though—I'm going to get that out of him on my own time.

Velandryn Savani scanned the main room of the Karthview Inn, strode over to their table, stoppered the bottle of Ashlander sujamma, and tucked it into his cloak. "It'll keep me warm of a night." His eyes flashed her a smile. "I'm ready to be on the road once more. Shall we?"

Carefully, she placed her crown of white flowers on the table. They would wither and die in the days to come, and she had no desire to witness that. _Let them stay beautiful, maybe bring some joy to somebody else first._ Besides, they weren't proper for travel on the open road.

She gestured out to Solitude, and the world beyond. "Let's be off, then."
Velandryn saw something on the way to the gates, and for a moment, his heart fell into his stomach. Then, he saw Serana twitch, and knew that she had seen it too.

The Dunmer from before, the girl who'd said a single stupid phrase and set off their whole blighted argument, was watching the road from a guard post, her partner a few paces away. Her face was still, but Velandryn almost fancied that there was a grief in her eyes that hadn't been there before. They locked gazes for a long moment, and then she turned away.

Beside him, Serana started to say something, but Velandryn raised a finger. "A moment."

It was the work of a moment to reach her, and in no time at all he stood before the other mer, though she would not meet his eyes. Finally, after a long and awkward moment in which he searched for something to say, she bowed slightly. "I hope you will forgive my earlier statement, citizen. I did not intend to give offense." Her voice was softer than it had been, diffident in a manner that sounded strange coming from a Dunmer. *Damn it, I hurt her.*

At that moment, Velandryn realized he didn't know what to say to make this right. Fortunately, old training bubbled to the surface, and the words came without thought. "There is no offense in words truly meant, sera." The benediction was almost in smooth in Cyrodilic as in Dunmeris, and the familiar thought brought his thoughts into order. "I...have not met many of our blood born in the Empire, and did not expect to hear those words from you." His bow was slightly deeper than hers, a gesture of contrition whose meaning he hoped she knew.

The depth of her answering bow was all the answer he needed. *Matching mine, or as near as she could.* "You're the first I've met who was born in Morrowind." Her eyes had become lighter as she spoke. "I don't—"

He cut her off, only realizing after he'd started speaking how rude that was. *Damn.* "One blood is a good oath. Use it proudly, and if any dare call you outlander, remind them that Veloth himself was born an Aldmer."

Her smile was back. "One blood, brother!" Her salute brought her fist to her breastplate, and the thump of leather on metal had a solid sound.

"One blood." He reached out and gripped her shoulder in a show of solidarity, though he had no idea if the gesture was known beyond Morrowind. "Fare well, sister."

Serana couldn't hide her smile when he rejoined her. "So, what happened?"

"We spoke." They could probably find a carriage, or someone who knew of them, at the plaza with the two fountains. He'd seen a stable there, and the road south was broad beyond it.

"You're not going to admit I was right, are you?"

"Do I need to?"

Her laughter probably should have annoyed him more, but it was a rather nice sound.

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**Jordis—**

*I'm writing this in haste. Alfa should make sure it reaches you.*

*If you notice any increased Imperial activity in the city, send me a message. I made a bit of a deal with Tullius, but I'm worried that if the situation changes I won't know about it until too late. I'm*
not asking you to betray confidences, just keep me up to speed on what the Empire is about.

Also, make sure that

It might also be wise

Jarl Elisif is following words scratched out to point of unintelligibility

The jarl will need your support as well. Any aid you can give her in establishing herself as a power in Solitude would go a long way towards making your city, and Skyrim, safer.

Be well, and thank you for the aid you have rendered me.

Go in the Light of the Ancestors.

—Velandryn Savani

It was two and a half days to Morthal by carriage, which meant three nights on the road, and the first was to be passed in a town called Dragon Bridge. Velandryn wondered aloud why it was called that, and Serana could barely hold back her laughter. "You'll see when we get there."

In truth, there hadn't been a town when last Serana passed this way, but the Dragon Bridge had been a fixture since before she was born. Now, it seemed that a pair of small settlements had sprouted on either side of the grim span, and what had been a desolate stretch of road was humming with activity. Of course, it was the dead of night the last time I passed this way. Her mother hadn't stopped to admire the sight, and so Serana had only seen it in passing. Now, as the carriage rolled down the hill into the town, she let herself take in her surroundings.

It had been overcast since morning, which Serana liked. It did mean, however, that the views over the water were more fog than vista, and as the sun dropped in the sky, there was no glorious riot of color. Indeed, their approach into Dragon Bridge was darker than the hour required, and little past the bridge itself was visible beyond the town.

The road from Solitude had been beautiful, running along the hillside with the water never far away, but the mountains had never been more than remote scenery to the west. At Dragon Bridge, that all changed, as the wide delta below Solitude narrowed and became more gorge than valley. Serana nudged Velandryn, and pointed. "The Reach is that way, up the river."

The man, heavyset and thick-jowled with a bushy mustache, whose cart they'd paid—overpaid, in Serana's inexpert opinion—to ride on, chortled. "Aye, miss, but best you stay away. The men up there are savages who'd eat a pretty little thing like you up for supper!"

Serana ignored him. Velandryn was studying the bridge, eyes narrowed. "How old is that?" There could be no doubt what he was asking about. The Dragon's Bridge, as it had been called when she was young, drew the eye not only because of its size, but by being so very different than the modest wood and stone structures at its base. It bore ornate carvings of dragons in flight, and the pillars that rose above the walkway were topped with claw-like crowns. In the center, where the span was at its highest, two pillars rose to become an arch of some twelve feet or more, topped with a pair of dragon heads seemingly roaring defiance to those below.

"The Dragon Cult had it made, or so I've heard." They'd ordered many such monumental projects; it was said that the workers who'd labored on the bridge had been thrown from the top once it was complete, to consecrate its majesty in blood.
"Interesting." The Dragonborn was taking in the town as well, but she could see his eyes keep returning to the bridge. She couldn't blame him, as she was still trying to pull more detail from its stones. "I'm impressed that it's so well-maintained. Too useful to destroy?" His voice grew soft. "But then why leave the carvings?"

In truth, Serana had no idea. However, a pair of mounted soldiers were riding towards the cart; a quick glance showed her that all traffic on the road was getting at least a cursory inspection. They wore the red capes of the Legion over leather and steel, and were each armed with sword, shield, and bow. Their casual approach, however, seemed to suggest anything but readiness for battle.

"Welcome to Dragon Bridge!" Serana couldn't see anything of the two behind their full-faced helms, but she thought it was the one on the left who'd spoken. She hadn't been expecting a woman, though.  *That armor hides her sex well.* "Is there anything you'd like to declare?" None of them answered for a long moment, and she trotted her beast closer, removing her helmet to reveal a severe face with olive skin and almond eyes. "Know that the penalty for transporting contraband has been increased to one hundred septims per item seized and detainment until investigation is complete."

The cart master—she'd gathered that he was some sort of itinerant merchant—rose and pulled a scroll from somewhere in his clothes. "I am a member in good standing of the Northern Winds Trade Guild, and covered by their Articles of Membership. My cargo was inspected in Solitude, and any further delay will only result in lost profit. If you would be so good as to point me towards their charter-house…"

The soldiers looked at each other for a moment, then the one who hadn't yet spoken shrugged. "Cross the bridge, their hall's on the Morthal side." He too removed his helm. "With the war on, inspections are up, even for the guilds. I'd make sure you didn't 'accidentally' bring anything you shouldn't have before going much farther."

The woman took the scroll from the merchant and studied it. "This seems to be in order. Proceed directly to the guild house and unload." She seemed to notice Velandryn and Serana then, and moved slightly closer. "And you?"

Velandryn only spread his empty hands. "Nothing but travelers headed to Morthal."

"Nothing in Morthal but bugs and stink." Serana tensed ever so slightly at the woman's tone. "What sends you there?"

Velandryn opened his mouth, and Serana instantly recognized the look in his eyes. *Oh no you don't!* She didn't need him snapping out for the soldiers to mind their own business. "We're potion-makers." The Legionary's head swiveled to look at her, and Serana was suddenly very conscious of her eyes and skin, either of which could rub a suspicious mind the wrong way.

Fortunately, Velandryn had caught on, and gave a bark of laughter. "Morthal's a pit, to be sure, but there's no better place to harvest marsh plants."

The merchant, apparently, had had enough. "You two, off now!" A moment later, they were standing before the soldiers, bags at their feet.

The cart rumbled off, and the woman watched it go. She turned to her partner. "Make sure the auditors check them tonight. I want whatever he's smuggling found before he can get it out of here." Her focus shifted back to them, and Serana once more fought the urge to look away. "Dangerous work, swamp-hunting." For a moment she looked as if she was going to say something else, but then she waved her hand. "One law, citizens!"
"One emperor." The fact that Velandryn had to consciously choose his facial expressions, Serana realized, gave him quite the edge when lying to others. If she didn't know his eyes, she might have thought he wasn't annoyed at reciting what was undoubtedly an Imperial mantra. "Is there aught else you need, and if not, might you point us to rooms for the night?"

The soldier shook her head. "Four Shields Tavern has cleaner beds, Blessing of Kyne across the span's got them cheaper." She paused for a moment. "Don't know if you're lying or actually fool enough to go into those swamps hunting plants, but either way watch your step. It'd be too bad if something happened to you."

Serana, once more, found herself unable to stop her retort. "I'm glad you care."

The Imperial snorted. "If you get shot by bandits or mauled by beasts, most likely we have to go hunt them down. We're stretched thin enough as it is without having to go and hunt down some rat-bagging deserters because you two couldn't keep your heads." She wheeled and rode away, not even bothering to say goodbye.

An instant's discussion steered their steps towards the Four Shields. Serana wanted to see the bridge up close, but the thought of inferior lodgings just to save a few drakes was not one she was willing to entertain.

Serana was already looking around, trying to take in as much of Dragon Bridge as possible. No doubt Velandryn thought her a fool, but even this handful of buildings was fascinating in its own way. She fancied that she could see where the Imperial styles met the local designs. *Those roofs have to be Nord.* They were steep and came to a ridge on the top, obviously to prevent the buildup of snow, but the walls below had a patterning that made her think of those legendary lands to the south, the realm of Cyrod.

If Velandryn was impressed by the architecture, he wasn't letting it show. He moved with an assurance he'd lacked when they parted, and strode towards the inn as though it was the simplest thing in the world to go and barter with complete strangers for food and lodging. *Maybe it is, for him.*

The Four Shields wasn't much different from the other taverns and inns Velandryn had found since coming to Skyrim. The same large fires keeping the chill at bay, the same half-drunken Nords passing their evening in quiet revelry, and the innkeeper cut from the same cloth as all the others he'd seen.

Serana quickly commandeered a table in what passed for a secluded corner of the hall, and Velandryn had to chuckle at the look on her face as she surveyed the room. "Not your people?"

"I'm shocked you don't feel this way. A bunch of rowdy Nords and you in the same room?"

"I've had some practice." He rubbed his hands together, enjoying the warmth. "Plus, I do know how to pick my battles."

Her sound of disbelief was far from subtle, and he flicked a finger in a gesture of dismissal as old as the Chimer.

Her grin told him that she knew full well what he'd been going for. "Since you like this place so much, how about you go and secure us some rooms and food?"
"You mean secure me those things, no?" Feigning ignorance, he'd learned long ago, was the best possible way to needle intelligent people. At least, it works on me. "I'd figured you wouldn't need either."

He response was to throw something at him. He caught it more by reflex than anything else, and found a pale pouch made of some soft skin in his hand. He hefted its surprising weight, feeling something shift within. "What's this?" He looked inside, and almost dropped the purse in shock.

A fortune lay within. A ruby the size of his eye winked at him from a bed of coins, some of which looked like they'd been taken from—is that an Alessian Royal? Some of these coins had to be three or four thousand years old, and that wasn't even getting into what looked like tiny ebony ingots stamped with some script he'd never seen. "Where in Oblivion…"

"I took a bit of spending money when I left." She smiled at him. "Do you think it'll cover my half of our travel expenses?"

She was teasing him, but he couldn't even care. He studied the Royal, a coin half again as large as an Imperial septim, made—if the treatise he'd read on the history of coinage was accurate—from the quicksilver alloy called mithril. It had fallen out of favor the moment the Alessians stopped considering it a 'holy metal,' and this coin was probably worth at least a hundred drakes to the right collector. "I think we'll make do." Truth be told, he still had most of Jarl Idgrod's reward tucked away in various pockets and purses about his person, but it never hurt to have more to spend. Just in case.

Something else occurred to him as he crossed the room. With what's in the purse, I could probably buy the inn outright! He'd never much worried about money in the Temple, and it was nice to not need to start now.

By the time he returned to Serana, she had pushed her chair back into the corner, eyes scanning the room. "They have what we need?"

He tossed her a key. "We have beds, and food and ale are coming." He sat opposite her, taking a quick inventory to make sure he hadn't left anything important on the cart or, ancestors forbid, in Solitude. "I hope you like stew and bread."

She would have preferred blood, most likely, but she only nodded. Then, she folded her arms across her chest and stared at him. "Can I ask you a question?"

He nodded, curious in spite of himself.

"What were your parents like? Your family?"

He blinked. "Why?"

"You've seen mine, so I'm sure you saw we aren't exactly normal." Something that might have been a smile twisted one side of her mouth. "I'm…curious. I want to know what a Dunmer family is like."

He snorted a laugh at that. "We come in more than one style, you know, and mine's not a typical story."

"Well, now I want to hear it even more."

Another laugh escaped him. "It's not that interesting, I'm afraid. Both my parents are alive and well, the last I heard. My father is serving as a priest in Irse Muur, and my mother's probably somewhere
in the Ashlands with her clan.” He hadn’t thought of either in some time. "I wonder if they’ve
learned I’m Dragonborn yet?"

Serana was leaning forward again. "Wait, your mother is an Ashlander? Aren't they nomads in the
wastes? How did they meet?"

"Ashlander doesn't mean barbarian, you know. The Urshilaku—my mother’s clan—are well-
respected in the Temple. They were the first to acknowledge the Incarnate, and that's earned them a
sort of…" he fished for the right words, "spiritual superiority. The way I heard it, the clan was near
nal'Gnisis, and she and my father chanced to meet a few times." He didn't much want to go into the
details of their courtship right now, however. "Sooner or later the inevitable happened, and I was
born somewhere near the Foyada Oryll in West Gash. It was a lean year, so I was sent to the
Temple for raising." He shrugged. "I see them now and again, and I spent a few months among the
Urshilaku once I could carry my own weight."

"So you never really lived with them?" There was something akin to sorrow in her voice. Does she
pity me?

"Not as such." It had never occurred to him that it might be odd. "They never bothered with
marriage, and were both busy. I trained under my father for a time when he was in Mournhold, but
the name of Savani doesn't shift enough water to warrant true blood allegiance."

He couldn't figure out what look she was giving him, and the arrival of the serving-boy with their
meals made the point moot. The next few minutes were given over to eating, and by the time he
realized how hungry he'd been, he was mopping up the last of the broth with what remained of a
chunk of coarse bread. Not bad, for Skyrim fare.

The room had grown louder as the evening lengthened, and now they had to raise their voices over
the clamor of the other patrons. Finally, Serana cast her spell of silence once more, and Velandryn
nodded his thanks.

Serana, casting done, returned her hand to her lap. Velandryn watched the movement, fascinated in
spite of himself. A glance might mistake her for nothing more than a pale human, but her hand…

Where the skin lay over the meat of the palm, it was merely pale. Where it stretched over the bone,
however, it verged on translucent. Every movement became a play of subtle color and tone, if one
knew how to look. And I haven't before now.

"Something wrong with my hands?"

He met her eyes, hoping against hope that his thoughts didn't show. "No, just…how did it happen?"

"Excuse me?"

Oh, right, need to articulate the entire thought. "I was wondering how you became…as you are."

She waved her hand, indicating the shroud of silence. "A vampire?" At his nod, she smiled with
what he almost thought was a condescending air. "Is there something you don't understand about
how it happens?"

He studied her, wondering if he'd made an error in judgement. "Your father, at least, was not
bitten." It was only a guess, but it fit. Vampiric lines do not come into being without a progenitor,
and Harkon claims to be one such.

She made no reply, but her smile was gone. "I was kind of hoping you wouldn't ask about that,
actually." Her eyes were fixed on what remained of her dinner. "It's not a pleasant story."

A better mer would have stopped asking then, and respected her obvious discomfort. "Few worth knowing are."

When she raised her eyes, they were as hard as he had ever seen them. "How much do you know about the origins of vampirism?"

"A bit." In truth, he was probably better-educated on the topic than most humans. The Temple might consider them anathema, but they were the most prolific creation of the King of Rape, and demanded understanding. "There's some…disagreement among the records. Some speak of a Nedic woman named Lamae Bal, but a few mention a ritual of blood upon the corpse of a defeated foe."

"I've never heard of the second one. It's a nice change, though, you not knowing everything." Her smile held nothing even remotely akin to joy. "Lamae Bal might have been the first, but the Volkihar got our gift from Molag Bal himself." She was silent for a long moment more. "My father…got his attention by sacrificing a thousand of his own subjects. When the altar was drenched and we stood among the charnel, he came to us. The ritual itself was…degrading."

"We were always the Volkihar." Her smile had regained something approaching real humor. "We became vampires. As you might have figured out, it…hasn't exactly been great for us. I'm fairly certain it was the prophecy that drove my parents apart, but," she smiled again, "it hadn't been a home for a long time before that." She gave a cough that might have been either a laugh or a sob. "I can see that now."

Or, it's what happens when you choose Molag Bal in particular. He understood, however, that saying anything flippant right now might well shatter the fragile relationship they'd built. "And after? You became the Volkihar?"

Velandryn wasn't often without retort, but he was finding it hard to say anything. "I'm…I'm sorry."

"I'll be fine. It's just…I am what I am. I don't like thinking about how it happened, though."

For the first time since her return, he understood exactly how Serana was feeling. "If you need anything—"

She was staring at the table again. "I'm sorry, but can you leave me alone for a bit?"

Velandryn rose, torn between sympathy and a bit of annoyance. "Of course."

"Thank you." One look at her face wiped away his ire. She looked on the verge of throwing up. Whatever she's feeling, she doesn't need me right now.

When he was a half-pace from the table, he must have passed through the ward of silence. The hubbub of the room crashed over him again, and he made his way through the crowd. I need some fresh air.
Serana looked out at the room, but saw something else entirely. Grey halls, the scent of blood and iron, pain as she was forced down, fear as she beheld—No! Her mind rebelled, and she slammed her hand down on the table with such force that the wood splintered beneath the blow.

Sense returned all in a rush, and she was back in the inn, seated alone at a secluded table in the corner. Her ward was still up, and none seemed to be paying her any mind. She closed her eyes, and, with some effort, brought her breathing back under control. I'm here. She was gone from Castle Volkihar. I'm a vampire. The ritual is done. It had been decades. Or millennia. Either way, she was in control. Not him. No matter what had happened, now she was free.

You will never be free. The voice was hers, but the words belonged to her father. And to my mother, and to the child who laid her flesh on the altar for the King of Rape to defile. She belonged to Molag Bal, body and soul.

Shuddering, she pushed herself up from the table. Despite not wanting to talk to Velandryn, the thought of being alone with her thoughts was even more unpleasant. The ward vanished with an almost inaudible whisper, and she stalked through the crowd to the door.

Night had fallen fully on Dragon Bridge. Lights burned in every window, and poles topped with lanterns cast golden pools of light on the ground. She peered through darkness that parted before her eyes, searching for the Dragonborn.

"You lost, miss?" It was a Nord, big, blustery, and obliviously helpful. "It can get dark here at night."

"I'm fine." For a moment, she wondered if this human was angling for something other than giving aid, but he simply nodded cheerfully and entered the inn. She shrugged and headed towards the bridge. That's where I'd go.

She found Velandryn Savani standing on the Dragon Bridge, looking north. The wind tore at his cloak, and the fabric flapped around his long-limbed frame. The hood was blown back, and his hair had been freed from the cord that usually bound it to billow out behind him. With his arms thrust into pockets on his cloak and his eyes staring towards the horizon, he could well have been another ornamentation wrought by whatever long-past Dragon Cultists had raised this bridge from the stone.

She moved quietly to stand beside him, saying nothing. The landscape before them must have nigh invisible to him, but you wouldn't have known it from the intensity of his stare. To her, it was cliffs rising from a river, and a great expanse of water bordering a black and foreboding marsh far in the distance. Solitude was visible as a hint of darker black against the sky, with perhaps the faintest suggestion of light along the horizon. The clouds hid the moon and stars from view, and no aurora shone down on them tonight. And still, Velandryn was staring out there.

Finally, she had to ask. "Can you actually see anything?"

He didn't turn his head. "The spell's called night-eye. Guess what it does." There was the merest hint of humor in his voice, and the knowledge that he wasn't angry over her abrupt dismissal loosened a knot in her chest that she hadn't even known was there.

She gave him the chuckle he'd almost earned. "You wouldn't want to miss all of the water and rocks." Then, because her gluttony for suffering seemed bottomless, she returned to their previous topic. "I'm sorry for before. I didn't want to talk about it, but being alone with my thoughts..." For a moment, she felt herself falling back, but she leaned against one of the stone pillars, and the cold roughness pulled her back to the moment. Dragon-carved stone, not the stone of the altar.
"Back home, every Acolyte wanted to rise to power." If Velandryn had noticed, he gave no sign. "We'd strive, scheme, sometimes backstab—do a terrible job of it, of course, but the intent was there—all with the goal of rising through the ranks of the Temple. Every scholar wanted to become a Prelate or a Canon, every warrior a High Ordinator or Armiger-in-Rep...
"Would I?" For whatever reason, hearing Velandryn describe this woman like that was making her more and more annoyed. "Does she do tricks?"

Velandryn did not seem amused. "Save your scorn for the ones who deserve it, Serana. She defended me against General Tullius, and is the first person with any power who didn't try and use me the moment she found out who I was."

He met Tullius? She'd picked up enough to know that he commanded the Legion here, but something else struck her first. "You don't think I have any power?"

"You leveraged your history to make me facilitate your return to Castle Volkihar. You might not have known I was Dragonborn, but let's not pretend there was anything like trust between us. We were using each other with all the vigor we could muster."

"Fair enough." That stung. She had been wary, true, but there had been moments where she truly thought that Velandryn had been…what? Fond of her, perhaps, or displeased that they were at odds. "So, she's your new favorite human. Good for you."

There was a long moment of silence. "May I ask an odd question, Serana?"

"Go ahead." The night was not looking pleasant right now. I should go back inside soon.

"You do know that I like you, right?"

What? That was a stupid question. What does it matter how he—

"I only ask because a lot of things suddenly make sense if you've been working with the assumption that I don't care for you."

Oh. She hadn't thought that, of course.

Except...

Except for the fact that, no matter what he said, she was still treating him as though he could turn on her at a moment. It hadn't been a conscious thing, but there had always been a knowledge in the back of her mind. A relic, perhaps, of her time among vampires. No affection was true, after all. Not even family. And he was mortal besides. It's only a matter of time before he turns on you.

She fixed him with a glare. "If this is some game on your part…"

He held up his hands. "I swear on the bones of Alandro Sul."

She turned away, not wanting him to see her face. "What did you mean? You've said plenty about how we're just working together. Are you saying we're suddenly friends?"

He laughed from over her shoulder, and she resisted the urge to turn. "I'm not saying I trust you, just that I like you."

"Explain." She kept her eyes fixed on one lantern in Dragon Bridge that was flickering a bit. The weak one. It would go out first.

"Not much more than what I said. I like you. You're smart, opinionated, clever, funny when you've a mind to be. I won't claim we always get along, but as a person, you're someone I'm very happy to have met."

She knew she was blushing, and she hated it. This is how he feels? "Well, you could be worse too."
His laugh was long and genuine. "Glad to hear it." With a whisper of cloth, he moved into her field of vision, peering at her face. "I'm going to get some sleep. Long road tomorrow."

It was only when he was away from her, heading down the bridge, that she realized he'd completely cut the jarl out of their conversation. Clever bastard.

She didn't mind as much as she might have, though. They would have plenty of time on the road together, and, somewhat to her surprise, she liked him as well. If I have to be dependent on a mortal, I could do worse than him. She would spend a little longer out here, she decided. Her thoughts weren't so unpleasant, now.

Dragon Bridge did dark well, Velandryn decided. Two steps beyond the pools of light, the night swallowed everything. Even with night-eye, he didn't trust that darkness, and wanted to be in his room, curled up under the covers. Stop using magicka to warm me. He wasn't running low, but the low-level warming was no match for actual heat.

It was dark and he was distracted, and so he didn't notice the human waiting in the shadows until it was too late. Or, if he was being completely honest with himself, the human might have been hiding too well for him.

"Master Savani, a moment?"

He froze. "I'm afraid you might have me confused with someone else."

"Oh, I don't think so. At least, I do hope you are Velandryn Savani. Otherwise, I think some questions are in order."

He turned, and beheld the most ordinary-looking human he'd ever seen. Brown cloak over greyish clothes, sandy hair atop a plain face dotted with a bit of stubble. The kind of human you don't notice in a crowd of three. "Usually, people have questions once they figure out who I am. You're the first one to threaten inquisition if I'm not."

The man smiled. "As you are Velandryn Savani, I'm here to give you a word of advice."

Velandryn exhaled, and gathered his magicka in his hands. If there was an attack coming, he'd be ready. "I'm listening."

"A Dark Elf and a vampire on the road aren't going to pass for alchemists. I'd recommend being mercenaries, or perhaps itinerant adventurers. Fewer questions that way."

Suddenly, things became clear. "You're one of Tullius'. Letting me know that the guard are keeping an eye on me?"

The human held up a sheet of paper. "This report recommends detaining you and your…lady friend, as you are obviously passing through under false pretenses. It has, most unfortunately, gone missing." The man smiled again. "A very good evening to you, Master Savani."

This didn't quite seem like the general's style. "That's it? No veiled warning, no admonition to stay on the Legion's good side?"

"I'm not with the Legion, Master Savani. It would be wise, of course, to stay in the good graces of those who protect the roads and catch ne'er-do-wells before they can bring harm to the citizenry."
He bowed. "Fare thee well, Dragonborn." With that, he vanished into the gloom again, and not even Velandryn's night-eye could make him out.

*Well, damn.* It was one thing to know that the Empire had spies in Skyrim, quite another to run into one face-to-face. *I suppose that's just another wonderful aspect of being the gods-damned Dragonborn.* Fortunately, it seemed as though nobody had been close enough to overhear them. *Though I suppose he set it up that way as well.*

Shivering, he headed towards the Four Shields. He was too tired for this.

"Ulfric's real problem wasn't killing the king, it was being so sloppy about it."

They'd left on the Morthal road as the sun was rising, in a cart loaded down with boxes of finely made tools and bolts of cloth and silk. "Things they can't make in the swamp," the driver had explained. "I load up with lumber and herbs when I'm there." It was around noon now, and they were stopped near a small hamlet, taking their meal while the merchant bartered with the locals.

Serana shot her traveling companion a look. "Weren't you the one waxing poetic about Jarl Elisif? And now you want to give the Stormcloaks tips on how better to kill their enemies?"

Velandryn jabbed a finger in her face. "That scorn right there is the reason Nords are all so terrible at using subterfuge. Ulfric might be dishonorable by Nord standards, but he still marches in and guts Torygg himself. Morality aside, it would have been better if he had blades in place to decapitate the Imperial leadership. That way, instead of having to flee the city, he could have at the very least thrown it into chaos."

Serana still didn't know too much about what exactly had happened when High King Torygg had died, but she wasn't in the mood to argue. *No, wait, the other thing.* She was always in the mood to argue with Velandryn. "And you, from what, three nights in Solitude, think you can just dance in and plan a takeover of the city?" She snorted. "No wonder everyone thinks you're arrogant."

"I am arrogant. It's one of my best qualities." There was a low stone wall that ran along the road' Velandryn had found a perch and now lounged there with an infuriating insouciance.

"What's gotten in to you? Last night you were...well, you, and today you're spouting off nonsense."

Velandryn blinked. "I got some perspective after we parted. Ran into someone who knew me."

"Ah." Then, what he'd said sunk in. "Knew you how?"

"By reputation." His dark tongue slid out and moistened his lips; Serana found the motion oddly hypnotic. "An Imperial spy of some sort. Said we were terrible liars, that the Dragonborn and a vampire would never pass for herbalists."

*Well, that's not good.* "So the Empire is, what, keeping watch over you? Didn't you say General Tullius promised you free passage through Legion territory?" Perhaps this was how the Empire got its revenge; make the Dragonborn squirm.

Velandryn did not seem to be squirming now, however. "He was actually very clear about that. He said, and I'm quoting from memory here, 'I am not with the Legion, Master Savani.' He might have been lying, but it seems an awful lot of effort to go through just to unsettle me."
Serana was fully engaged now, mind racing. "Why would he say that at all? If he is a spy, he's just blown his cover. If not—"

"He's got me jumping at shadows." Velandryn sighed. "I came to the same conclusions last night, and then I realized something." He fell silent, and Serana waited.

A long few moments passed, and the look in Velandryn's eyes grew increasingly self-satisfied. She glared at him, and he gave her a sly smile.

Finally, she laughed. "Oh, all right. What did you realize?"

His eyes laughed, even as his false smile faded. "That either way, they're scared. The Empire is walking softly on my account. Either they're misdirecting me, or playing a hand so I know that other forces are keeping watch." He leaned his head back and squinted his eyes against the sun. Not for the first time, Serana felt a stab of resentment for the hood that shielded her face. I'd like to feel the sun on my eyes as well.

"Well, congratulations, I suppose." That had come out dryer than she intended. "And that put you in a good mood?"

"In a way." His eyes were still closed, arms stretched along the wall. Were he anyone else, she'd have thought him carefree. "I'm running around trying to figure out what in Azura's name comes next, and the Empire is keeping one eye on me just in case I go rogue." He tilted his head forward to look at her. "Two years ago I had never left Morrowind, never even thought about leaving. Now? Now I've got the Penitus, or the Blades, or whoever shadowing my footsteps." He laughed again. "Nobody knows what in Nerevar's name they're doing. We're all stumbling around in the dark."

It was comforting, in a dark way. Unless that's what they want him to think. "Who are the Penitus and the Blades?"

"The Blades were the Empire's intelligence network. During the Great War they got wiped out, and now the Penitus Oculatus handles that sort of work." He shrugged. "At least, that's what everyone says." He stroked his chin. "Maybe there's a real spy group out there, one that not everybody knows exists."

She considered that. "If there was a group like that, though, they'd be glad to have the Penitus Oculatus running around. Good cover."

He nodded. "Agreed. My mind went straight to them, and he didn't have to say anything." A pause, then a quick tilt of his head. "So maybe that's another layer of deception I got handed." Rising, he yawned. "I slept terribly last night, and now I'm worrying again. Thanks for that."

She grinned at him. "Happy to help."

"Come on, let's see if that cart's ready to leave. If we're going back into that damn swamp, I'd rather be done with it sooner."

Morthal still put Velandryn on edge, but the knowledge that they were only going to be there long enough to grab their horses and head out was somewhat comforting. He'd begun to feel a sort of urgency since that midday conversation with Serana the day before, when his good cheer had evaporated in the face of the fact that he really had no idea what was going on. The Empire might
only have one eye, but I'm fully blind. And for now, the best thing he could do to ensure his success was get to High Hrothgar and the Greybeards.

Considering that the Jarl had given them use of her stables, it was only reasonable to go and speak with her, though Velandryn had the sneaking suspicion that the old woman had him exactly where she wanted him. At least Serana's here this time. He'd insisted on that much, at least. She wasn't sitting, though, preferring to lean in a corner.

Idgrod Ravenscrone poured herself a cup of tea. "It's far too early in the day for alcohol, those louts in the tavern be damned. Would either of you care for any? Silver-white from Falkreath."

Velandryn remembered all too well the games the Jarl had played the last time she'd brought out the drinks. "I'll be fine. Serana, would you like some?" He was a little curious to see how the vampire would react to the shrewd old ruler.

Serana, however, only shook her head. The Jarl peered at her. "So, I can't help but wonder at how you're still travelling together. She's a Volkihar, you know. If you've gone and gotten yourself enchanted, I can have Falion here in a moment to deal with it."

Velandryn laughed. "Serana's here as my...spiritual advisor." He glanced over at her, and she stuck her tongue out.

The Jarl sniffed at him. "You'd best be careful. Whether or not she can be trusted, keeping a vampire at your side will win you no friends."

He could almost feel Serana bristling. "I'm right here, you know."

"Oh, settle down child." She peered at Velandryn. "How's that make you feel?"

"Like you've a fairly solid grasp on the obvious reasons I shouldn't travel with Serana." He leaned forward. "Rest assured that I have a far more through list of reasons why I should." He glanced over at Serana. "Anything you want to add?"

The Volkihar scowled at the Ravenscrone. "Only that you are a perfect match for your town, Jarl Idgrod."

At that, the old woman burst out laughing. "Right you are, child! More right than you know." Her laughter subsided, and she gestured to Serana. "Sit, if you'd like. There's no thrall business here, and I've no more barbs for you."

Serana sat at last, and the Jarl regarded them both over her teacup. "I won't bother getting into your business any more than I need to. You're heading to High Hrothgar?" At Velandryn's assent, she nodded. "Good. Tullius and little Elisif have been harping on me to 'contribute' more to the war effort. As if more of Hjaalmarch's sons and daughters marching off to die will make a lick of difference."

"You don't think the war can be won, then?" Serana's interest was clearly piqued, and the Jarl didn't miss that either.

"I think that trying to occupy half of Skyrim is foolish, and that every day this war persists, we are all losing." She sniffed angrily. "If anyone can make them see sense, it's the Dragonborn."

Velandryn felt a bit as though she'd just punched him in the gut. "You expect me to, what, stop the war?"
"Who else? The dragons have returned, and the ones who should be protecting us are busy slaughtering each other!" Shriveled the Jarl of Morthal might be, but her fist made a respectable thud when it slammed onto the table. "I've given up trying to pound any sense into their thick skulls, so you'd best train yourself up to the task right quick!"

Velandryn could feel another laugh coming on, though that sick feeling in his stomach remained. "I'm afraid you might be giving me too much credit."

"And responsibility." Serana had engaged now, and her golden eyes were boring holes into the jarl. "It's not his problem if you can't keep from slaughtering one another."

"Perhaps you need to drink some blood, to un-addle your wits." Idgrod pointed to a tapestry that showed a mountain over which a dragon flew. "Dragons are part of our oldest legends. Like it or not, the fate of the Dragonborn is linked to that of Skyrim." She jabbed a finger at Velandryn. "Help us, and you'll find aid at every hearth. Let us wither and die, and you'll share our doom."

"Doom…" The word felt proper somehow. And so the Drum beats on. Lorkhan was dead and gone, however, his great task passed to mortals. "What you ask is difficult, perhaps impossible, but, once I have spoken with the Greybeards, I will do my best."

"Your best. Pah!" Idgrod spat on the floor. "I've seen men and women do their best for decades, and what changes? Nothing! You are the Dragonborn! The Elder Scrolls told of your arrival! You will do this, or die trying!"

For a moment, her passion took Velandryn off-guard. He'd pushed his chair back and risen a bit, but then Serana leaned forward, stopping just short of reaching out and physically grabbing the jarl. "The Elder Scrolls? What do you know of them?"

Idgrod Ravenscrone laughed, a cackle that sounded more than half-mad. "You don't know?" She looked between them. "Neither of you know?" She cackled again. "Elves and vampires, and you don't know more than me!" She was laughing so hard that tears were running down her face, but managed to bring herself back under control with a shuddering sigh. "Ah, I needed that."

Velandryn, however, was done playing games. "What do you know?"

She studied him. "Only fragments. Do either of you speak the old tongues?"

Serana nodded. "Awl luhk bralv."

"Well, I'll be damned. How old are you really, girl?" When Serana did not answer, the jarl continued. "The song only exists in fragments, but a few of us have pieced some of it together." She closed her eyes for a moment, then began to speak in a high, keening voice that had the cadence of recitation. "Ahrk fin Kel lost prodah, do ved viing ko fin krah, tol fod zeymah win kein meyz fundein!"

Something in Velandryn's head was throbbing, a voice that demanded to be heard. And the Scrolls have foretold, of dark wings in the cold...Impossible! It was one thing having Dov in your head, but to just know a language by instinct was beyond the possible.

The Jarl wasn't done, however. "ALDUIN, feyn do jun, kruziik vokun staadnau, voth aan bahlok wah diivon fin lein!"

Serana had gone pale. "Finish it." Her voice was barely more than a whisper. "How does it end?"

Velandryn barely heard either of them. At the word Alduin, a shadow had fallen over his mind, so
profound that he could scarcely breath. Alduin is returned. Mirmulnir's last taunt, so long ago.

Alduin isn't just an old Nord god.

He's an actual dragon.

Something happened then, a phenomenon that came but rarely to Velandryn Savani. His mind rebelled, and forced away the thought it was having. All notions of Alduin, speculations on his nature, were replaced with a single overriding desire. I must reach the Greybeards. Somehow, then, this would make sense.

He realized that the other two had fallen silent, and one look at Serana's face told him all he needed to know. "How bad is it?"

She gave him a sad little smile. "Well, the only part that directly references the Scrolls is Alduin's return. A bit about brothers waging war, and then it turns into doom, gloom, and eating the world."

Velandryn sighed. "So, Alduin's a dragon—"

Serana frowned. "Of course he's a dragon. He's the World-Eater."

Velandryn shook his head. "An actual dragon. I hadn't known that."

"Oh." She was silent for a second. "I guess it makes sense. Who else better to base your god on?" She smiled again, still without any humor. "At least that means he can't literally eat the world."

"At this point, I wouldn't bet against it." Velandryn had never felt despair like this before. Somehow, the name was filling him with hopelessness. No! This wasn't him. Whatever miasma corrupted him had no place in the soul of a Dunmer. This is, as all things are, a trial, and like all things shall be overcome.

Blessed Ancestors, witness my obedience to our ways.

Blessed Triune, witness my dedication to the True Faith.

Blessed Nerevar, witness my resolve!

The mantra calmed him somewhat, and he was able to think clearly again. "So, this Alduin has, for lack of a better word, returned. This return was presaged by the civil war in Skyrim, and I, as Dragonborn, will hopefully defeat Alduin and, by extension, the other dragons that have shown up. Did I miss anything?"

The jarl shook her head. "That is how I understand the situation." She favored them with a sly smile. "Remember, I bought you, Dragonborn. Gold, aid, and more. Now, it's your turn."

"Fine." Things were moving too fast for Velandryn to try and turn the tables right now. "I'd like to leave come morning. Do you have chambers we can use for the night?"

"Aye. Come morning, I'll have Valdimar lead you across the Labyrinthine Pass."

Velandryn remembered him, the Nord who'd helped them in Movarth's lair. "We've worked with him in the past. He's a good man."

"Why do you think I chose him?" Her eyes sharpened. "Do you really think there's anything you've done in my hold that I don't know about?"
Velandryn thought for a long moment, casting his mind back in search of something she might not have learned. "Which technique did I use to kill Movarth Piquine?"

The jarl, however, was unimpressed. "When my roof is leaking, I don't ask which tool the carpenter will use to fix it. All that matters is that I can sleep in a dry bed."

Velandryn sighed. "One of these days, I'll see you without an answer."

Idgrod cackled. "Days? Years, perhaps, and you'll get one." She sat back in her chair, and suddenly she was just an old woman again. "I'll have some sweet honeyed mead sent to your room, Dragonborn." She winked at him, and Velandryn sighed.

"I've agreed to your terms, Jarl Ravenscrone. There's no need to threaten me further." He rose, already tired from the journey yet to come.

When they were out in the mail hall, waiting on their rooms to be made ready, Serana finally relaxed. "You know, I'm not sure I've ever met anyone quite like her."

Velandryn nodded his agreement. "She reminds me of some that I knew back in the Temple."

"I'm not sure if I love her or hate her, to be honest." Serana twirled a bit of hair around her finger; one of the braids that usually wove behind her ears had come undone. "She reminds me of someone, too."

Velandryn watched the movement of her finger, pale skin contrasted against her ebon hair. "Oh?" he blinked, breaking the spell. "Who's that?"

Her smile was a brilliant flash of white teeth as her dark lips curled upwards. "Why, you." As she laughed, he saw a servant entering, and headed over to find his rooms. I don't think I know how to answer that.

A single bottle of mead sat on the small nightstand beside his bed. Velandryn grimaced to himself, but tucked it into a pouch, just in case. Better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it.

Serana didn't sleep that night, which was not unusual. Her body's natural—or unnatural, depending on your point of view—tendencies had her more alert at night, and right now sleeping during the day wasn't an option. Besides, she dreaded the thought of what dreams she'd be subjected to now that she had turned against the will of Molag Bal.

So, she'd brought a few books from Castle Volkihar, and Velandryn had a couple more that she'd borrowed. Right now, she was trying to get a feel for how people behaved. It was one thing to know the names of the Emperors or the High Kings, but there were so many tiny things that still felt wrong to her. The magic, for one. Velandryn might use it, but almost none of the Nords she'd encountered seemed to have any affinity for the craft at all. What happened? It was conceivable that the ways of the clever-men had simply fallen out of favor, but it still seemed strange.

The book she was currently reading was a drama set in Cyrodiil, concerning the multi-generational conflict between two families. The author seemed to take for granted that the reader understood certain facts about two groups called the Colovians and Nibeneans. She'd heard Velandryn mention those words, but she wasn't sure if it was a racial distinction or just culture.

She asked him when she saw him the next morning, as they prepared to depart. "A little of both."
They're all Cyrod, but you spend that much time breeding within your group, some differences will emerge." He shrugged. "Honestly, I mostly just go by the names. Nibeneese names are full of vowels, and Colovians have more of the Nord in them."

He paused for a second. "Also, there's Heartlanders. Not sure if they consider themselves a third distinct cultural group, but they're there. Why?"

When she'd explained what she'd been reading, he nodded. "Smart. If you figure out a good way to keep them straight, let me know. I've heard the Nibeneans have more meric blood, but who knows if that's true. In Skyrim, you can't go wrong calling them all 'Cyrod' or 'Imperial,' if you're feeling," his mouth twisted so slightly that she wondered if could have been unconscious, "patriotic."

She considered that for a moment. *I can live with that.* If she ever went to Cyrodiil, she'd likely have to learn more, but for now she should be fine.

Outside of the jarl's hall, they found a half-dozen guards, all mounted, with the horses they'd left in Morthal so long ago saddled and waiting. *Well, that's convenient.* At the head of it all was a man who she assumed was Valdimar.

"It is good to see you again, Lord Savani." Valdimar bowed from his saddle. "Shall we be off?"

They headed south into the foothills, climbing until the town was laid out below them. Velandryn turned back as they crested a small ridge, and the party awkwardly halted their progress.

Serana spurred her horse over to his side. "Something on your mind?'

Velandryn shook his head. "That swamp. I don't know what's out there, but I'm not sorry to be leaving."

Serana understood that feeling all too well. She too could feel the *power* in the mists, the omnipresent *pressure* that never let her forget that Morthal stood on the edge of...something. Still, though, the opportunity was too good to pass up. "What would the Nords say of their Dragonborn being afraid of a swamp?"

Velandryn, in answer, raised his voice. "Valdimar! We need a local's thoughts!"

The man in question rode up, smiling. "What can I do for you, Dragonborn?"

Velandryn blinked once. "I thought you weren't calling me that, based on how you called me in town."

Valdimar shrugged. "There? I was told to keep it quiet. But these are loyal men, every one. Besides," his smile widened, "word is there's been a dragon spotted up at Labyrinthian. Made them feel better, knowing they rode with the Dragonborn."

"Delightful." Whether it was the dragon or the faith of their escort that had put Velandryn in a bad mood, Serana couldn't say. *But I can certainly guess.* He'd given her enough information about the fight against the dragon at Whiterun for her to know that he wasn't exactly relishing going up against another.

*And yet...*

A part of her was excited. The thought of fighting a dragon at this Labyrinthian place was enticing in a mythic sort of way. Despite the fact that it was probably just rumor or one of the great beasts passing by, she almost hoped she'd be able to see one. *Imagine, seeing a dragon in the flesh!*
Some hours later, after passing below a fort where Imperial colors flew and guards peered suspiciously down at them, they reached what was unmistakably a ruin, and Valdimar signaled a halt. "Be wary. We're entering the outskirts of Labyrinthian."

At the risk of appearing a fool, Serana found herself unable to keep her curiosity squared away any longer. "So, Labyrinthian." Velandryn and Valdimar both looked over at her. "What do you know about it?"

Velandryn opened his mouth, but for once, he was beaten by someone else.

"It's the largest Dragon Cult site in Skyrim, so far as we know. A full city back when it wasn't ruined, rather than just a bridge or a tomb." Valdimar spoke while staring around them. "Shalidor was the one who gave it the name, and the stories say he created a great maze below the city, with a treasure for the one who proved himself worthy. Back hundreds of years ago, they'd send the ones who wanted to be Archmages out here, to pass through the maze and prove themselves." He scratched at his nose. "And every few hundred years, some bandit lord or sorcerer decides that he's going to set up there. I don't think any of them have even found it, though."

"Not to mention Jagar Tharn stowed a piece of the Staff of Chaos here back during the Simulacrum" Velandryn had apparently decided he could no longer bear not being a part of the conversation. "I'd always assumed he'd simply put it in Shalidor's Maze, but this place is big enough that he could have gone and hidden it somewhere else entirely." He was looking up at a crumbling tower, still some twenty feet high but with great holes in the sides. "It's more than just a stone maze, that's for sure."

"There were other Dragon Cult cities, you know." Serana had seen the maps, with the ruins clearly marked. "I heard that the stone was stolen for other buildings." She'd heard it from one of the men who'd been carting the stones to Solitude, back before he'd become a vampire. "Why didn't the same happen here?"

"Well, I wouldn't build with Labyrinthian stone." Valdimar looked a bit embarrassed. "I mean, I'm sure it's not cursed, but I think you'd be asking for trouble if you went poking through the ruins and just taking what you wanted. Trolls, spirits, maybe draugr; we shouldn't have trouble if we stay on the road, but not everyone who goes into Labyrinthian comes back out."

"And yet, the jarl had us take the pass." Velandryn, for his part, did not sound particularly awed. "Isn't it possible that it just doesn't make sense to quarry stone from such a remote location? The road we came up is doable enough by horse, but I wouldn't want to be the poor mage responsible for moving these rocks down the hill. Besides, I saw significant deposits back down by Morthal; any that you needed could come from there with much less fuss."

"You'd be wise not to take this place lightly, Dragonborn." That was another soldier, a tall woman with long braids. "There are old ghosts here."

"I'm sure there are." This, as least, was said with more respect. "And I've no intention to disturb them, but this is the primary overland route between Whiterun and Morthal. I find it hard to believe that you're losing travelers regularly."

"You're not wrong. So long as you don't camp here on nights when the moons are wrong, or go exploring, there's no danger. The roads are well patrolled, but bandits and who knows what else lurk off of the main paths, so don't go exploring."

Velandryn shot Serana a glance. "Should I be worried now?"
She gave him a smile. "I'll let you know before I go to look at anything, but you'd best do the same. I'd hate to lose you because you heard some old words calling."

It sounded like banter, but she could see that he'd gotten her message. If there were any of those walls he'd mentioned, the ones with the dragon script on them, he might not be fully in control. She wouldn't let anything happen to him if he were to lose himself. Without him, I get the feeling that everyone would be a lot less welcoming.

He flashed her a salute. "Mur alla, breyi."

She grinned at being called difficult woman, and wondered what it said about Aldmeris that it had been a single word. Of course, difficult man is bruntyu, so maybe they were just a difficult people.

As they entered the city, everyone rode a bit closer together, and Serana found herself gawking as though she were back in Solitude. Even in ruins, the scale of the place put to shame Morthal, and some of the halls would have rivaled anything she'd seen in Solitude. This city, how have I never—

Then, it hit her. "Bromjunaar!"

Velandryn froze ahead of her. "What?"

She was too excited to care about the odd note in his voice. "This is Bromjunaar!"

She'd heard stories, of course. The city that sat atop a mountain, where the greatest of the Dragon Priests had gathered to perform whatever rituals their masters required. I never thought I'd see it!

"The capital." Velandryn's voice was half-whisper, half-growl. "The seat of the North, and the Moot of Konahrik."

She spun, almost falling out of her saddle. "Where did you—" Realization came a moment later. "That's right."

It was something out of a bedtime story. Konahrik in Bromjunaar. She'd never given it much thought, but the words simply belonged together. And apparently whatever dragon is riding in Velandryn's head thinks so as well.

Valdimar was staring at the both of them, and Serana quickly smiled. "Just something I heard a long time ago. So, where do we go from here?"

The party continued through the onetime capital, which was still mighty even in ruin, and Velandryn drew closer. "There's power here."

"Do you mean—"

"Not a wall. At least, not nearby. Just…a feeling." He sighed, slumping slightly in the saddle. "This place was important." Another glance around them, taking in the snow-covered streets winding between tumble-down buildings. "It's huge, even after so long. Despite what I said, some stone must have been taken. How large was it before?"

That, Serana could not answer. Something struck her then. "Konahrik. How did you know that name?"

"I couldn't tell you. I just…Konahrik comes from Bromjunaar. That's something that is true."

"I heard that as well, but nothing more." She had the uneasy feeling that it might never be solved,
that she'd have to go on with only a single piece of this puzzle. "If anything else comes to you, tell me, okay?"

"Of course. After all, you've more experience—" Velandryn cut off and stared skyward. "Dragon."

"What?" Then, she heard a distant roar. "It's coming?"

"I don't know." Velandryn raised his voice. "Valdimar, there's a dragon about! We need to find cover!"

To his credit, the Nord lost no time. "On me! On me!" He took off up the road, the rest of them close behind.

It had been a long time since Serana had done anything more than trot on a horse, and she could feel the impact as they pounded up the stone way. Ahead, Valdimar peeled off to the left, into an open space where a two-storied building in better repair than most flew Imperial banners while a number of travelers and a few bored looking Legionaries milled around with no clear purpose. Looks like some sort of waystation.

"Dragon! Dragon!" At Valdimar's shout, the scene devolved into chaos. Soldiers ran for cover while others emerged with shields and spears. A child began screaming, and his mother clasped him tight. Some of the travelers took up arms, and in less than a minute they were surrounded by an impromptu force of defenders. Serana could make out sixteen Imperial soldiers, and another dozen travelers who looked like they knew how to fight. Perhaps twenty more were clutching spears or swords with varying degrees of competence; they'd be little help, expect perhaps as a distraction.

Clearly, Velandryn agreed. "Get them inside!" He pointed at an old woman with a rusty mace. "Anyone who can't fight, make sure they're safe!"

"Will that work?" The one who seemed to be in command of the Legionaries was a tall Nord with red hair and a close-trimmed beard. "It's a dragon!"

"It won't attack helpless prey while there's a real fight to be had." Velandryn spoke with absolute certainty, and Serana hoped that he was right. "Is there another place you can hide them? I'd like to use that main hall as our cover."

In the distance, another roar sounded, and Serana could just barely make out what might have been the beating of wings.

The soldier grimaced. "A few places, but nothing with as much protection."

Velandryn cursed quietly. "Then get them far from here. Somewhere with an intact roof, off of this main square. If the dragon comes down here, I don't want them to be collateral damage."

Both Valdimar and the Imperial nodded, and Serana marveled at how easily they conceded command to someone who sounded as if they knew what they were doing. Then, she realized she'd done the same. Ah well, it's not like any of us would do better.

Velandryn gestured at the central tower. "Use that for cover, but don't concentrate your archers."

He waved to indicate the ruined buildings around them. "Move from shelter to shelter. Believe me, if it focuses on one place, there's nothing here that can hold it back."

Serana looked around at the open plaza. Not a lot of cover between that middle building and the surroundings. "Should we set up somewhere else? This much open space, it's a risk."
"Not a good idea." That was the Imperial. "Intact roofs are rarer than you might think, and this
tower's the only place in the area with both elevation and cover."

Velandryn dismounted, rubbing his chin. "In that case, I'll try to draw the dragon there. If I can
keep its attention, maybe you lot can ground it."

Just then, another roar sounded. From the looks on everyone's faces, Serana figured this one was
close enough for even their mortal ears to hear.

"Go! To your places!" The urgency in Velandryn's voice was at odds with the stillness of his face,
and the dissonance made him suddenly seem like something not fully Dunmer. Is this the Dov he
mentioned?

"Wait!" That was one of the travelers, a Redguard in heavy armor. "Why are we listening to this
elf? Why are you in charge?"

Velandryn gave him a single withering glare. "I'm the Dragonborn." He looked the dark man up
and down. "If you don't have a ranged weapon, get in cover and be ready to swarm him when he
touches down." He raised his voice. "Anybody with a battleaxe or warhammer, you might stand a
chance of cracking the scales, but be careful of those claws."

The crowd was rapt now. The word, Dragonborn, had rippled through them and now they stared at
Velandryn Savani as though they beheld a ghost. Or a god. He mounted his horse again. "The key
is mobility. It's fast, but we're agile. Don't move in straight lines, and never strike from the same
place twice! Once it's grounded, stay behind it and watch the tail. Everything vital is deep inside,
so try and cripple the limbs so we can get close enough to kill. Now, go!"

There was no cheer, no rousing cry. The crowd simply exploded into activity, and Serana looked
up to see something moving behind the low-hanging clouds. "It's coming."

Velandryn had dismounted, and gestured towards the tower. Valdimar had led his Morthal troops
off to secure vantage points, and the Legion men were preparing. Once more, it was just the two of
them. As they walked, he suddenly looked very tired.

"So, how much of that was actual knowledge?"

"All of it, but not mine. There are things that I just know about dragons now, after all."

She nodded, for once at a loss for riposte or sarcasm. "Where do you want me?"

"At my side. Your magic is as strong as mine, and if this works, he'll be trying to kill me and
ignoring the others." Velandryn smiled in the human fashion. "Did you think you wouldn't be
staring into a dragon's gullet?"

"Not for a moment." It was a slow thing coming, the realization of what they were about to do.
"This is really happening, isn't it? We're fighting a dragon."

"So it seems." If the prospect excited Velandryn, it didn't show. "I suppose now I'll get to be the
only mortal living to have fought two of these bastards."

Inside, the tower was more ruin than fortification. Someone—perhaps the Empire, perhaps some
defensively-minded natives—had built wooden platforms and stair way that gave access to the
more defensible holes. There was also a single stairway that stretched up to a hole in the ceiling.
All about them, people ran this way and that, grabbing gear or herding panicked noncombatants
out of the structure. The sight of two young men clutching each other, eyes wide, send a pang
through Serana's heart. *That's who we're fighting for.* At the end of the day, Jarl Idgrod was right. All of the politics meant nothing when compared to the return of the dragons.

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Velandryn paused beside a rack of bows, looking them up and down before moving on. *Bows didn't do much against Mirmulnir.* Besides, his role this time was to draw the beast's attention. *Magic and Thu'um should be enough.*

Serana also passed up the ranged weapons, but grabbed a long pike that, but for her inhuman strength, would likely have been far too heavy and unwieldy for her to use with any skill. As it was, he figured it might pierce something, and the eight or so feet of sanded wood between the cruel steel head of the weapon and its base meant that she wouldn't have to get quite so close to the great beast. *Smart.* The thought of a dragon's breath on the vampire wasn't a particularly pleasant one.

For the briefest of moments, the absurdity of that last thought struck him. *I'm pulling for the vampire now.* A month ago, he'd have laughed himself senseless at the thought of Serana going up in a puff of indignant smoke. *Now?* Now he didn't know. Somehow, she'd become important to him. He hadn't been lying on the bridge, after all. He genuinely liked her, for all that she could be completely insufferable at times.

As they climbed the stairs, he saw Serana carefully hoist the pike to avoid a support strut. The movement, at once deadly and oddly innocent, sent a rush of warmth through him. *Never thought I'd call a vampire 'friend.'*

They reached the roof, and Velandryn beheld their battlefield from above for the first time. A moment's glance told him that this tower had once been taller, and this had been an internal floor, so rather than parapets to hide behind there were only irregular remains of the walls. *Unfortunate.* They'd have to be careful with their positioning.

Below, the plaza had all but emptied. Most of the soldiers were in the buildings at the periphery, peering up from hidey-holes and the best-protected bits of stone they could find. *It won't keep them safe under a direct barrage, but if I can keep its attention, they might be able to wound it enough to bring it down.*

Serana achieved the summit, and whistled as she looked out. "Not exactly the walls of Solitude, is it?"

Velandryn tried to get a feel for the space, to understand the flow of the battle, like the histories said. *The commander should plan around the terrain, but how can I do that when the enemy flies?*

"You have something to counter the dragon's breath?" He had a few spells in mind, but he wasn't sure if they'd work on her. *At least not well enough to help if she's caught in the fire fully.*

Serana shrugged. "A few. Mostly I'm hoping this one doesn't favor fire."

"*Doesn't favor fire?*" Velandryn felt something lurch in his gut. "What does that mean?"

Serana leaned the pike against a portion of half-collapsed wall. "Not all dragons favor fire. The stories tell of those who breathe the winter's frost, and others who can drain the strength from even the strongest heroes." She shrugged. "Fire might be good for you, but it's not ideal for me."

*They don't all breathe fire.* The only way he'd survived against Mirmulnir was by taking advantage
of his body's natural resistance to flames. I'll need to be more careful. It was only one more variable in a plan that was filled with them. So why do I still feel sick? His knees were unsteady, and something was pounding behind his eyes.

"Velandryn? Hey!" Dimly, he became aware of Serana's voice. "What's going on?"

"I didn't know their breath was cold." His own voice sounded distant as well. "I have Dov in my head, but I missed something so fundamental." His eyes found hers, and the concern in them was easy to read. "Serana, what else don't I know? What else is missing?" He was gripping the low wall too tightly, but he couldn't seem to let go. "Serana, I—"

She cut him off. "You don't have the luxury of doubt right now, Dragonborn!"

"I'm leading them into battle with incomplete information! What they don't know—"

"All they need to know is that you're up here, ready to lead!" There was something akin to desperation in her voice. "They're following you! Their Dragonborn! If you falter, how many of them will stay?"

She wasn't wrong, he knew. Still, his dragonlore had suddenly become ashen sand. It's dangerous enough to stand on, but try to fight with your feet in it, and you're sure to be dragged down. "You're here too, you know. Aren't you worried that we're about to die?"

She shrugged, and smiled at him. "I don't have a lot of friends right now. Can't go abandoning the one person who puts up with me."

That made him laugh. "Likewise." He felt a sudden surge of affection for the vampire. "For what it's worth, I'm glad you're here."

Another smile, with those golden eyes shining. "So am I."

He studied the sky, and the shadowy shape moving through the clouds. "I suppose it's appropriate, fighting one of them here, but it would be nice if there were a Legion or two nearby."

Serana's laugh was an airy thing, delightful in its incongruity with their surroundings. "They'll arrive just after we've slain it."

"Claim the kill in the name of the Empire." Somehow, this was helping. "Well, let's kill the damn thing so we can quarrel over who gets the credit." He was peering into the clouds again, hoping to make out some shape or shadow. He'd have to shout to get its attention. And then there's no going back.

"Velandryn." Serana's voice was quiet but not calm. There was something in there, as if she were holding back emotion. "Thank you."

"For what?" His mind flashed back over the last few days.

"For…for this." Her wave took in the both of them, and where they stood. "For traveling with me, arguing, even—"

Now, it was his turn to cut her off. "We're not done yet. We've both got our duties to fulfill." She's scared too. It wasn't like her to bare her soul so easily.

And, indeed, the moment passed. She nodded. "Right." Another small nod. "Thanks."
"Don't mention it." He scanned the sky. *The waiting is almost worse.* "Thank you, for coming."

"I wouldn't miss it for anything." As Serana spoke, he saw the shape, felt the flutter of wings deep inside. *There!*

"Get ready." He inhaled, feeling the cold air of the Hjaal, of Labyrinthian and Bromjunaar-Long-Fallen, and of the dragon far above. *Where did you come from?* He knew, however, that it didn't matter right now. *Wherever they've come from, I'll stop them.* There was no other option.

"FUS!"
Chapter Summary

It's Lydia in Riften. This should go well.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

By all rights, Riften should be a far more lustrous jewel in Skyrim's crown. It has a warmer climate than either Windhelm or Solitude, and the Rift is a far gentler hold than any save perhaps Falkreath, though that town's association with its cemetery has always precluded it from greatness. It is well-situated to dominate trade from southern Morrowind and Black Marsh, and its passes into Cyrodiil, while not the most accessible, are no more forbidding than those that traverse Reaper's March or the Dragontail Mountains.

Why then, is Riften not counted as one of the great cities of Skyrim? The answer is simple: crime.

Alone among the cities of the Nords, Riften seems to have a real and lasting problem with criminal elements and corrupt officials. This is not to suggest that such qualities are unique to Riften, only that they have, for a variety of reasons, flourished there to a degree not seen in the other cities of Skyrim. Windhelm has long been plagued by the Stone-Tooth Gang, and the pirate presence in Solitude's waters has been infuriating officials for years, but only in Riften can a member of the infamous Thieves Guild stroll into any tavern and order a drink while wearing their colors, secure in the knowledge that no lawman would dare accost them.

While the city has always had a somewhat looser relationship with its criminal class than others in Skyrim, it is only in the last sixty years that the current situation has existed. Since Jarl Hosgunn's seizure of power and the subsequent rebellion that ended his rule and his family, not one jarl has had both the power and the will to reign in the criminals and lowlifes who have carved their way into the city's institutions. Groups like the Black-Briar family and the Fal'tong crime syndicate of the Dark Elves have enough influence that to remove them fully would be all but impossible, and any attempt would doubtless result in vicious reprisals against any jarl who tried.

Is it any wonder then that none have attempted such a task?

Constance Michel put the book down, and sighed. She had little time to read, and she hated it when she opened up something depressing.

Not that she should complain. Bersi, at the Pawned Prawn, had found this one at the bottom of his latest shipment, with half the cover missing and water damage along one side. He was a good man, though, and handed it to her when she stopped in to say hello, allowing not even a septim in payment.

Still, an adventure novel would have been nice. She lived in Riften, she didn't need to spend her free time reading about how wretched it was. Given all the stories about the Dragonborn, though, I bet those books are in high demand right now.

For a moment, the old dream returned. That she'd been chosen, been taken far away from this
place. **To Solitude, or Cyrodiil, or Winterhold where the mages learn!** Instead, she'd just grown up. Nobody had wanted the scrawny little Imperial girl, just as they hadn't wanted the gangly adolescent she became. As time had passed and Grelo had grown older, it had naturally fallen to the oldest child to step in and help run the orphanage. Constance had picked up the slack, and told herself it was only for a time, that she would one day leave.

But she never did. Grelo the Kind was only getting older, and what had been a gently mocking nickname became a cruel jest. Pointed humor slowly became harsh words, and the woman who'd once held Constance's hair back as she emptied her belly during a bout of illness was now a figure of terror, growling and snapping at the terrified children.

So, Constance stayed. She made herself a little room in one of the larger storage closets, and fit a bed over some of the crates. It wasn't much, but it was enough.

Sometimes, she longed to pack what she had and run out the door never to return, but those were night-time dreams. The children needed her, and she knew that she needed them just as fiercely. There was a kind of peace to be found in giving them what joy she could, and little Runa especially had nobody else. *I was never the only girl; I can't even imagine how she must feel.*

Her room had no windows, but there was a water clock that almost kept good time. She filled it each night, and when the second bowl filled and rang the bell, she knew it was time to rise.

She'd gone over the books and stores last night, and she'd have to go down to the market today. The Temple of Mara gave them a little coin, the jarl a little more, and some of the farmers gave of their less desirable crops, so the orphanage got by. Winter was fast approaching, however, and so Constance knew that she'd need to stock up on meat, and whatever root vegetables she could. *They're only children, they need to eat to grow.* She could get by on less, but hopefully it wouldn't come to that.

*Besides, Samuel's birthday is next week, so I'll need to go and get a bit of sugar.* Her baking was adequate at best, but there was no way she could afford to buy a cake in whole. *Besides, this way I can write his name on it.* All of the children could at least read their own names, and Samuel loved to pick out the letters when he found them.

*I'm Tirdas, so Mellona should be in with her eggs…*

They had *trolls.*

As Lydia entered Dayspring Canyon, where the Dawnguard were headquartered, one of the great beasts had lumbered forward, sniffing and growling. She'd almost drawn steel, but a closer glance showed her the armor plates fastened around its shaggy hide even as a young man ran up, yelling at the beast to stand down.

"Sorry about that. She won't attack without orders, but she hasn't quite figured out that not everyone's okay with being sniffed." Underneath the armor that she recognized from Dimhollow, a young man was blushing and apologizing profusely. "Great for security, though."

"Do you have much issue with that out here?" Her horse was some distance away, too laden to run but not getting anywhere near the troll. "And how do you get them working with horses?"

"Mostly we don't." He grinned apologetically. "It's easiest to just keep them apart. I'm taking this one out for a patrol. Just bad luck she was here when you came in."

She waved his apology away. "It happens. I have a message for the Dawnguard leadership."
The man straightened. "Right away! I'll take you to the fort!"

As they travelled along the path, alternating between smoothed dirt and sections of worn stone, Lydia noticed how beautiful their surroundings were. Waterfalls ran down the cliffs into sparkling pools, and now and then a deer or mountain hare would pop out of foliage and regard them suspiciously for a long moment before vanishing again.

And then, she saw where they were headed. When Lydia heard fort, she'd expected some sort of ruin, perhaps in the Imperial style. Something like Fort Greymoor on the Whiterun plains. What she got was something else altogether.

Fort Dawnguard was huge. Each tower could have housed half the Whiterun Guard, and the main keep rivaled Dragonsreach. "Divines! How many of you are there?"

Her companion laughed. "I know the feeling. Most of it's not used, though." The path was leading them to a palisade where several more Dawngaurd were waiting. He waved to them. "Visitor with a message!"

One of the women at the gate began laughing. She walked forward, head thrown back, almost braying laughter into the air. Lydia quietly shifted her feet into an open guard. What's she up to?

"Been a while, Lydia!" As she drew closer. Lydia recognized the woman from Dimhollow, the one who'd returned to help her fellows. By Kyne, she made it out!

On the heels of recognition came consternation, as Lydia realized she couldn't remember her name. Ing-something. Ingard? That didn't sound right.

The guard beside her saluted. "Ingjard! This woman claims to have a message for Isran!"

Well, I was pretty close on the name. She held out the map that her thane had gotten from the vampire Serana. "This is for someone who'll know what to do with it. If that's Isran, then your man has the right of it."

Ingjard took the paper from Lydia's hand. "A map?" She looked over at the man who'd escorted Lydia. "Recruit, next time ask them a few more question before showing them where to find us. What if she'd been a thrall?"

The guard murmured apologies, saluting again. Ingjard sighed, and gestured at Lydia to follow her. "Downside of being the upstanding ones, our recruits usually have more ideals than sense."

The Whiterun Guard had experienced similar problems in the past, when farmers itching for some excitement had signed up without knowing even the basics of discipline. "Not the worst problem to have, though, too many enthusiastic people joining."

The other Nord nodded. "When I left for Dimhollow, there were a dozen of us. Now? We're pushing fifty, and that's not counting the five that Celann's showing the ropes."

They were passing open areas clearly laid out for training, and Lydia saw sparring and practice with crossbows here and there. As they passed another palisade, a sentry waved at them.

Lydia liked the feel of it. She hadn't realized she missed the discipline of the Dragonsreach barracks, but the drilling here felt a bit like home. "Your group is impressive."

Ingjard nodded. "Next time, we won't have to rely on mercenaries to help us clear out infestations."
She winced at that. "I'm sorry about Dimhollow."

Ingjard shrugged. "Lynoit and I made it back, but Tolan didn't. I never had much use for the Vigilants, but he had a warrior's death."

"May he feast in Sovngarde." The platitude rolled off her tongue easily enough, though the memory of her thane's abandonment still tasted sour. "For what it's worth, that map points to what's probably a significant group of Volkiihar."

"Charming." Ingjard was smiling, though, so Lydia wasn't sure how to take her tone. "Isran'll be happy to see this, at least."

Isran, a heavily scarred Redguard who seemed to lead the Dawnguard, was indeed happy to see the map of Castle Volkihar. He was less happy, however, to hear that they had let Serana return there. "Had you brought her here, we could have dealt with her as she deserved."

Lydia pointed at the map. "But then you wouldn't have that."

"Fort Dawnguard was built to house those who do battle with vampires. We have…methods of obtaining information."

Lydia spared a moment's thought for what she knew of Serana. "Still, I think you'd have a hard time torturing anything out of that one."

"People who think they can resist simply haven't experienced the hopelessness of interrogation." Isran shrugged. "But I'm not here to argue with you. This is valuable information, and I consider the deal Durak made with your thane fulfilled."

Lydia nodded. She shouldn't have been surprised, she supposed, that Isran knew about that. He's leading these people, after all. "So you'll provide the designs for your crossbows to Whiterun?"

"I already have." Isran folded his arms. "I sent the package as soon as Durak told me of the deal. I know of Jarl Balgruuf's reputation, and your Dragonborn isn't wrong that the weapon could be potent against dragons as well."

"My Dragonborn?" Isran wasn't a Nord, but surely he knew of the Dragonborn. "Is our mission unimportant to you?"

However, the Redguard just shrugged. "Vampire attacks are up across the province. We've recorded a threefold increase over the last year, and our soldiers are barely scratching the surface. Everyone else can focus on their wars or their dragons, I'm not letting this threat slip away."

"A worthy war, though I hope if you see us fighting a dragon, you'll lend your steel."

Isran spread his tattooed arms. "But of course. Provided, naturally, that you and yours will assist when more of the bloodsuckers need killing."

She nodded. "Besides that, my honest thanks for those crossbows. Whiterun will make good use of them."

Isran smiled. "They are magnificent, no?"

Lydia figured this would be as good a time as any for her request. "I don't suppose…"

She left Fort Dawnguard the next morning, the proud owner of a brand-new crossbow and two
hundred bolts, packed in neat purses of twenty. They had far more beds than they did bodies to fill them, and in exchange for her insight into what had happened down in Dimhollow—she'd told them everything except the specifics of what had happened between her thane and Serana—they were more than happy to put her up for the night.

Isran had explained that an associate of his named Sorine Jurard was working on improving their crossbows, but at the moment, all they had for her was the older model. Honestly, Lydia didn't much mind. What she'd seen of the Dawnguard crossbows was impressive enough. And when she met Sorine herself and the other woman explained that her new design still had a tendency to jam up on the third shot and the trigger mechanism fell apart on the fourth, Lydia was more than happy to take a weapon that was all but identical to the one she'd given to the Dunmer.

She'd had the chance to meet a few of the Dawnguard as well, and had to agree with Ingjard's assessment. A lot of heart, a bit of spine, but they need training badly.

She'd seen what Movarth and Serana were capable of, and even the hand axe Ingjard had shown her, etched with silver to better harm the undead, didn't set her mind at ease. Tools are all well and good, but a master vampire is a monster. They'd need specialized tactics to counteract their abilities, and maybe some wizards to even the playing field. Maybe Irileth was right, and I do have a knack for command. For now, though, the Dawngaurd wasn't her issue.

It was nearing midday as she exited the canyon, and the guard who'd seen her on her way indicated she could make Riften in not more than three days. It'll be nice to be in a Nord city again. Even if it was one with as unsavory a reputation as Riften.

Truth be told, what she was traveling on couldn't really be called a road. It had been once, but now it was a path, and sometimes she almost lost the track before finding a post or length of fencing. Not much traffic this way, it seems.

The mountain foothills were receding around her, and the lifting haze revealed a forest alight with trees in every hue of red and was almost a cliché to compare something beautiful to autumn in the Rift, and here it lay before her. As the road entered the light-spattered woods, she looked up to see how the sun was filtered between the leaves above.

Whiterun was her home, and she loved it dearly. The vast plains and the solitary hills that rose above them. The wind, sweeping in from the six corners of Skyrim, that the priestesses had told her was the purest example of the breath of Kyne. She would always hold Whiterun in her heart, and love it above all the rest of the world.

And yet, the Rift was beyond magnificent. Each turn of the road brought new vistas, whether it be a forest stream where a family of deer drank while a great red female watched her warily, or a circle of stones, carved in old Nordic runes but almost entirely covered in moss. Once, she caught sight of some great cat stalking her through the trees, but when she slammed her sword on shield and yelled, it vanished. Cats are cautious, wherever they be. That wouldn't have worked against a wolfpack or a bear, but even the huge saber-cats of the Moristrun Mountains avoided any fight where they didn't have the element of surprise. So, she kept on moving, enjoying the sights around her while keeping one eye open for danger.

She'd been warned of bandits, but saw none. She did pass a pair of Rift guards, who saluted and offered her the blessings of Talos. She smiled back and said the same, though her happiness at hearing the name of Talos was tempered by all of the political baggage that came with it. When did I start worrying about politics? Unfortunately, she knew the answer to that all too well. On the day she'd become housecarl to the Dragonborn, she'd lost her right to keep her head down and just watch the door.
Not for the first time, her thoughts returned to Irileth, the only Housecarl she'd ever really known. The Dunmer made it seem so simple, but being housecarl to a jarl had to be beyond difficult. And yet, she managed the Dragonsreach Guard while keeping a finger on the pulse of the city, as well as maintaining herself as one of the deadliest warriors Lydia had ever known. *Maybe someday, I can pull all of that off.* Right now, however, she only had one task. *Reach Ivarstead, and meet my thane.*

She had no way of knowing if Velandryn would beat her there, or indeed if he was even still on his way. *He might be dead.* It was a small, evil voice that sometimes whispered to her, and usually she gave it only the scorn it deserved. *You let him send you away, and now the world is doomed.*

She'd long since learned not to argue with that voice. She knew that it was only her own doubts and fears manifesting, and there was no cure for worry like work. *And right now, that means reaching Riften.* So, she picked up her pace just a bit, striding along at time-and-a-half, each step eating up the miles still to go.

Soon enough, she spied the first farm she'd seen since leaving Solitude, a simple Nord affair that looked to be growing some vegetables whose leaves she couldn't identify. Maybe it was something regional, but then again she might just be awful at recognizing plants when they weren't food. *Nice part about being a guard, never had to wonder where my next meal was coming from.* She thought that the ones to her left looked like carrots, but a wizened old woman was peering at her from across the field, and she thought it best to leave them be.

She found another farmhouse as the sun was receding, this one with boughs of silver elm over the door to symbolize an inn-house. For the price of five septims, she was given a bowl of soup and a place by the fire, and took it gratefully. In truth, she would have paid more to have the chance to pass the night with good Nord folk again. *Morrowind was fascinating, but Skyrim is home.*

The night was a good one. Other travelers were happy to tell their stories, and she laughed along as a pair of men down from Windhelm regaled them all with stories of hunting mammoths among the hot springs of Eastmarch. Another spoke of Dwarven ruins to the north and the treasure they hid, though the group agreed that venturing there was more likely to get someone killed. Her own Dwarven shield was the subject of some interest, but she told half the truth and said that she'd just gotten it from a smith.

She set out early the next morning, having been told that Riften could be reached after another day and night. More and more farms appeared, and soon she was in what almost resembled civilization. Clusters of homes and the occasional craftsman's house marked with a banner or sign were in evidence, and the number of guards on the roads had increased. Now, she was waving every few minutes, whether it be to patrolling soldiers or the civilians she passed. The day was in full swing, and by the look of things, it was harvest time.

*In Whiterun, they'll be done with the harvest by now.* The Rift was warmer, though, and so the farmers still worked. *I wonder if they plant winter crops here?* She knew that was something that happened in Whiterun, though she wasn't exactly sure which ones were the winter crops. *Probably potatoes.* There were always plenty of potatoes in winter.

She spent that night at another rural guest-house, though this one doubled as a feasting hall for the local farmers and offered only rudimentary accommodations. Still, it was warm and dry, and she stretched out on her blankets and hay with only a little stab of traitorous discomfort. *There's no shame in liking a real bed beneath me.* She was a city Nord, after all.

She left even earlier the next morning, determined to reach Riften by midday. It would be absurd not to spend the night in the city, but she'd heard enough about Riften's reputation not to relish the
idea of wandering its unfamiliar streets after dark.

Lost in her thoughts, she must have missed the signs that the city was upon her. And yet, past some buildings and through the trees, a wall rose, of a height that suggested importance and in that state of almost-disrepair that spoke of age and constant maintenance that never quite got it as good as it was. *That's a city's wall, all right.* Whiterun's outermost fortifications were even worse.

She followed the road along the wall until she came to a gate. It was clearly not the main way into Riften, as it was barely eight feet wide, just high enough to allow her horse, and barred fast. Were it not for the pair of guards leaning against it, she'd have thought it impassable.

*And what guards!*

The Dark Elf was massive, though by the look of things he was more fat than muscle. He wore a leather jerkin that strained around his girth, and a fringe of black hair surrounded a glistening patch of skin. She'd never known elves could go bald, but this one seemed to be managing it. Rather than the shades of red on every other Dunmer she'd seen, this one seemed to have eyes of brown, which now squinted at her suspiciously. "Whaddyou want, then?" It took a moment for her to recognize his growl as speech. *How can a guard be so lax?* Then, to her mounting horror, she noted the sergeant's patch on his shoulder. *He has* authority?

The other guard gave a hacking cough, and Lydia's eyes flicked over and down to him. Then, they flicked down some more, until she beheld him in all his repulsive splendor.

He was most likely human, if only because even Riften probably didn't let goblins join the town watch. She quickly looked away, though. Learning anything more would require studying him, and she wasn't in the mood to punish herself that way.

With some relief, she wrenched herself away from the oddly compelling horror of the smaller guard, and faced the obese Dark Elf. "I need to get into the city. Is this gate usable?"

He nodded, leaning on his spear. "Aye. Gate works." He smiled at her. "It's ten gold to use."

"Ten septims!" She saw red, and had to restrain herself. "Is this—is this a bribe?"

*In Whiterun, we'd have them flogged for even suggesting such a thing!*

The scrawny guard coughed, and when he started talking she realized it had been to get her attention. "Aye, for upkeep, innit?"

"Upkeep?"

The Dark Elf nodded in what he was clearly intending to be a sage manner. "Aye. Wear and tear, and the like."

The little one jumped in then. "Every day, the gate goes up and down, up and down. 'Snot good for the chains and, y'know, the like. So we needs you to contribute towards this public service."

Lydia knew a scam when she saw one. "Any why, pray tell, is the gate down at all?"

The Dark Elf puffed out his chest indignantly. "Why, leaving the gate open would be to invite all sorts of miscreants into our city! Perish the thought! Have you ever heard such a thing, Nobby?"

The little one—*Nobby*—shook his head. "Perish the thought indeed, Sarge! We'd be overrun with bandits and riffraff! This 'ere gate is key to the defense of our fair—" he devolved into a fit of
coughing that may or may not have been divine retribution for calling Riften fair "—home!"

She looked them both up and down, wincing when her eye fell on Nobby's face. "Could I have your names, so I can report such... dedication...to your superiors?"

The Dark Elf laughed. "Won't be anyone to care, I can tell you that. Unappreciated, the two of us!" He scratched his nose. "But, if you're wondering, I'm the honor of being Sergeant Fedril Kolyn. And this here is the right honorable Corporal Mordistair Nobbs, what we call Nobby for short."

*Mordistair Nobbs is it?* It was unwieldy and completely unfitting, and might almost have been Breton. However, she had a hard time seeing any Breton she'd met sharing much with this… nodded absently as she thought, almost forgetting their attempt to shake her down. "And, ah, Nobby, if you don't mind me asking..."

"Human!" He grinned hugely, and produced a greasy sheet of paper from under his breastplate. "Got a paper right here from one of those fellows at the College, saying I am," he read aloud from the paper, marking each word with his finger, "in the absence of ev'dence to the contrary, almost certainly 'uman!" His grin showed off his teeth, of which most were yellow and several were gold. "'Not many folks can say they got a wizard's affa-davit on that!"

So, this is the quality of the Riften guard. She'd never been one for prejudice based on appearances, but only an organization desperate for warm bodies would take Nobby. And as for Sergeant Kolyn...

She waved at the gate. "It's been a pleasure. Now, let me through."

Kolyn stood up as straight as he could. "Like I said—"

She glared at him. "You're trying to bribe me. Either you open this gate now, or I report you for corruption."

The two shared a long look, and then dissolved into peals of laughter.

Lydia waited until they'd regained some control of themselves. It would have been the easiest thing to go and find another gate, but now she was well and truly annoyed. *I'm going to go through this gate, and I'll not give them so much as a halved drake to do it!*

Sergeant Kolyn finally stopped laughing long enough to point at the gate. "You must be new around here, miss. Nobody's going to care if we're collecting some extra repair fees. Plus, we're guarding the gate. Right hazardous duty, it is!"

Corporal Nobbs nodded vehemently, and his ill-fitting helmet almost fell off his head. "What the big man said."

Sergeant Kolyn gave Corporal Nobbs a little nudge with the butt of his spear. "You'd best show me the respect of my rank, Nobby."

"Beggin' your pardon, Sarge, but I shows you a lot more respect than most what 'ave your rank. If'n you was one of those officers like I had in the Stormcloaks, then we'd 'ave a real problem."

Apparently they'd forgotten that Lydia existed, but she couldn't let that last bit slide. "You were a Stormcloak?"

Nobby grinned. "For all of a day, I was! Offered a signing bonus and it weren't half bad money, but then they wanted I should go to war. So, I slipped out of my tent with some of the captain's
silverware and came back." He winked at her. "Lucky I wrote the wrong name on the papers, and nobody never seems to draw my face right for the wanted poster." He shrugged. "Don't think war's quite to my liking, any'ow.

"Right you are, Nobby." Kolyn was nodding again. "War's a fool's game, and no mistake."

Lydia had had enough. "Very enlightening. Now open the damn gate."

Sergeant Kolyn blinked. "There's no call to be rude, miss."

She sighed and hefted her shield from her back. "Open the gate, or I will."

She could see the calculations happening in their heads. Their eyes went up and down the length of her body, and she obligingly loosened her sword and settled into an easy stance.

Sergeant Kolyn nodded, as though something had been agreed upon. "I think, for rare cases of clear civic virtue such as yourself, the ordinary upkeep fee can be waived." He slammed a fist on the gate. "Open up, you lot! Got a visitor!"

A muffled voice came back through. "Whatever you bilked her for, I get half!"

Corporal Nobbs put his mouth so close to the door that he was practically kissing the wood. "Listen to me, you skeeve-sucking stout! We've an important guest out 'ere! Open this door, or the captain'll 'ear about it!"

There was bit of muffled cursing while the gate creaked open, and Kolyn nodded to her again. "May I be the first to welcome you to Riften, my lady. Enjoy your stay, and don't drink the canal water."

Nobby leaned in too, and Lydia resisted the urge to lean away. "Also, I'd recommend 'gainst the antagonization of any others what are wearing the jarl's colors. Me and Fedril 'ere are fair-minded types, but some of the other fellows would throw you in the canal for nothing at all." He bowed, and stuck out a hand, palm up.

As if he'd get a coin!

She glared at them both. "You have to be the worst guards I've ever seen."

Corporal Nobbs snorted. "That'nd a drake'll get me a cup o' piss-ale at the Shackle, so'n I'll lose no sleep."

Ignoring the urge to grab them both and smack them around until they were less, well, them, she grabbed the reins of her horse and passed beneath the gate.

Welcome to Riften, I guess.

Perhaps ten minutes later, Lydia had been in Riften long enough to decide that it wasn't the sort of place she would ever feel at home. For one, the shadowy figures who lurked in alleys, eyes locked on her bulging saddlebags. None of them approached, of course—it was not yet night and with her armor and weapons she was clearly no easy mark—but the constant worry that someone would jump out and try to rob her or worse made every minute very long indeed.

The roads of Riften were narrow, and the buildings tended towards multiple stories, jutting balconies, and haphazard walkways linking the roofs above. She was fairly certain that somebody
of the criminal persuasion could get from the wall to where she was now without ever having to set foot on the ground. *Not to mention there's no sun.* Down at street level, Lydia was in shadow more often than not.

It was something of a relief when she arrived at the small canal. It was not *the* canal, that famous waterway that cut Riften in two and fed into the lake at both ends, since that one supposedly had homes, galleries, and hidey-holes of ill repute lining its walls. This was no more than a narrow stream some ten feet or so below the road, crossed by dozens of plank bridges, but above it, the sky was mercifully clear of walkways or protruding roofs. *Maybe if I stay along the canals this will be less wretched.*

Indeed, her travel along the planks and dirt that made up the road was easier once she stuck to the water. And, soon enough, there was stone beneath her feet and the buildings to either side, while still grim in a way she couldn't quite identify, were at least grander than the ramshackle homes and shops from before.

When she came upon the city center, it was something of a shock. The canal had been curving, and the roads getting gradually more built up, but she hadn't expected the path to open onto a massive open space, where buildings that could pass for respectable lined a market square and enormous bridges crossed the main canal. Here, she could look down and see the doorways above the water, and the rope bridges that crisscrossed the canal and linked these houses and shops together. The people around her had become something akin to a crowd while she wasn't watching, and she was seized with the realization that she really should have left her horse outside at the stables.

Turning, she saw a small man in a worn cloak drifting towards her, and tugged the reins to lead her horse away. However, that brought the beast—and its packs bulging with cargo destined for her thane—close to a woman with dark, hungry eyes. She put herself between them, and, glaring at everyone around her, hurried up the street to where she thought—and desperately hoped—she could find the main gate.

Indeed, it was only a matter of minutes until she saw the familiar ring of linked horseshoes hanging on a sign high overhead. Relief at seeing them—and the stables they signaled—warred with irritation at the fact that she'd just spent gods-only-knew how long stumbling through alleys with a horse in tow.

Somebody bumped her from behind, and she gave a gentle shove, more reflex than anything, that sent them tripping and cursing away. She glanced over her shoulder, and winced when she saw that she'd bumped a rough-looking man who was now glaring at her. However, after a long moment he just growled a curse and turned away.

Relaxing, she turned…and grabbed the arm of a child who had decided to go for the saddlebags while her back was turned. Her heart leapt into her throat, since the boy failing to steal anything was almost as horrible a prospect as his succeeding. *Gods only know what curses Dark Elves put on their seals.* "Away with you!" She released him, and the little boy gave her a gap-toothed grin before disappearing behind a pile of crates. *Dear Mara, let them have room in the stables.*

As she approached the building, she heard raised voices, and slowed her approach—after checking to make sure that nobody was too close to her precious cargo.

"I'll have the money, I swear! I just need more time!" It sounded like a young man, one who was about to soil himself from panic.

"I'm really getting tired of this. More time, more time. When you borrowed the money, you said you'd pay it back on time, and for double the usual fee." The second voice was a woman's, and
Lydia could find no hint of humor or compassion in there.

"I know I did. But how was I supposed to know the shipment would get robbed?"

The woman laughed. "Next time, keep your plans quieter and nothing would have happened to it."

Lydia tried to process this. *It almost sounds as if—*

"What? You robbed it? Why? Why would you do this to me?" Now, there were tears in the man's voice.

"Look, Shadr, last warning. Pay up or else. All I care about is the gold. Everything else is your problem."

Footfalls on straw, and then a woman was exiting the stall. Lydia froze, feeling like a child who'd been caught eavesdropping. The woman, however, only gave her a glance and moved off, seemingly unconcerned with the world.

Lydia had only seen this mysterious extortionist for a moment, but that was enough to tell her two very important facts. First, she was wearing the kind of leather armor that prioritized quick, silent movement. *Exactly like a member of the Thieves Guild.* If this woman was a guild member, it could explain why she was so comfortable with such brazen admission of lawbreaking. *From what I understand, they own half the city.*

The second thing Lydia noticed, and the one that made her curse her traitorous mind, was that this woman was *gorgeous.* Long black hair tied back to reveal a slender and elegant neck, piercing blue eyes, and a heart-shaped face atop a body that made Lydia's mouth go dry.

Shaking her head at the direction her thoughts had gone—*is that all it takes to undo you? A pretty face?*—she brought her horse into the stall. "Hello?"

"Don't, please!" A Redguard who looked to be around her age was pressed up against one of the walls, eyes wide. *This must be Shadr.* "I'll get the money, I promise!" A beat passed, and she could see him realize who she was. "You aren't with Sapphire, are you?"

Lydia studied him. The poor boy was nearly delirious with fear. "That the woman who just left?" She shook her head. "Don't worry, I only need some place to keep my horse until I leave town."

It was impressive how clearly his emotions showed on his face. "Oh, thank Zenithar! Yes, we have room and warm stalls, and a vault for your valuables." He paused for a moment, clearly thinking. "It'll be extra to lock your things away, but they'll be safe." All of this was said with an air of faint distraction, and Lydia sighed.

"Tell me about this Sapphire business." Clearly his mind was still on the money he owed. "It sounds as though you're being played; you should go to the guard."

Shadr laughed. "You must be new here. Sapphire's with the Thieves Guild, and they've got Maven Black-Briar as their patron." He slumped against the wall. "If I don't come up with seven hundred septims before she decides she's had enough, I'm dead. The Thieves Guild has thugs whose *job* it is to hurt people who don't pay them!"

Lydia had dealt with situations like this before—*though I'm supposed to have the guards on my side*—and she'd made up her mind.

*I have my mission, but I can take a few minutes to stop this one injustice.*
She handed the reins to Shadr, warned him not to go rummaging through anything for his own safety, and headed out.

She was striding across the stable year with purposeful strides when something occurred to her.

Trying not to let her chagrin show, she returned to Shadr and asked where this Sapphire might be found. The Redguard, however, wasn't having any of it.

"You can't go up against her! The Guild, they'll come down on you!"

"I just want to talk to her. That's all."

He stared at her with wide eyes, but finally told her where the woman called Sapphire could be found. She thanked him, handed over the coin for her horse, and was off once more.

*The Bee and Barb.* A good establishment, Shadr had said, though criminals patronized it without any fear of the law.

Like any guard with even a lick of sense, she wore her purse beneath armor, and now she could move with little thought for being robbed. She still felt the eyes of the lowlifes that seemed to be everywhere in this blasted city, but they worried her less.

She might not have her thane's cunning or Serana's effortless grace, but Lydia was nothing if not a warrior. She knew the figure she cut, and even the Dwarven shield on her back—worth a fair pile of gold to any collector or adventurer—wouldn't tempt someone into taking on a woman who stood nearly six and a half feet tall, clad in full armor and bearing a sword of Skyforge steel. Though it might be fun to have one try.

Once more, she entered the main market square, and this time searched for the inn. When she saw the sign hanging over a handsome three-story affair, she shifted her shield, squared her shoulders, and headed for the door.

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The Bee and Barb was a homey place, thick with chatter and the smells of food and drink. An Argonian—Lydia thought it was male, but she didn't have much experience with lizard folk—was serving drinks to a table of weary-looking Nords, and turned as she approached. He gave her a sharp-toothed smile, and bowed. "Welcome to the Bee and Barb, my lady. Would you care for a table, or a drink?"

She glanced around the room, but couldn't see Sapphire anywhere. "I'm looking for someone. A woman, with the Thieves Guild, goes by Sapphire—"

The Argonian's eyes widened and his smiles vanished, and the scales on his cheeks lifted in strange undulating waves. "Why her? What business do you have with her kind?"

She looked him up and down, and decided to trust him. *No way a respectable inn likes having the Thieves Guild hanging around.* "She cheated someone. I'm here to put things right."

"Then I erect the spine of warning, traveler." He lowered his voice and narrowed his eyes. "The Guild has power here, and angering them will only lead to grief. You cannot fight the Guild with armor and sword, no more than you can clean foul water with your cl—your hands."

She raised her own hands in a placating gesture. "I only want to talk. I promise there'll be no trouble." She looked around the inn. "You have a lovely space here; I'd not want to ruin it."
The Argonian gave her another smile, though this one was not quite so wide. "I thank you. Keerava has made a wonderful home for us here."

She smiled down and thanked him for his help, amused by the way his scaly face had changed when he mentioned Keerava's name. *He might be a lizard, but I think he's in love.*

The Argonian had pointed out a table to Lydia, and as she approached she grew more and more uneasy. The group seated around it seemed the worst sort of lowlifes, scum who nevertheless held themselves with confidence and likely had some skill to back up their viciousness. In Whiterun, any such gathering would have been suspicious, and even here it raised the hairs on her neck.

Of course, in Whiterun the criminals weren't usually in uniform. She counted no less than four of the dark leather outfits that seemed to pass for Thieves Guild colors, and two more who looked to be mercenaries of some sort. And there, in the corner, watching the others, was the woman she had come to see.

While the table was raucous, Sapphire was not. She had a drink before her, but her hands were crossed across her chest, and she was leaning back with a supremely self-satisfied air. Her eyes were on Lydia's approach, but if she recognized the housecarl, she gave no sign. Still, she leaned forward as Lydia reached the table, and one hand fell out of view. *This one knows which end of the knife to stab with, no question.*

By this point, the others at the table had taken notice of her, and fallen silent as well. For a long moment, they all stated at her, saying nothing. Then, a big fellow broke the silence. "So? You want something?"

Lydia gestured at Sapphire, mindful of all the weapons at that table. *Courteous, but direct.* "I want to speak to you, Sapphire."

The black-haired woman rose, waving down her companions when some of them made to do the same. "Oh, and why's that?"

"Shadr—"

Sapphire was fully out of her chair in an instant, smiling broadly. "Oh, what's that boy up to now?" She tapped the table. "Keep on without me, this'll only take a minute." She went for Lydia's arm, but the housecarl jerked it away. *Never let a suspect touch you.* She glared at Lydia. "You hearing me?" She looked the housecarl up and down, clearly assessing her. "Did Shadr hire you to get out of his debt? I knew that stupid kid would try and find a way to weasel out of that debt he owes me. Look, this is really simple. I lent him some gold, he promised to pay me back and now he says he's broke. Which is clearly a lie, since I doubt someone like you even gets out of bed for less than fifty. Tell you what, I'll give you double whatever offer he made if you go back and tell him that I'm adding the cost of hiring you to what he owes me." She gave Lydia another once over. "Then maybe we can work something else out. There's a couple of deadbeats down at the docks who think that promises work instead of coin, and I think you're just the woman to go dunking them into the lake."

This woman's easy manner hit Lydia like a punch to the gut. She'd dealt with scum of all types before, of course, but usually there was at least a furtiveness, an understanding that what they were
doing was wrong. Sapphire was trying to make Lydia her hired muscle with a casualness that wouldn't have been out of place from a grocer, and she felt dirty not dragging the woman off to the cells right this moment. *But I have no power here.*

Well, that wasn't entirely true. She shifted her feet, making sure that her sword-hilt was visible and her arms free. "Not an option. You already collected from your investment. Let the boy be."

With each sentence, Sapphire's smile had shrunk. Now she was studying Lydia with another air entirely. "Not happening. We had a deal. He still owes me my coin, no matter the fate of the caravan." She shrugged. "He made a promise, and where would we be if we didn't keep our word?" Her smile was back, and it was a vile thing indeed.

Lydia had a sudden vision of simply hitting the woman, of wiping that smirk off her face with a well-placed fist. But she had no authority here, and she would only be putting Shadr in danger. *The moment I leave, he's on his own.* Besides, she'd promised the Argonian not to cause a ruckus.

Instead, she shrugged. "A promise is a promise, but not in bad faith. I promised Shadr I'd get you off his back, and that's what I intend to do. You wouldn't want word of this getting to the guards, would you? I doubt caravan robbery is overlooked." *Even in Riften, they can't be that far gone.*

Sapphire looked worried for half an instant, but the moment passed swiftly and her air of ease returned. "You have proof, then? Because I know I'm a better liar than you, and I've the backing of the Guild besides." She winked at Lydia. "Maybe it was you that did it, and now you're going and accusing me of things to draw suspicion away from your criminal gang." Lydia opened her mouth, but Sapphire raised a finger and continued. "And if your next word was going to be 'Shadr;' I wouldn't bother. I'm astonished he found the spine to hire you, but there's no way he'd go before the jarl and publicly set himself against me."

Finally, Lydia could take it no longer. "How? How does this happen? This entire city is mad!"

Sapphire laughed. "We're just honest. There's crime everywhere, why hide it? This way, everyone knows where they stand."

"So Shadr gets terrorized by you and whatever goons you hire to do your dirty work, and you think this is *good*? That this is how things are *supposed* to be?" She shook her head. "If we were in Whiterun, the lot of you would be in the stone where you belonged."

"Murder, is it?" Sapphire's laugh was definitely forced now, and her smile strained. "You think we deserve to die, huh? For taking some gold?"

In truth, Lydia had simply been referring to the Dragonsreach dungeons by an old guard's phrase, but the thought of ceding even the ground that an explanation would require was hateful to her. "It's never just gold with your kind. Admit it; you love the power you have. I've been dealing with filth like you for years, and one thing is always true: it's about power. You *crave* power, and making that poor naïve stableboy tremble at the very thought of you is how you get it." She recognized that this wasn't the best way to go about convincing the woman, but this needed to be said. "I don't know you, I don't know your story or what else you do with your life, but this is *evil*. You made your money, Shadr's got nothing left to give, and now you're going to wring him dry because you can." She shook her head, the revulsion threatening to overwhelm her. "Turn away now. Let it go. *Let him go.*"

Sapphire's blue eyes were boring holes into her own. "You're right. You don't know a damn thing about me." She blinked. "But I can finger a guard at eighty paces, and I've got you made. Nobody else actually believes that tripe about criminals and evil." She shook her head. "Look, you big fool,
there's always going to be the strong and the weak. Shadr's too damn innocent for his own good; especially in this city, it was only a matter of time before somebody took him for what he had. I'm just looking out for myself."

Lydia saw her opening then, and pounced. "Which you did! You made your money back, and more besides! Why torment the boy? What good does it do?"

"Torment?" Sapphire laughed again, the bitterest one yet, eyes dark and angry. "This is nothing compared to——" She coughed. "Look, I'm not evil. I'm out for my money, and a lady's got to watch out for number one. Not like anybody else's lining up to secure my future. I let Shadr off the hook, what sort of message does that send?"

"That you know when to stop squeezing blood from a stone." What she was about to do was completely insane, but she saw no other way to end this without further strife. "The best criminals, the ones who gave us fits back when I wore the colors, made deals where everyone walks away happy. No injured party, no one goes running to the guards or takes matters in to their own hands. Take it from me. Quit while you're ahead with Shadr. He thinks he's out of options, and it's not long before he realizes that a dead woman can't collect on a debt. Next person he sends might not be coming to talk."

She wasn't lying about Shadr's desperation, but the Redguard seemed more like the type to flee than fight. By the way Sapphire was pursing her lips, however, the other Nord was considering her words. And now I'm advising criminals. Looking back at the last few minutes, she wasn't quite sure how it had happened.

Given Sapphire's bemused tone, neither was she. "For someone who wanted me dead a minute ago, that isn't half bad advice. Nothing I haven't heard before, of course, but maybe I was getting greedy. No need to spoil a good take by trying for more, right?" She reached out again, but Lydia took a step back.

"Keep your distance. This entire city is rotten, and I'm just doing what I can to help out a decent person who's gotten caught up in it all."

Sapphire threw her head back and gave a bark of laughter. "Shadr, decent? He came to me, you know. Looking to get rich quick. He might wear that amulet of Zenithar and wet his breeches at the thought of violence, but the boy's got the bug, same as any of us." She shook her head. "You'll have to learn how the world works, or it'll chew you up and spit you out."

Lydia snorted. "This was a mistake. You're just as vile as the rest of them." A horrible thought struck her then. "How many people died when you robbed that shipment?" She dropped a hand to her sword. "How much blood is on your hands?"

Sapphire raised her own hands defensively, clearly alarmed. "Hold on now! Nobody died, I swear it! I had an alchemist dose their meals in Shor's Stone, and we lifted the goods north of the Rhoba." A scowl marred her pretty features. "I've no shame for what I do, and when I shed blood, it's only those who deserve to die."

They glared at each other for a moment more, then Lydia sighed. "Fine. Leave Shadr be, and I'll walk out of here right now."

Sapphire nodded. "Fine." She looked thoughtful. "It is a shame you're on the wrong side. No interest in doing a job or two for me? I can think of a few places where some non-Guild muscle could give us both a hefty payoff."
Lydia couldn't help but laugh. "I'm here because you cheated someone, thief! Why in Kyne's name would I ever trust your word?" Still chuckling at the thought, she turned, then stopped. *If I don't say it, it'll never be said.* "You're scum."

Sapphire opened her mouth, but Lydia raised a hand. "You might not kill innocents, you might even be right that Shadr was blinded by greed, but that doesn't change what you did."

"I never—"

"You take, and cheat, and steal, and…" Words failed her for a moment, and she wished she had Velandryn here, to say what she was feeling. "All of this is false, is wrong. It's hollow, and one day, you'll wake up and have nothing." She leaned in. "I've never known a criminal who'd risk themselves for another. You'd best stay strong, because those friends of yours aren't going to be there when you're weak." With that, she did leave, content with having had the last word.

From behind, Sapphire's voice sounded out, thick with anger. "You're wrong, dammit!" Lydia smiled.

Shadr was trying to give Lydia some potions of invisibility, much to her displeasure. After her confrontation with Sapphire, she was wary of this man's motives as well, and only wanted to be done with this whole ordeal.

For the third time, she waved away the potions. "Stable my horse and we'll call it even." She couldn't get Sapphire's words out of her head, and the last thing she wanted was to be indebted to someone whose true goals she didn't know. *I might already be in too deep.*

Finally, the boy agreed to give her one potion and stable her horse for as long as she needed, though she paid to have the saddlebags locked up inside. Upon meeting the owner, a stocky Nord named Hofgrir, she felt slightly more confident that her things were in good hands. *And, if they're not, no doubt an army of horrors will pour forth upon whatever fool tries to steal them.* She had no actual evidence for her conviction that the Dunmer had used some horrible magic to safeguard their gifts, but it seemed like the sort of thing that they'd do.

Now, she only had to find a place to pass the night, and then she'd have the rest of the day to tolerate what Riften had to offer. She'd initially entertained an idea about bedding down in a common-hall or bunkhouse, but after actually spending time in Riften she wanted a door with a lock. *Sorry, my thane, but I don't care that much about saving you a few septims.*

She briefly considered returning to the Bee and Barb, but it was all but certain that Sapphire and her pack of goons would be there, and she had no stomach for another run-in with that woman. She'd seen some other likely-looking places on the main square, however, so she headed in that direction anyway.

The approaching sundown did not seem to be doing much to thin the crowds, and the market was still bustling even with many of the stalls closing up. *I have a moment or two to spare.* She hadn't had the chance to see the markets at Solitude, and she was curious how other cities compared to Whiterun. *No question we have the best market, but maybe Riften has some curiosities worth seeing.*

She saw one such not a moment later: a woman as tall as she was, if not even taller. She was standing with another person in a quiet alley; Riften seemed to get much less crowded when you left the main streets behind.
This other Nord was armored in iron and fur, though she wore no helm and curly hair of dark gold fell to her shoulders. Her poise was regal, and her face strong. A warrior born. Half her face was painted blue in the old style, and a few faint scars across her eyes and nose only told a story of battles lost and won. What are you, a poet? Snorting, Lydia dismissed such thoughts. This woman looked a formidable fighter.

She was also, apparently, as fed up with this city as Lydia herself. "I saw two of them. In broad daylight! Have they no shame?"

Her companion was a small Imperial man, who seemed to have heard it all before. "And you stopped them?"

The woman snorted. "Of course I did. The poor girl had no chance otherwise."

The man sighed. "And let me guess, they know who stopped them from having their fun? You have to be more careful! It's only a matter of time until they retaliate against you—"

The woman, however, had noticed Lydia, and raised a hand to stop her companion's talking. "You looking for someone?"

Lydia shrugged. "Sounds like you're doing the right thing, and that's rare in this city." She thought of what her thane would say. "I guess I wanted to see who else had a soul in this place."

The woman smiled, and held out her hand. "I'm Mjoll, and this is Aerin. You new around here?"

"Just passing through."

Mjoll shook her head, and the smile fell away from her handsome features. "Seems that's the way of it. Too many good folk leave, and far too many foul ones stay."

The Imperial, Aerin, was glancing around nervously. Mjoll had noticed too, and patted him on the shoulder. "Aerin worries for me, but I won't stop."

Lydia nodded. "Noble, but you should probably watch your back. I don't have much faith in the guards here."

"Some mean well." Mjoll sighed. "But the Thieves Guild is too powerful, and the Fal'tong too insular. I help one person, but ten more fall victim the same day."

"I…” Lydia started before thinking about how she'd end. You'll what? Help her? Stay in Riften to fight the Thieves Guild? She heard Velandryn's voice in her head. "One impossible war at a time."

"I wish you the best of luck, Mjoll." She clasped the other woman's arms in her own, and left the two to their valiant task.

It was not a long walk, once you knew the way. Without a horse, it wasn't even stressful. Once more, she arrived at the great canal and the market that surrounded it, and began looking around for a place to pass the night.

She hadn't noticed before, but the crowd was far more diverse than any she'd seen in Skyrim. It seems that every third or fourth person was a Dark Elf, and she saw no less than three Argonians, which meant there had to be many more she'd missed. Whiterun might be a center of trade, but its citizens were still overwhelmingly Nords, with a smattering of Imperials making up most of the rest. Here, it was obvious how many Dunmer had fled their homeland. Plus, judging by the clothing many of them wore, they had done well for themselves here. Well, good on them. She'd
rather live in Skyrim too.

She kept her eyes above the crowd and scanning the buildings, trusting in her size and armor to keep others out of her way. In Whiterun, she'd never had an issue, though here she kept one hand on her sword, just in case. She'd also bound the shield to her back with an extra cord that ran under her breastplate, just in case some enterprising fool decided to try for her Dwarven prize.

Suddenly, something slammed into her side at a bad angle, and her next step sent her spinning. In heavy armor, that was no joke, and she could feel her balance going. She'd been wearing steel since she was fourteen years old, however, and dropped to one knee to keep from falling. She pushed up at an angle that she knew would use the weight of her armor to her advantage, and spun as she rose into a fighting stance. A moment later she was ready to take down whoever had assaulted her.

Her assailant, however, was no hardened criminal. A young woman blinked up at her from where she lay on the ground, food spread around her.

"Oh! Oh Mara, I am so sorry!" The woman scrambled to her feet, but then saw her things and fell to her knees. "I was hurrying, and not looking where I was going, and...I hope you're okay." She was trying to gather everything back into her arms, and Lydia found herself, without conscious thought, bending to help.

"I'm fine. Are you?" This girl was skin and bones, and Lydia had once unhorsed a fleeing bandit with a single well-placed hand. *I could have broken her in half!* "Here." She handed a package to the girl, who accepted it and stammered thanks.

"I'm Constance Michel." She, as many others had before her, had to do a double take when she realized that Lydia's face was a full head higher than she'd thought. "I am so sorry." She bowed her head.

"Lydia. Of Whiterun." *Housecarl to the Dragonborn.* She helped Constance to her feet, as she feared the other woman wouldn't be able to do it with her arms full. "Can I help you with those?"

Constance looked around, shook her head mutely, then visibly swallowed. "No, thank you." The words came out half-whispered, and Lydia frowned.

"Are you sure? I can carry quite a bit, you know." Lydia couldn't quite figure out what was wrong with the other woman. *Is she afraid of something?*

Constance smiled nervously. "Well, then, how about this?" She handed Lydia some parcels, and the housecarl took them with no small relief. She wasn't entirely sure why Constance was so jumpy, but she'd hate to be part of the problem.

Lydia parted the crowd easily, and Constance laughed as she followed in her wake. "It must be nice, being able to do that." She moved alongside Lydia, smiling up at her. "I'm always the little one, you know."

Lydia chuckled. "The armor helps too."

"So, umm, what's your trade? Are you with the Stormcloaks?"

Lydia hadn't been expecting *that.* "No. Why, do I look like it?"

Constance blushed. "Oh, no, it's just that, well, you look like a warrior, and so many are going off to fight." She sighed, then froze. "I mean...I support Ulfric, of course! I meant no disrespect!"
Lydia smiled at her again. The two of them were around the same age by the look of things, but the other girl’s—I guess she's a woman, though—manner made her seem younger. "I'm just passing through, and I promise not to get angry based on your politics."

Constance gasped. "Of course! You're from Whiterun, you said, so your Jarl is neutral." She shook her head. "Aren't you scared, being in the middle like that?"

*Don't I wish that was the only thing I had to be afraid of.* Lydia shrugged. "We have brave hearts and strong walls, and the Dragonborn marches with us."

*At least, I hope he does.* Velandryn was a good man, but even Lydia had been able to figure out that Jarl Balgruuf wanted to use the Dragonborn to strengthen Whiterun's position. *Which means Velandryn knows, and I have no idea how he feels about that.* Her thane had no love for the Empire, but he seemed to disdain Ulfric Stormcloak just as much. *Hopefully, that means he'll have no problem telling them both to pound snow if they try and invade.*

Constance was staring at her again. "Have you met him? The Dragonborn?"

Lydia couldn't stop herself from laughing, but caught her tongue before it ran away from her. "Aye, you could say that. He—I was at the Western Watchtower when he slew the dragon." She nodded. "He's the real thing, no questions there." Her thane had neither bards nor skalds to sing his legends, so she'd have to play the part.

Constance's eyes opened wide. "They say he only speaks Elvish, except for when he Shouts."

Lydia had to laugh again. "Do they? No, Ve—The Dragonborn speaks the Imperial tongue just fine, though he'll switch into Dunmeris when he wants to be especially annoying." It was odd how fond she'd grown of her thane, despite the relatively small amount of time they'd known each other. "What else do they say?" *He'll get a laugh out of this.*

"They—" Then, Constance jerked to a stop. "Hey, thief!"

Lydia turned, and saw someone darting away, several of Constance's parcels clutched in his arms.

*Oh no you don't!* It took her half a second to dump what she was carrying into Constance's shocked grasp and another to take off after the ruffian.

Her quarry was smaller, and darted through the people like a snake in the grass, but more than one criminal had found out the hard way that Lydia of Whiterun wasn't easy to escape. When a woman who topped six feet and clad neck to toe in steel armor charged while bellowing demands to make way for the guard, people tended to move.

In Riften, of course, some of her usual shouts wouldn't quite work, so she had to make do with others. "Halt, lawbreaker!" was always effective, as was the ever-popular "Stop right there, criminal scum!" Truth be told, though, that one had always seemed a bit wordy to her, and most guards used it when sauntering up to some luckless fool who'd already been apprehended.

"Make way! Lawbreaker!" She saw the thief rounding a corner, and sprinted towards where he'd vanished. She didn't know this city, and every second she didn't have the thief in her sights was another chance for him to vanish.

Unfortunately, such speed had another effect. And so, when she hit the guard, she was going a good deal faster than was wise. Given the armor she was wearing, it must have been akin to being hit by a warhammer. And, as the man picked himself up off of the ground, Lydia could see in his eyes that he was not having a good day, and she'd just made it worse. *Well, damn.*
He spent a moment looking her up and down, then growled a single word. "Explain."

She pointed. "There was a thief! We can still—"

"You assaulted a member of the Riften Guard." He wasn't particularly intimidating, but the crossed daggers of Riften stitched on his tabard meant that any action he took would doubtless be backed up by the guard as a whole. "That's a crime."

Lydia gestured again. "So is theft! I'm sorry I hit you, but he's getting away!"

Just then, Constance hurried up, arms full of bags. Lydia winced at the sight of the woman she'd abandoned.

Constance gasped, and began babbling apologies. "Sir, please excuse her! It was my fault; I asked her to chase the man down—"

"Your fault, eh?" The guard leered down at her, and Lydia, with a wrenching in her gut, recognized the look on his face. "Well then, I guess you'd best make it right." He pointed to an alley. "Come on then."

Constance just stood there, though whether her hesitation was from ignorance or horror, Lydia couldn't say. For her part, the housecarl was frozen only because disbelief was still winning out over the blinding rage that was building behind her eyes.

Constance looked at Lydia, eyes wide. "I…I don't have money." She looked at the guard. "I'm sorry, but—"

He chuckled. "Ain't money I want, girl. You get on your knees, make me happy, we pretend this never happened and your friend here just walks away." He looked over at Lydia. "Else, well, assaulting a guard's no small thing."

Lydia's hand fell to her sword. "Get moving scum, and I pretend this whole thing never happened."

Constance jumped in front of Lydia, some of the bags spilling from her hands. "No!" She looked over at the guard, now moving for his own axe, and then up at the housecarl. "It's okay!" She gave a smile that might have been the saddest thing Lydia had ever seen. "This is…it just happens." She pressed her hand over Lydia's gauntlet. "I'm glad we met." She looked down then, and the faintest hint of a blush appeared on her cheeks. "I…I hope you have a good journey."

The guard grinned, and took Constance by the arm. "See? She's eager for it." He reached over and roughly cupped a breast. "Skinny little thing. You hungry?"

Lydia of Whiterun was not, as a rule, an impulsive person. Her time acting as the law meant that her every move was subject to scrutiny, and she'd long since learned to bite her tongue and hold her ire no matter what taunts a criminal came up with. If I'd done half the things they told me to, I'd never be able to sit down again!

This time, though, was different. She moved so quickly that her mind only caught up once she'd ripped the guard's hand away from Constance and pressed him against a wall by the throat. "You dare…" She couldn't even finish the thought, she was so incensed. "You!" She drew a shuddering breath. "You're a guard, for the love of Shor!" She pushed him away roughly, and one of his feet slipped on the cobbles, sending him to the ground.

Lydia advanced, and he tried to crawl away. "Stop running, you filth!" She grabbed him by the cloak and flipped him onto his back. "We are the law! Ours is to protect!" She realized she'd drawn
her blade, but didn't much feel like putting it away. The guard was staring at her open-mouthed and with terrified eyes. "You would have raped her? And you dare to wear the colors of the jarl!!" She wanted to drag him through the streets and throw him before the crowd, but she knew it would do no good. "Can I just have one of you not be awful? Just one! That's all!" She sighed, and sheathed her sword, her anger suddenly overwhelmed with a vast sense of exhaustion. "I'd drag you to an honest guard, but I doubt you could find one in the shithole of a city."

She turned away, but out of the corner of her eye saw the guard rising, his hand reaching to his hip—

What happened next truly was instinct. Lydia turned, hand lashing out to disarm him—

The hand that still held her sword.

The guard stumbled back, blood oozing from the gash on his chest. He stumbled over a crate and fell backwards—

Right into the canal.

Lydia didn't see him hit the water, but the splash and scream of rage was enough. She hurried to the railing, and saw a pair of townsfolk pulling the bedraggled, bleeding man from the murky water. He looked up at her, and there was only hatred in his eyes.

Someone grabbed her from behind, and bellowed into her ear. "Resist, and you're dead!"

She was hauled away, still in a daze. Four more of Riften's guards had arrived to bring in the woman who'd tried to kill one of their own.

One of them tried to rough her up, but his blow had been clumsy, and she turned so that his fist hit her breastplate. The crack of his fingers on cold steel gave her the tiniest stab of pleasure, though it was soon swallowed up in a rising tide of miserable disbelief. I'm not a criminal. Other people broke the laws, not her.

Welcome to Riften, I guess.

"So, uh, nice t' see you again, I s'pose."

Lydia looked up through the bars of her cell at the ugly, unmistakable, face of Corporal Nobbs.

Riften's jail was a single huge room, lined with cells and ringed by balconies. Lydia's cell was on the second level down from the entrance, and, so far as she could see, none of the other prisoners had been visited in this way.

She sighed. "Come to gawk, have you?" She supposed that word of the woman who'd attacked a guard was making the rounds through the barracks. Probably going to be a good crowd at my execution.

Nobby shook his head. "Jail duty." He leaned against the bars and grinned. "Heard some big wench in armor put Joldo in the dirt, and I thought, 'Nobby, that sounds like a lady I met just this very same day.'"

Lydia chuckled mirthlessly. "Suddenly, your little stunt at the gate doesn't seem so bad."

"Din't I tell you? Stand up fellows, the two of us." He pointed upwards. "Speaking of, Sergeant
Kolyn's got some mead over the fire if'n that's your taste. Black-Briar, too." He stuck a finger in his nose, rooting around with a thoughtful expression. "Ever since we got the Sibbi fella down here, qual'ty of the victuals gone way up."

Lydia found herself unable to look away from the finger, jammed farther into his nose than she would have thought possible. "Who's Sibbi?"

Corporal Nobbs shrugged, extracted the finger, and flicked something over the railing to the dungeon floor below. "Black-Briar. Killed some poor bastard over a girl, so I heard." He leaned back and shouted to another cell, on the level above Lydia. "Hey, Sibbi! What'd ya do again?"

"I killed the bitch's brother, and I'll have her head too, once this preposterous exercise is done." The voice was cultured and cold, sending shivers down Lydia's spine. *I've taken lives, but that one doesn't care who lives or dies.*

Nobby leaned in again, and gestured Lydia to do the same. Against her better judgement, she did.

"Powerful, that 'un. 'E's Maven Black-Briar's son, so's we can't actually do much. She's teaching 'im a lesson, see, about how to be circumsept with the killing."

She'd heard of Maven Black-Briar, of course, but this was new information. "The richest woman in The Rift threw her own son in prison?"

Nobby shrugged. "Rule number one in Riften—"

Lydia cut him off. "Let me guess. Don't cross Maven Black-Briar."

"Got it in one. Yeah, Maven's bad business, so Sibbi stays until she says 'e's out. You want some dinner?"

"What?"

"Dinner. Got a pot o' stew and some bread from the keep. Not bad, if you don't mind carrots." If there was one good thing she could say about Corporal Nobbs, it was that he didn't seem to harbor her any ill will.

She nodded. "Sure." An idea was forming, but she needed more information. "What was that Sibbi said about killing someone else?"

"'Oo knows? I don't mess with the important ones." Nobby tapped his nose. "Man of the people, me."

Lydia snorted. "You're a regular Othar Bared-Beard, Nobbs." As the little man beamed, she looked upwards thoughtfully. "You still in the mood for a bribe?"

Nobby grinned. "Doubt you've got much coin on you, less'n you hid it someplace…ah…private."

She shuddered at the thought. "My purse is with my things, and we both know that means it's all there." One thing all guards knew was that nobody stole from the prisoners. When you were dealing with people whose single unifying characteristic was contempt for the law, it wasn't wise to give them reasons to hate you personally. "Help me out here, and I've a sovereign for you."

Nobby snorted. "Dunno what you want, but I don't make deals with prisoners for less than a hundred."
Lydia laughed. "Don't' suppose you'll let me go free?"

Nobby joined in, chuckling companionably. "Not on your life."

She shrugged. "Then put me in the cell next to Sibbi Black-Briar, and I don't notice that fifty septims go missing. If everything works out for me, I put fifty more in your hands myself." It wasn't really her money after all, and her thane had given her a mission. She wouldn't risk failure to save him a few drakes.

Nobby looked thoughtful. "Wasn't kidding, y'know. Black-Briars are bad business."

"And what happens if I don't get out of here by morning?"

Nobby frowned. "You hit a guard. On purpose. And the market boys ain't nice like me. Them and the folks at the keep, they're the hard ones. You might get off with a lashing. Maybe they take a hand off, in the old way, like." He shrugged. "Or, you get really unlucky, they just drag you into a warehouse, have their fun, and we find what's left of you when it starts to smell."

"So, I think I'll take my chances with Sibbi. Would you do any different?"

"Wouldn't a hit him in the first place, for one." However, Nobby sauntered away, coming back with a ring of keys. "All right. I ain't gonna bind you, but best not try and do anything stupid. Four doors before you're out, and no one lady can take down every guard in Mistveil."

Lydia spread her hands. "You have my solemn word."

Nobby snorted. "Nope. Got fifty gold, though, and a knife to run you through."

True to his word, Nobby kept a dagger pointed at her as she marched upstairs. She tried to ignore the other prisoners, who ranged from miserable piles of skin and rags to scowling men in the patchwork armor of mercenaries and women with the unmistakable air of prostitutes. She asked Nobby about those, as there were no laws against the trade in Skyrim so far as she knew.

"Nothing 'gainst the selling, no, but those two got to robbing the ones what looked too rich." He grinned.

There was also a madman, pacing his cell while pulling at his clothes and hair, muttering about blood and darkness. They both gave him a wide berth. Nonetheless, he glared at Lydia with bloodshot eyes. "All around the Throat of Snow, the Eagles chase the Dragon! Red, Gold and Blue as the sky! They're singing the old song!" The man collapsed on the floor, sobbing.

Lydia looked over at Nobby. "What's his story?"

The guard looked away and coughed. "Comes into the jail, cool as you please, says he offed his wife. We go to the house, find her guts hangin' from the ceiling. They were eatin' breakfast when he stabs her, he said. Said she wanted to live somewhere beautiful, so's he decorates the house—"

Lydia raised her hand to stop him. "I get the picture." When they reached the stairs, she was glad to leave the second level behind.

As they approached the place where Sibbi was held, there were no other prisoners to be seen. The cells on either side of the Black-Briar's were empty, and his room itself bordered on opulence. There was wooden furniture of fine make, blankets and cushions on which to rest, and in the middle of it all, a single bored-looking man reading a book. He was handsome and had an air of culture, but there was also something about him that made the hair on her arms stand on edge.
Nobby opened the door next to the Black-Briar, and ushered Lydia inside. She nodded to him silently, and he waved and strolled away whistling the tune of an old and extraordinarily obscene drinking song. Then, she heard Sibbi approach. There was a long moment of silence, then that same cold voice that she’d heard while locked below sounded once more in her ears. "I told them not to put anyone in here. If I'm to suffer Mother's punishment, I'll do it in private."

Lydia took a deep breath. *Time to do this.* She imagined every thug and lowlife she’d hauled in for the night, every bandit she’d browbeaten into surrender. *And Corporal Nobbs.* "Yeah, well, shoulda thought of that 'fore you pissed off the big lady."

Another moment of silence. "Mother sent you then? Here to mock me?"

Lydia snorted. "Not hardly. Heard you need help killing some girl. Sounds like you could use someone to hunt her down."

She could hear the smile in his words. "Ah. An enterprising sort. And let me guess, all I'd have to do is let you go free? That right? You walk out this door, and then I just hope that you track down Svidi for me?"

"Got a lot of other offers, do you?" It was odd, mimicking this style of speech. It felt like wearing someone else's skin. *No respect in my words.* "Lot of folks looking to help?"

"If you must know, you are the first." He sighed loudly. "I've eight months left in this festering pit, and I'd sleep better at night knowing that little slut got what was coming." There was a long pause. "So, you'll hunt her down in exchange for freedom?"

Lydia nodded, though he couldn't see her. "That's right. Give me leads and an open door, and she's as good as dead."

Another long pause. "And how do I know I can trust you?"

Fortunately, she'd given this one some thought. "Look, seems to me there's two sorts of people in Riften. The kind that work for the Black-Briars, and the kind that cross 'em. Seems like one way you end up rich, and the other you end up dead."

"Hah! An opportunist indeed. But that's not a bad thing. You're right, you know. Help me, and you'll be well set. Betray me, and you'll be sharing Svidi's fate."

"Deal." She almost felt bad about reneging on her word, but the fact that she was being hired to kill an innocent dampened her guilt. "What'd she do to you anyways?"

"We were engaged to be married, if you must know. When she found out that I was entertaining some other women, just for fun, of course, she got upset and told her brother. *He* came at me with a knife, so of course I defended myself! And then they had the temerity to call it murder." She heard him snort. "That bitch tried to have me killed! It's my right to have her life in turn."

Lydia doubted very much that things happened exactly as he said. *No mother would put her son in prison for self-defense!* "Well, you keep up your end, I'll go track her down." She might at that, if only to warn this poor girl to stay far away from Sibbi Black-Briar.

"Good." There was another long pause. "What are in here for, anyway? I'd like to know the character of my new muscle."
Damn. "Hit a guard so hard he went into a canal." And just don't mention why.

A laugh sounded from the other cell. "Why?"

Well, that worked. "He said some things I didn't like." She suddenly realized the best way for this new persona she was creating to answer the question. "You worried I can't handle my own shit?"

Another laugh. "Don't try and talk tough to me. House Black-Briar has armsmen who'd make you soil yourself with a glare. But I like this. You aren't getting out of here without me, and you know it. Turnkey!"

The yell caught Lydia off-guard, and she only realized what he'd actually said a moment later when she heard the approaching footsteps of a guard.

It was, of course, Nobby. He bobbed his head in her general direction, then looked to the side where Sibbi was doubtless standing. "Somethin' I can get you, sirra?"

"You'll release this woman immediately. She's to be given her gear, and sent on her way." His voice rang with the unmistakable confidence of one who had been raised in wealth and power. She knew it well, and when she'd served at Dragonsreach, it had been a good way to quickly identify the visitors who would be trouble.

"As you says, sir." Given Nobby's earlier reluctance, she wondered at how easily he jumped to do Sibbi's bidding. I thought he was afraid of the guards. "O' course, you'd be signin' a form for her release, right? We in the Mistveil dungeons pride ourselves on our records." Well, he's not stupid.

Sibbi laughed, loudly. "Of course! Bring whatever papers you need, and I will make my signature. This woman is my creature now, and those who serve the Black-Briars are no common scum."

Easy, Lydia, this is all part of the plan. Still, it gnawed at her to let this farce continue. This isn't me! And yet, every step that had led here made perfect sense. Is this me?

Nobby gave Lydia a wink, then grinned broadly and bowed towards Sibbi's cell. "O' course, sir! It'll just be a moment, eh?"

There was the rustling of paper, the scratching of a quill, and then Nobby appeared again, pulling her gate open. "Out you are, miss."

Sibbi grinned when he saw her. "Shor's bones, but you're a big one. Shove a hand up her cunt and rip her in half, you hear?"

She nodded, not trusting her tongue. I start talking, I will tell him what I think.

"Wait!" Now that she was no longer confined to her cell, she could see Sibbi leaning close to the bars, sudden concern stamped across his face. "Your name, so I can…reward you for service well done."

Her heart fell into her stomach, and tasted bile as she opened her mouth. "I'm…L—Ledda. Ledda Elf-Scarred. From, ah, Falkreath."

"Hunt her down, Ledda. And when you do, make her scream. I want to know she suffered. Do you understand?"

"Of course." With that, she was gone. Sibbi had signed the papers, and all she needed to do was walk out of here.
As soon as they were out of earshot of Sibbi's cell, Nobby began chuckling. "Not bad, not bad at all. Had you fingered for one o' them uptight ones from the gate, said you wouldn't last you a day here."

"That you did, Nobby. 'Not a day,' you said." Sergeant Kolyn was reclining on a bench before a crackling fire. "Miss, nice to see you not dead." His tone wasn't friendly, exactly, but he gestured to the bench across from him easily enough.

"Thanks, I think." Considering how harsh she'd been with them, she was a bit surprised to get even this courtesy. Still, she sat. "I'm sorry about what I said at the gate." She wasn't, but she figured a little diplomacy couldn't hurt. *These two hold the key to my freedom, after all.*

Sergeant Kolyn shrugged. "You're paying me and Nobby a hundred each, so, way I see it, all's water 'neath the bridge."

*A hundred each, am I?* She glared at Nobby, who grinned back.

"You got a fat purse, there. There's this fella from the Temple of Mara, says gold corrupts." Nobby placed a hand on his grimy cuirass, over his heart. "Doin' your part for us lowly guards, right noble."

Lydia sighed. "Gods damn it all. Just give me my things and I'll be on my way."

As she strapped her armor around herself, she tried to figure out what she should have done differently. The frightening thing was, each step made perfect sense. *If I don't do the right thing, who am I?* And yet, each time she'd tried, she'd only gotten into deeper trouble.

Nobby was counting coins out of her purse and whistling, so she waited for the foul little man to finish. He tucked half the coins away, then handed her the bag with another gap-toothed grin. She took it, thankful that she was wearing her gauntlets. *He can't be as foul as he looks. He'd have poisoned himself long ago.*

The outer doors were great heavy things. The guards who hauled them open gave her a strange look as she passed, but neither moved to stop her. Glancing back, she saw Nobby waving, and couldn't help but raise her fist in salute. She resisted, however, her urge to use that hand to offer a rude gesture.

The doors slammed shut, and Lydia sighed. She nodded wordlessly to the guards, and headed up the stairs with tired tread. As she climbed, she warred within herself as to what to do next. The smart thing would be to leave Riften this instant, staying just long enough to grab her horse. Right now she was bone-tired, though, and it was still the middle of the night. Even the thought of travel in her current state felt like black ice in her gut.

Still, the one thing she knew was that she couldn't stay here. *The wrong guard sees me, and I'm right back in the cold.* She shifted her shield—the strap was digging into her hips—and—

"Hey." Sapphire leaned against a wall, smiling slightly. "Been looking for you."

Sudden panic gripped Lydia's stomach. "What does the Thieves Guild want with me?"

Sapphire raised her hands in a mocking gesture of defensiveness. "Hold on there, now. Nobody said anything about the Guild." She paused, and looked Lydia up and down. "How about a drink?"

"With you?" Lydia liked to warm herself up with some bite well enough, but she didn't usually share ale with people she'd threated. "I'm not in the mood to buy whatever you're selling."
"Yeah, well, you look like you could use a drink." She turned. "Come on. I'm paying."

The Bee and Barb was nearly deserted at this hour, and the table Sapphire had grabbed them was in a secluded alcove, far from prying eyes. Lydia had, with some reluctance, shed her gauntlets and cuirass to better fit in the chair. Sapphire's armor, at least, let her recline comfortably. By the smug look on the other Nord's face, she was enjoying watching Lydia have to compensate.

The thief had ordered them something called 'White-Gold Towers,' and the male Argonian she'd met before brought them two tall flagons brimming with foam. He deposited them on the table and looked down at Lydia, the scales under his eyes darkening. "If I'd known you'd been looking to join her, I never would have helped you."

Sapphire grinned. "Talen-Jei thinks my kind's no good for Riften." She looked up at the proprietor. "And don't worry your scaly little head. I'm making her another job offer, but she's already turned me down twice."

"Three times." Lydia snorted. "And I'll make it four when you ask again."

Sapphire smiled across the table at her. "See?" She looked up at Talen-Jei and waved a hand. "Now, leave us be."

The Argonian, scales still dark, retreated. Sapphire gave Lydia another smile. "So, where were we? Ah right, I got word about a fishing boat that pulled up some old Dwarven—"

Lydia raised a hand, "My answer's no, before you say any more." She studied the other woman. "Why exactly were you at the prison, anyway?"

Sapphire looked at the table, and Lydia was struck again by how lovely she was. Clear blue eyes cast down, cheeks ever so slightly flushed, she could have been a maiden out of a love ballad. And then, on that thought's heels, the disavowal. She's trying to play you.

Sapphire looked back, but this time she wasn't smiling. "I heard… someone assaulted a guard. A lot of rumors going around about who and why, but I heard about a big woman with a Dwarven shield." She shrugged. "Seen you just that day. Maybe I was curious about what happened."

There was a long pause as the two women studied each other. Finally, Lydia lifted her flagon and tried the White-Gold Tower. It was sweet and well-rounded, the kind of easy drink that hid a brutal kick. I can see why this one favors it. If Lydia wasn't careful, she'd be well drunk by the end of this.

"So you, a member of the Thieves Guild, were going to the jail just to satisfy your curiosity?"

Lydia cocked her head, hoping her mockery was obvious. "I know you lot are bold, but don't you think that's a bit much?"

Sapphire flushed, with anger at her foolishness presumably. "If you have to ask—" She sighed. "I know you don't like me, but I—" She lifted an inconspicuous flap on her armor and produced a small bundle of rough cloth. She handed it to Lydia. "If it was you in there, I would have given you this."

Lydia unwrapped the cloth. Inside, she found a lockpick and a narrow dagger. Pick the lock or...the other kind of escape. She met Sapphire's eyes, and their blue was as pure as any sky Lydia had ever seen. "Giving me a way out?"
Sapphire took a long pull from her drink. "Yeah. Worst thing in the world, being helpless. This way, you get to make the terms."

Staring at the other woman, at the eyes that wouldn't meet her own any more, Lydia wondered how this had happened. *Was she a callous criminal that found a spark of decency, or a good person fallen into a life of monstrosity?*

The other thing she knew, however, was that it didn't matter. *Maybe she's one, maybe she's the other, maybe she's neither.* Soon Lydia was to be gone, and then she'd need no longer concern herself with Riften.

*Except...* "Thank you." Whatever her reasons, Sapphire had intended to do her a kindness. "Out of curiosity, why?"

Sapphire finished her drink, and waved for another. Lydia could only stare. *The woman can hold her alcohol.* "Before, you said you'd never known a thief to stick their neck out. Now you do."

"Just like that?" Lydia had another sip. "Truth be told, I didn't think I'd bothered you that much."

"Yeah, well, you're not as smart as you think, then." She smiled sweetly across the table. "I'm a good friend to have, you know. And I think you are, too."

*Still trying to hire me? *

"Guards are easy to deal with, especially if you're with the Guild. A few septims or the promise of a favor can open plenty of doors." She shrugged. "And my hands are fast enough to slip that through the bars. Wouldn't be the first time somebody down there got a little present from a late-night guest." She sipped the White-Gold Tower. "So, why'd you put a guard on the ground. Thought you were smarter than that." She licked her lips. "Not much, but a little."

"He tried to rape someone." It might have been tiredness, or the surprising smoothness of her drink, but Lydia was done with convenient half-truths. "I ran into him while I was chasing a thief, he claimed I'd assaulted him, and tried to get the woman whose things were stolen to get on her knees." She took a long pull from her drink. "Then, I hit him." She might be tired and a bit drunk, but she'd always been good at remembering her fights. "The sword was an accident, though."

Sapphire's face had darkened as soon as Lydia started talking. "Rape, huh?" Her voice was cold. "Should have shoved that sword through the bastard's throat." She turned. "Barkeep! A plate of whatever's hot and greasy!" The other woman glared across the table at Lydia, though it was obvious that the housecarl wasn't the target of the thief's ire. "You and Mjoll, trying to save the gods-damned city." She leaned back, draining her flagon, then raised it. "And another White-Gold!"

"You know Mjoll?" Lydia didn't want to dwell on why Sapphire would have reacted so strongly to her story. "Maybe you should help her make the city better."

A snort. "Oh, please. She thinks that busting the Guild is going to make things safer? We make sure that things run well enough here. Not like the jarl's doing it. You see the Lioness again, tell her that every Guild job she ruins is a free chance for some freelance scum who isn't going to worry about collateral damage!"

"And the Thieves Guild does? You make sure that nobody gets hurt?" It hardly meshed with the stories Lydia had heard.

Sapphire shrugged. "Sometimes they do. But we don't slit throats before emptying pockets. Bad
Lydia shook her head. "And the only reason you don't murder in cold blood is because it would cost you money."

"Oh, get off your fucking high horse!" Sapphire's fist slammed down on the table, and Talen-Jei paused behind her, drink in hand. "I don't kill people. I backed off Shadr! I brought you a lockpick and a weapon, then bought you drinks and talked to you like—" She turned, and saw the Argonian. "Drink, now!"

The moment the flagon was in her hand, she gulped from it. "You did a good fucking thing, and I never even got your name." She set it down, and Talen-Jei dropped a plate of meaty ribs on the table in front of her. Sapphire tore one from the rack, and set to work gnawing on it. "Eat up. Prison food's shit."

Lydia wordlessly used the dagger to slice a rib free, and took a bite. Not cow. It was far too small to be mammoth, but the musky flavor put her in mind of that meat. Carefully, she finished it, making sure not to drip anywhere but the table. I might be a bit drunk, but I won't make a fool of myself.

"Look at you." Sapphire was laughing now. "Eating like a thane at Ulfric's table." For her own part, the woman had remained fairy neat considering how drunk she was obviously becoming. If I'm feeling this, what must it be doing to her? She had to outweigh Sapphire by more than fifty pounds. "You'll leave soon, right? Gone with the—the morning fog?"

"I'm not sure." Lydia had entered that cautious area where every word was chosen deliberately, lest she ramble like Sapphire was. "I'm bone tired, but the thought of staying here is—"

"Not really your city, huh?" Sapphire was laughing again, the sloppy laugh of the miserable drunk. "You're one of the good ones, and you're leaving."

Lydia studied the other woman. One of the good ones, am I? "Mjoll is still here. If you want to make a difference—"

"The Lioness doesn't see the difference between me and that guard you thrashed! You've got something going on between your ears! And you put a guard on the ground to defend this woman." Sapphire slumped down, supporting her head on her arms. "Gods, where were you?" She looked up at Lydia. "Seven years ago at Last Seed, how old were you?"

"Twenty-one, barely. Why?"

"And you were big, right? With that shield?" Sapphire's eyes were fixed on the Dwarven piece in the corner. "What were you? A merc, a guard?" Her head fell into her hands. "Saving the innocent, right? That's you."

"Guard. In Whiterun." She rose. Any more, and she'll say something she regrets in the morning. "Sapphire…"

"Sapphire." The other woman looked at her through hands pressed over her eyes. "That's not who they raped."

Lydia froze. No. She didn't want to hear this, but short of abandoning the woman, there was no other choice. "I can get you a room, a bed to sleep things off—"

"That stupid little girl thought that if you begged, they'd stop." Sapphire's voice was flat. "My family died on our little pig farm, but they took me with them. After a fortnight, they trusted me. I
stopped crying, so they thought I liked it." She laughed, and Lydia, acting without conscious thought, reached across the table to place a hand on Sapphire's wrist.

She jerked her arm away before Lydia could make contact. "I slit their throats, I took their gold." She glared up at Lydia with reddened eyes. "You hate me so much, but you weren't there! Nobody was there! I'm here, I'm alive, and nobody is going to make me weak again! You understand?" She sighed, and the anger seemed to melt like the snow. "They can't hurt Sapphire."

"Because you're strong." Sapphire nodded blearily, and Lydia rose, wanting to weep. "Come on. Let's get you to bed."

Sapphire protested weakly, but Lydia had handled far more formidable drunks. Talen-Jei's scales darkened when she asked for a room, but he handed over a key in exchange for a sovereign and a handful of lesser coins.

Lydia slid Sapphire onto the bed, then tramped back downstairs to gather their things. By the time she returned, the thief looked to be asleep, black hair fanned around her head as she wriggled deeper into the blankets and mattress. She didn't look peaceful, exactly, but by morning she might be better.

*How do you handle something like that?* Lydia only knew that she didn't begin to have whatever was needed to help Sapphire. *I'm just a housecarl.*

Still, she had to believe that Sapphire would be briefly considered joining the other woman on the bed, but rejected it just as swiftly. The chair will do. Given what had happened, and where her mind seemed to be, the presence of someone else might be more threat than comfort.

Her chair was a big high-backed thing in one corner, and once Lydia grabbed some cushions from the bed, it was almost comfortable. Sitting there, watching the —what is she? Just a thief?—sleep, she suddenly wished she'd curbed her tongue. She was so tired, though, that she found herself falling into sleep the moment her eyes closed.

She awoke to find herself alone in the room. Sunlight streamed in through a window, and she'd been covered by a blanket. The bed was rumpled, but in the middle of it sat a folded sheet of paper, weighted down by a few gold coins and a single blue stone. Lydia opened the note and began to read.

*Hey,*

*Never caught your name, but thanks for last night.*

*I hope the coin covers my part of the room. Since I got the bed, figured I could be a bit generous.*

*Consider the gem a bribe, if you want. I remember everything up until I passed out, so I know I said some stuff I wouldn't want getting around. Can't promise I'd have spilled it all if I was sober, but I'm not sorry I did. I've gotten drunk plenty, but you're the first one to get the story. Carrying around a weight like that hurts after a while. Didn't mean to put it on you, but I saw the armor come off. If anyone can bear it, it's you.*

*I don't know if you still hate me, and I think I'd rather not find out. Right now, writing this, I can pretend that you don't, and I kind of like that. It's not fair, but why start now?*

*I don't think you'll be coming back to Riften any time soon, and even if you did I doubt you'd be needing the help of scum like me.*
If you're ever passing through and you want to get in a fight, you know where I drink.

Whoever you are, wherever you're going, I hope you do well.

Sapphire

Lydia carefully folded the letter around the sapphire, and tucked both away. She made sure they were well-protected, and was shocked to realize how gingerly she was handling the parchment.

*She's not a monster.* Lydia couldn't begin to imagine what Sapphire had experienced, but she knew many who'd suffered as the thief had.

She dressed and made her way downstairs, to find the female Argonian behind the bar. "You're awake. The other one said we were to let you sleep. Would you care for breakfast?"

As she ate, Lydia couldn't get her mind off Sapphire. Finally, she decided to give in and ask the Argonian behind the bar what she knew.

The lizard's tongue flicked out, moistening her lips. "Hmm, only what I see. She's been coming in here for maybe two years. Always surrounded by a crowd of those lowlifes. Why?"

Lydia shook her head. "No reason." She took a quick drink, then looked around the inn. It was still early enough in the day that few people were sitting around. *I should be gone before the crew at the jail comes looking for me.* She paid for her meal, thanked them for the night, and headed out the door before she could have a moment of weakness and ask more questions about Sapphire.

Riften was already awake, and Lydia wasted no time heading to the stables. She settled up with Shadr, gathered her things, and in what seemed no time at all was making one last trip through the city.

There were three great gates of Riften, linked by broad roads meant for the traffic of carriages and wagons. The roads passed the markets and mercantile districts, making it easy for goods to get where they needed to go. The unintended benefit, of course, was that Lydia could easily find her way from the stable to the southern gate.

When she reached the gate, she found it open and lightly watched. A number of guards were standing about, but they had the unmistakable air of men who knew full well that the most dangerous thing they had to worry about was getting in the way of a careless cart driver. She'd always hated keeping watch, but these men's boredom was her gain.

She kept her eyes on the road before her, forcing the hand that led the horse to be causal with the grip and the other to fall at her side. *I'm not reaching for my sword.* One of the guards yelled, and she stiffened before realized that he was berating a farmer trying to lead his cow past a wagon laden with vegetables. *Don't let them notice me, don't let them notice me!*

For once, some god was with her, and she was on the road beyond without any giving her more than the most cursory greeting. She raised her head then, and took stock.

Ahead, the road wound along the shore of Lake Ilnalta, vanishing among the trees to the west. A road sign pointed that way, the word *Ivarstead* etched into the wood and accented with peeling black paint.

She had only the road before her, but what she'd done in Riften preyed on her mind. *I'm a good person.* Every step she'd taken had been the right one, yet somehow she'd ended up in a lot of wrong. *Or did I?* Given how Riften functioned, doing the right thing was no protection. *What do
you do in a city where a thief has more honor than a guard?

Right now, though, she had a task. *I can worry over Riften some other time.*

She gathered her beast's reins—*I should really give you a name*—in one hand, made sure her sword and shield were sitting well for a full day's trek, and set off down the road.

Riften had been an experience, but there was a world to save.

Chapter End Notes

GNU Terry Pratchett
Where Dragons Ruled

Chapter Summary

Two dragons enter, one dragon leaves.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Atop Solitude

Jarl Elisif had been anticipating a quiet evening alone with a stack of petitions, but it was not to be. Jordis had come rushing in not five minutes after Elisif had sat down, all but bursting with eagerness to tell of her latest encounter with the Dragonborn. Elisif had felt a stab of inexplicable irritation at her friend, but motioned for her to continue nonetheless. As soon as Jordis described Velandryn’s companion, though, Elisif felt cold fingers grip at her chest. She halted her friend and opened the door to her ante-chamber.

Bolgeir looked up, curious but not alarmed. "My lady?"

"Find Sybille Stentor. Quietly, if you will." Her housecarl nodded and set off down the stairs.

Elisif closed the door again, meeting Jordis' confused gaze. "I think there's more to this Serana than you know."

Sybille must have been close, for barely a minute later she was opening the door. "Yes?" Elisif's court wizard had never been one for pleasantries.

Elisif nodded at her friend. "Describe her again."

The moment Jordis fell silent, the jarl looked over at her court wizard. "She's a vampire, right?" Jordis gave a little hiccup of surprise.

Sybille nodded. "Without question." The red-eyed woman had been a fixture in the palace for as long as Elisif could recall; that she had hidden her own vampirism from the court was nothing short of magical. "By the sound of it, one of the Volkihar, though I wonder that her face was not distorted."

"What do you mean?" Whether by personal or professional interest, Sybille knew more about vampires than any other person Elisif had met. Jordis, however, seemed keen to press her. "Her face was fine."

"As I said, not distorted." Sybille conjured a book out of the air, and showed Elisif a sketch of a face that was marred with features not unlike those of a bat. "Only a few bloodlines display golden eyes." Her own had only the slightest hint of red in this light. "Here in Skyrim, it's almost certainly the Volkihar. She showed the picture to Jordis. "The woman had nothing like this?"

Her oldest friend recoiled. "Ew! No!"

"I see." Sybille slammed the book shut in her hand, then released it. The tome hung in the air for a
long moment before vanishing with a slight hum. "My jarl, I must take my leave." She bowed to them both, then exited the sitting room.

Jordis let out a long breath the moment the door shut. "You know, when I was a kid she scared me senseless."

"She still scares you, Jordi. Don't pretend." She didn't think that Jordis knew what Sybille was, and the thought of what would happen if she let her court wizard's secret slip scared her a little. I've seen her annoyed, not to mention upset, but never truly angry. "For that matter, me too, I guess."

The golden-haired warrior giggled. "Remember when we snuck into the cellar during the Feast of King Hrold?"

"And Sybille caught us with that bottle of Weald?"

"Four hundred years old and a gift from the Septims! I thought she'd never stop yelling!"

Jordis collapsed onto one of the couches, laughing all the while. "Gods, I miss that."

"Just thinking." Jordis reached over the back of the couch and grabbed a bunch of grapes. "I miss being able to walk around the city without being reminded we're at war."

"The sooner we defeat Ulfric, the better." Elisif's agreement was tinged with sorrow. "Torygg deserves that much."

"Hey, how're you doing?" When Elisif didn't respond, her friend stood, pulled the jarl to her feet, and crushed her in a hug. "Love you, Eli."

"And you, Jordi." She kissed Jordis on the brow, and worked her way out of the embrace. "Now, as your jarl I command you to lighten the mood."

Jordis grinned. "Sounds fun, but I've got nothing. What'd you have in mind?"

"What else? Why in Oblivion is Velandryn going around with a vampire?"

Her friend gave her a sly look. "Well, you didn't see her. Maybe Vel's got a thing for the pale ones."

"Pretty, then?"

"Gorgeous." Jordis' breath came out in a low whistle. "In a creepy way, though. Skin so pale she looked half a statue, and she didn't blink enough. Felt like a predator." Sometimes Elisif forgot that there was a sharp mind under Jordis' bluster and jokes.

Of course. She'd been doing her best not to think about Velandryn, but now the odd queasiness that troubled her stomach when she pictured his face returned. "First things first. Do you think she had him under a spell?"

"First things first? You sound like old Master Heldmer." Jordis stuck her tongue out at Elisif, who mimed a playful bite in her direction. Then, the warrior shook her head. "Nah. Remember when
Lord Sugorn hired that enchantress? His household was all staring and they'd talk like they were asleep. Vel wasn't like that."

"Mm." She didn't know much about enchantment, but she had a hard time imagining that the Dragonborn's mind hadn't been his own. "An ally then, but I thought Dark Elves hated vampires."

"I mean, doesn't everyone?" Jordis shrugged. "Vel's smart. Maybe he figured she'll be useful against a dragon."

"Maybe." She'd only met him for that one conversation, but she thought that might be it. "He has a hard road ahead of him."

"Specially if he's carting around a bloodsucker. I'd hate to be there when she gets hungry." It had the cadence of a joke, but Jordis wasn't smiling.

At that moment, Elisif didn't know if she was about to voice a belief or merely a hope. "He'll be fine."

FUS!

Velandryn pulled himself out of the snow, tasting blood. Damn it all to the Corners! He looked up, only to see the dragon coming around again. Cursing, he limped towards the nearest cover, sending magicka into his limbs to heal the injuries he'd suffered when the beast had demolished the tower. It was too much, though. Not with the pain. He couldn't run and heal at the same time. Get to cover first, then heal. Hopefully some other warriors could keep it occupied long enough for him to get his body working again.

*Maybe it wasn't a good idea to challenge it directly.* The dragon had come down on them with incredible speed after his shout, heralding its arrival with a spray of icy breath that had frozen the very stone on which they stood. Then, it had brought its claws and head to bear. He and Serana had both leapt free, but a wing had caught him before he could finish casting his feather fall, sending him the ungraceful plummet that had fractured one of his legs and sent lances of pain up his side when he tried to breathe.

He found himself in the joining of two walls, and took a moment to rest in the corner there, pouring every drop of magicka he could into his own flesh. He shuddered in mingled pain and relief as he felt the wounds knit beneath his armor, and groaned as his bones clicked back into place.

*Thank the gods I'm a healer.* Broken bones were a nightmare to deal with on someone else, but a mage who knew their own flesh could prevent anything from going wrong. *Usually.* He rose, and stomped experimentally. *It'll do.*

Their initial plan, to keep the dragon focused on him while the others brought it down from afar, was ash in the wind. The beast was already returning, headed straight for—

*Now that's a thought.* Quickly he ducked out from behind the wall. *Dov-Rah!* The ancient word for dragon felt right on his tongue, and for all that it wasn't a shout, it carried farther than his voice ever could.
The dragon's wings beat the air furiously, and slowly brought the beast's ponderous bulk to bear on him. _Remember the plan, mortals._ It opened its mouth, and Velandryn readied a ward that would only last for a few moments against the dragon's fierce breath.

Lightning lanced in from his left, even as a barrage of icy shards erupted from behind him. The dragon staggered, screaming, and beat its wings again to gain height. Velandryn began to turn to see who'd unleashed the spells, but somebody grabbed him by the arm and spun him with unnatural strength.

"Run!" Serana's hair was halfway out of its braids, and the effect was somewhat mesmerizing. She spun him around. "It's after you, like we planned! Go! We'll bring it down!"

"Right." He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, and willed himself to **focus**. When he opened them again, the world seemed sharper. He focused on the ruined city around him, and the dragon overhead. _Draw its gaze._ He ducked out from behind the wall, and bolted across the snowy courtyard. Overhead, he heard a roar. _Try not to die._

He knew the breath was coming before it did. Something above and behind him **shifted**, and he turned despite himself. _Face the foe._ That was Dov doing his thinking; not facing an enemy was something shameful.

"**FUS!**"

His own Thu'um caught the icy wind just beginning to emerge from the dragon's mouth. The air froze into tiny crystals and shards of ice, and those were then thrown back into the dragon's face and mouth. It gave a roar, and landed with a thunderous crash. It began walking towards Velandryn with purposeful strides, each step coming faster than the last.

"Attack!" From the ruins, war cries sounded, and suddenly the rest of his makeshift dragon hunters were charging. Imperials in their armored uniforms ran alongside Morthal guards and ragged adventurers. An Orc lunged ahead of the pack, twin axes flashing in the sun. A Bosmer in dark armor that was oddly familiar leapt upon a stone outcropping, firing a flurry of arrows so fast that her hands seemed to blur through the air.

The dragon, for its part, did not slow. It continued charging, and for all that it was ungainly on the ground, it was still thousands of pounds of muscle moving faster than a horse could gallop. One soldier, too close as it passed, was sent flying with a casual flick of the dragon's enormous tail. Others tried to land blows, but the glancing hits they landed had little hope of piercing its scaly hide. All the while, the dragon's black eyes never left Velandryn's.

_Come to me, beast._ But the dragon was no beast. It might not have the look of man or mer, but he knew all too well that this creature was, if anything, conscious on a level he could scarcely comprehend. Even now, after taking the soul of Mirmulnir, he was no closer to understanding what the dragons truly were.

That they were something more than merely mortal was beyond question, however. _Its breath didn't create ice._ The dragon's Thu'um had literally frozen the air as it passed.

_And mine pushed it back._ The Dragonborn laughed.

"**FUS!**" This time, his shout was not for the dragon's head, but for its limbs.

He had aimed at the wings that hung awkwardly as it clambered along the ground, and the legs that sought purchase each time they came down. Appendages not meant to run on icy ground couldn't
hope to withstand the impossible _Push_ that his Shout was somehow able to conjure.

The dragon collapsed mid-run, legs splaying out as its wings were pulled back. It slid along the ground, roaring in what could have been either pain or anger. Coming to rest, it gave a great shuddering breath and climbed back to its feet, eyes once more searching out Velandryn with what he fancied was renewed hate.

Those moments, though, had been enough. His allies had reached the dragon, and now fell upon it with a fury that was doubtless masking their terror. An Altmer in the same dark armor as the Bosmer from before unleashed a torrent of lightning upon the dragon, only to duck aside as a claw passed through the spot where his head had been a moment before.

The dragon had regained its footing, and already Velandryn's makeshift army was falling back. Warriors scrambled away from claws and tail, and archers suddenly hit nothing but air as the dragon twisted itself around, roaring. Ice and frost sprayed from its mouth, and two mercenaries went down screaming.

Great leathery wings buffeted the crowd, and the beast once more was soaring above them. The clouds had gathered thick and grey overhead, and the dragon vanished into them in an instant.

"It will be back." Velandryn realized that the voice he was hearing was his own. "No dragon would flee from _Joorre_." He studied the clouds, looking for any sign of the enemy.

"And what is _Joorre_?" The Altmer in dark armor had approached. "Something we should know if we'll be pitting our lives against a dragon?"

Velandryn saw, for the first time, exactly who this new ally was. _Oh, gods be damned_. Armor of adamantite and quicksilver shaded dark and trimmed with gold, and an eagle picked out in moonstones on the breast. "You, Thalmor." At that word, the surrounding crowd rumbled unhappily. Several Legionaries shifted uncomfortably, and one of the Morthal guards quietly moved to stand beside Valdimar, whispering in his ear.

_That was ill-done; I'm losing them_. The thought of a Thalmor in their midst had unnerved many, and in a moment they'd realize how insane it was to be taking on a dragon. Velandryn looked around and pitched his voice so all could hear. "_Joorre_ are mortals! To a dragon, we are all equally worthless! This is your chance to prove them wrong!"

The crowd didn't exactly cheer, but most seemed at the very least willing to listen. He looked up again. The clouds were thickening, and growing dark. _A storm's the last thing we need._ "We hurt it, and we can do it again! Get the injured to shelter, and be ready to bring it down!"

He might only have a few seconds before the dragon was on them again. He turned to see Serana standing behind him, watching with an inscrutable expression. Valdimar was herding some warriors towards a ditch, though he knelt to check a fallen Legionary. He looked up, met Velandryn's eyes, and shook his head.

_Damn_. Something moved in the clouds, and thoughts of the fallen soldier were gone in an instant. "Positions!"

As the group scattered, the Altmer moved beside Velandryn, smiling slightly. "Scatter, you say. All save you, I suppose?"

Velandryn kept the Thalmor in the corner of his eye as he scanned the sky. "That depends. Would you rather be beneath a dragon's notice or the object of its ire?" The clouds were now thick enough
that their roiling could well hide the dragon's movements.

Serana too was staring upwards. "There's no way that storm's natural."

The Thalmor's eyes narrowed. "A spell to call a storm? I would feel it, vampire." After a moment, he grudgingly gave them their due. "As would have both of you."

Serana was right, Velandryn realized. *However Thu'um works, it isn't just magic. Doubtless a dragon could call a storm without the inconvenience of spells.*

However, he felt no need to explain Thu'um to a Thalmor. "What matters is that we bring it down. Are you with us, Aedmer?"

Pale lips twisted into a smile. "Mockery and alliance in a breath?" He nodded. "I'd expect nothing less from a heretic." Then, he sobered. "Where do you need us?"

"You—" Just then, something moved in the clouds, a shape that was unmistakable. *There!* Planning was forgotten as the great grey bulk descended, and they leapt once more into battle.

Serana's strength was all but effortless to her. Her body still remembered when she was human, so she was unlikely to accidentally crush a goblet in her hand or find herself unable to block out a conversation a quarter-league away, but her gifts were never far below the surface. So, when the dragon dove from the clouds, she was ready in the time it took Velandryn to finish realizing they were under attack again.

The Dragonborn, to his credit, was becoming quick on his feet for a mortal. He called a shimmering shield into being around himself, a dome that crackled and spit whenever a flake of snow fell upon it. She saw his fingers twitch, and that Daedric sword was in his hand. He dropped into a warrior's stance, waiting.

She nodded to herself. *The cover did nothing.* It was good for the ones who weren't the targets of the dragon's rage, but the Dragonborn should be visible. And, judging by how fast the dragon was diving towards the three of them, the monster agreed.

The High Elf sent a wave of arcing lightning into the air, and Serana conjured a swirling storm of ice between her hands. She focused on her blood, willing her creation greater and colder. *You like the ice, hmm? Let's see how you favor the cold of the Volkihar!*

She loosed her spell, and it erupted as a blizzard pointing upwards.

The dragon didn't even slow, but barreled through the ice as though it were nothing. She noticed, however, that it shied away from the lightning of the Altmer. *That's a little insulting.*

Then it was on them, and their world became claws and leaping and blood.

This time, the dragon had not been knocked about by Velandryn's Thu'um before it reached them. It dove in with deadly force and was making full use of its claws. The Altmer was knocked away, hitting the snow and sliding for what had to have been ten feet. Velandryn looked almost like he was dancing, slashing with his blade in one hand while launching fireballs with the other. Each time fire or sword landed a blow, it left angry red marks on the dragon's scaly hide.

For her part, Serana was stuck trying to do any damage at all to the thing. With her strength she should have been able to land far stronger blows than Velandryn, but her blade was unable to do much more than shear off the merest of its scales.
Then, she saw a flash in the corner of one eye, and a wing was on her. She was fast, but the leathery limb was too wide to dodge, and it was all she could do to turn away so the hit landed across her shoulders. It still sent her to the ground and made her vision spin, but the blow of a dragon could well have broken even her in half.

She rose, channeling her magic to steady herself, and saw something impossible.

Velandryn was fighting the dragon.

That burning blade danced through the air, and the dragon's head snapped back to avoid it. Then, the mouth and teeth were back in play, and it was Velandryn who ducked under, letting the massive teeth skitter off of his flaming shield. A moment later, and the dragon opened its mouth only to have Velandryn let loose another thunderous "FUS!" that snapped the dragon's scaly head back and cut short the ice that had begun coming out.

*By the Mace, he's doing it.* Velandryn Savani was going toe-to-toe with a dragon, and somehow he hadn't yet been turned into a bloody smear on the snow. He was losing, of course, but it still took her breath away.

Others were crowded around again, hacking at the beast and dodging its wings and feet, but they were clearly an afterthought.

The great scaly tail made a shrieking sound as it drove onto the conjured blade, and for a moment, Serana thought the Daedric weapon would carve its way through the beast's flesh. Instead, however, the blade was driven up and away, vanishing as it left the Dragonborn's hand.

Velandryn had angled himself well, and so he was merely thrown into the air rather than pulverized by the incoming blow. Still, she could make out the sound of crunching bones as he rolled to a stop in the snow.

She was moving before she was aware of it, crossing the open space with all the speed she could find. *He can't be dead.* And, indeed, he was moving, though it was only a little.

*Please let him be okay!*

His world was pain.

*Nerevar defend me!*

He couldn't see anything, but somehow his vision was red. He couldn't move, but he was fairly certain he was writhing in agony. He could feel his hands and feet going cold, but there was a fire in his gut threatening to burn him alive.

*Gods, why?*

He thought he screamed, but couldn't be sure.

Then, he felt something. A hand, somewhere. And then, all at once, a wave of pain, but somehow different.

Another wave, and more thought returned.

Another, and Velandryn Savani opened his eyes.

The face that met him was ice-pale, golden eyes boring holes into his. One of Serana's hands was
on his chest, the other on an arm that he thought—no, it was definitely broken.

Then, another wave of pain, and his arm could move. Blearily, he realized what was happening. "A healer now?"

Another wave, and he became aware of how much his legs hurt. "You can't die on me!" Her face was too close to his own, and she was shouting. "On your feet! It's coming!"

He started to rise, but stumbled as one of his legs buckled under his own weight. She grabbed him by his arm and hauled him to his feet with one hand. He swayed, and for a moment almost forgot where they were.

The dragon roared. Its wings beat the air, and the soldiers around it fell away. Some clutched at wounds, while others only staggered back in fear. The monster, free of the distractions, began rising into the air. He had ten seconds, maybe less.

But it was enough. The roar and the pain brought Dov to the top of his thoughts, and Dov had no time for hesitation. He stomped his foot and thumped his fist against his armor. They'll do. He pulled deep, and the sword appeared again in his hand.

The dragon dove, and Serana unleashed a fusillade of icicles at the beast's eyes. For a moment it slowed to turn its head, but in the end she'd bought them only a heartbeat. The beast was still airborne, and bearing down on them with terrible speed.

Velandryn felt his lips pull back, baring his teeth in a snarl. It was a primal instinct, but one that even Dunmer upbringing couldn't fully extinguish. With Dov now exerting so much pressure, he had no chance of resisting.

And then, it paused. The dragon hung above them, wings flapping, terrible in its splendor despite the meager wounds they had inflicted.

"Boziik Joorre! Fahliil Dovahkiin! Hin Thu'um komeyt!" It was a command, a demand that the insignificant mortal let loose his Thu'um. There was something else behind the words, however, an unspoken demand for supremacy.

And Velandryn obliged. But not on your terms. He sent a gout of flame skyward, and spared a glance for Serana. "I'm going to ground him."

"Okay?" She'd sopped firing magic. Everyone on the battlefield seemed frozen, waiting for someone to move. "And?"

"Cripple a wing. No matter what. I don't think this'll work twice." The dragon was still hanging overhead. It was an insult, allowing the foe a moment to taste their hopelessness.

Velandryn didn't wait for Serana's assent, but raised his voice to reach the Nord he desperately hoped was there. "Valdimar?"

"Aye!"

"Okay!" He sent a gout of flame skyward, and spared a glance for Serana. "I'm going to ground him."

"Dov-rah! Are you afraid? So far away from the Dragonborn? Afraid to test your claws?" He waved his hand, wreathed in flame, at the dragon. Black eyes fixed on him, and Velandryn knew he had the beast. He stomped in a taunting gesture, and regretted it instantly as pain shot up his leg.
"Your time is done!"

"Sahlo tinvaaq Joorre." Mock my Thu'um all you want, it still staggered you. The dragon hung there, an impossible bulk to sit so lightly on the air. "Hi dinok kriif!" It dove at him, leaving a last taunt in the air. "Vobalaan!"

Unworthy, am I? For an instant, indignation won out over fear, then he remembered that he had a thousand pounds of angry dragon bearing down on him. Maybe I wasn't so clever.

And then there was no more time for thought.

He hurled another spray of fire as he ran, barely even watching his steps as he tried to evade the dragon. It was no use, however, and the massive beast crashed down on him. A shield thrown up at the last minute stopped him from being crushed, but the dragon's claws slammed against the shield of burning magicka and drove him—and it—to the ground.

He felt his magicka melting the snow around him. The claw above him pressed down harder, and he felt his ward begin to waver.

Not like this! He poured magicka into the ward, overloading it in the same way he had back in Dimhollow so long ago. The claw hung in the air as the dragon roared, and Velandryn seized his chance.

He opened his mouth, and reached for the idea of Fus. It wasn't a thought, exactly, but something felt. He would comprehend the push that must happen, and realize it through his voice.

This time, however, it wouldn't come. Instead, there was only a silent void, and the dragon's claw came crashing down.

Velandryn rolled away, but not fast enough. Once more, he heard the crunch of bones and felt agony stab through him. He coughed, and watched blood spatter the snow in front of him.

So this is how I die.

The thought came coolly, with resignation—and then he saw the jarl. Elisif, standing alone on a balcony in Solitude. Trying to change the world, but powerless before the forces that moved it.

Like me.

He swung his hand, and flames engulfed the claw. The dragon snapped back, but it was only for a moment. Once more it came, and his shield spat fire as it shrieked into being.

I am NOT powerless.

The dragon was over him again, but now he saw only the lights in the sky of Skyrim. Dancing among the stars. He'd stood upon a balcony, and shared his heart with a mortal. If I die here, I'll never speak to her again.

If he died, if the Dragonborn fell upon the snows of Bromjunaar, he would have lied to Elisif.

I told her I'd be there, alongside her. That we'd find our purpose together.

He let magicka suffuse his body, and flames ignited around his skin. He rolled to one side, snow melting around him, and grabbed a piece of some long-fallen building. Muttering a chant of recollection, he thrust it upwards, where his telekinesis spell took hold and smashed it against the
dragon's hide.

Somewhere nearby, he knew, Serana was there. The vampire who had abandoned her blood and her family to join his quest. *I die here, I fail her.*

The stone had done nothing. The dragon's head hung over his prone form, and now its jaws opened.

*So, this is the moment of my failure?*

The thought came burning, with fury. For the first time in too long, he thought of Lydia, who he had sent alone and unprepared into Morrowind. If he never left this battlefield, he knew she would never forgive herself for abandoning him.

*I chose this path.*

He had people waiting for him. If he died without summoning every last scrap of his strength, he had failed as both Dragonborn and Dunmer.

*I can't fail her.*

This was *not* how *Dov* died.

Something stirred within him, a rebellion against all of this. Not just the dragon above, but the snow beneath, and the wet cold that even now soaked into his bones. It was no longer mere irritation at the weather or a wry observation that in Skyrim even the dragons could kill with the cold, but a desire to show *what* he was.

*I am Dunmer, born of mortal and Daedra.*

His story did not end here, and he would burn this ancient city to the ground if it meant victory.

*They will watch and wonder, and know the nature of their Dragonborn.*

He knew the word, deep in his bones. It *was* fire, and he had known fire from the day of his birth.

*Let them taste of my flame!*

"*YOL!*"

Serana saw Velandryn go down, and wondered if her heart could actually stop. It was only an idle thought, however, as she leapt across the snow to once again save the Dragonborn's life.

"*Yol!*"

She needn't have bothered. A plume of flame erupted upward from where he lay, clashing with the frozen breath of the dragon. They hissed and sparked as they met, though—

*Neither is failing.* She had a fairly good sense of Velandryn’s limits with magic, and given the beating he'd taken, this spell was far beyond him. It wasn't a stream of fire or a spray of bolts, but an eruption. And, her eyes watering as she peered through the flame from afar, it was coming from his *mouth.*

*Thu'um.* Of course Velandryn Savani would be able to shout fire into existence.
He was wounded—she could smell his blood in the air—but for the moment, he and the dragon were evenly matched. Fire and ice annihilated each other at the point of their meeting, and for the two combatants, nothing else mattered.

Serana spun, and saw Valdimar bent over a fallen soldier. "Rally them! Now!" She didn't wait for a response, but darted towards the dragon. **My sword is useless.** However, the gifts of the Volkihar were many, and this sudden storm had blocked the sun.

She called on the last dregs of power from the blood within her, and knew her skin had grown hard. **But brittle.** Do this right, and she could likely pierce a dragon's hide. **Do it wrong, and my arm shatters.**

She hesitated. No mortal would have noticed, but to her heightened senses the pause was palpable. **One mistake, and I'm down an arm.** It would take a river of blood to recover from such a grievous wound, and she was nearly dry. **This fails, and there's no guarantee I can keep my sanity.** If she was revealed here, if she was stricken with bloodlust—**no, I won't think about that.**

Then, whether by fate or happenstance, the battling Thu'um flowed apart to let her see Velandryn's face. It was drawn and pale, though pale for a Dunmer was still darker than any Nord, and the pain there was obvious.

**He's suffering.** She ran on. **I might shatter.** She would be revealed as a vampire. Hunted, perhaps killed. **If Velandryn dies, my only ally is gone.** It would make the most sense for her to vanish now. Disappear into the storm; keep the scroll out away from everyone. **Just turn, and go.**

**If Velandryn dies—**

**If Velandryn dies, he's gone.**

Her hand, harder than steel, punched through the dragon's hide.

It only sunk in to her wrist, but that was enough. She released the enchantment, and could move it again. Screaming a wordless war cry, she dug her hand into the creature's huge flank, and felt the flesh and blood *squish* out of her way. A roar that was not Thu'um, one of pain, and she knew it was working.

She pulled her hand free, and blood gushed out onto the snow. Its potency nearly sent her reeling, but something deep within her knew that the blood of a dragon was not meant for such as she. Instead, Serana focused on the wound. **Have to hurt him.** She had to buy Velandryn more time—

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The vampire woman rushed away, and Valdimar cursed to himself. He hadn't been sure why the Dragonborn tolerated such a creature as a companion, but he was beginning to understand. **Faster, stronger.** Then, she put her hand through the dragon's side, and he wondered if she'd consider staying on in Morthal. **A dozen like her, and the jarl could tell Tullius and his little pet queen to go and freeze.**

Now, though, they had an opening. He waved at the nearest Imperials, a trio of Nords huddled against a wall. "Attack! While we can!"

One rose to her feet, but the others stayed down. "We can't kill it." That was an Orc in thick furs, part of a caravan that had gotten drawn in. Now, he looked over at where the battle raged. "We should run while we can." The Redguard beside him nodded.

"Run?" Valdimar might have expected that from an Orc, but one of the Nords was nodding along.
"Run from a dragon?" His voice was rising, and others tore their eyes away from the torrents of fire and ice to look at him. "Have you no shame? No pride?"

Eskern, another guard from Morthal, dragged a bleeding Imperial into shelter. "We'll just die. Better to protect our homes."

There were about a dozen gathered around him now. All injured, but only a few grievously. A blue-robed Imperial mage channeling Restoration worked his way around the wounded, but it was slow going.

Valdimar scanned the room. *We're running out of time.* "The Dragonborn is out there. Does that mean nothing?"

Nobody would meet his eyes, but the Orc at least offered up a retort. "Not my Dragonborn. No sense dying for your legend."

Near the dragon, there was a flash of lightning. The three Thalmor had joined the battle again.

Valdimar's heart hurt, and he wanted to weep. "The Dragonborn is out there! Fighting for us! And you'll sit in here and let Thalmor be the only ones to help?" He grabbed a spear from where it lay against the wall. "Eater take you all! You're not worthy of Sovngarde!"

"Like hell!" The woman had been sitting in the corner, bent under the weight of years, with pale skin as leathery and cracked as her armor. Now, though, she rose, grabbing an axe from the ground and hefting it with some hidden vigor. "Come on, you worthless skeevers! Earn your death!"

The Orc began chortling and leaned against the wall. "Aye, by the Maul. Go and throw yourselves away."

His companion, however, was testing the edge of a curved sword against his finger. "Heard a lot about Sovngarde." Pale eyes shone in a dark face. "Not where I'm headed, but being the first since Cyrus to kill a dragon will give me a fine story to tell Tu'whacca!"

Others were rising now, and laying hands to weapons. Even the ones who weren't Nords were preparing, though the eyes of the Skyrim-born shone with something more.

Valdimar looked towards the battle. Like something out of legend, the stalemate still held. Elf and vampire again dragon, none breaking. "Hit it hard! The Dragonborn will do the rest!"

*And, just maybe, I can see Morthal again.*

"Warriors, to me!" He was running now, and could see others emerging from where they'd been recovering or hiding. "This is our chance!" More Imperials had rallied on the far side, and seemed to be waiting for something.

*Well, I'll give them their signal.* "For Skyrim! To victory, or Sovngarde!"

Somehow, impossibly, Velandryn was still alive. He couldn't have said how or why, but his *Thu'um* was holding.

The word *Yol* was fire. It *was* fire, with all that entailed. He knew his own skills, and what was coming forth from his mouth right now was not magic. It was more primal. Somehow, his voice could call flames into being, flames that matched the icy spray of this dragon's breath.
Something beyond fire and ice passed between them as their Thu'um met. He sensed anger, resentment at losing something that was rightfully his. This dragon hates us. Hates mortals. He wondered if the dragon could feel his fear, and what that would mean.

Orvas Mathen had once told him that the goal of a soldier's training was to eliminate conscious thought. By drilling action and reaction into a soldier, they could move without having to consider their next action. For Velandryn's part, he'd always tried to think first. Maybe that's why I'm such a miserable warrior. Now, though, his mind was racing, and he seemed able to think about anything and everything even as he lay bleeding on the ground, matching voices with a dragon.

Suddenly, there was a roar, more felt than heard, and the distant sound of shouting. And then, all at once, the frost was gone.

Aching, he rose, pulling on what little magicka he had left to hold his body upright. Then, he saw what had transpired.

He had thought the others broken. He'd seen the Nords, the Imperials and mercenaries falling back after each of the dragon's attacks. He'd seen them dragging their broken and dead away.

And yet, here they were. Not all of them, but twenty or more, charging with weapons drawn. The dragon was turning, but somehow it was bleeding heavily from one leg.

He saw the three Thalmor, scattered but fighting as one. The Bosmer was firing arrows that seemed always to punch through the leather of wings or find open wounds to strike. The leader, whom Velandryn had spoken with before, was calling lightning to torment the beast. And the last one, the likely Altmer armored head-to-toe in heavy black and gold armor, stood like an ebon pillar, either unable or unwilling to use the greatsword on his back.

The Nords, by contrast, were fighting with everything they had. For a moment, Velandryn could only watch in awe at how they charged in, seemingly heedless of the fact that they were likely throwing their lives away.

"For Skyrim! Skyrim and the Dragonborn!" Valdimar was running headlong at the dragon, spear ready. Behind him came Legionaries and hired guards, a ragged pack of baying Nords.

Serana was half a blur, seemingly tearing a hole in the dragon's side with her bare hands. The beast twisted to snap at her, but she darted backwards and sent a spike of ice into one eye. The creature roared and spread its wings, but every archer, as if by unspoken agreement, loosed their shafts at the huge targets. Velandryn raised a hand and willed a single bolt of flame into being. He aimed it at a patch of tattered wing, and let fly.

The dragon screamed. Good. Right now, Velandryn wanted that bastard to hurt. He had little left in the way of magicka, but not even the dragon's thick hide was impervious to the amount of damage they'd been doing. Wounds covered its sides, and he wasn't sure if it could even take flight. By Azura, we're winning.

The dragon had seemed to realize the same thing. It spun again, tail slamming a wiry Redguard into a wall. The human fell to the snow unmoving, and the battle raged on uncaring.

Velandryn saw Serana leap over the tail when it came at her. She landed lightly behind the beast's legs, where she conjured a jagged shard of ice which she drove into the back of one knee.

The dragon screamed again as its leg gave out, and it tumbled to the ground. With a cheer, the ragtag attackers closed on it, weapons rising and falling without grace. Cuts gave way to gashes,
and more than one spear was thrust deep into the dragon's body and removed with a mighty spurts of blood.

For Velandryn's part, he was pouring every spare drop of magicka into healing his wounds and trying not to collapse. So, when the dragon dragged itself towards him, his first instinct was to hide behind something.

No. This was it. Not now. He had bested this one. Not my victory alone, but mine nonetheless.

"Dovahkiin." The word was a rumble, heavy with resignation. Something in its tone gave even the others hacking at the beast pause, and the battle stilled. "Hin krogra." My victory indeed.

Velandryn found his own voice failing him, and only nodded.

The dragon coughed, and blood gushed forth. "Alduin...Zu'u funt." His head crashed into the snow, and the dragon was no more.

Someone cheered, but the sound was small in the silence, and it died away in an instant. Even the onlookers could tell that something was coming, and Velandryn was finding it hard to breathe as the air around him seemed to thicken.

There was a shout, and one of the Nords staggered backwards. The Thalmor were backing up, and everyone looked a heartbeat away from violence. He should have felt alarm, or amusement, or something, but right now all he could experience was the impossible sensation of his soul singing as the dragon's body burned away before his eyes.

His breath was hot, and air that was not his own filled his lungs. His mind spun with impossible height, and each beat of his heart set the earth to shaking. A clamoring void filled him, and his senses failed as the world beyond became as nothing compared to the fury within.

Colors surrounded him, and a light that sang with a deep and thunderous voice flowed into his body. Fire filled him, and Velandryn Savani once more found his mind reaching inexorably towards dragon.

And then, it was done. He simply stood there, swaying slightly, across from the bones of a dragon. Save for the fact that it wasn't covered in snow, it might well have been a part of the ruins. Just one more relic from an age long past.

He realized that he was the center of attention. Be they Nord, Thalmor, Imperial, or those of one awestruck-looking vampire, all eyes were on him. Let's give them something to see.

He could feel a sluggishness in his chest, which, were he a more fanciful mer, he would say was the added weight of his dragon's soul. He stepped forward, feeling as though he were in a dream. Reaching the dragon, he reached out and pried a tooth from the great skull. It was longer than his hand, slightly curved, and ended in a shockingly sharp point. He tossed it in the air, caught it, and tucked it away. A soul's well and good, but a dragon's tooth makes a fine trophy!

One of the Nords raised his blade, and Velandryn realized that it was Valdimar. "The Dragonborn! Dragonborn and victory!"

Others raised their voices then, and surged forward. Velandryn found himself at the center of a riotous mass of humans and a few mer, all of them clamoring congratulations and trying to outdo each other with tales of their fight.

He noticed the wounded now, and how many were no longer moving. He moved towards
Valdimar, who opened his arms as if to embrace him; Velandryn raised a hand to ward the Nord away. He tried to speak, but found words once again eluded him. He placed a hand on the Nord's shoulder, and called up an ancient cantrip of Illusion.

_How Many?_ It was an imprecise thing, sending thoughts into another's mind, but simple ideas could be transferred with relative ease. Also, not having to worry about language helped. He visualized the dead bodies, and repeated the thought. _How Many Dead?_

Valdimar jumped in his armor, but recovered quickly. He gave Velandryn a long, studying look, then shook his head. "Too many. A hard victory, but the dead feast in Sovngarde, and we've slain a dragon."

"And when you don't have him around the next time, human?" The Altmer had approached, mouth tight. "How many will you have to lose to kill another?"

Velandryn saw Serana only an instant before she spoke. "They aren't gods. We brought this one down with force, it can be done again."

The Altmer gestured around them. "You see this and you are hopeful?" He shook his head. "I had thought the dragons little more than a footnote. My report…” He trailed off. "They are a true threat. I see that now."

"Glad you could join us." Serana's voice was icy, and she had moved to stand at Velandryn's side. "Maybe next time you can all fight, hmm?" Velandryn remembered seeing the other Thalmor, the one in heavy armor, staying back from the fight.

The Altmer smiled. "Thaulanwe was more interested in studying the dragon than in slaying it. Perhaps he figured it could thin out some Nords before going down? Do us all a favor."

Velandryn sighed. He opened his mouth to retort, but once more the words wouldn't come. Blinking, he tried again, but couldn't make a sound.

Panic rose in his gut. _Is because of Thu'um?_ He'd used it more in that last battle than ever before, and each time it had been harder and harder. That last, when he'd called fire into being, had felt like hot oil being poured down his throat. He'd thought it was just from the heat, but perhaps it wasn't. _What if this is the price of mortals Shouting?_

Quietly—as _if I had any other choice_—he placed a hand on Serana's shoulder. He felt her tense under his touch, and quickly formed the thoughts he needed to send. _Cannot Speak. Voice Gone._

She turned slightly, brow furrowed and eyes slightly narrowed. He glanced at the others, and Serana gave him a tiny nod. "If not for them, you'd be dead." She looked at the Thalmor. "Do you have a name, or just hate for humans?"

"Hate?" The Altmer shook his head. "Disdain." He looked over at Velandryn. "Were it not for you, my fascinating Dunmer, we would all number among the fallen." He bowed deeply, one hand extended while the other rested on his brow. "I am Ilcanataer, of Lillandril-in-Alinor, scion of the Spire of Phynaster Rising Upon the Shriving-Moon, and emissary of the Aldmeri Dominion. _From my ancestors to yours, I am known._" That last was in Altmeris, though it was close enough to Classical Aldmeris that Velandryn had no trouble understanding. Ilcanataer smiled, revealing even white teeth.

Velandryn bowed, and immediately regretted the motion as his head swam. His vision and hearing were restored, but his balance was still far from perfect.
He'd been pouring magicka into his throat, though if there was a wound, it was none that his magic could find. *It's more like something's blocking the sound.* Still, he managed a rough growl that could be understood as speech. *Truth in the meeting. Go from battle clad in glory, bearing the blood of new kin.* Aldmeris had a great many words designed to convey complex meanings; right now ancient poetry might well be the least painful way to communicate. *Plus, if I sound arrogant and pretentious enough they might mistake me for one of their own.*

Ilcanataer smiled back. "I hadn't expected culture from one of the Dunmer. A day of firsts, but I am afraid we must be away before Thaulanwe bursts from indignation. Rest assured, however, that I am overjoyed to have met you." Bowing again, he turned back to his fellows.

*There goes an odd one.*

"There goes a dangerous one." It wasn't until Velandryn's silent eyes locked onto hers that Serana realized she'd spoken aloud. Still, she wasn't backing down, whatever reproach she thought his red stare contained. "The way he was acting? Tell me that wasn't suspicious."

Velandryn looked a bit amused, though she might have just been imagining things. He shrugged, and pointed. "More important."

She looked where he was gesturing, and froze. *Ah.*

They were still in the midst of the ragtag dragonslayers, who had broken back into their respective groups. Many had one eye on them, however, and even now a severe-looking man in Imperial armor was headed their way.

He stopped at a respectful distance, arms crossed over his chest. "You are Velandryn Savani, correct? The Dunmer claiming to be Dragonborn?"

Velandryn's red eyes were nearly glowing in the half-light. He inclined his head the merest fraction, and Serana spoke in his stead. "You sure you want to say that after what you just saw?"

The Imperial didn't back down, but his demeanor softened somewhat. "Served four years in Elinhir. Just 'cause you can pull off a fancy magic trick doesn't mean you've the Dragon Blood."

He shrugged. "Still, you did well. Lost some, but I'm not seeing a path to victory that didn't involve you." His arms fell to his sides, then one fist rose to tap against his chest. "My report will reflect that. You saved Red lives today, and that means something to the Legion."

Velandryn spoke then, voice rough and low. "See that it does, and go with honor."

Valdimar was talking to one of his subordinates, but Serana hadn't been paying attention to what was said. She heard "—has to know," and the other guard took off running across the snow.

Serana stepped between Velandryn and Valdimar. "What's going on?" Battle or no, she couldn't trust any of these people to have her or Velandryn's best interests at heart.

"Grisha wants to return to Morthal immediately." Valdimar rubbed his chin and grimaced. "After seeing that, feels like we need to step up our own defenses."

"Then go." She wasn't sure exactly what had happened to him during the battle, but Velandryn's voice was deeper than it had been, with a throaty resonance that stirred something deep within her. *It's not fear, so what am I feeling?*

She didn't much feel like sharing her thoughts, however, so she just nodded agreement. "We'll be
She wasn't sure how true that was, but she hadn't much wanted the guards coming along to begin with.

Velandryn nodded. "Go to your people." His voice was apparently returning somewhat, and that strange quality fading back into the deep tones of his normal speech.

The Nord began to turn, then paused. He looked at Velandryn for a long moment, then knelt before the Dragonborn. "Give the call, Dragonborn, and I will answer." He rose, eyes locked on the Dunmer. "I serve Morathal, but say the word and I will follow you into battle once more!"

Velandryn remained silent for a long moment, then extended a hand. Fire leapt into being around his fingers, and he twirled them so that a burning rune not unlike the Daedric letter Neht hung in the air. "Thus is covenant made. Find truth within, Valdimar of Morathal." The guard bowed again, and left to rejoin his men.

Serana chuckled. "One by one, they leave."

Velandryn hummed a tuneless note. "Many fall, but one remains." It had the cadence of a maxim. Or a prayer. She knew that she was giving him an odd look, but didn't care.

With Valdimar, the Altmer, and the Imperial gone, they were alone again, albeit at the center of a rough circle of onlookers. Serana stared at a few until they turned away, but it seemed that everyone wanted to sneak a gander at the Dragonborn. "We should go."

Velandryn nodded. "Agreed."

She wondered when his voice would come back fully. It wasn't like him to use one word when ten would work, and it was a bit unnerving.

"Dragonborn!" A ragged woman who seemed to have no particular allegiance was calling out to Velandryn. "You must go to the Reach! There was a dragon over Ald Druach, and another at Karthwasten!"

"Forsworn scum!" A Nord in blue-stained hides thrust out an arm and sent the woman tumbling to the ground. "Dragonborn! Jarl Ulfric would take you, if you knelt before him and swore yourself to our cause!" The Nord raised a hand into the air. "This victory was given by Talos, and—"

"Still your tongue, traitor!" The Imperial from before had drawn up what remained of his forces into a rough formation, though given their state Serana was certain she could have slaughtered them all with one hand tied to her belt. "The Dragonborn is for the Empire, and will bring you rebels to heel like the dogs you are!"

"The Empire is dying! Talos is nothing! Only through True Faith will we find salvation!" The woman now speaking was swathed in furs, with odd bits of bone hanging down. She had a harsh voice, but it carried well. "Look to Kyne! To Stuhn and Shor! Hail and glory to the old gods!"

"Enough." Velandryn did not shout, but all other talk was silenced the moment his word cut through the crowd. "This victory is ours." He looked half a ghost, swaying in the icy wind, voice echoing with quiet power. "Give thanks to your gods, but that," he pointed at the skeleton of the dragon, "was won through your strength and sacrifice. Not Imperial, not Stormcloak, not that of the Reach or Morathal or wherever you raise your banner." He paused, taking in a rasping breath. "Not of Alinor, not of Morrowind, not even of Skyrim." He was half a lord, holding four factions at bay through his voice alone. "We have earned this, all of us."

For a long, terrifying moment, Serana worried it hadn't worked. I can grab Velandryn, get us clear.
She'd have to show her power, but it was better than getting bogged down in this morass.

Then, a great shout came from the dragon's skeleton. "Victory! Victory and the Dragonborn!" It was Valdimar, holding aloft a dragon's tooth. "Claim your trophies, dragonslayers!"

Smart. Clearly Velandryn felt the same, judging by the light in his eyes. He reached out a hand, placing it lightly on her arm. Throat. Hurts. She chuckled, imagining the annoyance in his voice.

"Fun speech, was it?" He shrugged silently, and she resisted the temptation to tease him. Still, it had the intended effect, apparently. "Maybe this is a good time to leave."

The Dragonborn nodded. Find Horses. Any mount. Quickly

"Thievery? From the Dragonborn?" They were now standing shoulder to shoulder as they walked, while conversing in low voices, and she found the intimacy a bit comforting. He's still on my side.

However, as the heat of battle and the rush of victory faded, something else rose in her. An old hunger, never truly gone but now clamoring to be heeded. I used too much of myself in that last battle.

And she would need to feed soon, or risk losing control. I can't let that happen.

She needed to feed, and she needed to do it without driving away her one ally in the world.

She glanced at Velandryn, and the other thought that she had been suppressing rose is response. His blood smells wonderful. There was always a feeling around him that his blood was more than simply ordinary, but ever since the battle's end he had been singing to her. As that light faded and the dragon's flesh burned away, another light was renewed that couldn't be seen by mere eyes.

If I drank from him, how sweet would it be?

Chapter End Notes

Dovahzul does not translate precisely into mortal tongues. The equivalents given are based on meaning rather than transliteration. I am not a linguist.

"Sahlo tinyaak Joorre" – "[I see] the weak voice [Thu'um] of mortals."

"Hi dinok krif!" – "You will die in this fight"

"Vobalaan!" – "You are unworthy"

"Boziik Joorre! Fahlil Dovahkiin! Hin Thu'um komeyt! – "Bold mortals! Elven Dragonborn! Unleash your Thu'um!"

"Hin krograh." – "[I see] your victory"

"Alduin, Zu'u funt." – "I have failed" [The use of the pronoun Zu'u rather than Zu or Dovah to refer to the self in this context is a sign of respect for Alduin]
Blood and Other Inconveniences

Chapter Summary

The conversations that need to be had aren't always the ones you want.

The pace of events is accelerating. While I am appreciative of your desire to continue serving in your current capacity, that may no longer be a possibility. Consolidate your findings, safeguard yourself and your identity, and await further instructions.

News of this 'Dragonborn' is of paramount interest to Our Order. You should consider information about this phenomenon of equal importance to your existing mission. Continue on, but do not lose sight of the larger nature of things.

Upon taking command of Castle Dour and the Skyrim Legions, General Tullius had been granted a fine suite of rooms atop the castle's highest tower, Uriel's Crown. It had taken him all of thirty seconds to glance around, proclaim it "too fancy by half" and march downstairs to commandeer a set of offices near the primary conference hall.

Now, the offices were his quarters and the conference hall his war room, which left the palatial chambers where Emperor Uriel the Just had once slept to be repurposed into a meeting-hall where he hosted visitors from outside the Legion. Elisif privately thought that the general mostly just wanted to discourage people from coming by making them walk up all those stairs.

The jarl had toyed with the idea of inviting Jordis to accompany her, but ultimately decided to bring only Falk and Sybille. The would-be heroine was her dearest friend, the scion of one of the best families in Solitude, and had fought beside the Dragonborn, but she was also dangerously irreverent. The last thing Elisif wanted was to squander any of her respectability or goodwill because Jordis had decided that she should needle the Thalmor. I must be taken seriously. In the end, she'd taken Falk and Sybille. Her steward and court wizard might not command deep respect, but they were her advisors.

It didn't help that the other people at the table were some of the most powerful men and women in Skyrim. General Saul Tullius commanded the Imperial Legion, Legate Rikke was his right hand and confidante, and Ambassador Elenwen of the Aldmeri Dominion could circumvent both of them and order almost anyone in Skyrim arrested on no more than a rumor. All three were technically on the same side as her, but she could never relax in their presence. Elenwen especially. She was beautiful, composed, and unfailingly polite even when hurling insults, but the veneer of sophistication couldn't hide what she really was. A poison snake, sent to separate us. A reminder of the chafing conditions that had led to her husband's death, to this war.

If she could feel Elisif's hate, the Altmer gave no sign. She sat quietly as Tullius spoke on guard rotations and the new inspections that would be taking place at the docks, only interjecting to insist that Dominion goods would have equal priority to shipments from Imperial ports. Elisif said nothing, but made a note to increase the number of portside inspectors. Better our people do it than soldiers or Thalmor. Besides, that way she could quietly make sure that Haafingar ships were moved to the top of the queue. Neither General Tullius nor Elenwen actually cared enough to oversee this personally, so they would pass down their orders and expect it to be done. In truth,
catching a few more skooma smugglers or grabbing a Stormcloak message wasn't going to make a huge difference to the war.

But that was the place Elisif had found for herself. It was useless to countermand the Legion or the Thalmor, but neither really cared about what went on daily in her hold. So, Elisif was becoming their intermediary. Doubtless many other jarls would have chafed at so obviously deferring to others, but it was either this or nothing. And here I can help my people, if nothing else. It wasn't glorious, but it was something.

After they'd haggled over various other trivial matters, Elenwen looked around the table. "Is there anything else?" When nobody said anything, she rose and bowed to them all. "Until next week." She nodded to her attaché, a handsome little Wood Elf who had just finished gathering the ambassador's documents, and swept through the door with a dancer's grace. She's a vile one, but she knows how to move.

The moment she was gone, the general sighed. "Glad that's done." He nodded to Legate Rikke. "Proceed."

Wordlessly, Rikke gestured at one of the guards, who ducked out of the room. Tullius closed his eyes for a long moment, then fixed Elisif with a steely stare. "Two days ago, a dragon was felled south of Morthal. We have accounts putting Velandryn Savani in the battle."

Something odd stirred in Elisif's stomach, and she found herself frowning. "I've heard of no battle."

"It was up in the mountains, near Labyrinthian. Remote." That was Falk. So he knows. She would have words with her steward later about what else he might be keeping from her.

The door opened, and the guard led an Imperial man and Nord woman into the room. Both were clad in simple clothes with the Imperial diamond stitched over the breast. "Jarl Elisif, Knight-Captain Titus Mollonius and Auxilia Bera Snowrider."

Titus Mollonius bowed, hand over his heart. Dark-skinned and wiry, he had the look of a seasoned soldier. "General. My lady. I led a Legion contingent that arrived on the scene engaged the dragon shortly after first clash. I am prepared to offer whatever information I can."

Bera did not bow, but saluted with a hearty thump as fist met chest. Her eyes met Elisif's, and there was no hint of deference. "I was there from the start. I'll tell you everything."

"You both gave statements already; you're mostly just here to answer any additional questions." Legate Rikke's voice was soothing. She slid a sheaf of paper across to the jarl. "Take a look."

She did, and her heart fell as she saw a long list of names. Twenty-six dead. Perhaps saddest of all was the group at the bottom. Unidentified Redguard male, unidentified Orc female, unidentified Reachman male...eight who died and we don't even know their names.

The two soldiers began speaking then, answering questions from around the table. Both answered much as Elisif had expected. The Imperial spoke like he was writing a report, with a clipped efficiency that omitted opinion but answered every part of the query.

Bera Snowrider, in contrast, must have spent some time with the skalds. She spoke of snow rising as the beast crashed down, or huddling behind stone walls as bursts of ice passed overhead. She would have been at home holding a skald's gnarled staff, rapping it on walls and tables as she paced and sang.

Falk spoke little, his questions mostly about morale and the battle's aftermath. Sybille focused on
the magics, and pressed Bera especially for details about the use of Thu'um. The general and the legate focused on specific tactics, and how the dragon had reacted to each.

When Elisif spoke, she found her query going to the one thing that was dominating her mind. "The Dragonborn. It says here he matched the dragon?"

"Yes, my lady. For the better part of a minute, I would say. Magic against magic. Allowed us to regroup."

"That vampire of his as well. Fought like ten men, with the winds of Kyne behind her and the hammer of Stuhn in her hands! She broke the dragon's hide and spilt its blood upon the snow!" Bera's hands were alive as she spoke, punctuating her words with enthusiasm that bordered on violence.

Sybille's eyes met Elisif's for a very long moment, then her court wizard brought knuckles down on the table to signal silence. "Auxilia Snowrider, you claim this woman was a vampire. How did you arrive at this conclusion?"

"Pale as the driven snow and eyes like gold fire, master wizard, plus she moved like a bolt from the sky." Bera grinned. "I've heard all the stories they tell about bloodsuckers, and they don't do her justice."

"Your thoughts, Captain?" General Tullius sounded as if something were annoying him.

"I cannot comment on her condition, but she was a significant asset." Titus Mollonius still stood ramrod straight, eyes forward. "Given the terrain, her ability to quickly move between groups provided superior mobility to our lines of communication."

"Interesting." That was Legate Rikke. "Your report made little mention of the communication issue."

"By the N-Emperor, Legate, I meant no omission." Titus covered his slip well, and everyone else let the moment pass unremarked. "I cannot speculate on how the situation would have unfolded had we lacked her assistance."

"Nonetheless, it is worth noting. Traditional lines of contact will be disrupted, and we should begin considering alternatives." The legate marked something in one of her folders. "Which leads to another matter. Both of you. Thoughts on disposition of weaponry and armor? Were we to field dedicated anti-dragon forces, would heavy armor be an asset or a liability?"

"A little of both. In the light stuff that breath will end you in an instant, but no plate can save you from a tail across the neck." Bera thumped her chest. "You need more auxiliaries. Engage at range, keep moving constantly. The beast would turn his head this way and that, but he couldn't pin any more than one of us down when we were all apart!"

"Though when the dragon did target lone soldiers, they perished almost without exception." Captain Mollonius might have been discussing a meal he'd not particularly enjoyed. "When targeting groups, individual survival rates increased significantly. The dragon attacked my group from range three separate times, and we lost a total of only two soldiers."

"But you also had those big Orc shields. Put those in the air, and it wouldn't have been able to get as many of my scouts either."

Elisif swallowed a sigh. "So it sounds as if every possible tactic is going to get our people killed."
"That's war, my lady." Rikke sounded resigned but not particularly distraught. "No matter the situation, victory requires sacrifice."

General Tullius had been silent for a long time, but now he placed both hands on the table. The soft thump of flesh hitting wood cut through the quiet conversation, and all stilled. "Captain Mollonius. In your assessment, what information do we need to have? Assume it must be disseminated to every allied soldier in the province."

The captain thought for a long moment, eyes downcast. Finally, he looked up and met Tullius' gaze. "We must revise Legion doctrine. Adopt behaviors that emphasize indirect line-of-sight, and reduce the length of each individual contact to seconds if possible. Leverage mages and siege weaponry if they are available, but under no circumstances attempt to fortify a fixed position."

Tullius nodded. "Auxilia Stormrider, your thoughts?"

"I don't disagree with the captain, sir, but you're overlooking one thing." The Nord woman grinned. "The Dragonborn's worth a cohort and a half, and you'd be damn fools not to use him whenever you can. His vampire too, if she's part of the deal."

"His vampire?" Sybille sounded a bit annoyed now, and Elisif silently gave thanks for her court wizard's condition. She'll ask all the questions about her, and I won't have to. She couldn't quite pinpoint why the idea of a vampire accompanying Velandryn unnerved her so much. Sybille herself was proof that they could be allies, and obviously the aid had proven useful. So why do I feel like I swallowed frost salt?

The Nord shrugged. "She fought for him, left when he did, and pretty obviously didn't really care about any of us. Seems to me she's following him. Can't blame her, y'know."

"Explain." That was Tullius again, eyes narrowed. "For a moment there, it sounded as if you were advocating loyalty to an individual above the Legion."

Bera didn't even bother denying it. "He's Dragonborn, and you're talking about small unit tactics! I know you Imperials like to pretend that the Dragon Blood's all spent since the Medes haven't a drop of it, but I saw him take a dragon's soul." Her voice was rising again. "I saw flesh burn away as he took the dragon's soul! The dragon laughed at our mages, but when that Shout rolled forth, it turned and dove like a hawk at the hunt!"

Legate Rikke was rising now, one hand out. "Your opinion is appreciated, Auxilia Snowrider, and we will take it into consideration." A wry smile broke out over her face. "Believe me when I say that we'd rather have the Dragonborn at every battle too, but he's just one elf. We can't quite rely on that."

Both General Tullius and Captain Mollonius were looking more than a little displeased, and Elisif could almost feel schisms forming across the table. "Regardless of the Dragonborn, the two of you are to be commended. You've done an incredible thing, and I know that I speak for all of us when I say thank you." She saluted the soldiers.

Bera saluted back, grinning. "My thanks, Lady Elisif. Glad to have more Nords at the table." She paused for a moment, looking around, then grinned. "That Dragonborn, though." She shivered. "Got a face something fierce and spat fire besides, wouldn't mind warming up-

"That will be all, Auxilia." Legate Rikke's interjection spared them all from whatever ribald comment Bera had been preparing. She simply laughed and headed for the door.
After Captain Mollonius had exited as well, Tullius sighed. "What I wouldn't give to put those auxiliaries under an Orc drillmaster for a few months. These northern types need discipline."

Elisif felt herself bristle just a bit at that. "By the sound of it, your discipline didn't save them." She glared across the table at Tullius, so quick to dismiss anything that wasn't Imperial. "You might be the general in command, but you should listen to the Nords. We're the ones who live here, after all!"

The general gave a bark of laughter. "That's a good one!" He rose, waving at an aide to gather the folders before him. "You can do as you like while I'm busy winning this war for you." Without so much as dismissing them, the general left the room. Rikke sketched out the slightest bow, eyes not quite meeting Elisif's then left as well.

*And there we go.* She'd overstepped, let her emotions get the best of her. *I can't challenge him.* Whatever she did, it had to be in that little space where she had power. *Where I won't get slapped down or sent to bed without supper.*

It was simply so infuriating. She knew that she was no tactician, but Tullius was no diplomat either. Those few Imperial ambassadors who were in Skyrim seemed to spend most of their time elsewhere, apparently assuming that Solitude was safely in their pocket. *But even here, people aren't happy.* Oh, Ulfric was hated to be sure, but the Concordat still sat poorly with too many. *Including me, if I'm being honest.* And the only thing keeping much of the city reasonably complacent was the belief that Nords were the Empire. *Tiber Septim was one of us, we've been the strong arm of the Legions since before he took the throne.* But they weren't of the Imperial race, no matter how much General Tullius might wish it. They had their own traditions, beliefs, and a culture and history of which they were justly proud. *And the last thing they need is to have some Imperial from Crodiil telling them to shut up and behave!*

No, Nords and Imperials might share blood, but a year in Skyrim hadn't taught Tullius who his hosts really were. *And I'm sure I'm not helping, sitting down meekly every time he glares.* Like she did every time she thought of her position, she resolved to be stronger when next she was challenged.

That thought, like so many did these days, brought her back to Velandryn Savani. Of that strange conversation just a few days past, and his outlandish suggestions about how to gain power. *Though at this point, I don't see it doing any harm.*

It might only have been a week ago that she met him, but it felt as if she'd known him for months. *Like an old friend.* Sometimes she found herself wondering what he'd think about this or that. She'd once seriously considered penning him a letter, despite that potentially being a political nightmare if word got out.

*He's safe.* That much, at least, seemed true. *And he has another dragon soul.* Considering some of the things he'd said, however, she wasn't sure that was much of a blessing. *Velandryn, you'd best be strong enough to handle it!*

More worrying was this Serana. That she was accompanying him was one thing, but something about that woman's closeness to the Dragonborn churned her stomach each time she thought of it. *She's a vampire!* She had been trying to think of Serana like she did Sybile, as someone whose vampirism was incidental, a well-handled irritant rather than an affliction that ruled her life. In light of the power the other woman had displayed, though, she wasn't sure that was true.

*Could Sybille do all of that?* Elisif didn't think so. If her court wizard had been capable of such, surely she would have intervened when Ulfric murdered her husband. *So what does that make*
Serana?

Shaking her head, she climbed the steps to her home. She's on his side, there's nothing to fear.

She wished she felt more convinced.

Serana had been quiet, and that was worrying Velandryn a little. Of course, he'd been quiet too, but he liked to think that he at least had a good reason. How many more of these fights can I take? That's twice now I've only barely survived. Not to mention that somehow he'd breathed fire.

Yol. It made sense to him, but it had come out of nowhere, and he couldn't help but wonder where it had been hiding. Yol. He rolled it around his mind, tasting the shape of it. Fire.

His throat still hurt, of course, but that was all. After he had slain Mirmulnir, the dragon's voice had rumbled in him, warning of Alduin and the Dragonborn's doom. This time, he couldn't even be sure of what his foe's name had been.

Perhaps this second dragon was weaker, or Velandryn had grown stronger. He had Dov in his head now; maybe that had blunted the edge. Whatever the reason, he was free of that turmoil.

Of course, there was another problem, one that he hadn't expected. Since they had departed the battlefield, Serana had felt off. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something about her made his flesh crawl. It didn't help that every time he tried to engage her in conversation, she gave a monosyllabic answer and pulled ahead.

Finally, as they passed into the trees beyond the ruins, he had had enough. "Whatever it is that's bothering you, either let it go or let it out."

Serana said nothing, only stopped riding. Finally, she turned and looked at him.

The prickling on his skin changed, became more intense. Something in her eyes was terribly wrong, and he half-fancied that her skin was more drawn than usual. She looked at him for a long moment, then shook her head. "I'm sorry. It's nothing, just…"

She looked away, up the road. "I shrouded us leaving the battle. Didn't want us followed, but it'll wear off soon. How about we find a place for the night, then talk about it?"

Velandryn considered that for a moment—a powerful spell, to cloud us in that many minds—then nodded. "Thank you for taking my frail mortal form into consideration."

A laugh. At least that was the same. "Right now, I think it's a toss-up on who needs it more."

Velandryn took the lead up the road. As he passed her, something occurred to him. "Is it blood? I know if vampires go too long without—"

"Look, can it wait until we camp?" Her voice was sharp. "I've sort of been avoiding the issue since I left home, a few more minutes won't kill anyone." I hope that's true.

In fact, it was the better part of an hour before they found shelter in the remains of what looked to be some sort of cabin. It was a meager place to pass a night, but the mountains weren't exactly overflowing with wayhouses. Velandryn waved a hand, and a pile of sodden logs reluctantly burst into flame.

Serana was staring at the flames, wordless. Velandryn, for his part, pulled out a few strips of dried
meat. Glancing over at Serana, he held one out. "Care to eat?"

She gave a start, as though shocked that he was there. "No!" She looked him full in the face, eyes wide. "You're right, it's blood. I've gone without, and I used vampiric magic today. It doesn't just draw magicka like mortal spells do—"

"It pulls from the blood itself?" That was fascinating, if a bit unnerving. "So it hastens the necessity of feeding?"

Serana laughed without joy, hunching her body forward. "Something like that. I won't change physically like some lesser vampire, but the sun is going to hurt tomorrow. My powers will get more powerful as time goes, but…" she looked at him across the fire. "I can't promise complete control."

He'd been afraid of this. "Serana, how much do I have to fear from you right now?"

She didn't smile, didn't even try to pretend at levity or reassurance. "I can keep it in check. The last thing I want is to hurt you, but," she drew in a harsh breath, "maybe it would be good if I went hunting tonight. There's people a few miles away. Might be bandits, or—"

"And if they aren't?" He didn't raise his voice, recognizing how fragile this thing between them had become. "If you find them and they're innocent? I saw you with those outlaws, and that wasn't somebody who had control."

"I don't know, okay?" She was bent nearly double now. "I have to drink. I need it! I'm around you all day, smelling it, and—" she froze, and her eyes were wide as she looked up at him.

Something like ice crept down his spine. "Smelling what?" His voice was quiet. Do I really want to make her say it?

She didn't answer, wouldn't even meet his eyes. "Serana, what did you mean?"

She looked away. "This was a mistake. I shouldn't have traveled with you." She rose, but Velandryn was having none of it.

"If you think I'm going to let you go, in the state you're in, you are very much mistaken." He was still fatigued from his battle earlier, but flexed his fingers nonetheless, readying flame and his conjured sword. "I don't want to fight, but I won't unleash you on the world like this."

"Unleash me?" Her voice was almost a whisper. "Am I an animal? A weapon to keep on a chain? I don't belong to you, and you don't get to dictate where I go!"

"No, but you agreed to travel with me, to work with me. Right now, I'm less worried about Molag Bal's hold on you, and more about Sheogorath. Whoever I'm talking to, this isn't the woman who found me on the Solitude docks."

She froze for so long that Velandryn found himself preparing for an attack. Then, all the tension simply drained out of her, and she collapsed onto the half-rotten bed against the far wall. "Fine. I know you mean well. Just, please don't try to control what I can or cannot do. That's—just don't. Please."

"Agreed. And if you could refrain from threatening to go murder people in the night, I'd appreciate it." He let the air between them rest for a moment. "What exactly did you mean about being around me? Did it have something to do with my blood as Dragonborn?"

She laughed. "By the Lord, yes. I didn't know what I was smelling at first, but once I learned that you were Dragonborn, it all made sense." Sitting up, she pushed hair away from her eyes, absently
braid it into that complex plait that usually held it in place. "Your blood is…imagine all you've ever known is grey, and then one day you see red. When I fought the dragon, spilt his on the snow, it was different. Too much. Yours is better." She spoke haltingly, not focused on him.

He studied her for a time, hoping she'd say something else. Unfortunately, it seemed like she was waiting for him to respond. "So, about my blood…"

She jerked her head around, staring at him. "What did I say? When?"

"Just now." He studied her, wondering if she was jesting with him. "You don't remember?"

Her head fell into her hands. "Blood and shadow, I thought I was better than this. I'm farther gone than I thought."

"Than what?"

"Sometimes, when the hunger gets…bad, my mind goes…away. I was fine this morning, just the normal cravings, but that battle…I used too much. Right now, just then, all I could think was how badly I wanted…blood."

He noticed the pause. "My blood, right? That's what you were focused on."

Serana just looked at him, then shrugged, looking back down. "Guess the game's up. Yeah, it's yours. That dragon blood, or whatever you have, it's something else. More potent than any mortal I've ever run into, and right now it's really hard to focus on talking with you just sitting there."

By the time she was done talking, Velandryn had made up his mind. "Well, I guess this is it."

He didn't realize that Serana had moved until she was standing. Ancestors, but she's fast.

"This is what?" There was a wildness to her eyes that made her look half feral. "You going to try and kill me?"

He blinked, unease and confusion swirling through his mind. "Why in Oblivion would I do that?"

"I just told you I want to drink your blood, and you're...you. This is what I was afraid of." She took a step back, eyes wide, and Velandryn noticed that a mist was rising around her. "I don't want to do —"

"Oh sit down!" He'd had a very long day, and while he knew what she had to be going through, he wasn't in the mood to sweeten anything. "I don't want you dead, Serana." He pulled a bag towards him. I think it's in here.

"What are you—oh." Serana trailed off as he pulled the mug from where he'd stashed it. "Are you...having a drink?" Her voice was as careful as he'd ever heard it, as though she were addressing a madmer.

Carefully, he placed the mug on the ground before him. "No, but you are." Before he had a chance to reconsider, he drew his dagger, removed a glove, and sliced into his hand. He squeezed, forcing blood into the cup. A rush of magicka, and more gushed out. Another, and the wound healed, leaving him slightly light-headed and holding perhaps the strangest beverage he'd ever encountered. And I once tried Greenvigor Sap.

Serana, for her part, was simply staring at him, mouth slightly ajar. "Are you—"

"Drink!" He thrust the mug out, and a bit of blood spilled onto his fingers. "Before I change my
mind."

It was out of his hands before he'd finished the last word. Serana cradled the cup with both hands, and gulped the liquid down. He watched a bead of red trace its way down toward her chin, before her tongue snaked out and wiped it up. The sheer intensity of her body as she drank was a bit shocking. He had never seen her like this before, and the almost animalistic cast of her movements was more than a little unnerving.

Even after she'd finished and the mug had fallen to the ground, she remained entranced, eyes closed and mouth just slightly open. She raised a hand to touch her lips gently, a single finger tracing their shape. Then it fell back to her lap, and she only sat there, silent and unseeing.

Velandryn, waiting, began to wonder. *Did I make the right decision?* He hadn't been lying when he'd told her he'd known this moment would have to come. He'd made an irrevocable choice: to aid a vampire in the drinking of mortal blood. That the blood was his own only added another layer of uncertainty. *My blood was freely given, at least insofar as I can tell.* He doubted that the mortals kept as blood stock by vampires were afforded the luxury of such a choice.

*Or is my trap simply harder to see?* He knew that Dov lashed out when something attempted to smother his consciousness, but perhaps Serana was using a subtler method. *It might not even be magical.* She was a beautiful and clever woman, and skilled as she likely was in speechcraft and social manipulation, it was entirely possible that she'd designed a scenario where he would make the first move.

*Or she's exactly as lost and desperate as she appears, and I've just taken the first step towards winning an ally for life.* He almost felt bad about framing what he'd done in those terms, but altruism was a luxury he didn't think the Dragonborn could be afforded.

So, he waited for Serana to return from her reverie, and kept his fire close to hand. *Just in case.* He pulled more magicka into his body, replenishing the blood lost and clearing his mind. He had made the choice to do this, and if anything were to come from a vampire drinking the blood of a Dragonborn, he would have to see it through.

She had drunk the blood of kings. The Volkihar were reclusive, but her father had sought out the finest stock, and so once a petty jarl of some southern hold had been ambushed and dragged before them. She remembered thinking that he tasted no better than any other healthy Nord.

She had tasted human, elf, and more. Once, she had even fed on a lesser giant long removed from Atmora, though that had been one of her mother's experiments and the two of them had agreed it was a revolting experience.

In almost every case, the feeding came with turmoil. Guilt at what she was doing, and relief that she'd done it. It was an odd feeling, one crushing weight being replaced with another, but she'd grown used to it.

What passed her lips now was something utterly new. She'd long since accepted that she'd never feel another sunrise, but this warmth put her in mind of how it had once felt to have the first light of day upon her face. It was the warm embrace of her mother after she'd skinned her knee. It was that moment of strength as she stepped out of the sun, feeling her composure return as the shadows surrounded her. She was empowered and embraced, and never wanted it to end.

The blood nearly bubbled as it slid down her throat, and her tongue pressed forward of its own accord, seeking more in the bottom of the mug. She tilted it further, and felt some escape down one
side of her mouth. *No!* She quickly reclaimed the precious meal, and continued her bliss.

Finally, reluctantly, she felt the last of the sweet liquid trickle down her throat. Its warmth suffused her, returning clarity to her senses and causing unnoticed tension to drain out of her limbs. Her face was sore for a moment, as muscles that had pulled her neck taut relaxed. She sighed and let the mug fall away.

One of her hands touched the ground, and she felt the cool earth between her fingers. Entranced, she inched her fingers into the dirt, savoring the sensation. *Does it always feel this good?* She couldn't recall if it had been like this the previous times she'd fed.

She opened her eyes a fraction, eager to see if the world looked as new as it felt. The first thing she saw, however, was Velandryn Savani, and everything crashed back into place.

His face was, as ever, set somewhere between stoic and stern. His eyes, though, were dancing, staring at her with almost frightening intensity.

*What do I say now?* Offering thanks seemed insufficient, and she'd never really considered the etiquette of how one treated a blood slave. *Though he's far from that.*

For his part, the Dragonborn seemed content to let her stew in indecision. He leaned back slightly and pulled a strip of some dark meat from his pack. Eyes still on her, he took a bite and chewed contemplatively.

Finally, she realized that he wasn't going to make this easy. *I guess it's up to me.* "Enjoying your meal?"

He opened his mouth, and she could already visualize the retorts. *Less than you enjoyed yours* was the kindest of them. Instead, he just nodded, and waved to the fire. "Very much, now come sit down."

She did, the glory of his blood fading in the reality of her situation. *What's he thinking?* She found her seat and took it, eyes never leaving his. "Thank you." *Well, here we go.* He nodded, but made no other reply.

Velandryn Savani had become a contradiction. He hated vampires, believed them not only dangerous but unholy. Molag Bal was some sort of primary evil in his belief system, and as far as she could tell, it was practically required to kill beings like her. *And he let me drink his blood.*

"Why?" Her plan, to let him talk and reveal his mind, was gone. She just wanted answers.

"Because you needed it." He took a long pull from a waterskin. "And I can always conjure more."

At those first four words, she felt something strange in her throat. *Is that true?* If so, if Velandryn Savani had given a vampire his blood because he saw her suffering, she had no way to repay him. She knew what he believed, what he'd said about lineage and more. For him to give his blood to a vampire was...words failed her.

"About the blood though, actually you can't." She hadn't intended to launch into this, but he'd mentioned it. *And if I talk about this, I don't have to think about what just happened.* Right now she wanted the Velandryn whose mind was dissecting a problem, not the one who had once cried out that the dead must burn. "My mother tested it. Blood obtained through magical regeneration doesn't have the same effect on us."

He tilted his head, and she knew she had him. "So it does nothing?"
"Not exactly. It's...refreshing, you could say, but not sustaining." There wasn't really anything to compare it to. "We never figured out why, but she thought it might be due to something in the soul."

Velandryn nodded. "AE and animus." Serana had only ever learned a little of the ancient Ehlnofex tongue, but she knew that word. Velandryn continued, still clearly thinking hard. "You didn't connect it to soul theory?"

She favored him with one of her better glares. "Your race didn't even exist the last time I studied the topic, so maybe you're a little forgiving if I haven't heard of something."

It wasn't a human smile, but she knew he was grinning behind those eyes. "In that case, I'll deign to explain." He steepled his fingers, gazing into the fire. "Current theories posit the duality of the soul into AE and animus. You know some Ehlnofex, right?" At her nod, he continued. "Like the name says, AE contains the identity, and animus the force. The way it was first explained to me is that AE is what makes us, well, us, and animus is the energy binding that identity to our mortal—or immortal, in some cases—form." He waved a hand grandly in her direction, and she had to chuckle.

She considered what he'd said. "So blood replenished by magicka doesn't have enough animus, so it doesn't fulfill our need?"

Velandryn shook his head. "I'd argue that it's actually the AE. Galvayn Luwani posited that AE and animus are inextricable in a living being, and studies back him up on that. When you drink, it's that AE that does...whatever it is that blood does for a vampire." Had he not been a Dark Elf, he would likely have grimaced. "You can't feed on animals, right?"

She shook her head. "Not really. You can get some energy, but not a full meal."

"Animals have exceptionally weak AE. That's the reason it's so easy to soul trap them. Mortals are harder. The AE doesn't want to let go. I'd bet it's the AE you're really after."

That made sense. "And you think it takes time for the AE to latch onto the new blood?"

"Anything new. Our bodies are a thousand tiny pieces and our AE decides that it's 'me.' Add blood that's still carrying the magicka used to create it? No question." He looked over at her, eyes slightly narrowed. "Out of...curiosity. How long before your...test subjects...could feed you again?"

"A day or two, usually. Depended on how much blood we took." She recalled drawing the knife across their legs, watching the liquid pool into the basin on the floor, and swallowed. Were we evil?

"Takes blood less than an hour after leaving the body to lose its potency as well, in case you were curious." Velandryn sighed. "Makes sense, I suppose. Humar Thrice-Wise called it the pressure of Creation. A thing in the absence of all other forces will seek to approximate the state of being closest to complete neutrality within its surroundings. For blood, I guess that means it loses whatever quality makes it belong. AE losing a grip faster than it gains one, though, that has to be worth something. I know Thesos Miln and Magistrix Siddra back in the Third had theories on permanence of self in the absence of physical anchors, but I never actually bothered reading their essays."

For a moment, Serana felt a stab of ire that Velandryn had the benefit of so much knowledge that she lacked. She wasn't really angry at him, though. It's just how things are. She'd been away, and now she was back. "So, your blood. You've the AE of a Dragonborn, and—"
"I don't know if you'd actually taste AE, though. Animus varies significantly across species lines, so I'd wonder—"

"Animus is irrelevant." No mortal got to lecture a vampire on what it meant to know a soul. "The amount might vary, but the core energy is the same."

"Five minutes ago you didn't even know that animus existed, Serana." His tone was insufferably smug.

She glared at him. "Don't use my name like you're doing me a favor, Vel." The tightness in his jaw as his teeth clenched brought her no small joy. "I might not have known the terms, but I spent decades watching my mother try to figure out why vampirism works the way it does. It all comes back to the soul, and you didn't even bother reading the essays." Now it was her turn to be smug.

A laugh. "I didn't read Thesos and Siddra because neither one could write worth a damn but they were both too proud to hire a scribe. I—"

"I know that what you call the AE is in the blood I drink. It's not about strength; there's something unique to each person-"

"But that's impossible." His eyes were bright, but it wasn't the fire of anger. He's enjoying this. "AE is absolutely indivisible. Every piece of scholarship indicates that."

She sighed, maybe making it just a little more dramatic than was necessary. "And I'm telling you that, given the rules you've laid out, something of the AE has to exist in the animus. It may be indivisible, but it isn't isolated."

"So, you've decided you know better than four thousand years of scholarship? Perhaps my blood swelled your head." Then, she saw the set of his face, the subtle tells around his eyes that let her know he'd been teasing.

She smiled at him. "I was trying to say thank you. Giving me blood can't have been easy for you."

"It wasn't." His eyes were sober now, and his long face harsh in the firelight. "There are those back home who'd cast me out for shedding blood on your behalf. The Temple has its schisms, but there isn't much leeway on the subject of, well…"

"People like me." She sighed. "How much should I read into that?" How much of a monster am I to you?

"A precept of Saint Llothis has been roaming in my head for a while now. 'Virtue is all the greater for coming from within.' You did the right thing despite having every chance to turn away. You left your own family to help me on this mad quest, and never even asked for an apology. That's worth a bit of my blood."

She felt an uncharacteristic warmth in her chest. "Well, I might come asking again, just so you know. Turns out Dragon Blood is something special."

"Really?" She'd been terrified he'd recoil, somehow show his disgust. Instead, he almost seemed pleased. "Should I be afraid to ask how?"

"To someone who's never had to drink blood? I wouldn't even know how to explain."

"Mmm." He left it there, however, and pulled a bottle from one of the packs. "Something for me." He cracked the wax stopper with a tap of his finger, and she could smell alcohol. Plus something
"Berries?"

He glanced up. "Greef. Another little luxury from Master Movarth of Morthal. This vintage predates the Red Year and I'm probably a damned fool for opening it, but considering the events of the day, I'd say I've earned the right."

She smiled back at him. "I've never tried it, you know, and this seems to be a day for new things."

A chuckle. "What's mine is yours."

Velandryn slept, the fire blazing beside him. Serana had assured him that she was more than capable of masking their presence from the road, and he'd wasted no time in getting as warm as possible. He'd mentioned using magicka to warm himself, but that had to be tiring. *If I still got cold, doubtless I'd feel the same.*

Now, she was pacing the bounds of the ward she'd erected. She'd made it large enough to hide the cabin. From outside, it would look as though there were nothing but snowy earth and darkness. It wouldn't work as well in direct light, but by night someone would have to cross the threshold to ever learn that they were there.

*Eight paces at the widest, in a perfect sphere.* She wasn't entirely certain why, but circles and spheres lent themselves well to magic. *Maybe Velandryn knows why.*

And there it was. She'd gone almost a whole minute without thinking about the Dunmer again. *Why did he really do it?* Nobody would give their blood just like that, especially the Dragonborn.

The only thing she could think of was that now he had her on a chain of sorts. *I should have been more careful when I drank his blood.* He would have to have been an idiot to have missed its effect on her, and it would be a grave mistake to call Velandryn Savani an idiot.

*And now he's asleep.* Just like that, he'd curled up under his cloak and was out. She'd expected more restlessness, given that he'd consumed a dragon soul today, but he'd seemed his usual self. *Or he's just good at hiding it.* It was a sobering reminder of how much she didn't know about her companion.

By the fire, something crunched on stone. She spun, but it was only Velandryn shifting in his sleep. *A dreamless sleep.* He'd mentioned to her that he hadn't had a single dream he could recall since learning he was Dragonborn. *And don't I envy him that.*

She sat down across the fire, but after a moment the flames began to hurt her eyes. She stood and sat next to Velandryn instead. There, she could look at her companion without pain.

*Well, without physical pain.* She'd thought she had Velandryn figured out, and then he went and did something like this. To give his blood to a vampire, without her using even the barest thread of magic on him, was something he'd never considered possible.

*So why do I feel so uneasy?* She should have been ecstatic. The one mortal she had decided to trust, and now he was pouring out his own blood for her. He hadn't been *happy* about it, of course, but she'd rather have an annoyed Velandryn sharing her camp than literally anybody else in Skyrim.

Even now, she could feel his blood within her. It was warmth moving through her body, flowing and spreading like a living thing. It reminded her of having a heartbeat, and every moment sent the
tiniest trickle of warmth racing through her.

She turned to look at Velandryn, and suddenly the sight of him set her mind spinning. She bolted away from their campsite, dodging trees and leaping over uneven ground as she sped up the hillside. Every branch that whipped towards her face was dodged with careless ease and every rock that rose from the fallen snow avoided almost without thought. This is what I am.

The Dragonborn's blood was pounding in her ears, as if that meager cup had been ten flagons filled to their brims. She leapt upwards, one hand grasping a branch as it passed overhead. The motion spun her around and sent her careening away, but with inhuman grace she turned the tumble into a graceful downwards spin. She landed in the snow with a muffled thump, and she was off again.

Why am I like this? She was almost luxuriating in this power, as she never had before. Is it him? Perhaps this was what it meant to have the blood of a dragon.

She broke from the trees, and the dark rise that was the mountain's top loomed before and above. She crouched, breathing in and feeling her muscles bunch. Then, she leapt, thirty or forty feet up and ahead, landing with less than perfect grace and jamming fingers into cracks in the rock to stop herself falling back down. Then she was scrambling for purchase up the final few yards that kept her from the summit, until she stood, breathing heavily and with blood pounding in her ears, atop the crest at last.

She was facing north, and the world fell away at her feet. She could see their campsite below, Velandryn's fire muted behind the dull shimmer of her ward. To any eyes but her there would be nothing, but even from this distance of a mile or more, she could see that the Dunmer was curled tightly in his travelling cloak, head resting on the pack that contained what clothes he had. Their horses slept as well, one kicking at some dreamed irritant, and Serana found herself smiling at how normal that little detail was. No foe or beast approached her Dragonborn, and she let her gaze wander farther afield.

She felt as though she could see everything though the clear night air, and peered east and west for miles afield. The mountains and foothills were cold and wild, but far from empty. Imperial camps dotted the mountainside, neat lines of tents surrounded by earthen embankments. So too did the Stormcloak war parties, though she noted that while some of the blue-banded camps matched their Imperial counterparts for organization, others were strewn about with haphazard abandon. Adding in the hunters, travelers, and bandits whose fires burned new stars against the mountains' shadows, there had to be hundreds of souls sharing these mountains with her and Velandryn tonight.

Looking out and beyond the high ridges and frozen forests, to where slopes and valleys became hills and meadows, she quickly picked out tiny details that no mortal would have been able to discern. There were still lights bobbing in Bromjunaar; after that battle she had the feeling the hubbub there would last for days. A squat stone fort dominating the low road to the west was alive with activity, and even as she watched a gate opened and light stabbed out from the dim grey walls.

And further still, the place where stone met water, and the vastness of what they had jokingly called the Hjaal-Marsh began. Morthal, thirty miles distant or more, was a cluster of reddish pinpricks of firelight, and the villages that squatted on the edge of the swamp itself were little more than smears of brightness in the fog rolling up out of the water.

And beyond...beyond was the marsh itself. Serana found herself seized with an unnerving desire not to peer too deeply into that mist-shrouded blackness. She was able to find the outcropping of rock where Movarth had dug his lair not far from Morthal itself, and she realized with a tiny thrill of terror just how large the fog-shrouded swamplands truly were. It would likely have taken her a full
night or more to cross them, even travelling with as much speed as her body could sustain, and far, far longer for any party of mortals. *Not to mention, I doubt you can go in a straight line.* Since becoming a vampire she had encountered very few things that actually frightened her, but that black morass below was one.

It was with some relief that she tore her gaze away. She spent a moment considering the distant lights of Solitude, so faint and far that they could almost have been an illusion. Her time in that city had been a hazy dream of color and song, and she swore to herself that she would return someday.

Her gaze traveled west, and *there*…

She couldn't see it, but she knew that if she were to stretch out a hand and point, her finger would make a line directly to the heart of Castle Volkihar. It was usually a feeling so subtle that it was buried beneath the tide of sensation that was her life, but right now the weight of the black altar was strong. She could have been standing anywhere in the world, and she would be able to perfectly know the direction of the place that her first life had ended and her second began.

She couldn't have said how long she stood there, looking at that spot, too distant even for her eyes to find. *This is who I am.* She might have turned against her father, be carrying his greatest treasure on her back at this very moment, but she was still of the Volkihar, forever bound to the ice and the power of Molag Bal. No matter how far she ran, or what she did, she was—

*I'm free, damn it!* She had stymied her father's plans, chosen her path, and made it so. She'd chosen to accompany Velandryn Savani on his quest because he was worth following. *I chose that!* Her power might come from the Lord of Rape, her soul irrevocably defiled by his touch, but she alone chose where her next steps would lead.

As if the thought had conjured it, a wind rose from the south. It pulled at her cloak and set her hair to flutter. She turned to let it play over her face, but was struck still by what she beheld. *By the Mace…*

Here the mountains rose and fell as they marched south, lines of cresting peaks and slopes that harbored broad forests and secluded valleys. Each was its own world, but together they were merely a backdrop for what lay beyond.

She had never seen the plains of Whiterun, but had always privately believed the stories to be exaggerated. She had seen the ocean before, after all; how could any expanse of land, however vast, compare to that?

Now, though, she understood. Stones rose from the earth like icebergs, and villages and farms carved out small islands, but the plains of Whiterun seemed to go on forever. Grass and snowy earth formed patterns and added texture, but it truly was an ocean of tundra. The sky above was clear, and Masser hung fat and red over the scene while Secunda, high above, shone white.

It took her a moment to find her bearings, and another to pick out the few landmarks she could recognize. Far to the south and east was a shadowed bulk wreathed in light; that could only be the hill of Whiterun. A few rivers, known from her maps, traced their way along the ground, and she could even make out a dark line to the southwest that had to be an outcropping of the Druadach Mountains. *The Reach, then.* Finally, there was the town of Rorikstead, the second largest settlement on the Whiterun Plains after the hold capital itself. It hadn't existed in her day, but she'd been devouring every map she could get her hands on, and the size of that particular settlement meant it could be nothing else.

She knew that there were mountains to the south, but even from her lofty perch she could make out
no sign of them. A few hillocks and lone peaks, but nothing that could be considered a true range. *I honestly didn't believe that land could be this flat, or this vast.* Mountains had always been a fact of life, and a landlocked horizon without them was a little bit off-putting.

*Except...* There were some, near Whiterun but clearly beyond it. They rose alone, dark shapes nudging up against the stars. One in particular caught her eye, a monumental bulk of shadow, higher even than the rest. Something about it was odd, though. It lay past Whiterun, and the city's peak didn't even reach the horizon. Not to mention, she could swear that something at its crown put her in mind of swirling winds.

*I feel that mountain is as far away as I think it is, it must be...*

Unless her eyes were lying or there was some trick of the land, that summit would have to be miles high. *And that means...*

She didn't know if she believed as the Nords did, that Kyne had breathed life into the world, but every story of the Nords began on the Throat of the World. *The greatest mountain on Tamriel.* The seat of the first goddess, where the very wind echoed with Thu'um.

And their destination. Up there, apparently, were a bunch of old greybeards who could teach Velandryn how to use his power. She had to admit, however, that if there was any place in Skyrim where the Voice could be understood, it would have to be Snow-Throat.

*And here I stand.* She recognized the almost poetic nature of the thing. Poised on the mountain, past and future laid out before her as if on a map. *And all I have to do is—*

Something was wrong. She spun, searching, but whatever it was that was tickling the back of her neck was—

*My ward!* Something had, impossibly, penetrated her protection. She could feel it, magic probing at defenses, but whoever was doing it shouldn't even have been able to tell it was there.

*Unless...*

Unless they were a vampire, and trained in the mystic arts of the Volkihar.

With a grunt, she threw herself off the mountaintop, hurtling down towards their camp.

*I can't let anything happen to him!*

In his days and nights trekking across the Haafingar coast and mountains, Velandryn had developed a rhythm for sleeping out in the cold. He would make a fire, wrap himself in all of the clothing he could, and then curl as close to the flames as was safe. He slept lightly this way, the cold never far away, and enough of his mind remained awake that he could pull on his magicka. He threaded this through the flame, pulling warmth into his own body and stoking the fire in turn. It was a sort of second breathing, a push and pull that turned the fuel for his fire into warmth within his flesh.

He was privately convinced that this technique had saved his life out there, for some of those nights had been so cold that his breath had caught in his throat each time he inhaled. Plus, it had allowed him to develop some new skills. One was that his control over his own magicka had grown by leaps and bounds, allowing finesse of which he'd never thought himself capable. Another, he learned as he awoke for no reason that he could discern, was an odd sensitivity to anything that disturbed the flame from which he was pulling his warmth.
He opened his eyes slowly, his body resisting the command to awaken fully. Someone was making their way towards him from the darkness, moving gingerly as if afraid of the flame.

Velandryn sighed. "Serana, what are—"

The light caught his companion, and Velandryn Savani's body went tight with shock. Instead of the sweeping black cloak that Serana always wore, he saw a ragged thing that might once have been a fur coat. In place of elegant curves framed by finely-made armor and golden eyes that danced in half-light, he saw a thin body draped in strips of tattered hide, and a face that was mere skin stretched over bone. The eyes were yellow, to be sure, but they shone with cruelty, and a wide smirk revealed rows of sharpened teeth and a pair of wicked fangs.

*It's the wrong fetching vampire!*

Velandryn pushed on the fire, and it erupted outwards, a burst of orange that hinted at blue as his magicka heated it beyond what wood could provide. He was already connected from his time sleeping beside the flames, and it was the work of a moment to guide a burst of heat towards the intruder. "Who are you?"

The vampire snarled and danced away from the flame. "Doesn't matter. You're the one—" he ducked under a gout of blue fire and patted himself quickly to check for damage, producing a pair of long knives from sheaths strapped to his red-and-black-armored legs. "Doesn't matter!" Blades out, the intruder lunged forward.

*Ancestors!* Velandryn had been asleep not ten seconds earlier, and conjuring a sword was still beyond his bleary abilities. He threw out a wave of fire, but the vampire dodged to one side, and darted in. Another few steps, and he'd be close enough to strike.

*Go fuck your mother, abomination!* Anger burned away weariness, and his sword sprang into being just in time to clumsily parry the attacker's strike. His weapon was more unstable than usual, spitting off flame and with jagged edges that flickered into and out of existence. As he drew it into a guard, however, he was pleased to see the vampire retreat warily.

*At least he's not as fast as Serana.* A flick of his wrist sent fire hurtling towards the vampire, and another sent a gust to take out his legs. The undead hissed and darted away as the flames licked at him, but appeared relatively unharmed. *I'd wager that armor's enchanted.* It was the first thing he'd do if he was a vampire, after all.

Even attuned to the flame as he was, Velandryn could feel the task of controlling multiple bursts begin to take its toll. Once he moved the fire away from the wood that fueled it, he was essentially practicing telekinesis, and that was perhaps the most draining thing one could do with magicka. Reluctantly, he let the campfire reform its natural shape and once more moved to put it between him and the vampire. "What is it you want from me?"

The vampire stared at him, head cocked slightly. He said nothing, seemingly studying Velandryn. Then, he shrugged. "The Dread Father wants you dead." And with that, he was leaping back into the darkness beyond the cabin's ruined walls.

*Four be damned!* Velandryn summoned his night-eye, trading sight in darkness for the ability to look at the flames without wincing. He'd been working on it and knew that equalization was possible, but couldn't quite work out how to make it all fit together. *This isn't the time, Savani!* Something moved above and behind, out of the corner of his eye, and he spun, but far too slow.

The vampire's knives were out and before him, even as the undead hurled himself into the air.
Velandryn had sent fire into the air all around him, but the assassin was already turning and landing in a corner, dodging to one side and ducking around the thin flames that were all Velandryn's panic and haste could manage now—

**Now!** Velandryn didn't even have a half-second's warning before the other was charging—too close now to dodge. He was on him, he was—

A *crack* sounded through the night, and a dark shape collided with his attacker. A grunt and a thud, and the assassin was thrown into a wall. The whole thing happened so close that Velandryn was knocked bodily to the ground, and for a long moment just laid there, trying to understand. *I'm... saved?*

It was Serana. His night-eye had been lost as he'd been knocked about, and so she emerged like a wraith from the night. Her luminous skin had never looked more beautiful, and the fury in her eyes—though it was fading fast as she approached him—was more than a little heartwarming.

"I'm so sorry." She was offering her hand, pulling him from the ground with effortless strength. "I didn't think they'd send assassins so soon." The vampire groaned, and Serana's blade was at its pale throat in an instant. *You. Don't. Move.*"

Velandryn studied the both of them, his assailant's words coming back to him. *Dark Father... "You think this is one of Harkon's?"

"Who else?" Velandryn was no expert on faces, but haunted eyes were easy to pick out. "This is because of me."

The vampire, however, didn't seem to think much of that. He gave a harsh laugh, then spat on the ground. "That's for your Harkon! I serve only the Mistress and the Void!"

Velandryn cursed, and Serana looked over at him. "What?"

"I know who he works for." He waved at the assassin. "Why does the Dark Brotherhood want me dead?"

The vampire gave a bark of laughter. "Because someone paid for it! The Black Sacrament was completed!"

"I almost feel honored." Velandryn conjured his sword. "I doubt there's a path out of this where the writ is annulled?" The vampire only stared at him, and Velandryn shrugged. "I want answers, though, so maybe we start there. How did you find me?"

In response, the vampire tried to escape by ducking under Serana's blade. Her other hand, however, was more than capable of driving the wind out of his lungs. He collapsed on the ground, wheezing.

Serana leaned in close. "I take it I should have heard of this group?"

"Most people have. A guild of assassins. I can give you the history later." He squatted before the vampire. "Should I ask again?"

The assassin coughed. "Blood. Had you made leaving Solitude, but lost you in Morthal. Battle with the dragon, though, had to be you. Dragon blood everywhere. Nords keep calling you Dragonborn, even Astr—even everyone saying it. Then, smelled your blood on the air tonight. Followed that."

"Hmm." Velandryn glanced over at Serana, who was conducting an intensive study of her gloves and the filigree on her sword. "Potent stuff, my blood."
The vampire snarled laughter. "I always starve myself before a kill. I can smell you from ten miles when the wind blows right."

Velandryn nodded absently. "Good to know." With a glance over at Serana, he said no more.

A long moment passed, as everyone seemed to be waiting for something to happen. Velandryn, for his part, could have happily punched someone out of sheer indignation.

*The Dark Brotherhood!* It was bad enough to be targeted for death, but one would hope that their assassin would at least have the good sense no to be one of those. *If I was back in Morrowind, they would have just used the Morag Tong or sent the Bal Molagmer like civilized folk.*

Well, he might as well get this over with. *Vampire and Dark Brotherhood? He's dead ten times over.* "Anything you want to tell me, or do I just have to stake your body out here as a message for the rest of you?"

The vampire grinned. "Won't be my body they see." Then, as if he were made of smoke, the assassin *rippled*, and vanished.

Serana nearly left the ground, she started so hard. "He's gone!"

Velandryn was pouring magicka into his senses. *Any sound, any shimmer.* "Yes, I noticed."

Serana was turning this way and that. "No, he shouldn't have been able to do that. I should have—"

"You've been gone for a while. Maybe the rest of your kind picked up some new tricks." Velandryn exhaled, carefully letting his magicka spread around him. *Five paces.* If the vampire got that close, he'd detect it. *Ten."

Serana raised a hand, and a shudder passed through the air, quite ruining Velandryn's attempts at detection. "I command you! Volkihar! By the blood we share! You cannot disobey!" *And now she's shouting.* Velandryn almost let his magicka go out of frustration, but managed to hold on. *Ancestors, what I wouldn't give for a warm bed in a snug room!*

Serana's shout faded. A moment more passed, and Velandryn still heard nothing. "Apparently he can disobey." He was in a strange place, somewhere between terror and fury. It was almost calming, being this close to completely losing his senses. *I really just wanted a good night's sleep.*

"All Volkihar come from my family. If he doesn't serve my father, his blood can be bound if I so choose. I may not have sired him, but I am a pure-blood." Serana's voice was rising, something not unlike panic slipping through. "Do you think he ran?"

"Doubt it. I've never heard of the Dark Brotherhood giving up, and this bastard hardly seemed beaten." A breath, and his magicka spread further, to the limit of his ability. *Where in Oblivion is he?*

Serana's head pivoted at something Velandryn couldn't discern, and she darted off without a word. Inside of an instant, she was nothing more than a shape among the trees.

Velandryn swore quietly to himself. *Vampires.*

Serana could *feel* the other one ahead, like an itch behind her eyes. His blood was too close to long escape her notice, though the nature of vampire hierarchies meant she might well be able to hide from him. *Not like this, though.* She could feel the unbearable rage bating in her chest, and this
assassin had to feel it as well. *Even if he somehow ignored my command.* No matter what Velandryn said, unless he was sworn to a pureblood Volkihar…

*Mother?* The thought came upon her like a sickness, and she shook it away. *No!* There was no way that the Lady Valerica would harbor assassins and this Dark Brotherhood. *She always hated butchery.* Serana would catch this one and have his secrets. *And then another threat to Velandryn is gone.* But the thought remained, a tiny suspicion that refused to die somewhere in the back of her mind. She focused on the chase, and shut out troublesome distractions. *Kill this one. Get answers*

She caught the vampire's presence ahead, and sent a spray of icy shards through the air. When she heard the tearing of cloth and the sickly smell of a vampire's wound, she drew her blade and closed for the kill.

His flesh was already closing, the shimmering shadows of a vampire's healing swirling around him. When he was near enough to her he tried to do something, but she drove the point of her sword through his belly. He gave a reflexive gasp, and she pulled the blade free and stabbed it deep into his side. *Have to cut him to pieces, it's the only way to stop him.* As he doubled over, she lifted him bodily from the ground, slamming him into a tree then throwing him back down the earth.

"How did you disobey me? Who is your master?" She *had* to know. Her mother *couldn't* be trying to kill Velandryn; it simply wasn't possible.

Even with his guts exposed to the night air, the vampire was laughing. "You're old. Your ward, your magics, old, old old." A hacking cough. "Old blood's weak, they say the first Volkihar are dead or hiding. And I serve the Brotherhood. Sithis shields my soul."

"Sithis?" That made no sense. "The changing void?"

"The Dread Father, you *relic!*" His face was a rictus of hate. "Kill me, and my soul goes to him forever!" He spasmed, and somehow another blade appeared in his hand. It stabbed towards her neck, but Serana was faster. Her sword severed his hand at the wrist, and he sagged back onto the snow, laughing madly. "What are you, old-blood? So fast, so strong, so *stupid!*" Another laugh. "You think the elf is your friend? Or something else? I smelled the lust. Thought it was his." He laughed until the sound became a wheezing cough. "There are masters and thralls, and if you aren't one you're the other."

She stared down at him, disgust at his mocking lies threatening to overwhelm her anger. "I'm glad I never made another vampire. I can know I wasn't responsible for you."

"Strong words, elf-slave." He tried to stand, but the stump of his hand was slowly oozing old and coagulated blood. When he tried to brace himself on that arm, it slipped out and sent him sprawling to the ground again.

*Pathetic. "Why taunt me? Hoping I'll kill you faster?"*

"Pain is…nothing. My soul will…join the Dread Father…in the void." Despite his brave words, he was gasping. "You will … be a slave forever. First the elf…then to…Bal."

"So will you." She hated thinking about that, the fact that, no matter what happened, she would one day end up in Coldharbour.

Another cough, and this time something dark flecked the skin around his mouth. "Sithis…the Dread Father…join… in the Void." He tried to rise one final time, but her master's curse was no longer enough to hold his will and body together. She could almost see it as the life ebbed out of
him, and the presence of the nameless assassin faded away. His body too seemed to drain, and less than ten seconds after his death his corpse could have been mistaken for something left outside for a week.

Which left her alone with far more thoughts than she was ready to handle just then. She turned back towards the campsite, but heard something rushing through the underbrush. Another assassin? She picked her blade up off the ground, readying it to skewer whoever—

Oh. Velandryn ducked around a tree with both hands aflame, slowing when he saw her. I must be off my game, not to know it was him. His presence aside, she'd actually seen the light. Feeling a bit foolish, she sheathed her own weapon.

She could tell the moment he saw the assassin's corpse, as his posture changed from one of battle to something that spoke deeply of discomfort. He opened his mouth, seemed to think better of it, and then nodded in her direction. "Quite the day, no?" He sounded unbearably tired. He took another few steps, only to stumble over an exposed root and fall to his knees. His hands lost their flame, leaving him looking like nothing more than a tired and freezing elf in a Skyrim winter.

She was at his side in an instant, helping him to his feet as he cursed quietly to himself. She put a hand on his back and turned them towards the camp. "Come on. Let's get back."

She gritted her teeth and made to stoke the fire once she'd sat him down, but he waved a hand and the flames rose higher. "Thank you, Serana." His voice was a bit stronger now, but still quavered worryingly. "I'm not sure what…" he trailed off into silence, and she turned to see his head slumped down, eyes closed.

"Velandryn!" She reached out more by instinct than anything else, and grabbed him before he collapsed fully onto the ground. She was no healer, but a quick inspection with her magicka showed that his vitals were strong. Except that he fell asleep mid-sentence.

A soft shake did nothing to wake him, and he merely groaned when she used more force. Offering a silent apology, she let ice accumulate around one hand, then raised it to the neckline of his heavy clothes. With a thought, the ice was free, and running along his skin.

Velandryn Savani jolted awake, eyes wide. "M'bak velto fil'cheth—S'rana?" His red eyes bored holes into her own.

She didn't bother with an apology or justification. "Something's draining your strength, and I can't fix it without your help. I need you to tell me what you're feeling."

He nodded absently. "Nesseth nrae—mmm, sorry, just so tired. Like I haven't slept in days."

"You're not poisoned." She passed a hand over his brow. "Your blood is clean."

Velandryn chuckled. "Good…bad to have that get dirty…" he started laughing again, quietly and mostly to himself.

Serana was growing more and more concerned. "Do you feel weak? Sluggish?" the elf made no answer, and she found herself shaking him again. "Tell me what's happening to you!"

He was wide awake again. "Not poison! Spell!" He breathed deeply, and his eyes were already closing. "Willpower, and…stamina?" He shook his head. "Can't think. Can't…focus."

Serana cursed to herself as she went rummaging through Velandryn's packs, looking for anything that might be of help. She found a number of potion bottles, but all of them were labeled in what
had to be Dunmeris. *Damn it all.* Unless she knew what to look for, she didn't have time to stumble through translations.

Beside her, Velandryn Savani gasped, delirious and more than half-asleep. Desperately, Serana searched the saddlebags for something, *anything* that could help.

Finally, she grabbed Velandryn and hauled him to the bottles. "Which of these? Which one dispels magicka?" She could, if she had time, try and divine the purpose of each potion on her own, but curses that drained or damaged the body could be deadly. They were rare, but vampires had always liked them, and a vampire assassin was exactly the sort to use one in exactly this manner. *Right at the start.* It would act slowly, making sure the target eventually fell. They wouldn't even notice something was wrong until it was too late.

The Dragonborn stared at the bottles for a long moment. "Need to dispel. Rare." He sighed, eyes closing. "Don't have it." He turned away. "Let me sleep. I'll figure it out in the morning."

*If you're not dead by then.* Right now, every idea going through her head was a bad one. It was possible that if she drained his blood she could take some of the magic into herself. *Or, it could kill him.*

She could try casting an incantation of dispel herself. *Except I'm sorely out of practice healing things as fragile as mortals, so that could kill him.* Not to mention, she'd never been much of a healer really.

She could just wait, keep an eye on him and hope that the curse wore off on its own. *And hope he doesn't freeze to death before morning.* However, the fact that the spell was gone but the effect remained suggested that the effect was not intended to be temporary. *Which means…*

It came to her like a bolt from the blue. *Of course!* She's still need to do some translation, but Dunmeris and Old Aldmeris weren't *that* dissimilar. *Hopefully.*

*And here we have…*

When she was done, she had a potion of stamina, one of health, and one of magicka. *At least, that's what Velandryn thinks they are.* They might not restore him entirely, but with luck they would give him enough of a jolt that he could use his own healing abilities to fix whatever was going on inside of him.

*Well, here goes…*

Velandryn groaned. He had a splitting headache, every muscle he had was on fire, and he'd vomited out the meager contents of his stomach. He glared up at Serana, watching from some distance away. "Thanks."

"So, your head's clear now?" She'd been insistent that he pour magicka into his body to restore his mind, shouting at him until he'd done so. Now, he was torn between gratitude and a good-natured desire to set her on fire for making him endure this cure.

"An immortal lifespan, and you never bothered to learn healing." He found one of the water skins, and took a drink. "Made me heal myself. What kind of cut-rate companion am I putting up with?"

Serana snorted. "I'm pretty sure you're still holding onto some of my share of Mmovarth's bounty. When you start paying, I'll start healing."
Velandryn felt just barely self-possessed enough to try and raise an eyebrow. "You really want to start pinching drakes?" He gave her a grin. "I can always stop bleeding, if we're playing that way."

Something not unlike panic blinked through her eyes, but was swiftly replaced by a knowing light. "Now hold on—"

Velandryn couldn't help but laugh. "Seriously, thank you. That was one of the nastier things to happen to me recently. I couldn't even think straight enough to put together a spell."

The vampire nodded. "It seemed like a nasty curse." Then, grimacing, she held out one more potion. "You'll also want this."

Velandryn recognized that bottle, and his blood went cold. "Oh."

"Some spells can also infect. I'm not sure you have it, but by the time we know—"

He'd already grabbed the bottle out of her hand and drained it, ignoring the protest as the pungent mixture hit his stomach. "The last time I might have become a vampire, you were a lot more conflicted."

He got a golden glare in response. "We already had that battle. I respect you enough to accept your choice."

He tilted his head, studying her. "And also, I'll bet it'd wound your pride if some Dark Brotherhood f'ghan succeeded where you failed."

He only got a shrug in response. "Think that if you want." She settled in next to him. "You're in no condition to travel just yet, and I don't think you're going back to sleep."

Ignoring his snort of derision, she pressed on. "The Dark Brotherhood, are they all vampires? Is that why you hate them so much?"

"Not quite." He wondered briefly where to start, then decided that he didn't much care. "They're assassins."

"I thought Dunmer liked assassins." Nords liked to gossip when they saw a Dark Elf around, and Serana had exceptional hearing.

Velandryn blinked. "I recognize that assassination serves a vital purpose. Targeted violence can avert larger conflict, and Righteous Murder is sacred to the Three." He sighed, trying to give voice to his complicated relationship with sanctioned killing. "Back home, it's a tool, and one that should only be used with purpose."

"So let me guess. The Dark Brotherhood doesn't play by those rules." Serana's voice was drier than the Foyada Molamma.

"They're a death cult, nothing more. I've heard stories that they started off as Morag Tong, but honestly I don't know too much about them. Just that we drove them out of Morrowind a century ago. Honestly, this is the first I've thought about them in...years, I think." He wasn't lying, or even hiding anything. He honestly hadn't given the Dark Brotherhood any thought in a very long time. As well worry about...the Blades, or the Mythic Dawn.

Serana was silent for a moment. "So, someone wants you dead. Any theories?"

Velandryn shrugged. "I had a few thoughts. The Stormcloaks can't be happy with a Dunmer getting the honor of being Dragonborn, maybe one decided to do something about it. I feel like the Empire
would just send their own assassins if they thought I was threatening their legitimacy, but maybe it’s somebody acting without orders. I’ve met three jarls and they all treated me fairly, but one of the others might see some advantage in killing me."

"So that's a no on any actual leads then."

"You asked for theories, and my mind's not quite back to where it was." He drained a full waterskin, which did a bit to stop the headache's slow return.

Serana looked thoughtful. Somehow, she was easier to read than humans. *I think it's the eyes*. They weren't as revealing as his own, but they helped.

He grabbed a pack, and went to grab the reins of his somewhat leery horse. "Come on." He didn't much feel like joking right now "The sooner we reach the Greybeards, the better." *If I'm a target because I'm Dragonborn, I'd be wise to at least seek out masters of the Thu'um."

"You're sure you want to cross mountains at night? In Skyrim?"

"There's not an Orc's hope in the sand that I'll get any more sleep tonight, so we might as well start moving." He shrugged. "Besides, I'm already a shivering mess. A campfire won't fix that."

As they doused the campfire and Velandryn pulled on his night-eye again, he found himself wondering just where Serana had been. When he asked, however, she only gave a noncommittal grunt, and tugged on the horse she was leading hard enough to make it whinny in protest.

*Fine then, have your secrets*. He doubted she was hunting, and she'd arrived in time to help him. *Maybe she was just watching the moons*. Chuckling at the absurdity of that thought, Velandryn followed the vampire up the mountain, into the night.

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*Regarding your previous communication, I have compiled some eighty pages of fact and speculation concerning the Dragonborn Velandryn Savani, and the return of the dragons more generally. Much of what I did find leads me to believe that there is further information regarding the nature of a Dragonborn in the Imperial City, but others are better positioned than I to investigate. Winterhold as well doubtless contains much that exists nowhere else, though I am known to them and would thus face increased scrutiny.*

*Furthermore, it would appear that the situation with the Volkihar has changed. My familiars tell me that the castle is in an uproar, with patrols leaving nearly daily. There is also speculation that one of the lost members of the Volkihar family has been found. Whether this is the mother or the daughter is unknown at the moment, as is their current location. While I find it highly unlikely that Harkon will make any significant moves, this atmosphere of unrest could work to his advantage.*

*By the grace of our Order, I remain.*
The Ways to Ivarstead

Chapter Summary

It's not the destination so much as the journey, but some people really want to get there.

"Well, it took you long enough."

*Velandryn briefly considered a smile, then decided against it. "I'm here, aren't I? Is that not what you wanted?"*

*Jarl Balgruuf sighed. "I'd be a damn sight happier if you were returning from High Hrothgar, but I suppose this will have to do." He looked over at Serana. "Do I even want to know what happened since the last time I saw you?"

Not thirty seconds after passing through the Riften gate, Lydia heard a shout. "You there, wait!"

*And I was so close. Lydia was less than a hundred yards from the last house along the road leading to Ivarstead. So damn close. She turned, sighing, but to her surprise it was neither a guard nor a criminal who faced her. Instead, a Dunmer in the robes of a priest was waving at her from an alleyway. "By the grace of Mara, please! I must speak with you!"

Lydia had no quarrel with Mara or her order, but she'd never been much of one for the Mother. Still, she shrugged and gestured for the other woman to approach. *Never a bad idea, getting on a priest's good side. "What's the problem?"

"You're headed to Ivarstead, aren't you?"

Lydia froze, thought for a long moment, and then deliberately put a hand on the pommel of her sword. "Now, what would make you think that?" She remembered Morrowind, and how another pretending to serve the gods had tried to kidnap her. *Who better for a spy to disguise themselves as than a holy woman?*

The priest, however, only smiled. "You must forgive me, child, but I know of your passing. A lone woman, leading a laden horse, going to Ivarstead with a Dwarven shield upon her back. I could not see her face, but it cannot be coincidence, my meeting you here."

Lydia nodded reluctantly. *She might actually be telling the truth, simply because a lie would be more believable. "A shield, huh? Let me guess, I'm the only woman you've seen leaving town today?"

"My visions don't lie. Mother Mara tells me you'll be going to Ivarstead?"

Reluctantly, Lydia nodded. "What does she want?"

Relief flashed across the priest's face. *Well, at least I know she's not from Morrowind. "There's a woman in Ivarstead, barely more than a girl. You'll help her, bring her the Mother's gift."*
Lydia had to laugh at that. "Holiness, love's an area I've had little luck in. Still, I suppose I can do my best. Does she like flowers?"

The priest bowed slightly. "She is torn between two men, each offering her a different life. You will know her by her amulet, bearing our Lady's crest." She handed Lydia an amulet of Mara.

Lydia looked down at it, a strange sensation wriggling in her gut. "Look... I'm happy to bring this along but I think you might have something wrong. I'm not the right person for this at all." She'd never worn one of these amulets herself, of course. Typically you only did that when you had a prospective partner in mind. This all feels wrong.

The Dunmer gave her a quizzical look. "Why would you think that, child? Do you believe yourself unworthy of love?"

Lydia snorted at that. "More like I don't have time. There's a lot going on, and I can bring a message if you want, but I think you'd better go to another if this woman needs advice."

"Mother Mara does not lie. You are going to Ivarstead, and when you are there, you will do her work." The priest smiled, and laid a hand on Lydia's arm. Through steel and fur, Lydia couldn't feel anything. "The Book of Love opens for you, child. Do this, and surely you too will be blessed."

A wave of warmth rushed through Lydia, and she stiffened at the telltale signature of Restoration magic. I just can't get away from the stuff! "What did you do?"

"You will walk straight and true. You will turn, but not stray. Ivarstead lies before you, now go!" The woman's voice had turned commanding, carrying more power than before. Lydia felt herself straightening. "Your legs will not tire until you wish to sleep, and you will not sleep but before the hearth. This is the blessing of Mara, given to those who set out upon the road. Go, child of Mara, and bring her light to the world!"

When she came to, Lydia was walking down the road. She spun, but Riften was already far away, receding into the morning haze. What manner of witchcraft was that? The Hearth-Blessings were powerful, to be sure, but Mara's sphere was not the traveler.

And this is why I'm not a priest. Mara was one of the good ones, held in high esteem by Nord and Imperial alike. She liked gods like that. No matter which side of things you came down on, Mara was alright. If the Hearth-Mother wants me to go to Ivarstead, I guess I can go for her as well.

Maybe her thane was rubbing off on her, or maybe she was just eager to be done with this tortuous side-track.

Humming, she continued west.

Serana might have gaped like a fool upon first seeing the scale of Whiterun Hold, but its grandeur had dimmed somewhat by the third day of trekking across the wide tundra. "By the Mace! How much further?" Whiterun had been small and far from that mountaintop, to be sure, but this was absurd even for the largest plain in Skyrim.

Irritatingly, Velandryn didn't seem phased at all. "A few days, maybe." The plains did have enough hamlets and way-houses that they hadn't had to sleep outdoors since the night of the assassin's attack. Unfortunately, that meant it had been impossible for her to try and get more of the Dragonborn's blood. A single cup wasn't enough to last her for nearly this long, and she was seriously considering pulling him off to the side of the road and just asking him to slice his hand open again.
Every time, though, something stopped her. He offered last time. If she asked, it would be something else. A price for her services, or coercion. No. She'd accept when he offered, and not before. And as to what it means, to crave his blood this badly... She'd think about that later. When I'm not so thirsty.

The sun was hidden by a cloud for the moment, and so Serana's senses, while not at their height, were far sharper than most mortals could boast. Her vision grew washed out and indistinct where the sun shone unimpeded, but her ears were as keen as ever. She felt a shift in the wind, and turned her head to feel it creep under her hood and tousle her hair. Then, on that breeze came the sound of hooves on cobbled road. "Velandryn, someone's coming."

The Dunmer glanced around, and Serana felt a tiny surge of magicka around him. He squinted at the place where the road vanished into the glare of the sun, and nodded. "Nice thing about these plains, you can always see."

I can't. She didn't feel like sharing that information with her companion just yet, though. The ground was mostly flat, so Velandryn could definitely see far further than her. And with magicka, he can make out details as well as I could at night. It might be more work for him than it was for her, but she didn't love the idea of simple spells being able to replicate the advantages her vampirism bestowed.

Even while recognizing that Velandryn had done nothing wrong, Serana felt the familiar tickle of irritation somewhere deep in her throat. He was a noble ally to be sure, but somehow his transgressions, no matter how minor, struck at her in a way nobody else's could.

He doesn't even know what he's doing! He'd cheerfully admitted to modifying night-eye in an attempt to improve its functionality, and even solicited her help when one unfortunate attempt had blinded him for a few hours. Once his sight returned, however, he was right back at it, carefully and methodically trying to destroy what made her special.

That's not fair. The problem was, there was no reason he should stop. Asking him to cripple his ability to fight at night because of her own ego would have been insane, as would her telling him not to try and see things far away. Especially since I can't right now. Still, she didn't have to like it.

The other travelers were drawing closer, and Velandryn's posture shifted. It was subtle, but in an instant he'd gone from simply a wandering Dunmer to someone who was ready to fight.

Serana placed a hand on the hilt of her sword, but didn't pull the cloak away to let it be seen. The odds were low that these travelers would be a threat—everyone they had encountered in Whiterun Hold thus far had mostly seemed eager to be about their business—but ever since learning about this Dark Brotherhood, the thought of danger was never far from her mind.

Velandryn, however, was perhaps being a bit too paranoid. She leaned in towards him. "You know, I doubt they'd ride up in broad daylight."

The Dragonborn gave her a sidelong look. "Which is exactly what they're counting on." Still, he relaxed slightly. Not too much, though. Jokes aside, she too looked sideways at everyone they passed.

This, however, seemed an unlikely group to hide an assassin. Resolving out of the sun-glare was a band of some ten or so riders, each on a heavy horse. Their armor was made of metal scales and tanned hides, and all carried some form of long weapon. She saw spears, halberds, and even a huge spiked ball at the end of a pole that had to be nine feet long. That last was being carried by an Orc, so bulky that, though he seemed to be only a bit taller than his Nord companions, he made his
horse look half a pony.

The lead rider, however, was far smaller in size. Likely the leader from the golden trim on his cloak, he looked even smaller than Velandryn himself. Judging by his stature, as well as his thick dark hair, he was likely an Imperial. His most notable feature, however, was the massive network of scars that marred half his face. When he saw them, he raised a mailed fist and blew a short blow on a bronze-chased horn. "Dragon Guard, hold!" This one might look like an Imperial, but his accent was all Skyrim.

Velandryn froze, and, as the column came to a halt, began to laugh. Serana stared at him, but the leader had already dismounted, and was coming towards them at what was almost a run. "Dragonborn! You've returned!"

"Kenrik of…White Bend, was it?" Velandryn's voice was warm, and he placed a hand on the man's shoulder. "It has been too long."

"Green Bend, but no longer." Kenrik's hand clamped onto Velandryn's shoulder as well, and he leaned in close. "They're calling me Dragon-Spear now." His voice was too quiet for any mortal besides the Dragonborn to make out.

I wonder if it bothers Velandryn, me knowing everything anybody says to him. There had been a bard at one of the inns they'd passed who had been making disgusting advances on her companion, up until Serana had suggested that she go play in the corner farthest away from them for the remainder of the evening. Better than letting some vapid farm wench drape herself all over him. The last thing she needed was her companion getting entangled with some simple Nord on the road. Though I'm sure he'd want nothing to do with her.

Velandryn laughed again. "By the ancestors, you earned that!" His voice pulled Serana back to the here and now, returning her focus to this newcomer.

Kenrik Dragon-Spear's face looked fit to split from grinning, though his smile was twisted by scars. He waved at the riders behind him. "We're the new Dragon Guard. The jarl ordered our commission just after you left. I'm second in command, and patrol leader for the western hold."

"A lot of ground to cover." The Dragon Guard might be better-equipped than the group they'd had at Bromjunar, but Serana was still fairly certain they'd collapse under dragonfire. I'd take Velandryn over the lot of them any day! The Dragonborn seemed genuinely interested in the Dragon Guard, however. Or he's better at faking it.

"Oh, it's not just us! We've eight other patrols right now! Nearly a hundred men west of Whiterun alone!"

Velandryn made a noncommittal sound. "So long as you aren't trying to kill them. You'll need more than this for that."

Kenrik tapped his scars. "You don't have to tell me! Our mission is to follow and track, and lead them away if they approach a village. We found that some dragons just roam freely, while others make a sort of roost, a place where they return."

Now that was something worth knowing. And clearly, Velandryn agreed. "You've compiled this information? I'd be interested in seeing what you've discovered."

Kenrik nodded. "Every patrol submits a report back at Whiterun. I think Farengar's keeping them." He glanced back at the patrol. "Is that where you're heading?"
"Aye." Serana did her best to keep her tone conversational. The gap in the clouds was overhead now, and the sunlight was giving her a bit of a headache even with the hood. "You're coming from there?" She just wanted to get going, to get out of the light. *I don't think I've ever been this far south before.* She didn't much like it.

Kenrik gave her an odd look. "Yes, we're two days out." He looked over at their pair of heavily-laden horses. "I can give you some extra beasts to ride if you need to make better speed." He waved, and a wide Nord woman rode forward with a line of horses following.

The other Dragon Guard bowed deeply in her saddle, eyes bright as she studied the Dragonborn. She detached two, and Velandryn took the reins in hand. "Thank you, Kenrik Dragon-Spear." He raised his voice. "May the Dragon Guard be worthy of you!"

Kenrik was grinning as he blew two short blasts on his horn and the column clattered back into motion. Serana and Velandryn stood to one side, watching them pass.

As they faded into the sunlight's glare, Serana glanced over at Velandryn. "You have some interesting friends."

"Kenrik saved my life. He carved up a dragon's flank and got half his face torn to shreds. I think that's earned him some familiarity." Velandryn chuckled. "And by the look of it, the boy's done well for himself."

That got them into a discussion of the first dragon Velandryn had fought, which burned a bit more of that irritating sunlight. Eventually, however, when Velandryn stopped to stretch, Serana forced herself to confront the inevitable. "Velandryn, I need to… I need more blood."

She was facing his back, and a sudden fear seized her. *What if he says no?* There was no reason for him to refuse, but—

"Don't we all. Can you make it another few minutes? I'd like to get a bit off the road if we're going to eat."

"We?" The jibe came unbidden, but she barely even registered speaking. *It wasn't just the one time.* Somewhere in her mind had been the fear that she'd only ever taste of his blood once, and he would turn and reject her the next time she asked. *And instead he lets you shackle yourself to him.*

And yet, now she found herself drinking again, fighting a desperate battle not to gulp it down as fast as she possibly could. *Show some restraint!*

Restraint may have eluded her, but this time at least she stayed aware of her surroundings. Unfortunately, that meant that she could almost feel Velandryn's eyes on her. When she put the cup down, she met his red gaze with her own. "Can I help you?" *Which of you is the slave?* The assassin's golden eyes shone somewhere in the darkness of memory.

He simply shrugged. "Ready to get going?"

She nodded, and dipped the cup in one of the shallow creeks that seemed to be everywhere on the plains. "Thank you."

"It costs me little." Shockingly, she could hear no mockery in his voice. "Sometimes I forget how much we've been through. A bit of blood isn't so much to ask."

*Yes it is, and that's a new song you're singing since the last time.* But if Velandryn wanted to pretend that it didn't bother him, she was willing to play along. "Two days to Whiterun?"
A grunt of assent from the Dragonborn. "Riding." He studied the horse he'd been given. "I can handle a guar, I even mounted an alit once. But horse belongs on the table, not the road." Still, he pulled himself up with a reasonable amount of grace. And if Serana heard him mutter something and wave a hand to calm the creature before he did so, well, that was what magic was for. She swung onto the horse with only a single hand on the beast, a mount no mortal could have achieved.

Velandryn snorted. "Show off." He clicked his tongue and jabbed his heels, and the horse was off.

Serana spurred hers towards the road as well. *Two days to Whiterun?* She could think of worse fates. *And worse people to share them with.*

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Lydia kept one eye on the tower as she approached. It loomed to her left, atop a low hill overlooking the road. It was more ruin than fortification, and Lydia had seen the like dotted across Whiterun Hold. Most, however, didn't have light flashing through gaps in the stones or the occasional *crack* of what sounded like magic wielded as a weapon. *Something* was happening up there, and she didn't like the look of it one bit. *Just let me pass on by, and we don't need to bother each other.*

The moment she arrived at the ragged dirt path that marked the approach to the tower, there was a mighty crashing sound, and a gust of icy wind set the horse to complaining. She wrapped the reins tighter around her hand, and, with a sigh that she wouldn't have stifled even if she could, turned to face whatever was coming.

*You could always just keep walking.* Another cry, and a robed figure was running out the door and down the slope. A second person emerged, and in no time at all the two were throwing ice and fire back and forth. Lydia took a step towards the battle before her mind caught up to her body. *What would you do here?* She wasn't in Whiterun and had no mandate to keep the peace. Besides, she had no idea which of the two was in the right. *Or they might both be foul.* Numerous covens of rogue spellcasters dwelt in out-of-the-way places like this one, and those who lived outside the law often settled disputes with violence. So, she stood and watched, and kept one hand on her sword.

One of the mages must have made a mistake, and the duel was over with a strangled cry. The winner seemed to notice Lydia then, and raised her hands towards the housecarl.

Lydia was already bringing up her own shield and letting go of the pack horse. The mage was about twenty paces away, over rough but open ground, slightly to her left. *Breaking line of sight isn't possible, so move erratically and close fast.* Spellcasters were by and large a lot less dangerous once you'd hit them in the face with a shield.

"Wait, no!" The mage was shouting something at Lydia. "Please, you have to help me!" Her hood had fallen away to reveal a young woman, apparently on the edge of panic. "We have to stop her, please!"

"Stop who?" Lydia stayed where she was, and didn't lower her weapons. She was no stranger to helping those in need, but this was the first time someone had asked her after killing a mage in single combat. "What's going on here?"

"It's my mother. She found a ritual, and she's going to… change! I tried to stop her, but the whole coven is against me!"

*I knew it.* Magic brought trouble. "Change into what?"

"She said it would give her wisdom, and power, but what she's done… she's killed people!" The
woman was babbling, looking slightly past Lydia. *Some sort of terrified fervor.* "They wanted me to...to... they needed an innocent, but I couldn't!" The woman was on the edge of tears. "I couldn't do it, but she's my mother! I should have stopped her!"

**Damn it.** Lydia sized up the woman. "What's your name?"

"Illia, I'm Illia."

"Okay, Illia. I need you to take deep breaths." Lydia sheathed her sword and slung her shield onto her back. "Tell me what happened, in as much detail as you can." Some things were universal, and getting a story out of a panicked witness was much the same no matter where you were. "Deep breaths, and maybe I can help."

The woman did just that, closing her eyes as her chest rose and fell. "My mother found a book of some sort. Reach magic, old. She says it's the secret to... to true power. But it needs blood. Innocent blood, she said."

Lydia nodded slowly. *And Velandryn wonders why I don't trust magic.* "And that's when you left."

"I tried to talk to her, tell her this wasn't right. But the others..." she waved at the body, and shivered. "There was fighting, and my mother...she...I've never...never killed anyone before." She blinked a few times and swallowed. "I have to go back in there and stop her, but..."

"You need me to help you." They *always* needed that.

The look on Illia's face was answer enough. *Kyne, but she's scared.*

Lydia knew what she had to do. *I've known since she started talking.* She sighed. *I've been doing that a lot lately.*

There was a fence she could lash the horse's reins to; she slipped the feed bag over its head to keep it calm. She glanced up and down the road, but saw nobody. Still, she dreaded the idea of someone taking anything from the beast.

Illia was pacing, clearly agitated. Apparently she'd decided to mask her fear with action. "Come on, we have to go!" When she realized that Lydia was worried about the horse being stolen, she waved a hand. Icy white symbols covered the ground. "There! Anyone gets close, they're frozen. Now, let's go!"

Lydia glanced back at the horse. A dozen good reasons to stay were already rising in her mind, but she knew how this was going to end.

"All right, lead the way."

The outer markets of Whiterun were more crowded than Velandryn remembered, though by the look of things more than a few of these people were not here to buy or sell. Tents stood in open spaces, and families bustled around fires preparing evening meals. Around and among them, the normal trade and business of Whiterun continued unabated. He kept one eye opened for any more Dark Brotherhood lurking around, but suspected that even those lunatics wouldn't be foolish enough to try and murder him in this crowd.

He guided his horse around an Orc being yelled at by a pair of Bosmer, and caught Serana's eye. "What do you think?" He had to raise his voice a bit, since one of the small elves had uttered a blistering stream of insults about the Orc's parentage.
Serana rode closer, leaning in to be heard. "It's incredible. I never thought Skyrim had places like this!" She pointed at a Redguard in what looked to be silken robes, richly embroidered, walking beside a cart being pulled by a horse that had to be a good foot taller at the shoulder than the ones they rode. "Look at them all!" She turned this way and that, before Velandryn saw her gaze arrested by a line of merchant stalls. It was a slow path to the gates of Whiterun, but not an unpleasant one.

They left their horses at the same stable he and Lydia has taken them from so long ago. The place must have had some deal with the jarl, since half the animals there were barded in the city's colors and a pair of guards were patrolling the grounds. When they saw Velandryn, one dropped her spear in shock, and the other nearly decapitated himself trying to salute with his.

Young, even for humans. Ignoring Serana's chuckling from behind them, he strode in close. "You know who I am?" He didn't think he'd seen either of them before. They certainly weren't at the watchtower. Many had been there, but he had a good head for faces and every moment of that battle was seared into his memory.

"You're…you're Velandryn Dragonborn! The Savani!" Either the girl was mixing her words up in awe, or Nord honorifics were far stranger than he'd anticipated. Judging by the way Serana's mouth was twitching, it was the former.

"Something like that. How did you recognize me?" He looked closer at the two of them. The girl gulped and locked eyes with him, and the boy looked away, red rising in his cheeks.

She answered first, having regained her ability to speak straight. "From the hand." She pointed at his chest, and Velandryn realized he was wearing the tunic he'd received from Camilla Valerius in Riverwood. Feels like a lifetime ago.

He nodded. "Keep it to yourselves for now. I would prefer to get up to Dragonsreach without much fuss." Or assassins.

"Be careful then." That was the boy. "Things are getting strained with all of the new arrivals."

"I saw that. Fleeing the dragons?"

"The dragons, the war, bandit raids on the rise." The girl looked around. "People are coming to Whiterun because they think it's safer than staying put, but everyone's on edge."

Velandryn left the stable a good deal less cheerful than he'd arrived. This isn't good. He hadn't noticed any particular devastation or desolation on their trip across the hold, but things had to be bad for people to abandon their lands and duties. Serana too was quiet, though she might just still be taking it all in.

At the main gate of Whiterun, he recognized one of the guards. The last time he'd spied that particular face, it had been screaming in pain in the Western Watchtower. As he did so, he noticed the widening eyes and slack jaw on the man. Oh no you don't.

"You're the-" Velandryn flicked a finger, and the Nord's remaining words were swallowed by silence. The guard blinked, moving his mouth soundlessly. He turned to his partner, but Velandryn was already stalking in close to put a hand on his shoulder. The man was taller than Velandryn by a full head, but still froze at his touch.

"I need to travel quickly and quietly. I need to see the jarl, and I don't want to cause a scene." His words almost hissed out, and the guard began nodding frantically. "I'm taking the spell off now."
He concentrated, and the binding vanished. "You fought well against the dragon. Can I trust you again?"

The guard stood straight, looking over Velandryn's head. "Yes, sir!" Well, so much for subtlety. Still, the man meant well. They passed into Whiterun, Serana chuckling again.

When he looked over at her, she smiled at him. "You're a hero here."

Or a target. Still, it wasn't as if he hadn't earned it. Except for the part where I go and visit the greybeards to learn about my power and how to stop the dragons. Well, he would speak with Balgruuf, consult with Farengar, and be on his way to Ivarstead in the morning.

Serana had thought that after Solitude, she'd be ready for any city, since surely no place could be grander than those plazas and high stone buildings festooned with painted art and draped with flowers. She'd thought herself nearly cosmopolitan, ready to take on the world while knowing the kind of things it held.

She'd been wrong.

Where Solitude had lounged in glory, Whiterun buzzed. True, as they rose through the city the buildings grew more ornate and the roads became paved with close-cut stone, but there was an energy here that was almost magical.

She'd never seen so many non-Nords before. They were still only one or two in every ten, but Orcs walked with heavy armor or hunter's skins, and tiny Wood Elves darted through the crowd, many carrying packages or letters. She saw another of those strange cats called the Khajiit, who looked to be female by her... should I call it a mane?

A pair of Redguard men, being escorted down the hill, were dressed in robes and armor that looked to be straight from their desert homeland. One of them, on seeing her, raised his voice and offered her coin if she brought them some woman they were hunting. Not likely.

Even the Nords were more varied than she'd ever seen before. She'd spied a camp of hunters out in the markets, wearing animal hides covered in cloth sashes of green and brown. In brush or forest, they'd likely be invisible to mortal eyes. Others wore little to nothing, or covered their bare skin in the whirling blue patterns that she'd only ever seen on the stones of the giants. Here and there stood priests and cultists for various faiths, shouting their beliefs at the passerby and occasionally each other.

I never thought it could be like this. Skyrim was huge, of course, but she'd never actually considered just how varied it was. And Father wants to rule all of it!

Thoughts of her father's mad ambition were swept aside when someone hit her from the side. She spun, incensed, but they were already vanished in the crowd. Someone else jostled her, and then another. After a moment, she realized that these were no attacks, but simply the reality of moving through a city.

Is this what it's like to live here? Someone else bumped into her, and she shoved back. There was a grunt and a crash, and she turned to see a three people in a pile on the ground. Oops. None of them looked too hurt, and even the woman she'd pushed was getting back on her feet.

That had gotten Velandryn's attention as well. He gave her an amused look, then waved a hand. "Enjoying city life?" His voice was conversational and quiet; he was doubtless counting on her heightened senses rather than shouting. "Or did she say something to offend?"
Serana started walking away from the people she'd… inconvenienced. "How are there this many people in one place?"

She saw the slightest rise of the Dunmer's shoulder. "World got big while you were gone."

She inhaled, tasting the sweat and stink and smoke. "I think it was always like this. I heard the stories, but never understood what it meant." She saw the humans, of so many shades, and the elves among them. "It's chaos, but it's beautiful."

"El'tyem bruhad al'aram." She did not know the words, but Velandryn's voice was soft, and suddenly she became aware of how close he was to her. She could smell blood every time his heart beat, and the faint hint of sweat that, even in this cold, clung to his clothing carried some of that same power.

She blinked, and stepped away, even as Velandryn too seemed to come to his senses. He stepped back, straight into a passerby. The woman gave a yelp of surprise, then turned, eyes blazing. "Watch your step!"

Velandryn, however, was already stalking into the crowd, leaving the irritated townswoman yelling after him. Serana took off after the Dragonborn, finally catching him as he passed under a carved arch into an open stone square.

She wasn't sure what Velandryn was feeling. He'd been almost intimate back there, talking to her, but now his posture seemed to imply anger. No, frustration? Whatever it was, his shoulders were hunched and his steps long. "Do we have a problem?"

He stopped, then looked around at the crowd. "Not here." He pointed at an alleyway. "Come on."

When they were alone – except for the drunk passed out behind some boxes, but he hardly counted —Serana set hands on hips and tried her best to stare him down. "What's going on?" She'd been having her own reservations about exclusively drinking his blood, but if it was bothering him… "I'll scale that peak when I come to it."

"Not here." He was still glancing around. "We can talk later, away from others."

She sighed. "Look, if this is about our arrangement-"

"No, not that. Like I said, later."

She let a breath she hadn't realized she was holding in. "Are you okay?" Somehow, the moment she'd realized it wasn't about their odd little relationship, a knot deep in her belly had dissolved.

Another one of those subtle shrugs. "Probably. Let's just get to Dragonsreach, check in with the jarl, and get on our way."

_Check in with the jarl._ He said it so casually, without a hint of arrogance, and something about it struck her as appropriate. Velandryn could be an arrogant bastard when he had the mind to do so, but he didn't seem to think that his being Dragonborn made him better than other people. She felt a sudden rush of affection for Velandryn Savani, and smiled at him. "Whatever's bothering you, we can tackle it together."

A sharp nod, and they were off once more.

Lydia grunted as her shield smashed into the witch's jaw. The woman went down with a thud, and
the ghostly wolf she had summoned shimmered away into nothingness. Illia, who had been keeping the beast at bay with a ward of her own, let out a sigh.

"Why don't I feel bad?" Illia was staring at the crumpled form of the witch. "That's Minja, she came to us from Greyloam. They drove her out when—" Illia shook her head. "It doesn't matter now."

"It's not like she's dead, you know." By the way Illia's head snapped up, the woman genuinely thought Lydia had just killed the other witch. "She'll have a horker of a headache when she comes around, but she'll live." Head wounds were no laughing matter, but blows to the face had to be a lot harder than that to be fatal.

As if on cue, the woman groaned. Lydia stepped in and raised her fist, but Illia darted in first. "Wait! Let me deal with her! She doesn't need to die!"

Who does she think I am? "Kyne's Breath, I wasn't going to kill her!" Guards who made a habit of murdering criminals got a reputation, and their careers typically didn't end with a night at the tavern to celebrate their retirement.

"Oh." Illia looked embarrassed for a moment, then nodded. "Thank you."

Honestly. Do all outlaws think like this? She'd taken lives, of course, but usually there was a better alternative. Right now she wasn't sure how this would end, but slaughtering them in cold blood went beyond what she was comfortable with. We get to the top, deal with the leader, and then I figure out what to do with these. It was far from perfect, but it was what she had. "Illia, do you have any spells to make sure she doesn't wake?"

Illia had wrapped the other woman's hands in rope, and pressed a hand against her back. There was a flash, and the witch's body went fully limp. "There. She'll be asleep for hours."

After that, it was a matter of checking to make sure that nobody else was on this floor. Illia had said their coven was small, but Lydia's time with Velandryn had gotten her used to much less equal odds. Now, though, she only had to contend with her enemies one at a time, and none were trained in combat. And yet, Illia seemed nervous. As they climbed to stairs to find another empty room, Lydia asked her what was wrong.

The witch gave a little start at being spoken to. "Oh, nothing, just… I didn't think about what this would mean. I'm fighting them!"

"You tried arguing first, right? And I'm doing my best not to kill." By rights, they should be carting all of them back to the nearest outpost to be held as lawbreakers, but sometimes you had to make do. "Come on."

As they climbed the stairs Illia started talking again. "We're doing the right thing, aren't we?"

Lydia turned and stared down at her. "If you're having second thoughts, we're about three witches too late!" She regretted saying it the moment it left her lips.

Illia looked as though she'd been the one who'd taken Lydia's shield to the face. "I… I just…"

Lydia sighed. Velandryn must have rubbed off on me. "All right." She took a moment to gather her thoughts. "I understand that this is hard for you, but you said yourself that it has to be done, right?"

Illia nodded, and looked up at her. "Yes. We have to stop Mother."
"Well, there you have it." She stepped down and placed a hand on the witch's shoulder. "I know these are your friends, but if they're going to hurt people, I can't just look away."

"Right, that's why we're doing this." Illia's resolve seemed to have returned. "They'll kill someone if we don't do anything."

Lydia had her doubts that this mission could be resolved without any blood shed at all, but she kept those thoughts to herself. *I'm doing the right thing here.* Of that at least, she had no doubt. She'd seen liars try to turn guards to their own ends, and Illia was a different kind of nervous wreck. *Poor girl knows she's doing the right thing, but really wishes that she wasn't.*

Still, in a case like this, right and wrong were fairly well delineated. *I'll side with the one who isn't going to butcher a traveler for dark power!* She strode up the steps, Illia close behind.

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"Three months, Dragonborn! Three months, and you haven't even set foot on the Throat!"

Actually, it was less than two and a half months since the death of Mirmulnir, but Velandryn had the feeling that information wouldn't be well-received.

It was somewhat nice, he mused, that the Jarl had adjourned into a private chamber before beginning to yell at him. Irileth was leaning against one wall, watching him, while Serana was studying the carvings on the heavy doors leading back into the main hall.

The room they were in was clearly designed for breakaway meetings like this. A round table dominated the space, with a half-dozen chairs around it. Right now Balgruuf was pacing, one hand reaching out to tap each chair as he passed. "What in Oblivion have you been doing?"

Velandryn sighed. "I got…sidetracked. However, I've not been idle. I learned more about what it means to be Dragonborn, and I've taken down another dragon." The worst part was, the jarl was completely correct. He had kicked his duty as Dragonborn to the side the moment something else piqued his interest. "I'm better able to handle the duties required of me, if nothing else. I'm headed to Ivarstead now, and from there—"

"Yes, yes, to the Greybeards." The jarl sat, finally. "My city hasn't quite fallen to pieces yet, so maybe it'll still be here by the time you get back." He sighed. "I'm almost tempted to have Farengar conjure some wizardry to send you there."

Velandryn had entertained a few thoughts in that direction as well, but he wasn't sure that Skyrim had the magical infrastructure to support fixed-point teleportation. "I could consult with him, see if we could find an acceptable destination array. Are there any mages around Ivarstead that you could contact?"

"What?" Balgruuf's mouth had fallen open for a moment. "You would trust your life to that?"

Velandryn suppressed a laugh. "Nearly every city, temple and fort in Morrowind has some form of teleportation capability. We call them guides, and to be honest your lack of them strikes me as an oversight at best."

Irileth cut in then. "So you could bring an enemy into your hold?" She snorted. "As if we don't have enough trouble without having to worry about Ulfric dumping a squad of Stormcloaks into the main hall."

"There are precautions." Right now, though, Velandryn didn't want to get into an argument about the relative merits of mundane transit as opposed to arcane. Well, that wasn't true, but he had the
feeling it would ultimately be counterproductive. "Alerts, sigil locks, a big guard with an axe. We've been doing this for a few thousand years now; I'm honestly amazed you don't even have one."

"Regardless, I won't be having any portals into my keep." Judging by Irileth's tone, the fact that the jarl ruled the city was of little relevance.

Balgruuf raised a hand. "Peace, the both of you!" He sat there for a moment, eyes closed. When he opened them, it was to look straight at Velandryn. "Whether by magic, horse, or your own two feet, you'll go to the Greybeards. Last time I left it to your own judgement, but clearly that was a mistake." He rose, and his voice grew louder as he spoke until it filled their little room. "Velandryn Savani, Sword-Thane and Dragonborn, as your Jarl and Protector of Whiterun in the eyes of gods and men, I charge you to journey to High Hrothgar, on the Throat of the World, and learn whatever they can teach. When you have done so, you will use that power to defend Whiterun against all who would do it harm. This is your duty as thane, to be discharged in defense of this hold. Should you accept, you will take no other task, serve no other master, and pursue no other aim until this mission is complete." He paused, and took a long breath. "Should you refuse, speak now or suffer forever the punishment of an oathbreaker."

And what exactly is that punishment? Velandryn's mind was racing, trying to figure out exactly where he could draw the line to please the jarl while not committing himself to any burdensome promises. There were a few tricks he could pull with wording and carefully timed pauses, but he was worried that using Mephala's Gambit would backfire spectacularly, and he'd need an accomplice to even think about the Morning in Suran. He sighed to himself. "I accept, though I cannot promise that I will rush blindly towards my goal. I will endeavor to complete it, but will take whatever precautions and tangents are necessary to give me the greatest chance of success."

"Meaning, I suppose, that I'll see you back here in half a year with another excuse and companion."

Balgruuf gave Serana a long look, which she ignored. "One final question, Dragonborn. Where is Lydia?"

Well, I knew it was coming. "I gave her a task. She should be waiting for me in Ivarstead."

Velandryn dearly hoped that that was true. He liked Lydia, and more importantly, at some point he'd begun to trust her. He would be glad to have her at his side again. Plus, if anything happened, I doubt they'll just give me another housecarl. He did not miss Serana's glance in his direction. He'd been intentionally vague about the details of Lydia's trip to Morrowind, but Serana knew full well that his housecarl had been delivering messages designed to harm the Volkihar.

And Jarl Balgruuf might have one of them. He hadn't included information about Serana in his letter to Whiterun, only referring the Volkihar royals as what were likely three exceptionally dangerous vampires. And even if Balgruuf figures it out, I have to imagine that he's smart enough not to do anything rash.

Irileth was glaring at him, the fire in her eyes conveying her wrath more convincingly than the furrowed brows above them. "A housecarl is not a servant, Dragonborn! Lydia chose to serve to protect you, not to be sent off to—"

"Spare me your indignation, sister." It was a calculated mode of address, and it gave Irileth enough pause for Velandryn to continue. "Lydia agreed that this was the best way to protect me. I needed someone I could trust, and she was by far the best option."

Irileth opened her mouth again, but the Jarl rose from his seat. "Enough, Irileth. I would speak with the Dragonborn alone."
To her credit, the housecarl's obedience was immediate, and she even managed to mostly smother the sour look she sent Velandryn's way as she walked to the door. She opened it with a tiny flourish, and looked at Serana. "You first, pale one."

Serana moved as though she were strolling among the paths of the Mycologeum without a care in the world. She paused as she passed Velandryn, and leaned in close enough that her words sent little puffs of air against his cheek. "If you need me to rescue you from the big scary jarl, just say the word." And with a grin, she was gone.

Once the door fell shut with a resounding thud, the jarl sighed. "So, you send me a message warning about vampires, then return having abandoned your task. Lydia is gone, and in her place is this… woman." He placed his hand on a section of wall, seemingly no different from any other. There was a clicking sound, and the jarl took a dagger and a ring from where they had lain, hidden. 

"This knife will burn away any magic that binds you." The jarl slipped the ring onto his finger, and the pale skin of his face and hands glimmered with magic. "And this ring was forged by a Clever-Man of old, made of Skyforge steel and blessed by Stuhn the Unyielding. While I wear it, blade and hammer will be turned aside, and magic will rebound upon its caster. You are a thane of Whiterun, so this task falls to me. Hold forth your hand that I may test you and know that you are not enthralled."

Velandryn nodded slowly. Well played. The dagger was little more than a useful tool, but that ring was something special. The jarl had prepared them, and gotten him alone. Good thing I'm not enchanted…

Another thought stuck him, and Velandryn Savani was almost tempted to laugh. He thrust his hand out before him, hoping his eagerness did not show. "Across the palm, please, and not too deep."

Balgruuf had been a warrior once, and his arms still held as much strength or more than Velandryn's own. One hand gripped his wrist, and the other drew the point across his palm, leaving a red line that began to steadily drip blood.

Velandryn met the jarl's eyes, and raised one eyebrow. "Is there a flash of light for a spell undone, or should I just promise you that it's me?"

Balgruuf chuckled. "You saw nothing, but I felt it. No spell bound you."

Having felt the blade's magic probing at his own, Velandryn was forced to reassess. "That's not just some mage's tool. That is a good piece. It didn't just dispel, it searched me for residue, didn't it?" That last part wasn't really a question. The enchantment had swept through him almost imperceptibly, but he'd felt it probing and seeking. "Where did you get it?"

"Winterhold, or so they say. It was carried by the woman who saved my life, back during the War." Balgruuf laughed again. "I accuse you of being under a vampire's thrall, and you show more interest in the tool I use to test it. Most of my people would have been bristling with indignation."

"Honestly, you did me a favor." Velandryn chose his words carefully, aware that Serana would be able to hear every word. "I've wondered, on occasion, if there were some subtle magic making me more amenable to having Serana as a companion. It would seem that is not the case."

"Only the magic of a woman, eh, Dragonborn?" The jarl smiled, apparently far more at ease now that his prize thane wasn't of dubious loyalty. "So you were telling the truth about the Greybeards."

"I've always been easily distracted. When the chance came to head off some sort of vampire
I took it. Did you get my letter?"

"I did, and the map as well." The jarl waved a hand. "I had a copy made for Farengar, and sent another to Jarl Idgrod of Morthal. She speaks well of you, by the way. I don't think any of us can do much, but I thank you."

Velandryn nodded. "I'm glad to hear it. I do take my duty to Whiterun seriously, you know." He thought for a moment. "And I am headed to the Greybeards now. I've put it off for long enough."

"Good. Take a day or two. Rest, get your things together. I'll even let you run your insane teleportation idea past Farengar. The man might be dragon-mad, but on any other topic he's sensible to a fault."

"My thanks. We'll get started at once." Velandryn bowed, thankful for Lydia's lessons so long ago. I do hope I didn't get her killed.

Lydia sat in the chair, as Illia had asked. Right now, she was pretending to be a sacrifice, but there was an uncomfortable feeling that the ruse could become real at any second. She hated this plan, but the older witch was only just out of reach. Illia had asked for one more chance, to talk her mother out of her foul plan. Lydia was willing to give her that, but the moment a knife came anywhere near her she was going to take it away and give it right back. Point first, in the chest. Damn rogue witches. She didn't find Illia too repugnant, but outlaw spellcasters had to be dealt with. And once this one is done, hopefully Illia makes the right choice.

Her ally was pacing back and forth, while her mother stood calmly over a stone plinth, dagger in hand. Before the older woman was a ragged stack of paper that could perhaps charitably be called a book. It looked to have been bound with animal hide, and the writing on the yellowed and irregular pages was the scrawl of an untrained writer. It simply oozed an aura of malevolence, and Lydia found her eyes drawn to it despite the drama unfolding before her.

Illia's voice was uneven, as though she were on the edge of tears. "I brought you the sacrifice, as you asked, but I hate this! You told me that we came here to be safe, so they couldn't persecute us for our gifts! Was that all a lie?"

Her mother laughed quietly. "Oh, my dear innocent girl. They will always hate us. We seek power, and they wish it all for themselves. They exile us from their cities because we threaten their rule. With this, we will finally be truly free!"

"Who?" Illia had asked her to be quiet, but Lydia couldn't help herself. "Who is doing all of this to you?"

The old woman's mouth twisted. "You bound her poorly, daughter, if she can still speak." She turned to look at Lydia. "The jarls, the thanes, all the ones who would keep us in bondage!"

"Somehow, I get the feeling that you'd be a lot more accepted if you weren't trying to murder passers-by! Half the villages on the Whiterun Plain have a wise-witch, and the rest have a hearth set aside for Dibella or Mara. Try living with the people instead of running off to play outlaw in some crumbling ruin, and you'll find things are better for you."

"No! You don't know what it's like! Their gaze turns dark, they hate and fear, they want what you have!" The old woman spun, and placed a hand on the book. "This is power! This is what they all want! And it's mine!"

Illia stepped forward tentatively. "Mother… Mama, please!"
Her mother gave no sign she had heard her. "I know you've betrayed me, Illia. Brought a warrior to help you kill me. Did you think I didn't hear you talking on the other side of that door?"

Damn. Lydia kicked the chair aside, lunging for the old woman. Behind her, Illia brought her hands up and the air crackled with energy. Her mother was already moving, however, and a shimmering barrier isolated her with that damnable book.

"Innocent blood. It will be needed for the full transformation, but not yet." She raised the dagger, and plunged it into her own hand. "Ra-sham-let-os-ur-kai!"

The book burst into flames, blue tongues of fire leaping towards the witch. She screamed as they flowed along her arms. Where they touched, her skin split, and feathers began bristling outwards.

Disgusting. Illia had cast some spell on Lydia's sword and shield, so they would pass unseen. She grabbed them from the ground now, and pointed the Dwarven shield's burnished boss straight at the magical barrier. "Illia, can you bring down her shield?"

The only answer she got was a torrent of ice splashing against the ward, causing it to flash and hiss like a hot pan dropped into water. I guess that'll do. She squared her shoulder, lowered her head, and charged. Shor's bones, this had better work!

It felt like hitting a wall of water set aflame. The barrier gave before her, but began pushing her back instantly. Her training kicked in, and she lashed out, using her whole body to bring the shield up and forward. Break the cohesion of the barrier. Most spellcasters in Whiterun Hold were decent folks who lived with their neighbors. If the barrier tears, it collapses. The ones who weren't were the ones she and hers had had to deal with.

The barrier did not collapse, but it wavered. The edge of her shield seemed to have punched through, but even though the barrier couldn't reform, it hadn't collapsed. Damn it! She gritted her teeth and took a step forward. This is going to hurt.

It did. The barrier was hot and cold at once, and even through her armor sent pain lancing through her. This had to be draining the other woman, though. Velandryn had taught her the theory behind the limits of wards, and she knew that her efforts had to be taxing the other woman dearly.

That didn't make it hurt any less, though. Damn! Another step, and there was a cracking sound. Lydia grit her teeth and raised the shield, screaming as she took one more tortuous step into the crackling barrier. There was a feeling and noise like shattering ice, and the ward was gone.

Lydia stood, panting, facing the…thing before her. She'd heard of the Hagravens, and this was not that. They were twisted and deformed, while this woman had only managed to sprout a few ugly feathers out of her skin.

The woman's face was contorted with rage. "I'll kill you both! I'll use your blood to become stronger than any other witch in Skyrim!"

Lydia sighed, and stepped forward. "No, you won't"

The woman raised her hands, cackling. They sparked with lighting, and another feather burst through the skin on her wrist. "Can't you see what I've become?"

The only answer she ever got was the rim of Lydia's shield jammed into her throat. Her head snapped back, and she gave a strangled yell. Lydia smashed her across the face with the shield again, then silenced her for good. One thrust, into the gut, then another at the neck. She'll be dead in seconds.
The woman staggered back, trying to scream through her ruined airway as blood gushed from her wounds. She was still standing, and raised a sparking hand to point at Lydia. She suddenly felt a stab of fear. *Did the magic sustain her?* Lydia brought her shield up once more. *This time you'll stay dead.*

She needn't have worried. The not-hagraven crumpled to the ground, a last gurgling sound that might have been a scream managing to escape as she collapsed. Illia screamed as well, and began pummeling the body of the thing that had been her mother with a barrage of ice. She was shouting one word, over and over. "Why? Why? Why?"

Lydia raised a hand to get the witch's attention. "Illia. It's done."

She should have saved her breath. The girl was sobbing now, hunched over her mother's body. Every breath came out as a shuddering, weeping cry.

Lydia barely remembered her mother, and her father's death had been a swift and distant thing, one she'd only learned of when the patrol had returned to Whiterun bearing his body. She could recall lying curled up on her bed and going for two long days with barely a bite to eat, but the pain had long since dulled now.

She also remembered Freya, and how the intoxication of their young love had helped pull her mind from the darkness. *I don't think that will work here.* While she thought, she removed the book from the pedestal and carefully tucked it under her arm.

Illia looked up. "What are you doing? That thing is evil!"

"Maybe." Lydia looked down at the book's rough-hewn cover. "But my master will be irritated if I tell him this story and don't bring the book for him to see." Velandryn, it seemed, was a bad influence on her. "Besides, I'd think you'd be happy to be rid of it."

"But you mustn't use it! Swear to me that you won't!"

Lydia shrugged. "I won't use it, and I can't see Ve—my master doing that either. If it concerns you so much, come with me to Ivarstead and tell him yourself."

The girl's eyes widened. "Ivarstead? But I can't go into the towns. I'll—" She stopped herself abruptly, looking down at her mother's body. "Can I?"

"I think you're the only one who gets to decide that now." She studied the young witch. The robes were nondescript enough, but for the Daedric lettering stitched here and there. "I'll say this, though: change your clothes and nobody would give you a second glance." Another look, and a moment of thought. "Or don't, if you'd rather show your power than hide it."

Illia shivered. "I haven't been in a city in years. Mother said it was dangerous."

"She would." Lydia wanted to curse at the dead woman's body, but restrained herself. "And Ivarstead's not much of anything at all, from what I've heard. You want to get back to being around people, you could do worse." She wasn't sure why she cared so much, but the thought of leaving this girl in the tower rubbed her the wrong way.

Illia stayed quiet, either thinking or mourning, as Lydia looked around the top of the tower. *Have to make sure there's nothing else here that could be dangerous.* There was a worrying pile of bones in one corner, but she wasn't sure how to dispose of that. Another pair of journals joined the first book, and she pried open a chest to find a gnarled staff and a coin purse. These she handed to Illia, who took them silently. As Lydia turned away, she heard a soft "Thank you."
On their way down the tower, she nearly tripped over one of the witches, still unconscious on the floor. *Damn.* She'd forgotten about them.

By the look on Illia's face, the other woman had too. "What do we do with them?"

Lydia chewed her lip as she thought. All her options were bad, but she wasn't about to start butchering helpless people, even if they were outlaws. "Were they like your mother?"

"They followed her, we all did, but I mean…" Illia's eyes were wide with what had to be an awful lot of stress. "They never killed anyone, but they would have, and they attacked us, and…I don't know, I'm sorry."

As Lydia studied the slumbering woman, something occurred to her. "This tower was abandoned when you moved in? You didn't kill anyone to take it?"

Illia shook her head. "We tried to stay out of the way. It looks like a ruin, and the main road doesn't go this far south."

That much was true. Lydia had been avoiding that larger road, since she still wasn't certain where she stood with the Riften Guard. "And you haven't been robbing travelers or the like?"

Illia's hair flew as she shook her head. "No, I swear it! We grow and hunt our own food, and sometimes Mother or one of the others would go trade with…someone, I don't know who."

Lydia didn't love the sound of a black market for outlaw mages, but this gave her an out. "Fine. We leave them. Let them make their own paths from here."

The witch's eyes went wide again. "Really?"

"Yeah." The guard in her didn't like it, but she was a long way from home, and her time in Riften made her wary of subjecting anyone to what passed for justice there. "Leave them tied up, though. I don't want them coming after me."

"Us." Illia smiled at her. "I'm going with you, for now at least. I'll find a way I can do some good with my gifts."

Lydia shrugged, then turned away so before she gave the game away by smiling. "Grab what you need then, and let's be off. *She's a good kid.* Maybe this hadn't been such a waste of time after all.

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Jarl Balgruuf sat back in his chair, rubbing his eyes. Irileth had shut the door behind the Dragonborn and the vampire, and now stood before him, arms crossed.

"So that's that?" Her words were clipped in the way they got when she was irritated. "Runs off for months and you just let him wander off to cause more mischief?"

"As opposed to? Throw him in a cart and dump him on the Greybeards' doorstep?" Balgruuf considered the idea for a moment, then shook his head with a chuckle. "We're not dealing with a reticent child. He's the Dragonborn."

"And he has a responsibility to Whiterun. Lydia is still missing, and now he has a vampire! How does any of that help us with the dragons?" Irileth was pacing now, a nervous tick whose existence Balgruuf knew infuriated her. "I'm getting to wonder if he's worth it!"

Balgruuf rose, smiling down at his housecarl. "You're not a Nord, ma'shova. The Dragonborn,
he's...he's everything it means to be of Skyrim, a legend given flesh. Velandryn will find his way."

Irileth's eyes had darkened in alarm and flicked towards the door at Balgruuf's words, but she relaxed upon seeing everything tightly sealed. Sighing, she stepped into his arms and leaned forward, forcing him back down into his chair. "You are a most frustrating man."

Balgruuf laughed, enjoying the feel of her against him. One of her hands had worked its way under his tunic, and he savored her fingers along his chest. "And yet."

She smiled, and planted a small kiss on his chin. "And yet." She twisted a little, as though she could burrow into him. "I shouldn't have taught you that word. Savani would know about us in an instant if he heard it."

Balgruuf chuckled. "Let him. I've told you before, I don't care! Deyna is long gone, nobody's honor is besmirched, and I want you to——"

She put a finger on his lips. "Enough." She rose, and a small noise of dissatisfaction escaped Balgruuf before he could bite it back.

The Dunmer smiled at the sound. "Go to bed, my jarl. I'll be along soon."

Balgruuf smiled as he stripped off his clothing and climbed under the heavy furs. Life went on, as it would. For so long, he had been on the edge of a knife. Imperials and Stormcloaks, and before them the Thalmor. Now, dragons as well, and a strange elf who claimed to be Dragonborn. A vampire, one who bore an uncanny resemblance to the most ancient legends of the Volkihar Purebloods. And yet.

And yet, he felt hope, where for a long time there had been nothing. Rather than dreading the dawn, he wanted to wake tomorrow, to see what it would bring.
"So come, join, sit by the warm fire,
This tale will make your heart soar,
Of the cave, bleak, beset by foul evil,
And the heroes who freed it once more!"

-Early draft of the opening for 'Ballad of the Wolfskull Heroes'

"I'm worried about you, Elly." Jordis never bothered sending any sort of word that she was coming to the Blue Palace, but Elisif had a free morning and so could properly host the woman. Even if she apparently come to tell me I'm working too hard again!

Now, she just smiled at her friend. "Unlike you, Jiji, I actually like doing my duties." She liked that particular nickname for Jordis, in no small part because it made no sense to anyone who hadn't known them when they were five years old. It's just ours. "You'll be at the feast tonight, won't you?"

Jordis gave a sigh that was more theatrical than sincere. Then, she smiled. "Deal. The ladies at Radiant Raiment are finishing up a new piece for me." Ever since the night where Elisif had met Velandryn, Jordis had been happily attending parties and feasts in armored dresses and gowns stitched with battle scenes. She'd also been swelling the numbers of the Young Wolves with other young warriors with aspirations of adventure. She still thinks she's a hero, and we're living in a ballad. Elisif loved her, but Jordis had a very romantic view of the world.

Elisif looked out the window, willing some brilliant idea to come to her. Jordis wasn't wrong; Elisif was taking on more and more responsibility, and had precious little support. Falk and Sybille meant well, but both had served her late husband and his father before him. To them, she was a child sitting on a throne she did not deserve. At first, she knew, there had been hopes that she would bear Torygg's child after his passing, and continue the line of High Kings that had given Skyrim generations of competent-if unexceptional-rule. Once they knew that wasn't happening, I guess it was just easier to keep me around as a figurehead. It wasn't as if anyone else was clamoring to be Jarl of Solitude at the moment. Even Erikur's snide comments about how he was better suited than she to rule had no real force behind them. He knows better than to want what I have. She had taken a one-way trip to a dead-end throne. Everyone knew that Tullius was calling the shots, after all.

Jordis had been saying something, and leaned in to peer at her. "Elly, you in there?"

Elisif was no longer paying much attention to her friend, however. This war, it's eating me alive. She hadn't even wanted to be the jarl. It had made sense to marry Torygg, it was a sensible match and a chance for her to make a real difference. I might even have come to love him. He had been a
kind man, and would have made a good High King in time. *But now there's just me...*

"Elisif, is something wrong?" Jordis's voice was louder now, and Elisif felt something grab her by the shoulder. "Elly, talk to me!"

Elisif shook her head, willing the darkness away. "How'd you feel about taking the Wolves out for another mission? We've been getting reports of lighthouses going dark, and the Imperial Trade Collective's reported two ships delayed."

Jordis' brow furrowed. "Pirates?"

"I hope not, but General Tullius is on me about having to divert his own men to look into it. Could you and yours do it instead?" It was a small matter, but any issue with Solitude's maritime trade could quickly escalate to a real problem. "So, muster the Wolves and look into it?"

"Of course! We'll get it done, just like we did with Potema!" In the weeks since Wolfskull Cave, the Young Wolves had been constants in the taverns and inns of Solitude, earning more than a few free drinks with their tales of the necromancers who had tried to raise the Wolf Queen.

And the Dragonborn too. According to Jordis, Velandryn had been essential to their victory. *Even though I'd never have known it from talking with him!* Now, though, the people of Solitude were hearing the story from the lips of every bard in the city. "Was it you who suggested the Bard's College spread that ballad?"

Jordis grinned at her. "A team effort. Sophie wrote it, I signed on as her patron, and the College lapped it up!" The smile grew conspiratorial. "We're heroes, and anybody who gets a thistle in their shift about Vel being an elf has to listen to a bunch of Nords cheer his name!"

Elisif smiled at that. Sometimes people forgot Jordis was clever. *Sometimes I did too, as a girl.* That had been unwise. Her friend could be a bit of a fool, but she had the cunning of the old heroes in her.

Jordis, however, seemed to have misunderstood her smile. "Thinking about Vel, huh? Is that why you keep throwing these parties, you hope he'll show up again?"

Elisif threw her empty cup at Jordis, but the woman just snagged it out of the air with a grin. "So that's a no?"

"That's a no." It wasn't though, not really. She threw the parties out of obligation, but she would have been lying if she claimed she didn't hope that she'd spy a certain lithe silhouette on one of the balconies, looking out into the darkness. "I hope he's well."

"I mean, he bagged another dragon, so that's something." Jordis smacked the arm of her chair. "Shor's bones, what I wouldn't give to have been there!"

And then she wants to go and fight a dragon. Clever she might be, but Jordis the Sword-Maiden would always be her foolish best friend. "And now he's heading south, to High Hrothgar." It was a long way from where she sat to the Throat of the World. *How long before I see him again?*

"You should write him a letter." Jordis had found Elisif's secret bowl of oranges, and was tearing into the painfully expensive fruit with her bare hands. "Let him know you're thinking of him."

"And where would I address it? To the Dragonborn, in the care of the Greybeards?" Skyrim's couriers were formidable deliverymen, but she doubted even they would brave the Throat of the World.
"Send it to Whiterun. Twenty sovereigns says Vel's got quarters in Dragonsreach anyway. He didn't strike me as the type to go buying up land in Skyrim."

That actually wasn't a bad idea. Even if he'd left Whiterun by the time the letter arrived, he would doubtless return there after consulting with the Greybeards. Can I trust a letter in the court of Jarl Balgruuf, though? The man had honor, in his own way, but she would have said the same of Ulfric Stormcloak, once. The Jarl of Whiterun had sent her a kind message when Torygg had died, but then refused to support the Empire in bringing his killer to justice. Does Velandryn trust him, though?

She had to give this some more thought. The idea of keeping in touch with Velandryn was appealing on several levels, but it certainly wasn't worth letting a third party read her correspondence.

Sighing, she made a note in the little journal she kept on her always. See if there's any way to protect the letter. Then, it was back to business.

Or, as it turned out, back to chewing the fat with Jordis. Her friend had an uncommon talent for pulling Elisif into whatever nonsense she was on about at any given moment. This week, it was getting the Wolves geared as a cavalry unit. However, while many of the Young Wolves of Solitude came from the upper crust of the city, few of them could afford the exorbitant costs associated with purchasing and maintaining a warhorse. So, she wanted them to be brought on as auxiliaries, and have their costs covered by the Guard. Elisif, laughing, told her she was dreaming. Especially since Jordis had apparently decided that they would do best using Yokudan Chargers. The finest horses in Tamriel, to be sure, but also ill-suited for the climate of Haafingar, and easily ten thousand septims a head besides.

It was only after five minutes of lighthearted argument that Elisif realized how easily her friend had pulled her out of a bad place. Smiling, she listened as Jordis explained how useful a mounted bard could be for morale, and resolved to do something nice for her soon.

Serana felt their eyes on her every moment she spent in Dragonsreach. The servants, whispering about the strange woman who had followed the Dragonborn. The guards, who loudly wondered what she had done with Lydia whenever they were hidden behind a door or around a corner. Even the jarl and the other nobles watched her warily, though she knew that Balgruuf had gotten the true story from Velandryn. I'm not your enemy, you fools!

Velandryn had gone straight to the jarl's wizard, eager to see if he could achieve teleportation without a target array. Serana was fairly certain that it was impossible, but she'd also missed out on four thousand years of magical advancement, so she wasn't going to go making any definite statements just yet. He'd invited her to come along, but she had no doubt that the wizard would see her for what she was, and didn't want to deal with that right now.

As to whatever had been bothering Velandryn, he'd simply brushed her off when she'd asked, saying it wasn't important. That rankled, but she didn't want to put her companion's back up by bothering him about it. He's the only friend I've got.

There was also the matter of his blood, and the increasing unease that came with it. She didn't like being in his debt, but somehow the assassin's words still haunted her. Either master or slave. She wanted to believe it wasn't true, but she'd never heard of a vampire having an equal relationship with a mortal. One of them always held the power, and right now she was worried that it was Velandryn. However, this too would have to wait until they'd reached the Greybeards. I gave my word, after all. For the moment, Serana was left with basically nothing to do.
Not wanting to mope around Dragonsreach alone, she spent most of that evening out of the keep, walking around Whiterun. She doubted Velandryn would even notice she was gone. When she'd left him, the wizard had been asking questions about how his experience as Dragonborn had changed while Velandryn read Dragon Guard reports and tried to steer the topic toward transportation magic.

Walking down the hill, Serana almost wanted to shake her head. It will never work. She knew Velandryn was convinced that they only needed proper preparation, but he was used to significant magical infrastructure. Not to mention, you're up against the Weight of Creation. She realized they might not even call it that anymore, but the principle should be the same. Unless they wanted to go and lay out an array at their destination, it simply violated too many fundamental principles of the world. It can be done, of course. Anything can be done. It just can't be done well.

She passed the priest of Talos, ranting about something or other. This whole business with the Ninth Divine worried her each time she thought about it. The Divines as a whole still seemed an odd bastardization of various faiths, but there was so much vitriol around Talos that it put her on edge. Everyone in Skyrim either had an opinion on Talos or made a great show of not having one, which amounted to the same thing. Usually wars over religion were actually about something else, and this time it seemed to be the Empire.

Serana had never considered herself much of a statesman, save for what she'd picked up by living in her father's hall. However, she'd always had a basic level of understanding about the state of the world. Now, so many things that others took for granted were revelations to her. Velandryn answered her questions readily enough, but the number of mysteries she let pass her by far outweighed the ones she had the mental energy to investigate. As a result, she understood only the broadest strokes of the state of Tamriel. Once I get Skyrim figured out, I can work on the rest. Elsweyr, for instance, caught her fancy every time she heard about it. Plains of sand, and forests so thick you couldn't see the sky. Cats of a hundred kinds, each as clever as any man or mer.

She walked as she thought, but stopped when she came to a longhall whose roof was unmistakably styled after a longship. And not just any longship. She recognized that style, down to the bulges on the sides. An Atmoran raider! She'd been born long after the great waves of migrants from the frozen continent arrived, but the distinctive style of their vessels had endured. And now I find it here.

Someone had noticed her watching. A woman in armor, short enough that she probably wasn't a full-blooded Nord, smiled and walked over. "Do you need the Companions for something, friend? You can come in and ask if you've a job that needs doing."

"Thank you, but I was just passing by." Still, she did have questions. "The Companions, you say. Did you name yourselves for the Five Hundred?" That would make sense, given the longship.

"You haven't heard of us? We're the most famous warrior band in Skyrim! Have you been living with the horkers?" The woman seemed genuinely offended.

Serana wanted to laugh, but managed to hold back. "I didn't mean to offend." She looked at the longship. "You did a good job getting the details right."

"That's Jorrvaskr, our mead hall! Made of Atmoran wood from the very ship that Jeek of the River carried across Skyrim!"

Wait. Serana had heard this before. "Jeek mu'ka Rivyna? Of the Companions of Ysgramor?" They hadn't just named themselves after the Five Hundred, they'd been founded by them. "You weren't joking about being famous!"
"I know!" The woman fairly bubbled with excitement. "It's incredible, like something out of a song. Come on, I can show you around!"

Serana, however, had no desire to enter that hall. Something about the building felt…off. As if there was some smell, just beyond her senses. She only shook her head, and was on her way.

She immersed herself in Whiterun again. The people swept by her, and she by them. Two Redguards, arguing about a lost sword. A woman in fine clothes, flanked by four soldiers wearing green and red. Two children, darting between legs and slashing at each other with wooden swords. A priestess of some Divine—Kyne, perhaps?—engaged in a spirited debate with a bearded man in golden robes. As she passed, the woman said something about "…the vital essence of the Gildergreen…"

It was overwhelming, but also exhilarating. Here, she was one more face in the crowd, someone who didn't have to be anyone special. She was just here, and that was all that mattered.

A snippet of music caught her ear, and she turned, looking for the source. She saw a tall building that seemed to be the source, and headed towards it. *Seems I can't stay away.*

It was three levels, each smaller than the one below, with a sign bearing the words Roaring Horker above the door. She ducked inside, relaxing as she got indoors. Even on cloudy days, she couldn't be fully comfortable with the sun overhead.

Inside, it was clearly some sort of tavern. There was a single enormous room, three floors high, with galleries on each floor. Craning her neck, Serana could see people sitting and eating. The smell of food led her gaze to a door in the back that looked like it opened to the kitchen. A stage dominated the center of the room, with a trio of Nords performing there. One of them held a lute, while another had a flute and the third banged a drum. It was they who were making the music, and the woman with the lute who was singing.

"It's an end to the evil of all Skyrim's foes, you'll know oh you'll know when the Dragonborn comes!"

This song was catching fire across Skyrim, it seemed. *Everyone wants a part in the legend of the Dragonborn.* It was odd, hearing something from her own time, updated and sung in a language that had barely existed when the song was written. *But, it still seems right.* The Dragonborn was something out of legend, so his song should be as well.

*What does that make me?* The Dragonborn's companion, perhaps, or an associate of sorts. What was not in question was that she had inexorably been swept up into his quest, her own concerns going by the wayside as Velandryn pressed onward.

The odd thing was, she couldn't figure out if that bothered her or not. The fact that her father's Scroll was gone meant that the plans of the Volkihar were hampered, but they were still out there, planning to somehow darken the sun. *If that's even possible.* It sounded mad, but then so too did the return of the Dragons.

She found herself sitting down at a small table tucked away in one corner. *Just for a moment.* She might have tried her hand at being a bard, once. *I did love to play.*

"A beautiful woman shouldn't sit alone." She turned to see a man smiling down at her. He wasn't unattractive himself, though she had no intention of pursuing any sort of dalliance with some random Nord. *Besides, he'd run screaming if he knew what I really was.* He reached out a hand to the chair across from her. "May I?"
She nodded. It was nice to be noticed, she supposed, and it had been a long time since anyone had compliments her beauty. Other than some of Father's underlings, seeking to curry favor. Besides, it wasn't as though she had anywhere else to be.

The man gestured at the musicians. "How are you liking the music? I find a rousing song sets a fire in my belly."

She thought about the lyrics as she listened. "Maybe a little too optimistic, but appropriate. The Dragonborn has come." She listened for a moment more. "I'm not sure that evil has ended, though." Doubtless Velandryn would have some thoughts on that.

The man chuckled. "They're alright, if you've never heard better. I myself studied at the Bard's College, in Solitude." He inclined his head. "Mikael, Bard of Skyrim and singer of songs, at your service!" He reached across the table for her hand. "And might I know who I have the honor of addressing?"

His fingers brushed hers, and the touch set a wave of nausea rising in her stomach. She felt her vision swim, and her head grew light. He moved his hand as though he meant to caress hers, but she recoiled far faster than any mortal could emulate. "I'm sorry." She stood, nearly stumbling as she did so. "I have to go."

She heard him say something in protest, but she'd already ducked out the door. What's wrong with me? Nothing would have happened; the man's flirtations had seemed good-natured, not to mention she was more than capable of defending herself. So why am I running?

It wasn't just the touch. She'd been far closer with Velandryn time and again, and not felt this. Was it the intimacy? Nothing had happened, but his aim had been clear. To get closer. Which could only lead to one place. Iron, cold on skin. Stone, smooth. Flesh, warm. Pain, so sharp, like the screaming; BLOOD—

She turned, spinning in the street. No! She pulled her hood back in desperation, and the sudden pain of sunlight streaming onto her face brought her back to the here and now. The churning in her stomach was staying there, not rising into her throat. Her breaths were slowing, and as she blinked, she saw only the street before her.

The fit had passed. She stood there, attracting a few strange looks from passers-by, but unharmed. In place of panic came frustration, and an overwhelming feeling of helplessness. Why am I like this?

Evening was falling, and even looking to the west was painful. It had been a few days since she last fed, and even that short time was enough to make the setting sun a burning beacon that blinded her with pain if she so much as glanced in its direction. This is what I am. She couldn't go too long without remembering.

Well, it was what it was. She had made her choice, nodded when her father had asked, in somber tones, if she was willing to dedicate herself to Molag Bal. It was the reason she had so many gifts that lesser vampires lacked. A Daughter of Coldharbour. Her mother's name for the two of them. Mother and daughter, bound to Molag Bal.

She was heading up the hill again, towards the hall where everyone whispered about her. And yet it's the one place I feel safe in this city. Not for the walls or the guards or great dragon's skull hanging over the throne, but because of one person.

One infuriating elf.
Velandryn stroked his chin, where he could once more feel the beginnings of a beard. *I'll need to shave again soon.* It had nearly two weeks since Solitude, and soon others would be able to see his stubble as well. "Try it now."

Farengar gestured over the urn, which rose gently into the air. Below it, the array they'd been working on for the past day glowed gently, anchored by four soul gems. The urn blinked out of existence, then reappeared over a painted white circle on the stones at the far end of the room.

Unfortunately, it looked to be spinning in three different directions, none of which were compatible with one another. It wobbled, then cracked, and finally split apart. With a snap that echoed off the walls, pieces of it bounced off of the ceiling, floor and far wall. Farengar gave a little grunt of irritation. "Jhunal, not again!"

Velandryn sighed. "What do you think? Stabilization or transposition?"

Farengar was muttering to himself now, flipping through one of his books. "The issue is the same. Unless we want to apply portal theory, the arrays we're using rely on a reception conduit. Without that…"

Velandryn stopped listening. This was the fourth time they'd gone over this ground. He picked up one of the books lying about, and flipped to the page where he'd stuck a bookmark.

'**Aligned magicka, when passed through the Galerian-Lamr Array, forgoes previous attenuation in favor of alignment provided by adjacent structures.**' Below that sat a diagram of said filter, with a trio of possible surrounding structures, and a list of their effects. *With this, we might be able to stabilize the object on both ends.*

"Farengar, what are your thoughts on integrating a space-locked hold until the object's location has finished altering?"

A few minutes later, they flanked a circle somewhat modified from their previous attempt. The pot this time was thick cast iron, which might get dented if their trial failed again but hopefully would not shatter.

Farengar nodded at Velandryn, who reached out with his magicka, felt the soul gems, and eked out the barest trickle of power. He touched the edge of the array, and it began to glow.

There was a hum, then a sharp crack as the pot exploded in all directions. Fortunately, the wards in the array held, and Velandryn sighed as he looked down at the pile of twisted metal shards.

"Ah yes, so perhaps next time we don't try and hold it in place while moving it." *I really should have seen that coming.*

"We've made little progress, Dragonborn." Farengar was making another note in the experiment's journal. "What we are attempting flies in the face of every rule I can find on the use of teleportation from within an array."

Velandryn was forced to agree. "It seems we won't be able to upend one of the Four Axioms in an afternoon."

"Actually, I was meaning to talk to you about that. I don't think that you should be using such an outdated—"

"I'm not arguing over Mysticism with you, friend." Velandryn hoped his good humor was coming
through. "You can do as you like, but I went through the trouble of learning the Six Schools, so by Azura I'm keeping them!"

Farengar sighed. "As you will, Dragonborn." He closed the journal with a deliberate motion. "I am, however, prepared to say that you'll be walking to Ivarstead."

"As am I." Velandryn followed the Nord out of the chamber. *And here I was hoping I could spare myself another two weeks of tramping across Skyrim.* He'd seen the maps, and they only had two choices, neither of them good. The first was to approach Ivarstead from the north, which was not only longer but would send them through a region of Eastmarch that swung back and forth between Imperial and Stormcloak control. The other was to pass south through Riverwood and the ruins of Helgen, then brave mountain passes as winter fell upon them. He'd been captured on one of those roads, and Jarl Balgruuf had said that avalanches had closed Pale Pass and reduced the Legion presence to essentially nothing.

He pulled his mind from unpleasant options, and spared a thought for the poor woman he'd sent to Ivarstead to await his arrival. He had no doubt that Lydia would be furious when next they saw each other. He'd be a month late or more, and he hadn't thought to give them a means of communication. *Better for security, but our little detours truly did spiral out of control.*

Then, his mind swung to his other travelling companion, and the reason for his delay. *I wonder what Serana's been up to today?*

As he passed a window, he realized that the sun was getting low over the mountains to the west. He tapped Farengar on the shoulder, told him that he would be late for dinner, and turned down a hall he vaguely remembered from his last time in Dragonsreach. He climbed a narrow stairway, and emerged on a broad stone-tiled porch.

Overhead, an odd wooden contraption hung from the ceiling, perhaps some sort of shutter against inclement weather. Below the heavy beams and pulleys sat a patio of sorts, a massive hall whose western wall was missing, leaving it open to the sky. It rather gave the feeling of being in a man-made cave. Near the open edge was a long table, set with dishes and cups but no food. Velandryn wouldn't have enjoyed eating in so cold a place, but he could see how a Nord might find the view worth it.

Velandryn walked to the edge, feeling the wind wrap itself around him. He pulled on his magicka, warming his body, and looked out at the setting sun, just visible near the bulk of the keep. It was south of west this time of year, a grim reminder that winter would soon be upon them. Farther south still was the Throat of the World, where sat High Hrothgar, home of the Greybeards. Reach the mountain too late and the snow might close the path. Or, he could simply arrive at the temple, only to be stuck up there for the entire winter.

He sighed to himself. He'd come out here to watch the sunset and meditate on Azura, not bedevil himself with the problems he faced. He breathed in deeply, feeling the frigid air off the plains fill his lungs. *I'll be back out there soon.*

A sound from below caught his attention, and he looked over the edge. Someone was climbing the wall towards him, moving with a familiar grace and an equally familiar scroll case on her back.

Velandryn almost called out, but thought better of it as an idea came to him. With a cheery wave, he signaled the guards, and had them fall back to the inner door. He reached into a pocket, finding the bottle of sujamma the jarl had thoughtfully set aside for him upon his arrival. Then, he sat down at the table, poured two glasses, and waited.
Serana had chosen to climb a wall and enter Dragonsreach through the back porch precisely because she didn't want to have to deal with or answer to anyone right now. She had a lot on her mind, and the thought of standing there while a guard scrutinized her made her teeth hurt. So, of course, who should she run into but Velandryn Savani. *I thought I smelled his blood.*

The Dragonborn was seated at a long table, and waved cheerily when he saw her. "Enjoying the afternoon?"

A part of her wanted to be irritated at finding him here, but something inexplicable was warming her from the inside, and so she just smiled at him. "Well enough. Yourself?"

"As lovely as can be found in Skyrim. Come, sit!" He waved at the table.

Serana would have loved seeing the sun's descent, but knew full well that all she would see was blinding light and pain. Instead, she seated herself across from Velandryn, wincing at how strong the scent of his blood was this evening. Among other things. "Direct sunlight is...not great for me."

Velandryn's eyes widened slightly, but they also lightened, a sure tell that he was genuinely surprised. "My apologies. I'd completely forgotten." He even sounded as though he meant it, which was a minor wonder in itself. They were getting along well, but he was keenly—and obviously—aware of her vampirism at all times. He shook his head. "Here. Something to take the edge off after a long day." He paused. "I'm just assuming yours was as frustrating as mine."

Serana chuckled. "So, we're walking to Ivarstead?" She didn't move to take the cup; alcohol did little for her, and she only ever drank to be polite in mixed company. With Velandryn, she felt no such need for pretense. *And he knows that. He must have had a lot on his mind to have forgotten.*

With a muttered oath, Velandryn took a long drink from his cup. "Looks like. Without a destination array, it's useless." He pointed at her. "Drink. It's a good vintage."

She snorted. "I doubt anything you're drinking is going to quench my thirst." She could see the guards, standing far away but still within line of sight, and so left the rest unsaid.

Velandryn laughed. "I'm drinking a mediocre sujamma. You, on the other hand, have perhaps the rarest vintage in Tamriel."

Her eyes widened as she realized what he meant. She'd grown so used to the smell of his blood that its unusual strength right now had hardly even registered. She pulled the cup towards her, careful not to let it spill, and looked in.

"— for over forty years, kept safe in the temples of Baan Malur and tempered by the bitter frosts of Skyrim—"

She waved a hand at him to shut up—*he really does think he's much too clever*—and raised the glass. The scent of his blood washed over her, and she drank as slowly as her thirst would allow. Once more, she tasted hot iron and felt heat rush into her. *The only fire I'll ever touch again.* And, as ever, the fear of how good she felt.

*Another chain, this one binding me to Velandryn Savani.* But there was nothing to be done about it. She had forsaken her people and her god, and in their place she had a single friend, whose very blood had the ability to drive her to distraction. Not the best situation. Still, though, it was what it was. And Velandryn had, thus far, not made any move to leverage his blood against her. So, she finished the cup, and resolved to worry about the future when it came.

When she opened her eyes, Velandryn was looking at her, his expression inscrutable. "Can I help
you, Dragonborn?"

He shook his head. "Not with this one."

She sighed. He'd been like this for days, with these lapses into silence and brooding. "Whatever it is that's bothering you, out with it!"

Velandryn didn't speak for a long moment, then leaned back and put his hands over his eyes. "It's not a single thing, not really." His hair hung loose around his face, and he absentmindedly ran his hands through it as he drew it back behind his head. He tied it loosely with a length of ragged cord, clearly thinking hard all the while. "I would call it... a malaise, I suppose. Like something is wrong, out of place, inside me." He tapped his chest. "I'll be laughing, or talking, and then," he snapped his fingers, "a pit opens in my gut. All I think about is what I've become. A Dragon, of all the mad things. As if it wasn't bad enough that I'm a Tongue on top of it."

Serana's breath caught in her throat at the look on his face. She was torn between wanting to laugh and knowing that would only damage the fragile relationship they'd built. "That's what it was? I thought you were wrestling with some dragon soul or the like!" In the months after her transformation, she too had been haunted by a sense of wrongness at what she had become. "Take it from me. You're not what you were, and that's not an easy thing to be." She shrugged. "You get used to it, eventually." For the most part.

The sunset behind her cast amber tones across his grey skin, highlighting the sharp bones beneath. "At least you had a choice." His voice was low, and she wasn't even sure that he knew he'd spoken. Did I? From the moment she'd beheld the altar, she'd known how it would end. Was there a choice? "I like you, but I will thank you not to speak on matters which you do not understand." Even she was surprised by how cold her voice came out.

Velandryn's eyes flared, and his mouth tightened as he leaned forward with an intensity that took Serana aback. His mouth opened, but nothing came out. He paused, as if searching for a word, then pressed his lips together. He nodded, and sank back against his stone seat. His head leaned back, Velandryn Savani stared above and behind her, at the sky she couldn't see. He said nothing.

A part of Serana wanted to apologize, though she had done nothing wrong. They had reached an uneasy peace about her vampirism, but now, it felt newly fragile. He'd said something foolish. But so did I. She hadn't needed to tell him they were alike, perhaps that was—

"I'm sorry." If Velandryn's voice had been low before, now it was almost a whisper. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

She looked up. Velandryn's gaze had come back down to her once more. She smiled, as much as she could given what she was feeling. "So am I. I don't know what you're going through, not really."

He gave one of his sharp barks of laughter. "I don't know about that. As much as anyone can, I guess."

She thought on that for a moment, then nodded. "Just, about how I became...what I am...I...I don't—"

Velandryn raised a hand. "I shouldn't have assumed. Whatever happened, it's in the past."

It wasn't, though. Not for me. Time was a funny thing. It had been four thousand years, but inside her it happened over and over. It's always now. Still, she nodded and smiled. "Thank you."
Velandryn didn't look fully pleased, however. His eyes were darker than normal, which couldn't be good. "How do we avoid this, Serana?"

That got her attention. He rarely used her name when they were alone together. "Avoid what?"

"This…anger, this discomfort." He pressed a hand against his eyes. "Right now, I feel as though I'm about to drive you away, that you'll go off and pursue your own quest."

"No!" The thought was almost painful, though she couldn't quite pinpoint why. She laughed a little, though, again, there was nothing really funny about the thought. "If you want to drive me off, you'll have to do a lot better than saying one slightly insensitive thing."

Velandryn nodded. "Somehow, it's easier to pour you a cup of my blood than it is to think about who you really are." He sighed. "I'm sorry. You deserve a better friend than me."

She gaped at him. "You…you…" words failed her. Is this what he thinks? She wanted to grab him by the scruff of the neck and shake him for being a damned fool, but that would only do more harm. "You think that bothers me?"

His eyes held something she hadn't seen before, a sort of pain that even she didn't recognize. "There are maybe four people in Skyrim that I value, and you top the list. I keep hurting you, and I don't know how to stop."

She opened her mouth, ready to tell him off for this maudlin nonsense he was spouting, but Velandryn held up a hand. "I've seen how you act around me. They trained us to read body language at the Temple, you know. Just now, drinking my blood almost made you ill."

Serana looked up, alarmed, but the guards were far away. Plus, Velandryn was speaking quietly enough that anyone besides her would have had a very hard time hearing him. Still, she cast her spell of silence, just in case. Then, she realized what it was he'd said.

"Oh, you poor, sweet fool!" Still, she'd made up her mind. Her stomach was roiling, and something in her that thought it was still human wanted to vomit. "It's not that."

"What?"

"The reason I've been reticent around your blood. It's nothing you've done." She didn't want to share this with him. She didn't want to share it with anyone. But maybe she'd be able to find some peace if he knew. "And after what he's said, I don't think he'd use it against me."

She took a deep breath. Even though she'd resolved to say it, the words wouldn't come out. "I do this, it goes from just being my problem to something. He would know everything. And what else would it mean? He'd offered her his blood while they were traveling together, but if he knew the full extent of it… How long before he refuses?"

Still, she'd made up her mind. Her stomach was roiling, and something in her that thought it was still human wanted to vomit. "It's not you." Nothing for it but to say it. "Your blood is too much. Too powerful. I think… I don't think I can stop."

Velandryn's eyes were full of confusion as he leaned forward, but Serana knew she couldn't stop talking now. "It's…the dragon blood. I think. It's more potent than anything else I've ever known." She closed her eyes for a moment. "You're telling it all. Keep going!" "I can tell where you are by the scent of your blood alone. Ever since I first drank, I've been able to close my eyes, stopper my ears, and still point at you if you're within a thousand paces." Further if the wind is right. "I'm not angry with you, Velandryn, I'm terrified. I don't want to drink anyone else's blood anymore, and it isn't just because I don't want to hurt them!" She knew she'd lost her composure, but she didn't know
what else to do. "I abandoned everyone in my life to have the right to choose my own path, and now I'm like a starving beast if I go two days without drinking your blood! I don't want to be bound by anyone, but I can feel it happening! I want to travel with you, but I can't put my fate in another's hands again!" All the fear that she'd been holding back rushed forth, the thoughts of what could happen should the worst come to pass.

With horror, Serana realized she was on the verge of tears. She squeezed her eyes shut, took a deep breath, and swallowed several times. When she looked, Velandryn's eyes were on her, dark but clear and full of concern.

"This is why you've been upset." His words were, as they'd been all evening, quiet. "I wish I had some words of wisdom or kindness to offer, but I don't have much experience with this one, and I don't recall the Temple covering it either."

She laughed a little. He wasn't angry. In fact, he wasn't showing much emotion at all. "Is that all? I tell you that a vampire is hungering for your blood, and you make a joke?"

Velandryn gave a slow shrug. "I've known what you were since the moment you woke up. I've long since made peace with that fact." Sitting back, he sipped from his own drink. "I've seen you tear through people like they were made of paper, and wrest yourself back from a bloody frenzy. I might be able to stop you, but I'm not naïve enough to believe I would live through the attempt." A smile, deep in his eyes. "I've been trusting you since you came back from Castle Volkihar. Why should that change?"

He means it. She felt a twisting in her gut. He trusts me. Knowing full well what she was, he had chosen to believe her, and travel with her. "You mean that? If I left, you'd let me go? Trust me to do the right thing?"

"I'd worry." Velandryn did not sound overly concerned. "I rather like having you around, and you're more fun to tease than Lydia." The warmth in his eyes sparked something in Serana's heart. "Besides, you're far too virtuous for your own good. A vampire could get in trouble, being a good person in Skyrim."

"Oh, don't worry. You're stuck with me." Serana found herself smiling. "We had a deal, and besides, I worry about what you'd get up to if left to your own devices."

"A damn sight less trouble, for one." Velandryn stretched his arms above his head, giving a grunt as something popped in his back. "Ancestors, but I've been too still today." He shook his head. "Skyrim's ruined me. One day studying teleportation, and I'm already getting restless."

"Did you actually figure anything out, or just find ways to not get us where we need to go?"

He failed to dignify that with even the smallest chuckle, which she felt was a bit unfair. "Regrettably, no. We'll reach Ivarstead later rather than sooner." He tossed a journal across the table to her. "Take a look. Is there any vampire spell or First Era trick you can think of that'll substitute for a target array?"

Serana glanced over the pages of circles, magicka diagrams, and writing in three different languages. Not for the first time, she marveled at the fact that the Imperial tongue came so easily to her in both its written and spoken forms. Whether because of her mother's skill with the array that held her or the Elder Scroll, it came to her as easily as the language they now called Ancient Nordic. With her somewhat limited knowledge of Daedric, and given Dunmeris' similarities to Aldmeris, she could get a pretty good idea of what approaches Velandryn had tried. The actual sketchwork was unfamiliar to her, pulling as it did from traditions she'd never seen, but she only
needed the broad strokes to know what Velandryn was thinking.

"I don't think any of these will work." She closed the book and slid it back across the table. "Sorry. Couldn't be done then, and it looks like it still can't be done now. I think you'd need a portal."

"And I doubt there's five people in Skyrim who can just go conjuring those in this day and age." Velandryn's words were tinged with fatalistic regret, and Serana found herself nodding. Even in her time, it had been exceedingly rare to find a mage with the power to open a gateway through space. She'd certainly never met one.

Then, as she sat there, a thought came to her. "Maybe there is another way." She grabbed the journal, and flipped through until she found the page she was after. "This array. Does it work?"

Velandryn rose and moved to stand behind her. He looked down over her shoulder, and she saw him nod out of the corner of her eye. "Yes, but that one was designed to be a target. We were trying—"

"Yeah, I can see. Long-range array projection." It was a novel idea, if impractical. She ran a finger over the lines, thinking. "Strip out the runic stabilizers, since you won't be projecting it from another point, and that's a very simple array." She paused for effect, enjoying the slight tension as Velandryn leaned over her, ever so slightly. "Simple enough to draw freehand. In a cave, or a mountainside."


"Oh. Of course he didn't realize, because she hadn't given him all the pieces. "You know I'm fast, right?"

He had moved back around to the other side of the table, and now just stared at her. "Obviously."

Serana sighed. "I'm really fast. In battle, I'm thinking about a dozen different things, and trying to do precise movement. Give me an open plain, enough blood, and a night to run, and," she shrugged, "I can have an array drawn halfway to Ivarstead by morning."

Now she got the reaction she'd been looking for. It was subtle, but Velandryn's jaw might as well have dropped open. "It's over four hundred miles!" Then, he visibly caught himself. "No, that's roads. But still, even if you were flying, it's at least two, three hundred easily, and I don't think you can go over the Monahven."

"The what?"

Velandryn blinked. "The Throat of the World. I think even you would have to go around."

"Again, I'm telling you that you've never seen me at my fastest. My mother and I got from Castle Volkihar to Dimhollow Crypt in the span of two nights, and we waited until it was full dark to leave."

Velandryn stood without a word, gesturing for her to follow him. He led her into Dragonsreach, away from the sunset and the encroaching night, and to a part of the keep she'd never been. He took her to a nondescript door, but one that had a soldier in the armor of the jarl's guard standing in front of it.

The man was staring into nothing, but jerked out his stupor as they drew near. He watched them approach, and when Velandryn stopped before him, drew himself up to an impressive height. "This
"I am the Dragonborn, Velandryn Savani, Thane of Whiterun." The man's mouth went slack at
Velandryn's words, but the Dragonborn continued, unheeding. "Do I need to go find Irileth, or will
you let me pass?" At that moment, though the Nord overtook Velandryn by what had to be almost a
full foot, there was no question who dominated the space.

The soldier saluted, panic stamped across his face. "Kyne keep you, Dragonborn!" He got out of
their way and stood against the far wall, making a valiant effort to look as though he hadn't just
challenged a thane of the hold. *Must be new.* Most of the guards—the ones inside the keep, at least
—seemed to know him by sight.

Velandryn, for his part, ignored the guard. He gestured at Serana. "Come on." Silently, she
followed.

Inside, they found a map of Skyrim laid across a table. Red and blue flags of varying size dotted
the province, along with a number of yellow ones around Whiterun Hold. The walls were covered
in shelves, many of which seemed to hold more maps, rolled tightly and labeled with dates and
locations. Serana was seized by a sudden urge to go start opening them up and seeing what each
one held.

Velandryn tapped one finger near the center of the table. "Whiterun." He drew it over nearly a
quarter of the length of the paper, to a small house inked at the foot of a massive mountain.
"Ivarstead." he looked at her, and raised a single eyebrow, a gesture she'd never before seen from
him. "You can do this?"

She looked down at the map. Slowly, she reached out and from her father's castle to Solitude, then
down to Morthal and across the mountains. She thought of those two nights, of soaring through the
air between each leap. Of the form—

—She would need to take the form. She'd only ever done it for those two nights, at her mother's
insistence. She'd hated it then, and the toll it had taken on her. They'd fallen upon a farmhouse, and
—

*We did what we needed to do.* She would always remember their screams as her mother fell upon
them, and the churning in her own belly as she'd fed. *The last time I ever drank from a child.* Pain
beyond imagining, looking at their bodies lying cold and still on the floor of the hut.

But it had been enough. They'd reached Dimhollow, and with a speed impossible for any save the
Vampire Lords.

*And now I'm going to do it again.* The thought held less terror for her than she'd thought it would.
For a night. Nobody would see her do it. Nobody has to know. She wouldn't have to see it. And
when it's done…

"I can do it, but I'll need blood. As much as you can give me."

Out of the corner of her eye, Serana saw Velandryn's mouth tighten by the slightest amount, then
relax. He was still for a moment, then nodded. "Of course." By the way he was holding himself, it
almost appeared he wanted to say something more, but then he shook his head. "Once you find a
place to do it, how accurately can you draw the array? I don't want to come out missing half my
limbs."

The book made it look simple enough, but Serana knew better than to trust in that. "I should be
okay." She raised her hand, looked at the image, visualized the lines, the flow of magicka, then pushed.

On the floor of the chamber, the array sprang into being, shimmering faintly. Serana nodded, satisfied. "There we go."

"You cast it." Velandryn's voice contained something odd, a note of what sounded like disbelief. "You cast a teleportation array." She turned to see his eyes boring into her. "Who are you?"

"Of course I cast it. Much easier than drawing it." It would have taken too long to not only draw it on the ground, but then make sure everything was correct. It was far simpler to cast it out of raw magicka. Even holding it in place was a small price to pay for the guaranteed precision. Make it in the mind, then in the world.

Velandryn was slowly shaking his head. "And, just for my own curiosity...did you call on your vampiric abilities in some way?"

"Of course, I just—oh." She'd used blood to enhance her focus and fine-tune her control. "Fair enough. Not everyone can do it." She studied Velandryn. If he'd become one of us, how powerful could he be? "I hope I'm not going to get a lecture about using vampire powers now."

A short laugh. "I try to avoid hypocrisy where I can." He took the journal, pulled a sheet of blank paper from the table, and began sketching the circle. "Let's get you a copy, some sort of signaling mechanism, maybe a confirmation spell. You want a soul gem to sustain it?"

She demurred. The majority of power was going to be from the sending array. All hers needed to do was provide a location. After consulting with Farengar, they devised something that should do the trick, and left the mage to get the thing drawn in his workshop.

Velandryn closed the door to his rooms, and sighed. "I'd like a day or two to check everything out. Do you want to leave tomorrow evening?"

"I was going to leave now, actually." The night had barely started, and the longer she had to make the trek, the less she'd need to call upon...that. She wouldn't give it another day, though. I know what Velandryn meant, feeling stuck here.

"It's a few hours past dark. I know you're fast, but Whiterun Plain is huge, and I'm not sure you want to be caught there by the sunrise."

She recalled the map. "I'll be fine." She looked up at him. "If I send the signal around sunrise, will you be ready?"

Velandryn hesitated. "The sending portal is complex, and needs about four Grand-tier soul gems to power it. I'm not sure we can scribe it on the move. I should probably just travel to you once you're near Ivarstead."

Serana shook her head. "I'm going to be pulling deep for this." She winced as she spoke the next words. "I'll need blood after, and probably the next night before I leave." The Dragonborn's blood was potent, but the bestial form granted to pure-bloods and those they favored required a momentous amount to sustain. "I can't afford to lose control, so I need you nearby."

Velandryn said nothing. Each moment of silence was another bit of ice in her belly. What if he says no? She was essentially asking him to serve as her blood thrall.

"On the mountain, you said that blood restored by magic loses its potency." His voice wasn't angry,
"Yeah, I'm not saying it'll be delicious, but it should keep me going."

Another pause, so long that Serana began to worry. "Velandryn?"

"This is going to take a toll on you, isn't it?"

She nodded. "Yeah. It won't be easy, but it's the best way."

Velandryn sighed. "As you say. I'll look into potions of replenishment tonight as well. Might help dull the edge a bit."

She wasn't sure if he meant for him or for her. "Thank you." It didn't matter much.

"I'll have everything ready to go by morning." He was silent for a long moment. "You're certain you're okay with this?"

Whether he'd noticed her discomfort or was simply checking on her, she couldn't say. However, the very fact that he'd asked put a warm feeling in her belly.

"I'm good." She smiled at the thought. I'm not even lying. "But you'll owe me after this one."

Velandryn laughed. "I can live with that, though I think you'll be drinking enough of me that we should be calling it even. Now, let's get this done."

Arriving at Ivarstead was so uneventful that it felt like a letdown. They simply strolled into the town, Illia looking around with wide eyes. Were it not for the leviathan bulk of the Throat of the World dominating the western horizon, it could have been any of a dozen towns Lydia had seen in her life. One thing missing, however, was any sign of Velandryn Savani.

Ivarstead was barely larger than one of the farming hamlets that dotted the Whiterun plains, though a number of decaying structures indicated that it must once have boasted a more respectable population. As it was, Lydia could not only see where the Riften road entered the town, but turn halfway about and also see where it left. The Greybeards aren't what they once were.

A single inn, whose sign named it the Vilemyr, looked to be the only accommodation the town offered. It, like everything here, seemed a bit shabby, but when Lydia opened the door it was warm and clean within. The innkeeper Wilhelm hadn't seen hide nor hair of any Dark Elves, but offered Lydia and Illia beds for the night. He glanced upwards as he spoke, and drew his hand over his chest in a sickle-shaped mark of reverence. "Kyne keep us, but wind's been something fierce off the Throat of late."

Lydia accepted his offer and handed over a few coins, but Illia demurred. Lydia offered to pay, but the young witch took Lydia's hand in both of hers, face very serious. "Thank you for everything you've done for me, but I have to keep moving. Find a way to use my powers the way I should be. Make people's lives better."

Lydia found herself smiling. "Then you've chosen a good path. Kyne keep you, Illia."

"And you, Lydia." The young witch gave her a quick hug, and then was gone.

She'd been a fine traveling companion, and Lydia suddenly felt a little lonely without anyone by her side. She went to the counter to order some dinner, and asked if there was anywhere else in
town Velandryn might possibly be staying. Wilhelm pulled a bowl of soup and a mix of grilled vegetables together, but couldn't think of anywhere else a traveler might stay. "You could ask Temba, perhaps. Her mill overlooks the road down to Eastmarch, so she'd see anyone who came in." He placed a thick slice of bread in front of her, and rubbed his hands together over a brazier. "Don't get many visitors this way, though, 'cept for the ones going to see the Greybeards. And not many of them these days, what with the war and all." He looked up as the door opened, and his face brightened. "Lynly! Come to play for us?"

Lydia turned, and tried not to stare. A woman stood there, cradling a lute and smiling sheepishly. "Only if you don't mind the noise." Her voice had a musical quality about it, though her words had something of a Riften accent. Her hair was the color of wheat ripe for the harvest, and framed her face wonderfully.

"Gods, woman, stop staring!"

Lynly noticed Lydia's gaze, and her smile vanished in an instant. She swallowed, looked down, and then met Lydia's eyes again. It had all happened so quickly that the housecarl could almost think she'd imagined the whole thing.

Then she came over to Lydia's table, smiling again. "A traveler? We don't see many of you these days. What brings you to Ivarstead?"

Lydia swallowed her mouthful of food, hoping she wasn't blushing. "Mother Mara! It had been far too long since she'd done anything but look at another woman, but this wasn't the time for such thoughts. "I'm meeting a…friend of mine here. A Dark Elf, named Velandryn Savani. Have you seen him?"

Lynly shook her head, setting that beautiful hair to waving. "Sorry, not seen a soul. And I'd reckoned we'd have seen anyone on the road."

Fastred. The name rang a bell. Mara's priestess. Lydia unhooked the Amulet of Mara from where it sat on her belt, placing it on the table and running her fingers idly over its surface. "Well, I suppose I'll wait here, then."

Lynly said nothing, and Lydia looked up to see the bard glancing away, tears unshed in her eyes. Lydia rose, trying to apologize for whatever offense she'd caused, but Lynly just shook her head. "It's nothing, really! Just…it's nothing."

It didn't take a genius to figure out a few reasons why a young woman might be upset by the sight of Mara's amulet, so Lydia said nothing more. She did, however, resolve to keep an eye out for any way to cheer the bard up. That, and dealing with whatever nonsense Fastred is tangling with. Maybe the two of them were in love, and couldn't be together. Or it's a triangle, or one of them loves someone else, or…

At least she wouldn't be bored waiting for her thane to arrive.

Serana checked her small bag of supplies, smiling with what she hoped was reassurance. "I'll see you in the morning, Velandryn."

"El'tei dirn a bresseth kuin." Classical Aldmeris. The sun shall not shine until I see you again.

She laughed. "I should be so lucky." She stood there for a moment longer, almost wanting to do more. To signal in some way how important it was, what they had. The only friend I've got.

They stood perhaps three steps apart, close enough that, if either of them wanted, they could be upon the other in a moment. I need his blood. And yet, he'd made no motion. Has he forgotten? It
was always Velandryn who made the offer, now that they'd fallen into their little routine. *Or is this a test?* It would be a step back in their relationship, but not entirely out of character for him to wait for her to make the first move. See how desperate she was.

Still, she needed that blood. He was facing away from her, doing something on the table. She cleared her throat, the smallest sound she could make.

He turned, cup in his hand. The other glowed faintly with the residue of healing magic. "Did you say something?"

Serana blinked away something that had gotten in her eye. "Not a thing." That wasn't exactly a lie, but now she seemed to be having a bit of trouble breathing normally. *What's wrong with me?* Maybe it had something to do with drinking his blood.

She took the cup, inhaling deeply to clear her head. *There we go.* The scent of the blood became her sole point of focus. When she had finished, she somehow paradoxically felt depleted. *And I'm still not full.*

Perhaps it was because of what she was going to do tonight, but she felt as though she needed more. *But I can't ask for that.* Although, if there was any time where it would be acceptable...

Hating herself as she did so, she held out the cup again. "Any chance I could get a little more? I'm going to be doing a lot tonight, and I'd rather not run dry."

Velandryn took the cup again. "It'll likely be weaker this time, since I just healed. Apologies."

His worry was touching, but Serana cared not at all. The potency was such that the slight decrease in this cup still made the liquid far superior to any other mortal's she'd ever tasted. When she finished it, she could easily have downed a third, but she figured there was a limit to how much she could ask.

They fell silent then, the moment companionable if not totally comfortable. Serana wanted to believe she was just imagining it, but somehow she knew that Velandryn was on edge. *And I can't blame him.* This whole thing felt as though it could collapse in a moment.

Then, wanting desperately to say something, anything, to make him understand, she turned. As if in a dream, she made him promise to be ready at sunrise, and picked up her pack. She opened the door, walked out into the hall, and headed for the porch where she'd come in before, all the while fighting the urge to turn around and go back into the room. *I don't know what I would say, though.*

When she emerged into the night, it was to find three people already there. The two guards, as she'd expected, but also a Dunmer who fairly radiated disapproval. Irileth waved at the guards. "The two of you are dismissed." They bowed and headed inside. She turned to regard Serana. "This had better work, vampire."

"Your court wizard, your thane, and I all found it suitable." Serana checked the night wind. *Cool, under a cloudless sky. The moons are approaching new.* That was good. She didn't want to have to worry about being seen.

"Savani thinks he's twice as smart as he is, Farengar's convinced that the Dragonborn has the wisdom of the ancients, and you're a vampire who came back instead of one of my favorite guards. If this actually bears fruit, then I might consider trusting you three the next time you cook up something like this."

Serana studied the city and the plains. *I could probably make it out of the city just by going along
the walls. Most mortals wouldn't make a twenty-foot drop, which gave her the edge. The
Housecarl's words registered then, and she sighed. "Well, if it doesn't, at least one of us probably
won't be your problem ever again. Silver linings, right?"

Irileth's glare was significantly less enjoyable than Velandryn's. *In hindsight, maybe tamp down
the joking with this one.* "Believe me, vampire, if anything happens to Thane Savani, you'd best
pray I find you before Lydia does."

Serana grunted, not much liking the thought of that. Then, she realized what was really going on
here. "There's really no cause for worry. We have safeguards and a complete rejection pathway.
Anything goes wrong, Velandryn just gets to Ivarstead the slow way." She hesitated. "I won't let
anything happen to him." She tried for a smile. "I know I'm not your favorite person, but I promise
that I'll keep him safe. After we meet up with Lydia, he'll be the best-guarded elf in Skyrim."

Irileth didn't smile, but her nod was slow and thoughtful. "Good. Whiterun needs him, and we need
him trained." She studied Serana, eyes inscrutable. "Since you claim to be such a virtuous soul, see
if you can't keep him from gallivanting off this time, hmm?"

Serana had to laugh at that. "We'll see."

Another nod, and to Serana's shock, Irileth actually held out her hand. Serana remembered the inn
earlier, but clasped the housecarl's arm in the old Nord way nonetheless. The touch brought
nothing but the feel of rough skin and firm muscle beneath. Irileth's grip was firm. "Travel well,
vampire."

"May the Ladies watch this hall, and keep you well in their names." She doubted the Imperials kept
to the old ways, but that was a strong blessing. *Even if I have a different god now.*

With the housecarl watching, she leapt from the edge of Dragonsreach, landing as lightly as she
could atop the wall below. She ran along its length until she reached a portion where the stones had
begun to crumble, and jumped out again. She landed on a shadowed patch of earth, where the
backs of a half-dozen houses formed a secluded square. She looked around for a moment, then got
her bearings and leapt once more.

Back on the walls, though this was the lower wall that enclosed the city proper and separated it
from the markets below. She passed a guard doing his patrols; he gaped as she passed. A railed
platform lined with torches rose ahead, she planted a foot on the planks and pushed off and out,
calling on her blood. If anyone looked up, they would see her. As she called the blood, she could
not bring herself to care.

Landing on a rooftop—wood, not thatch—her next jump was to an empty balcony. From there, it
was only one more leap, and she touched down into soft soil just beyond a wooden stable. The
earth smelled of beasts and hay, and the air around her was pregnant with the thousand scents of
the unwashed masses of the Whiterun Markets.

Before her were still more buildings and camps, but they had begun to spread out. Whiterun did not
truly begin or end so much as it dissipated into nothingness, but she had enough room to run
without worrying about knocking anyone over. People might see, though out here none were
straying far from their fires, and most looked to have already tucked themselves away for the night.

Less than ten minutes later, she found herself alone enough that she began looking for a place to
transform. She headed south from the road, where her sharp vision in the dark picked out an alcove
by a stream. She ducked into it, and began stripping off her armor. She folded it neatly into her
pack, and pulled out a rather shapeless garment she'd found in the basements. Her transformation
would shred anything else, and this way she wouldn't have to be naked when she turned back. She laced up the pack, then checked each knot. *Wouldn't do to have it come undone.*

*It churned.*

She reached down, into herself, below every thought and desire she acknowledged. It was always down there, waiting for her.

*So hungry.*

She fed it then. Fed it her attention, her intent. Fed it herself, all that she was. *Set me free!*

Serana's skin did not tear, but pain lanced along her arms and legs as they deformed. Her back buckled as wings sprouted forth. She could feel her face changing, the bones and muscles twisting and writhing in grotesque mockeries of emotion.

And then, she was done. Serana, but not her. A passenger in her own flesh. Panting, rising, Serana beheld herself in the water that flowed past.

It was as she remembered. Everything human about her form, subsumed by the monster whose flesh she now inhabited. Every inch of it, a foul marriage of her own features and that of the creature that had violated her upon the altar that night. Ultimate power, in the name of Molag Bal.

The memories were upon her again, but she forced them down with a fury born of desperation. If she lost herself here, she might never wake up. She could feel Velandryn's blood within her, and she pulled on it desperately, using it to counterbalance the fear and pain rising within her.

*This is what I am.* The thought came unbidden, and she forced it back down. This...thing...was a part of her, but not her. *It isn't!*

The pack was picked up, and tied around the waist. The form's strength was such that the weight utterly failed to register. A Volkihar stood there, and stretched. Wings extended to their full width, and hands with their long-taloned fingers reached for the sky. *How foul.*

She thought of Ivarstead, and the form began to run. Each step moving forward and up, where wings caught the air to glide back down at the speed and direction of her choosing. As she fell into her rhythm and every motion accelerated, it all smoothed into a blur of motion. She watched the ground move below, and the stars shine above.

The plains were not empty. When a farmhouse drew near, a mighty leap cleared it without a hint to those within. When soldiers drew up on the road, it was the work of a moment to avoid them. Each time, hunger rose within. *I could feed.* When that happened, she felt the dragon's blood—Velandryn's blood—deep within, and focused on its warmth until the urge faded.

Time was an odd thing, passing at it pleased. Sometimes Serana was excruciatingly aware of each moment burning away, and urged still more speed out of the flesh and bone of the Lord's Form. Others, she would realize she was far from when last she'd noticed her surroundings, or spend what seemed like an hour lost in her perpetual turmoil only to realize the whole thing had happened in the span of a single stride. Still, the land passed with speed greater than any horse, perhaps faster even than a dragon could achieve. The Master's gifts.

But the gifts of Molag Bal were bitter things, and the hunger was never far. The battle was omnipresent, the urge to break off and feed to her heart's content. But she persevered, and the great body bounded onward.
Sometimes, those on the roads glanced upwards, doubtless feeling the passing of some presence at massive speed. She wondered if they thought it was a dragon. I would, if I didn't know better. And were it not her controlling this beast, they would be in far more danger than any dragon could threaten. The worst they can do is kill you.

The Throat of the World was close now, its peak easily obscuring most of the southern sky. Her path took her into its foothills, where the rough terrain posed little problem. In truth, the peaks meant that it was easier to leap from one to the other. She was pushing the capabilities of this form farther than she ever had before, clearing entire valleys in a single leap.

The plains of Whiterun had been swallowed by forests and ridges, and the lights she saw now were from military camps rather than farmhouses or hamlets. What villages she could see were meager things, a few pinpricks of light amongst the black that threatened to swallow them. Of the war, she saw only a few camps, and most had Stormcloak banners and warriors sitting around their tents. To the north, once, there was a fortress that had red banners, and men in armor walking the walls. She gave all of them a wide berth, and pushed on.

To the south, something was rising, a wall of earth that only grew as it drew closer. She wrenched the body to a stop atop a crumbling stone structure set into a cliff, ignoring the faint pulse of some magical ritual far below. Snow crunched beneath a heavy foot, but rough skin grasped the slick stone beneath, and held firm. Eyes, sharper even than what Serana could ordinarily muster, glared forward. That cliff. It had to be hundreds of paces high, and the maps she'd pored over had told her that this could be only one thing. The Rift Wall. On paper, it had been a line, marked by a few crossed hatches and notes indicating elevation gain. Here, it blotted out the southern sky.

The sky. To the east, black had faded to grey above the distant mountains. She didn't know how long she had, and threw the body off the cliff with something approaching panic. I can't be caught in the open. She needed some cave or ruin, but in truth any place sheltered from the sun where they wouldn't be disturbed would do.

However, every possibility failed her. Each cave held beasts, every ruin stank of bandit blood or mages' rituals. Precious minutes fled as she hunted frantically, until she found nothing before her but the wall of earth and rock that led upwards to the Rift. The sky was lightening steadily, gold beneath the blueish grey, and moving higher would only bring the sun closer. I leave the ground, and I risk it all. This form could not exist under the light of Magnus-the-Sun, and she did not care to know what would happen when the two met.

I have no choice. She had seen some sort of alcove fifty or so feet above. Clawed hands dug into the rock, and wings beat the air to drive the body upwards. It was the work of only a moment, and she beheld the alcove. Too small! There was a tiny space at the back, but there was no way it could —

Her side exploded with agony, and grey flesh burst into brilliant golden flame. Screaming, she dove forward, clawing at the back wall. Stone shattered as she pressed the form into the shadow, but its skin was blistered and peeling away. I need to change back!

But she couldn't. Even hidden from the direct light of the sun, the form rebelled and refused to recede. It was growing harder to think clearly, and she could feel the sun rising, even on the other side of the wall. I don't have time! She had to focus. She couldn't cast the array like this. First things first.

The form had to go. Every second in its skin was agony. She thought of her body, her real body, the flesh and bone that was hers and hers alone. My skin, my eyes, me!
Unbidden, thoughts of the altar rose. *Not your body.* This form might be more obviously monstrous, but every inch of her belonged to the Master, now and forever. *You cannot forget what you are.*

What she was. A vampire. She had done so much work to distance herself from her family, but it was there, in her, all the same. Why change back? She would always be this thing on the inside. Better to stay here. Velandryn would have to walk, but it would be better for him to be rid of her. *All I have to do is pull down this cave on myself.* She'd be free of Velandryn, of his blood, of that desire to be more than what she was. *I pull this down, I won't wake.* She didn't have enough blood left. Sleep or death, either way her pain was done for now. Her wounds might even destroy her, though it was a slim chance. *Or I go back out there, throw myself into the sun.* It would ravage this body, and offered a greater chance of killing her forever. And even if it did, what then? Her soul belonged to Molag Bal.

She couldn't die yet. *I have to stop him.* She focused inward, towards the pain that was always with her. Except now, there was a bit of blood, a warmth that hadn't been there before. Velandryn Savani. She saw him, face serene, upending her world as he spoke words that echoed and roared. Facing a dragon, eyes blazing and his whole body alive with power. A knife drawn across his palm, giving her the most precious gift he had.

*I have to keep my word.* She'd said she would bring him here.

*I have to.*

She raised a hand, focusing on the array, on Velandryn on the other side of it.

*So beautiful.* She wanted his blood more than she'd ever wanted anything, and she hated herself for it.

*So hungry.*

She focused, talons twisting back, mottled grey hide giving way to smooth white skin. *The array!*

It was mathematical, each segment of curve inscribed with between one and nine angles. It calmed her, to think of its forms. But it was complex, and so she summoned power from the rapidly dwindling blood that remained, sharpening her mind and letting forms fall into place atop each other. The inner array bled into the outer, and then curved back in on itself. *So beautiful.*

The magicka would flow like blood along the arrays, pumped by the distant heart in Whiterun. Velandryn would step into it, born to her on a tide of blood—

She'd lost it. The array collapsed in her mind. Cursing, she drew upon the last dregs of the blood within her. The array sprung forward once more, and this time shimmered into being just above the rock floor, ready to receive its passenger. However, the last of the blood was gone, and the hunger hit her with all its force.

**He would be stepping through, full of blood. ***No!*  

She pressed herself to the back wall, breathing heavily. She dared not reach out, dared not even think about moving towards the array. She had never been this hungry, had never felt this stabbing hunger before. She had drained herself dry to travel the distance she had, and now everything else was subsumed by a single urge.

She huddled against the stone, almost sobbing from pain and fear. *This was a mistake.* She'd lost control, but never like this. Never had she been so lucid, but so powerless to stop the urges pulsing
through her. *I need it.*

She watched the portal, almost hoping she'd done something wrong. *But I didn't.* She watched, and hated herself for it. *I should throw myself out of the cave right now.* Because she knew that Velandryn Savani would step through that portal any moment.

*I want to die.* She wouldn't though, even if she jumped. *I might.* At least she wouldn't be here when Velandryn arrived.

Because the moment she saw him, smelled that blood, she would kill him.

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Velandryn got very little sleep that night. He fell asleep early, as was his habit, but awoke to find the candle in his room barely shorter, and the basin of wash water still warm. He pulled himself upright, grumbling under his breath.

It was Serana's fault, really. She had an incredible talent for worming her way into his head, forcing his thoughts into circles while appearing totally innocent. *Frustrating woman, that.* It was an affectionate thought, though. Especially with what she was doing for him at this very moment. *And saving us who knows how long on the road.* Still, she conjured some uneasiness within him, an ill-fitting mass that sat in his belly and refused to leave. *If I knew what was bothering me, would it bother me less?*

Sleep, apparently, was out of the question. The Refugees still sat unread in his pack, so he pulled it out and began to read. After a page and a half, however, he realized that he hadn't retained a word of it.

So, he went for a walk. He stalked the halls of Dragonsreach, passing servants as they cleaned the floors and guards standing quiet vigils. He didn't quite know who or what he was looking for, but found himself in front of a door, nondescript save for a hefty iron lock. Something tickled at his mind, as though there was a whisper at the edge of hearing—

Somewhere far away, a dragon roared. It had to have been miles and miles distant, but Dov awoke in his head, and he was filled with the urge to go out and tear its still-beating heart from its chest with his bare hands.

Velandryn chuckled to himself as he turned away from the door. It had been a while since Dov had made itself known, but it felt oddly good to have an arrogant dragon riding around in his head. *Eat this, smash that, go and conquer Skyrim.* They weren't always good suggestions, but they provided a welcome respite sometimes.

Farengar was asleep, but he'd given Velandryn the key to his workshop. Inside, the array lay inert, ready to send him to wherever Serana drew the target. Two packs sat on a table, stuffed with gear for their travels. Hopefully she covered enough distance to make this worthwhile. They'd estimated nine days from Whiterun to Ivarstead by horse. This teleportation business would be useless if Serana hadn't gotten them to within seven days' walk from where they needed to be.

He recalled the map, and thought about the distances at play. *She'd best be right about this.* The distance was no joke, even if she could do what she claimed. Not to mention, if she was seen, there would be a whole other set of issues to untangle.

Fortunately, being a thane gave him an enormous amount of leeway within Whiterun Hold. He'd been warned against frivolous uses of his power, but getting some hold patrol to look the other way about a vampire should be doable.
At that, an image of the Mourning Fane of Narsis came to him, the great hall where the most honored of the Dunmer dead were laid for thirty-three days, to be viewed by any who wished it while they underwent the highest honors that could be accorded to any of the honored dead. Anointed with oils four-and-three, as the pieces of their body were removed and burned to ash in fires fed by Daedric Servitors of the Triune Princes. *Remove the hands for Boethiah, but three fingers off of each, as is Mephala's due. One eye for Azura, and the other as well, for we must behold her twice.* The flames that fed these holy cremations were kindled for no other purpose, and took no fuel save magicka. The ash produced, therefore, belonged entirely to the deceased. Shalda Mur, the Divided Cremation.

It belongs to those who lived lives of high honor. Few Dunmer rose to prominence without making a goodly number of enemies, but to be named for Shalda Mur, none could speak against you, even after your death. It meant that either you were universally beloved, or that those who hated you were smart enough to keep their mouths shut. Or you spent your final hours having them all killed. That had almost worked for Dalvyn Sarethi, after all.

Velandryn snapped out of his reverie with a sigh. The Mourning Fane was the sort of place that one imagined their body might end, in the dreams of the early morning. *And here I am, using my political position among Nords to free a vampire!* There was little chance he would ever lie there. *Perhaps a tomb for the Anointed, or I can be recognized as a wandering martyr.* The worst case would be one of the Halls of the Dead that they had in Skyrim. *They don't even burn the bodies!* Which, considering draugr, was a serious oversight.

All humor aside, though, his actions had put him in opposition to the teachings of the Temple, and that still didn't sit well with him. He glanced at Farengar's clockwork timepiece, a rarity in Skyrim. It showed dawn still an hour or more away, and so Velandryn once more climbed to the Dragonsreach porch.

It was early, but he had to try. Once more he waved the guards away, then sat himself on the ledge, legs dangling as he looked out over the city. It felt sacrilegious, to sit like this, but the Daedra cared little for such things.

*Azura, hear me.*

He did not expect an answer, but prayed all the same. Of the Triune Princes, Azura was the one who cared most for the Dunmer as individuals. Hers could be a harsh love, but it was love all the same. *And I am the Dragonborn.* That had to count for something.

He knew she would not answer in words, but he did not have words to bring before her either. Instead, he thought of Serana, of the inherent contradiction in her being. Of the paradoxes she represented, and the fire within her. When he thought of that last one, it was as though some lightness took hold within his chest, and he saw those moments where she'd chosen to be a good person.

*It's harder for her, struggling against what she's become.* He'd seen that struggle for himself, though he'd never shame Serana by acknowledging it. *She's doing well.*

He had a moment of worry about her running through the night, but arrested that line of thinking as soon as he recognized it. *She earned my trust.* It was still his conscious decision to trust her, rather than one based on unshakeable belief, but he had made it all the same. *She's trying.* Not to mention, he'd given her all the blood she'd asked for. *I guess I just have to let her do her best, and trust that it's enough.*

*And so your answer is found.*
The thought felt as though it had not been his, and was different than those that belonged to Dov. It had come from deeper than the recesses of his own mind. With it came certainty, as though his thoughts had been smoothed by an unseen hand.

*Was that Azura?* Something very like terror rose in him. For forty years he had been taught that it could happen, of course, but it wasn't the sort of thing that happened to, well, normal people.

*But is that me?* He was Dragonborn, after all. Perhaps that was enough to draw the notice of the Twilit Queen.

*Or I'm just desperate to be told that I'm doing the right thing.* That was more likely.

The sun was breaking over the far mountains. He'd now watched both sunset and sunrise from this same porch, an interesting fact with no bearing on anything whatsoever. He recalled a map of the sun's path he'd seen long ago. *How long will that be true for?* Given where things were now, and the assumption that the lowest point of the sun was on the Eve of New Life….

The problem occupied him until he reached Farengar's chambers, where he found the Nord. The wizard looked as though he'd just risen, and stared at Velandryn with the bleary expression of someone who would rather be in bed. For a moment, Velandryn felt guilty about asking him to rise so early. "Any word?"

"Not yet." Farengar waved in the general direction of the array, which sat inert on the stone.

"Hmm." Velandryn placed the soul gems in place anyway. "Let's give her a few minutes before we start worrying."

Farengar had gone to a carafe that sat over an alchemical flame, and poured himself a mug of something black that smelled of burnt wood. "If we had some way to speak with her, I would feel better about this."

"Well, unless you mastered Psijic Projection in the last eight hours..." Velandryn shrugged. "She'll get it done."

As if on queue, the tether glyph ignited. "See?" Velandryn grabbed the small pack that contained the few things he felt he couldn't live without. And a stack of potions. "Send the rest through after a count of one hundred." He thought about all of the places the array could be, and the fact that they hadn't added a safeguard to check if the target was clear. "A slow count."

Now that the thought was in his head, it festered there as he stepped onto the array. *I really hope she cleared the arrival point.*

The actual transition was, as such things always were, terribly mundane. There was a rush of magicka, a glow from the array, and then he was standing in what looked to be to be a cave mouth, apparently—*Blessed Ancestors!* — several hundred feet off the ground.

He quickly stepped away from the array, being careful not to get too close to the open sky. This was a small cave, though perhaps not so high as he'd first thought. Less than a hundred feet, for sure. It was still a long way down, though.

A sound behind sent him spinning, but he relaxed upon realizing who it was. "Nice work. You —" His voice cut out as he saw what was really happening.

Serana was hunched over, pressed into the wall, eyes boring into his own with a look that was somewhere between panicked and crazed. She gave a shuddering groan that seemed to set her
entire body trembling, then rocked forward before slamming herself back against the wall. "No!"

Velandryn reached out for her almost on instinct, but her shout froze him in place. It was wordless, almost feral, and it trailed off into a keening moan. "Get away!"

Velandryn didn't move. "What's going on, Serana?" He noticed then, for the first time, that she was wearing only a plain grey robe of some sort; everything else must have been in the pack. It hung in tatters about her, barely concealing her modesty and adding fur. "Do you need my blood?" He reached for the pack.

She was on top of him before he even knew that she'd moved. Her mouth opened wide above him, sending him frantically trying to conjure flame.

Then, she slammed back against the wall again, this time speaking through her contortions. "Hungry! Get away! I'll kill you!"

Finally, Velandryn understood. Blessed Three. He'd never seen it this bad before, or even heard of such inner conflict. "You don't want to hurt me." He should have been afraid, but the absolute terror in her eyes made that impossible. He reached out a hand. "It's okay. Let me get the—"

She moved with impossible speed again, but this time it was to curl herself into a ball, hands clutching her knees. "Not enough, not enough!" She took a shuddering breath, then moaned. "It's too much. I want all of it, all the blood." She was sobbing. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." She was gulping now, her breath coming ever more raggedly. "Leave, before it's too late."

"Don't be ridiculous." Velandryn sat himself against the wall and grabbed her bag. "There are some potions—"

"Kill me." Serana's voice was flat, making it by far the most frightening thing she'd said since he stepped through the array. "Kill me, or I'll kill you." Her voice broke then. "It's too much. I shouldn't have done this. You need to stop me!"

"I am stopping you." It was almost surreal, how calm he felt. He held out a hand. "Here, drink." He tried to smile, but his face wouldn't obey, and he doubted she would have noticed anyways. "From the source."

This time, her approach was slower than he would have thought possible from a famished vampire. A halting crawl along the ground, bringing her closer at an interminable pace. Until, suddenly, it wasn't. She was in front of him, eyes blazing into his own. "You don't get to take this back." For an instant, she was utterly lucid.

I know. Serana seemed to be going for his neck, but he offered her his wrist instead. His arm hung there, in the air between them, for a heartbeat that lasted a lifetime. Not pulling away should have been the hardest thing Velandryn had ever done, but the look in her eyes made it a foregone conclusion. When she took his hand and raised his wrist to her mouth, the motion was shockingly gentle.

Her lips were cool, the pressure of her mouth more like a kiss than a bite. Two sharp pricks of pain, and then a gentle pressure. And then, what he'd known would come. He could feel the blood leaving his body. Serana moaned, and the sound was a soft vibration against his skin.

She needs this. That was the thought that kept him there, that stopped him from forcing his arm away. Even now, she relaxed into him, the weight of her body pressing him back into the wall. She was turned slightly, almost as a lover would lie nestled in his arms. The thought came suddenly,
and he pushed it away even as she squirmed deeper into him. She ran through the night, pulled too deeply on her powers. And she’d done it because he needed her to. He adjusted his arm slightly, so she’d have an easier time.

With a start, he realized that he was growing a bit light-headed. _How much is she going to drink?_ He cast a spell to heal himself, to replenish the blood in his veins without closing the wound on his arm. It was a bit tricky, but healing had always had a way of bringing out his experimental side. He could feel the magicka coalescing into new blood within him, and marveled at the newness of the sensation. _I guess I'm usually too focused on the wounds to think about the blood._

Here, though, the only distraction was Serana. He wondered why she’d shed her armor and cloak for this ragged robe. It kept her from being entirely naked, but little more. His free hand found her bag—this cave truly was tiny—and he managed to work her cloak free. He draped it over her, hoping it might provide some warmth. It was difficult with one hand, but he managed well enough before remembering that, as a vampire, it probably wouldn't bother her much.

Velandryn sighed and slumped against the wall again. _What's wrong with me?_ Serana removed her mouth from his wrist for a brief moment, then licked up a bit of blood that had escaped and resumed her feeding.

_I should be horrified._ And yet, somehow, this bothered him not at all. He would take the potion he had prepared, of course, but other than that...

_I'm feeding a vampire._ Not from a cup, not through whatever other intermediary he could conjure to convince himself that wasn't what he was doing. _I'm feeding her._ His magic was still replenishing his blood, and incredibly, Serana was still drinking. _How long has it been?_

As if on cue, there was a flash of light, and two large traveler's packs appeared in the array. _A slow count of one hundred._ Time was an odd thing.

There was a soft sound from below. Serana’s head had fallen against his chest, and her breathing came slow and even. _Is she...asleep?_ He shifted slightly, trying to see her eyes, but it was in vain.

One thing was certain, and that was that he was going nowhere so long as she slept. Serana might be small for a Nord—or whatever proto-Nordic race she belonged to— but the way she was lying on him meant that he was well and truly pinned to the wall.

His own bag had fallen to the side in the excitement, and he extended a hand to try and grab the strap. It was just beyond his reach. Cursing, he focused, trying to pull his wayward thoughts into the focus necessary for telekinesis. It wouldn't come, though whether that was because he'd expended too much magicka providing blood or simply his own distraction, he couldn't say. Either way, telekinesis was an exceptionally difficult feat, and one he simply wasn't going to be able to manage right now.

_I still need that potion._ He didn't quite have enough trust in his own magic right now to try and cast a spell that cured the curse Serana’s bite had doubtless inflicted upon him. He had four of the vials in that pack, but he hadn't foreseen this.

He exhaled, and shifted as much as he dared without waking Serana. It was enough for his outstretched fingers to brush the leather. He shifted again, but stopped when Serana gave a grunt against him. Fortunately, that little bit had been enough, and soon he'd downed the thick red concoction in a single unpleasant gulp. _The person who makes a disease cure that doesn't taste like rancid guar bile will be the richest mer in Tamriel._ He pulled another potion from the pack, one that restored magicka, but couldn't quite bring himself to drink it. Blues always left him feeling a
bit like he'd hit the sujamma too hard the night before, and he didn't truly need any more magicka at the moment. Serana seemed to be well and truly asleep, after all.

Serana…

At that thought, and with his immediate concerns of infection dealt with, he could no longer put his travelling companion out of his mind. *What in Oblivion is going on with her?*

She was hungry, that much was obvious, but everything else was shockingly out of character for her. She'd always been extremely physically reserved, and now she was curled up on top of him. With a jolt, he realized that he was running his fingers along her head, tracing the braids woven into her black hair. *Ancestors!* He jerked his hand back. Serana mumbled something in her sleep.

*Think.* Clearly she had been through an ordeal this past night, pushing herself as she had. *Was that enough to make her act like this?* Perhaps her hunger, and its relief, was enough to render her into this state.

It was getting harder and harder to think straight and keep his eyes open. His arm wasn't doing anyone any good held up like that, so he let it fall. It lay somewhat awkwardly on her shoulder, so he snaked it around her neck and let it fall over her chest. There was something there that could have been improper, but his mind wasn't sharp enough to make heads or tails of it. *If she minds, she can try not falling asleep next time.*

His thoughts were much fuzzier than they had been. It probably wasn't blood loss, since he'd been replenishing that, but even having his blood restored by magic didn't leave him in a good state. *Maybe I could just close my eyes for a moment.*

He adjusted himself a little, trying to find a spot of wall that wasn't too rough. Serana grunted in apparent displeasure, but failed to wake up. Velandryn felt the dark rising to claim him, and only one last thought remained.

*This isn't how I saw this going, but I don't hate it.*

"All I'm saying is, you don't want to go to Riften."

Fastred opened her mouth, but Lydia held up her hand. "You want a city? Go to Whiterun. Kyne's breath, go to Falkreath or even Cyrodiil if you want it warmer, but don't go to Riften."

"But Bassianus knows a man who can set him up with good work. We'll be out of this town, finally!"

The Vilemyr Inn was mostly empty, so Lydia felt fine with pounding the table for emphasis. "For some insane reason Mara chose me to advise your love, so here's my advice. Don't. Go. To. Riften!"

Across the room, Lynly giggled. Ordinarily, that would have done funny things to Lydia's stomach, but she would be damned if she let Fastred make this mistake. "Look, Bassianus, Klimmek, whatever. They both seem fine if you like men. I don't care which of them you're with. Go with both for all I care, so long as you don't do it in Riften!"

Fastred's face had fallen, but Lydia wasn't done. She'd been in Ivarstead for almost two weeks now, and had just about had her fill of chasing off bears and wandering the roads waiting for something, anything, to happen. "Look. I get it. You want excitement. But the way I see it, you're either staying or leaving, and the only reason to do that is because you want to. Who you love, that's
important, but it doesn't come first."

"You have to be the worst representative Mara could hope for." Somehow, Lynly had snuck up behind her. The woman had a very light footfall. Her words, however, were no reproach. "I'm with Lydia, Fas. Riften is no place for you."

Fastred glared at the both of them. "You don't understand! Bassianus can give me a good life, he can—"

"And Klimmek?" Lydia was well-versed in the woman's problem by now. "He can't?"

"I mean, he's been wonderful, but all he wants is to stay here, keep farming and hunting. He won't even ask for my hand! I can't wait for him forever!"

"So don't." Clearly Fastred had a different way of looking at the issue than Lydia. Which might be why she has two lovers right now and I haven't had so much as a kiss in months. Still, she was fairly certain she'd figured out how to get through to the girl. "Do you want to leave or stay?"

"Leave." Fastred's answer was immediate. "I've lived my whole life here."

"Now, if you had to take one of the two with you, who would it be? They would go with you, no complaints."

"Oh." Fastred's eyes were distant. "I…I don't know. Bassianus is so thoughtful, so loving, but Klimmek…"

"I suggest you figure that one out first. He still loves you, I've spoken with him enough to know that." Lydia found Klimmek more palatable than Bassianus, but she was not Fastred. Thank the gods. "Talk to them, see which one lights a fire in you."

"Or, maybe neither one does." Lynly had been here longer than Lydia, and seemed to be approaching a point of frustration with her friend. "You don't need a lover to live your life."

Not for the first time, Lydia wondered what Lynly's story was. She wasn't from Ivarstead; Lydia strongly suspected she came from the east, near Riften. She also disliked the city, though she was less vocal about it than Lydia. She was a fairly good bard, though there was an undeniable sadness in her. She never played love songs unless it was requested; her preference seemed to be wordless music in spite of her lovely voice.

Lydia knew herself well enough to recognize the warning signs of infatuation; the combination of Lynly's beauty and her sadness was one that could spell trouble. Lydia had always gravitated towards women who needed saving. Freya had called it her 'hero's soul.'

Now, she was doing her best to ignore those feelings. I'm here on a mission. Velandryn would arrive soon, and they would leave this place. All the rest of this, it's secondary. She hoped Fastred would find her love and Lynly could find happiness, but she couldn't let it distract her.

Although, of late treasonous thoughts invaded more and more often, worrying over just how overdue Velandryn was. She'd gone over the travel times using a map Wilhelm the innkeeper kept in his room, and her thane should have been here long before. Skyrim was not Cyrodiil, true, but you could take a cart to or from any city or town of any real size. Even if he had to take a boat back from the castle...

The truth was, she had no way to know for certain. All she could do was sit here and try to fill her days with hard work and Fastred's troubles, and sometimes let her mind drift to Lynly. Better that
than worrying.

Still, sooner or later she would have to make a decision. Each day she woke up sure that this day would be the one that rewarded her patience, and by evening she was always disappointed. Even now, with the light through the windows fading into the colors of dusk, another day had passed without any sign of—

The door opened, and Velandryn Savani walked in. Lydia froze, half-sure that her mind had finally snapped and simply created an image out of her hopes. However, this was not Velandryn as she'd left him. He moved with a grace he'd lacked before, and the lines of his face were somehow different, as though he'd spent a long time outdoors. His eyes, too, had a look in them that she couldn't quite place. He was looking at the fire, and had entirely missed her table tucked away in the corner.

The Dragonborn exhaled loudly, and a puff of steam left his mouth. "Molag's balls, but it's cold out there!" He stretched, something in his back cracking audibly. Then, he looked around the room. "Don't suppose you've seen—" his eyes met hers "Hello, Lydia." An odd smile broke out on his face, one that looked startlingly unpracticed. "It's been a moment or two, hmm?" Then he started to laugh. "Ancestors, but I've missed you!"

She gaped at him, disbelieving. He was just standing there, as though nothing had happened. "You...you...you!" She realized she was laughing as well, for some mad reason. "I've missed you too, my thane!" She wanted to hit him. "It took you long enough!"

The door opened again, and Serana walked in.

Fuck.

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