Fus Roh Ta-Dah!

by FroggyFeet

Summary

Artan knew what he saw. The man saw what all Nords saw. A tail. He saw a thief, a disaster waiting to happen, a murderer and a swindler. He saw a problem, sitting like a vulture on top of all his other problems, waiting for the other problems to crush him, so the vulture-problem could eat his liver. They all saw it. And it never became okay.

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The knife slid in so fucking easy that it felt like heaven. Blood flooded across his hands,
across his legs, and the expression on the man's face was so surprised that Artan could almost taste the burgeoning fear, fleeing with the last dregs of life. Isran was a bag of dicks, to be honest. Hard, bearded and no nonsense. Artan got sent on a mission straight off the bat. Said something along the lines of “You look competent. Go prove it.” And after that, well. It was a bloodbath, and not in the regular vampire-related way. There weren’t any desiccated corpses in this ruin; no fresh kills but Artan’s own. It was almost funny how much these things were feared, and how easy they were to hunt. These ones were full of pride, and apparently didn’t expect to have anyone opposing them. None of them expected that they could die.

Notes

Okay, this is cross posted from FF.net. I'll obviously be keeping both of them up to date with each other, I just figured it might be easier to reply to comments on AO3 since the only way I know how to reply to comments on FF is through PM. So yeah.

Importantly though is Garma/Artan doesn't speak like regular Khajiit. That's a part of his backstory, and you'll find out why later.
But yeah, hope you enjoy it :)}
Garma was sat rather happily on the cart, eyes watching the clouds. The wagon was full with Nords, and even an Imperial. He ignored them. He watched the clouds. He even ignored when they started talking about Stormcloaks, and missions, and Nord this and Nord that. He tried especially to zone that part of the conversation out. He doubted the others would take his opinion very well.

He sighed and lifted his bound hands to look at them, ignoring the squirming thief sat across from him.

Somehow, he had gotten arrested. They had told him he was a Stormcloak, and he would be slaughtered along with Ulfric and his fanboys. He was on the run from the Alik'r. There was a hilarious amount of money on his head, and these buffoons were arresting him for joining in a rebellion. In a country he had never been to before the day before yesterday. He tried reasoning with them. Why would someone like him side with the Stormcloaks? Seriously? He would have explained why he was there, but then he would get sent back to Hammerfell with a bow on his head. Garma simply glanced at the blonde Nord still gibbering away about Nord land. He dearly wanted to shove a very Nordic sword up the man's ass. But hell. The creepy bastard would probably brag about it. It really wasn't that much different than listening to one of the Isle natives, to be honest. Same pomp.

When they passed the Thalmor, it was like watching a really small dog bark at a really big dog. The elf didn't even twitch in her saddle. It was almost funny if it wasn't so pathetic. Garma blinked, and didn't bother to tell Rogvir that the 'pointy-eared devil' didn't care what he said. That she was probably more concerned about the bodyguard that she was obviously porking, or maybe what wine she would drink with her steak later. Whether to make it out of their blood or not. She was just as bored by his rant as Garma was.

Even Ulfric looked like he was about to pass out.

Garma grinned.

The man wasn't asleep. He was trying to glare at him.

Garma purred and rolled his tail. The man mottled in anger, and looked as if he was about to explode. The khajiit meowed and made a show of wiping his face with his paws. Rogvir kicked him. Garma made goo-goo eyes at the Nord. It was like trying to melt glacier ice.

They were bundled off the wagon, and made to stand like slaves in front of a man clad in gold armour and an angry woman, a muscled man at her side with a wad of paper and a pained, constipated face. When the muscled man asked for a name, well. Garma didn't really know what to say. His name was renown. He would be on the block for sure. Or maybe worse. The Bull. The Eagle. Ugh. Melted or snapped open? No thanks. He did what he did best. He lied.

"Artan. Of Elsweyr."

"Well, Artan, we have no record of you. And you have no valid permits allowing you into Skyrim. Captain, what should we do? He isn't on the list to be executed."
The woman looked at the poor man like a dog looked at a tasty bone; snap it in half and drink the marrow. "Send him to the block."

"But-

"Did I stutter, Hadvar?"

The muscle man swallowed the retort. "Follow the captain, prisoner."

For a wild second, Artan had almost believed he had got out of it.

He still had hopes when he was pressed against the headman's block.

Who knew a ten tonne lizard would save the day?

Well. When the dust settled, it wasn't in any way shape or form of what Artan expected. Hadvar, the constipated scribe, cut his binds, gave him some armour, and told him to get his wiggle on. Before giving Artan a sword.

"I'm a wanted criminal, and you're giving me a sword," the khajiit snarked, glancing from blade to man and back.

Hadvar smiled tightly, "you won't kill me. You haven't got it in your eyes, Artan."

The khajiit smiled back.

Hadvar led him through a small door, but stopped dead and glared grimly into the adjoining room. Artan didn't have to look. Hadvar didn't have to turn to know the khajiit was grinning from ear to ear. The two Stormcloaks were pacing the room, searching their fallen comrade, saying quiet prayers, comforting each other that he was in Sovengarde now.

"Stormcloaks, maybe we can reason with them."

Artan purred back, "I don't think dumb and dumber over there are going to bend over long enough for you to hack their heads off. You might have to throw a sovereign on the floor. Distract them you know. I hear all you Imperials like killing a man while he's down."

Hadvar gave him a pointed look. "I'd smack you in the mouth for that, Khajiit, but I don't know where it's been."

"Ouch. Pulling a race card," Artan nodded in approval.

"Just let me talk to them," Hadvar huffed angrily.

"Shouldn't you be all about 'squashing the rebellion' and upholding the law?" the khajiit sniped, glancing at the Imperial.

"The Nords are our brothers, misguided, but brothers none the less," Hadvar huffed, sounding sincere.


"No…?"

"Then you won't get it. Continue."
"Thank you."

Hadvar pulled the chain, and the metal grille separating the room and hallway disappeared into the ceiling. Stepping in, he was greeted by a big, burly Nord with his sister-daughter. "What? You give in to those pointy-ears and now start messing with the animals too? Is anything sacred to you people?"

"There is a dragon outside. We need to-"

"No, I tell you what we need to do," Sister-daughter growled, hefting her axe," get mamma a new fur rug for the living room."

Artan bristled, "I don't think she understands what I am. You, big man, tell your pet that if she comes any closer, it won't be my pelt warming her mother's toes in winter."

"As if vermin like you could do much harm. You have barely evolved thumbs, filth. Remember your place."

"Oh I remember my place, Nord," the khajiit growled, "Standing over your putrefying corpse and peeing over that monstrous beard."

Artan didn't understand how it had escalated into full blown warfare, but he never understood much when the adrenaline kicked in. He just felt his limbs moving, the air becoming warmer, the bodies colliding. If he could have betted the fight would get ugly, he would have been one rich fat cat. Fuck cream, he would be minted. What he didn't expect, was Hadvar's capability with a blade. Artan guessed it was to do with his extended exposure to so many men.

"Well done, Khajiit. You really held your own."

"What can I say? In some places, I'm considered a sword master."

Hadvar didn't ask why he was grinning while he said that.

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The small, brown haired woman stuck another plate of potatoes under Artan's nose, ladled with sweet meat, some kind of strange turnip and what looked to be tiny orange logs tucked underneath. However strange this human ritual was, he politely ate, thanked the woman, and listened to Hadvar tell his uncle the story of their escape. He knew well that fucking with a mans wife led to misery, despair and ultimately castration. It was a wide held belief in Hammerfell.

One he planned not to learn from experience.

But what was just as surprising was how Hadvar called him by his name, and ultimately didn't seem to be a total ass. He actually seemed to be a nice guy. Even suggested Artan join the force. Artan had laughed, brushed the comment aside but it never really left his mind. Only when sat in the pub, ale in hand, ignoring all the stares and some lean blonde wandered into his vision, did the thought really leave. "Hey, can you do me a favour?"

Artan coughed, "Look man, I know you might've heard a few quirky stories about Khajiit, but trust me, not every one of us can-"

"Oh no! I don't want that! I wanted you to deliver this letter for me!" the lad choked a little, waving his hands in dismissal.
"Ahh that's okay then. Who's it for?"

"A woman, Camilla. She lives-"

"A bonny little lass? I didn't have you pegged for that sort of thing kid, honestly. I figured you the type for diapers and maybe a wooden axe to hammer away at the bars of your crib."

The blonde gave him the same, ridiculous glare that Hadvar gave him. "She is funny, wonderful and the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. But this damn elf wants her too! He shows up at her house, spewing his lies about me, making her lose interest. I need you to give her this letter, tell her it's from him. She will come running back, regretting she ever laid eyes on him."

"This sounds pretty sneaky kid," Artan frowned. "Shouldn't you just put on some armour and go kill a dragon? Win fair lady's heart the same way the dumb or the ugly do?"

Sven scoffed, "I was thinking of asking you the same thing."

"Oooo. That really hurt my heart; got right in there! What's to say I won't just tell her it's from you?"

"You only just strolled into town. You're obviously broke; you had to dance for that ale," the lad motioned towards Artan’s table, but pointedly didn’t notice the several or so empty tankards. You can lodge at mine until you're back on you're feet."

"I need a few more ales before that, sunshine," the cat grinned, but Sven just paled and shuffled on his feet.

The Nord seemed to shake himself and grimace, before eventually biting out "Just take her the letter so I don't have to talk to you anymore."

"Throw in another ale and you've got a deal."

"Fine."

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Three days later, and after scrubbing himself raw in the nearby river, Artan got back to Camilla's house. Well, shop. She shared the quarters with her brother, and had asked him with her big brown eyes to go get some stupid claw back. So, Artan did what he always did. He talked to Faendal, and then Camilla. Then he decided who he hated the least. Then he told Faendal, the tricksty elf that tried to 'steal' Camilla from Sven, about his employment as a local postman. The elf practically had kittens when he realised how close he was to being canned by the woman, and gave Artan a new letter to give to her. She almost broke Sven's nose, Faendal decided to follow Artan into the nearby Barrow, and the rest was gravy.

"I am never following you ever again."

"That's fine with me, man. It did get a bit hairy in there. Which reminds me, have fun with our dear little Cammy," Artan shrugged.

"What…?" Faendal shook his head in confusion, ponytail bobbing.

"I'm just happy for you two love birds, that's all."

"I would love to believe that, friend, but you're grin is rather worrying."

"This is just my face. You should always listen to your mother, especially when she talks about
wind,” Artan grinned back, flinging the elf a wineskin and pressing forwards into the village.

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Whiterun was cleaner than he expected. When the smithy asked him to tell the Jarl, Balgruuf, about the dragon, well he couldn't say no. It would be rude. And the smith had biceps that could crush a frost spider's thorax. It was smart and polite to say yes, oh god yes.

If he knew what would happen, he would have run the other fucking way, planned a route to Solitude and thrown himself at Tullius' feet begging a quick death.

"My Thane, going into that cave is a bad idea. The tracks leading in are bear tracks, and we are not equipped to deal with them right now," Lydia pointed out, monotone.

"Who's the Thane?" Artan snapped, barely looking over his shoulder to glance at her.

"You are, my Thane," Lydia breathed back, sounding bored.

"Then we are going hunting. Daddy needs a new coat," the cat sniffed, making a beeline towards the cave nestled in beside the road.

"As you wish, my Thane," the Nord sighed, before falling in behind.

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"You just stood there and watched! That thing was ready to claw my guts out! If I hadn't stabbed it in the paw and gouged its eye out then I'd be dead!" Artan snarled, throwing his hands up before he turned on Lydia, fire in his eyes.

"You never asked me to attack, my thane," she said simply, shrugging her shoulders.

"How did you become a housecarl again? I can't remember the story you told me. Doesn't it coincide with that story of how you got those greaves, the ones that cover your knees too? Cause they look pretty damn new," the cat sniped, folding his arms across his chest. Lydia was kind enough to ignore his tail puffing up in annoyance, but that was all she was kind about.

"I was going to ask a similar story about your new leathers my lord. That back-plate looks very fresh. I guess it must have been worn out rather quickly, considering your character," she replied easily, eyebrow raised and sending a rather pointed glance his way.

"You Nords always come back with the same shit," Artan sighed, idly checking his claws before he continued, "I guess that's what you get for bending over before getting on your knees."

"Speaking from experience, Master Thane?" she trilled, pushing the meat she had finished cutting into the stewing pot over their meager fire. She used her short knife to flick the last bits in before she settled back into the rock she had been sat on for the last half hour, picking up the leeks next.

"I bet that's what you had to say to the Steward to get this job. What did he tell you? That it was like milking a cow? Divine knows you have the hands for it. Must be all that backwater village hick blood in you, girl." The cat huffed, making a show of looking away from her in disgust.

"What's the matter Thane? Was your litter tray not cleaned out to perfection?" Lydia smirked, unable to hold the bitterly sarcastic tone any longer.

"You should know, we both know who has to scoop my poop around here," Artan chuckled,
rubbing his hands across his arms. He still wasn’t used to the chill of Skyrim, even with all his fur.

"Aye, that we do Thane," Lydia conceded, snapping her fingers to regain the cats attention before motioning towards the other rock beside the fire.

"You know what? You're not half bad," Artan hummed, taking the offered seat and tried in vain to not make it too obvious how cold he really was. Lydia didn’t mention it, however obvious he was. She carried on cutting the leeks along one side before dropping them into the pot alongside the meat and carrots, ignoring Artan’s slow fall towards the fire. She would stop him before he burnt himself, so she let him crowd it.

"Neither are you, Thane," she said, eventually.

"When we get to Windhelm, I'll buy you an Ale," the cat growled back, rummaging in his pack.

"You're charity astounds me," she smirked, the monotone almost completely gone.

"You should be happy you're getting that much. You only got crusty bread for your labour back when you stood on street corners," the cat scoffed, setting a tankard down on her rock and one on his own before pouring them both a drink from his wineskin. It didn’t take a khajiit nose to smell the spirits that settled in those cups.

"I remember. It's all your mother could afford," Lydia shrugged again, taking her own tankard and taking a sip.

"Ouch," Artan hissed, grinning around his own cup.

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"Kill her for me. Here's the contract. I'll pay you when you get back. Thank you, again."

He was practically thrown onto the street after that, the snow cascading down on his darkened form, still processing what the fuck that was. The whispers of Windhelm said that the Arentino boy was dabbling in the dark arts, and to be honest, he believed them. Artan expected black magic and an immense pay check when he told the rickety old witchdoctors holed up in the college about it. Instead? He got a crazy boy with authority issues giving him an assassination contract to kill a pensioner. Lydia was in the pub, sleeping off the spell that a wandering enemy mage put on her. Artan had to drive an axe through his head to stop the leeching spell, before carrying the exhausted housecarl to the nearest civilization; Windhelm. At first, he had to explain that he hadn't done her in, and that he was trying to save her. Only the town's priestess stopped the angry mob. "He has honesty in his heart, and this girl is in dire need of rest. Let them through."

Artan nearly snogged the crazy old raisin.

The city was a pallid, angry ghost of what the Stormcloaks in the other cities said about it. They called it a haven, a safe place full of beer, wenches, and ultimately freedom. Artan had only talked to three people, and already he wanted to join the Imperials, if only to put their leader's head on a pike, body still attached. They oppressed their dark elves to the point of throwing them all in run down slums on the edge of the city, and that was only because they were borderline humanoid. The Argonians had been thrown on the very edge of the river, and disallowed entry into the city. The only exception was a yellow ticket, allowing them to enter the market once a week to get fresh food. The reptilians seemed happy, enough.

The dark elves were torn.
But that woman looked pretty much dead over it.

She was laying on her back, naked on a tombstone in the graveyard, a set of guards bumbling nearby, the rickety old priestess wandering around the body waving her voodoo-stick. Only the old man did anything special. He tore off his goat hide cloak and covered the poor young woman, giving her some decency in death. Artan couldn't help himself. The older man looked like he had eaten glass, shamelessly crying about the woman on the floor. Artan would have guessed that he was close to her. Maybe like a father to her. Maybe lost his own kids in the war. Now his only happiness was dead, ripped open by some nut job called the 'Butcher's handiwork.

"Do you need anyone to help find the fuckwad?"

xxx

He had come to a dead end at Hjerim, and sent Lydia back to Dragonsreach to recuperate some more. Nords might be frighteningly rigid with cold, but it didn't make them invincible. Artan had left for Riften the next day. The Arentino boy had promised him an heirloom, an old Nordic one. In this day, when the Nords had most of their heritage taken by Thalmor, well, anything to remind them of Grand-pappy and the good old days was worth a Mammoth's weight in gold.

The stink pervaded the city.

As did its rotten guards.

"Pay the tax, or you might as well turn tail, cat."

"We both know that I won't pay you. We both also know that this tax is a load of crap. We also know that I will skin your hide and use it as a nice winter coat while I roast your ass over a crackly, peaceful fire. As for your friend here, well. I guess my vampire friend Mozarth would like a nice bottle of Nord for his birthday." Artan leant in a little closer and whispered, "He does like them a bit chubby. More 'cushion for the pushing' he says. I don't know what he means, but maybe you could tell me. If he doesn't kill you. But if I were you, I'd be hoping to Ysgmirr that he kills you."

"Just go inside," the guard bit out, shuffling on his feet away from the cat.

"Thank you. It's so good to see such helpful guards," Artan laughed, practically bouncing past the other, paler guard and into the city.

xxx

The old woman was asking for it.

At first, Artan got a bitter taste at the thought of battering an old woman to death in her own orphanage. Until he watched her with the kids. How she made sure to not bruise their faces, and made them wear long sleeves. He guessed he was going to Hell when he died. Two wrongs don't make a right. Murder wasn't right. Even if it was to free a bunch of parentless children, all of them wanting something stable to cling to in the days when they still believed in the bug bear and the monster under the bed. Instead they got a cruel woman who took the frustration she had with her own life out on the children she was meant to protect.

His claws were bloody, but it didn't matter much. He wiped them on her dress, straightened his tunic, and walked out with a spring in his step. The assistant's screams brought the hounds of hell down on the tiny orphanage, but Artan was already in the pub, enjoying a pint with a mouthy magician, who got quite riled when Artan asked if he could make flowers come out of his sleeves.
When he first got there, he wondered what kind of crazy people would live in old ruins on top of a crypt; full of inventions that killed on sight. And the he understood it. They were Nords. Mostly. He took a step into the stone city, and to be honest, he expected bloody cutthroats.

The market was tiny, set up right by the front gates, expecting the travellers to wander in and coo at their wares. Maybe be too tired to haggle for a deal. If they hadn't, Artan might not have saved her life. The man was shifty, and the khajiit automatically had him pegged. Artan slunk forwards, ignoring Marcurio's gibbering. The mage was intelligent, and downright brilliant. But he could talk the pants off an Orc, and Artan had to use a muffle spell on his follower more than once to get some peace. At least Lydia knew when to shut up.

In this instance, his gibbering helped.

"FOR THE FORSWORN!"

The man sprung, and Artan pounced.

The guards were on them in an instant, seeing the man jump at the shopper, just being too slow to intercept him. Artan drove Valdr's very lucky dagger into his armpit, and he slumped. Marcurio looked like he was about to keel over with shock, but he held himself a little straighter after that.

"So, care to tell me why I had to do that?" Artan practically snarled at the nearest guard, already shepherding people away from the corpse.

"Move on. This is none of your business, outsider," the guard growled back, barely even glancing at the khajiit.

Artan's brows rose, "So I save one of your citizens from a crazed-"

The guard took a few steps towards the cat, until he was practically nose to nose with him. There was a moment when Artan wondered whether or not it would end in a fight, but the guard snorted a large breath out through his nose and spat on the ground between them; "Move. On."

Artan frowned when Marcurio started maneuvering him down a side street, eyes boring holes into the guard's face the whole trip, until the walls of the city hid him from view. "What a heartless troll. He didn't even check on that woman."

"If you think that's bad, then you're going to love it here," Marcurio rolled his eyes, swiftly going from placating to sarcastic.

The two turned, and spotted the blonde in time to see him jam a wad of paper into Artan's hand. "You dropped this."

The khajiit's eyes lidded, brow rising in skepticism. "Oh did I?"

The boy shrugged, "Just being a good citizen, stranger."

After he loped off, Artan looked to Marcurio, "Do all you humans act so… weird?"

"Just don't do anyone any favours, unless they are a Jarl or a very beautiful woman with small hands," the mage huffed, rubbing at his hair.

"Why?" Artan asked, half expecting the mage to explode from the strain. He knew that he was
difficult to travel with, what with all the ‘pelt’ and ‘provincial.’ Let alone the fact that he knew that
the city’s inn would probably turn them out or ask a ridiculous price to try and dissuade them from
staying. It was only the fact that they did it with all outsiders that made it easier.

"Just," Marcurio hissed, waving a hand as if he could pull his words from the air before settling on,
"don't."

xxx

The halls were beautiful. The warm glow of gold was everywhere, but it did nothing to stop the
shivers of chill creep down Artan's back. This place smelt old, musky like beer and thick with
burning wood. It also had a resident Thalmor. The thing was staring at him, emerald eyes analyzing
him, as cold as the gold around them. "I bet I can warm up that ice queen."

"What are you talking about, creature?" the thing snapped, and Artan had to force a smile when it
finally turned to him.

"Nothing. I am Artan. I'm guessing you're a new face around here," he said, conversationally.

"Ondolemar. Proud Altmer, the saviours of Mer. And no, I do not come from such a parasitic
background as these cretins do," the Thalmor sniffed, motioning with a flick of a wrist towards the
congregated humans in the throne alcove. He didn’t even wave it properly, just a little flick as if they
weren’t worth the energy for more. Ondolemar turned back to Artan, eyes flicking the height of him,
“And what, pray tell, are you doing here?"

"Sight-seeing, just like you," Artan sighed, rubbing at an ache in his shoulder. As he expected, the
Thalmor didn’t miss the movement.

"I am no tourist, cat. I am here to keep these humans in line," Ondolemar bit out, after a few
moments of silence. He threw one of the sleeve-tails of his robes over his shoulder so he could tuck
his arms across his chest. It was so he could feel along the knives hidden under the robes, probably
belted to thin leather armour. It was a nervous reaction, and honestly Artan was surprised the
Thalmor even allowed himself one.

"I'm glad a fellow non-human can understand that these brats need some discipline," Artan smiled,
only half joking.

"We are not fellows," the Thalmor sniffed, but there wasn’t any heat there.

Artan got confident. "What happened to the natural Altmer courtesy? You might be an amazing
specimen of elvish lineage, but there's no reason to get all up in my grill about it. I thought that
Altmer were so smart, they didn't have to go pronouncing their superiority all the time. It would just
be universally known," the cat pressed a fist to his hip, waving his other hand noncommittally.

"Don't be sarcastic. It's asinine." Ondolemar half-grinned, showing teeth.

"I didn't hear 'his highness says.'" Artan bared his throat. This wasn’t a proper one. He would have
already been killed if Ondolemar was a proper Thalmor. He had either grown soft here, or he was
just young.

The frosty elf actually smiled. "You might be what I need, cat," he hummed; almost to himself, but
loud enough that Artan could hear him. He was obviously putting on airs, but Artan didn’t care too
much for that.

"I hate it when people say that," the cat grimaced.
"Hah. I am investigating a Nord in the city who is still worshiping Talos. The man does not understand the words 'banned' or 'illegal.' The Jarl's men are being rather, watery about his arrest, and just punishment. They want proof. Get me proof. And I will consider you a higher life form than the amoebae that forms the general masses," he waved his hand again, but this time he actually waved it properly and even held it out for a moment to appraise Artan before he let both of his arms drop to his sides.

"How could I ever skip such an opportunity?" The cat smirked again.

"You jest now, but I bet you will be coming back with that proof in the morning," Ondolemar smiled back, a hard little line on his face.

"If I had it my way elf, you would be nursing a wound and walking like a duck in the morning," Artan bit out, ignoring the way Marcurio practically shrieked behind him.

"I do not understand, but I guess it to be more drivel. Off with you," Ondolemar sniffed, waving a hand again, but this time in dismissal. Artan didn’t miss the way he only half meant it.

The khajiit swept up the short walk to the jarl, Marcurio at his back practically hyperventilating behind him. "Thank Talos that he didn't understand you." The mage was shaking, his head, his hands, his entire chest. He was wiping his palms against his robes, almost as if he was drowning in sweat. A good gauge on what the mage-folk here thought of Thalmor Justicars, if anything.

Just as they pierced the bubble around the throne, Artan whispered back, "I do that every day."

"Who are you?" A weathered old thing asked, sitting forward in his throne.

"Artan, my Jarl," the cat replied, but didn’t bow like Marcurio.

"What are you doing, interrupting my court like this?" The Jarl frowned, and Artan could almost feel the pressure his eyes had, the weight of them on his head. Balgruff didn’t have these eyes, but hell. It was good that there was a leader somewhere who could actually hold some weight behind his words.

"I am the answer to all your problems," Artan grinned, holding his hands out as if he were presenting a gift.

"Oh, how so?" The old man asked, his crackly old voice almost sounding curious. He was blatantly ignoring the other old fart sat beside him, muttering loudly about rudeness and pelts. He was much better at hiding his dislike for the new arrivals than the Jarl’s housecarl, who was stood a few inches from the cat with her sword drawn and her eyes like fire in her face. Her hair was still swishing around her shoulders with the force of her movement.

The cat grinned, "I came here to deal with your savage little problem. You take issue with the crazy people in the hills. And I want to help you."

The jarl looked at him, really looked. Artan knew what he saw. The man saw what all Nords saw. A tail. He saw a thief, a disaster waiting to happen, a murderer and a swindler. He saw a problem, sitting like a vulture on top of all his other problems, waiting for the other problems to crush him, so the vulture-problem could eat his liver. They all saw it. And it never became okay. He seemed to sit back after he was done with his staring, and eventually huffed out, "I hate sellswords."

Artan almost spat at the man, "I don't want your money."

The housecarl at the Jarl's side almost blew a vein at the impudence. Artan didn’t flinch from her or her sword; even if she looked like she was about to catch alight with rage. "I don't need your silver. I
do fine when it comes to paying my way. I'm doing this so that fiasco in the market never happens again. A woman who can't shop in the city market because she's scared of getting killed over a cabbage? It's disgusting. And since your guards are a bit slow on the uptake, I will just have to step in. AGAIN."

"You are the one who saved Margaret in the market," The jarl said quietly, almost as if he was making notes for himself.

Artan threw his arms across his chest and lifted his chin to better glare at the old man. "Give me a destination and I'll get the job done."

The jarl glanced to the other old man, who was still grumbling into his beard. After a few moments, a hard voice filtered out of that beard, "Red Eagle Redoubt." The old sod seemed to huff after that, folding his hands in his lap and pointedly not looking at Artan.

"See you in a few days, Jarl," the cat turned from them, throwing a hand up in goodbye. He forgot how much he hated talking to Jarls. He forgot, but fuck if he ever would again.

"That remains to be seen," he heard the old shit say, before they were fully outside that bubble of shit.

Artan was fully intending to do a walk out, but his eye caught something shiny in one of the small alcoves of the throne room. He was standing there, silent as a sabre tooth while it watched prey from the grass. His armour was what caught Artan's eye, shining silver in amongst all the gold and finery. His boots were leathery, old and scratched from what looked to be many battles, but still in good order. As was the rest of his attire, prim and proper, with the salty undercut of something else to rat him out as different in the throne room. His mouth was a set, pink line, almost marred by the ghastly silver scar that blinded his right eye. Only the other stark blue eye gave him away.

Artan snapped his trance and walked out, Marcurio at his heel.

They were barely out of the throne alcove and at the head of the steps before the magician was gibbering again; about forsworn being strong and how they were going to destroy a camp. Marcurio was almost at the bottom of the steps before he realized he was alone, that Artan had stopped beside the Thalmor agent again and was talking quietly with him.

"Who is in that throne room?" the cat asked lowly, barely able to keep the irritation out of his voice.

"The Jarl, his elderly uncle, and the woman is his housecarl." Ondolemar replied, pointedly ignoring the clawed hand around his arm.

"What about the blonde Nord. He looked like he could bite the head off a goat," Artan brought his hand up to his face and clacked his claws together, almost sounding like grinding teeth to the altmers surprise.

"That's Argis. The Bulwark. He's in line to be the Housecarl of the cities new thane. The Jarl just can't find a useful warrior in the dawdling fools he recruits to guard his gates to make the new Thane," the elf scoffed, hand waving again.

Artan clapped the elf on the back, ignoring the grimace of distaste.

"I am going to find you so much proof that you won't know whether to use the Orsimer burn or the Imperial titty-twister!"
Chapter Summary

Argis hates his new thane, and then he doesn't. Hate him as much, that is.

4E, 202 Early Morning Star

It was well past midnight, the moons watery tendrils choking, smothering the crisp, blackened trees chalked up into the sky. The grass was almost black, as was the water that clung to it, almost like a drunken love affair between the strange, shifting marsh and the blazing shoal of grasses that speckled the land mass around –and in- Morthal.

Artan himself was a rather sorry sight.

The ghostly apparition looked much better, in her pearly gown, pale face, and unmistakably dead aroma of crushed tulips and wet mud. She was tiny, a good half of his size, and as she whimpered and pleaded, Artan found himself almost ready to cry. Lydia was at his back, bristled like one of those prickly bushes that seemed to love growing here, and he knew they were good to go. The ghost girl disappeared, and they began the dreary, incredibly depressing game of hide and seek.

Artan let Lydia kill the vampire.

She was pale, dark haired, cropped short around her sharp, angular face. It reminded him detachedly of a snake, predator, devourer. The next forty-eight hours were draining, if he was honest. He just wanted to go back to Markarth, demand his Thaneship, take his new housecarl, fuck him, and go about his business like he was supposed to; free and full of humour. Usually he didn't get like this.

Other people always wanted something, and it was always something stupid, or gross, or simply physically ill-recommended. Usually, he would get the good stuff, and dodge the weird. Especially after that Sanguine fiasco. Lydia quirked an eyebrow at his shiver, but he motioned for her to carry on burying the girl's coffin. The ice princess was quite observant, and usually Artan thanked any Daedra, Aedra or deity for that. But when he's thinking about the beast with two backs, not the best quality for her to have. He shivered again.

He guessed he was a weirdo.

It wasn't that he didn't enjoy it, because he really did. He just didn't like what you usually had to do to get to that point. Sharing thoughts, feelings, ect. Give him smoke and dagger any day. Getting naked with someone needed either a lot of trust or a lot of self-confidence. Either you trusted them enough not to kill you while you slept, or you had to have the confidence in yourself to be able to survive such an encounter. He survived that encounter many times. Other people were not to be trusted. They are only trustworthy when belly-up in a ravine.

J'zargo taught him that much.

The other feline was brilliant, tactical, and completely dependable to run the other fucking way when a Dwemer automation starts running at you.

Artan grimaced. He hated the idea of talking about himself. About his life. About his thoughts. He
talked bullshit. It was another mask. If people think you're an ass, they will most likely believe you misplaced most morals, and most regular feelings too. Such as feeling hurt, getting sad, falling in love. It is assumed that these asses don't feel, and therefore questions that make him feel uncomfortable are not asked.

It creates a whole set of other problems, but Artan takes them.

Rather that than the alternative.

xxx

Artan drives a stake through the chest of the thrall, rather disgusted with the amount of blood that surges from the man's violated sternum. He figured stakes as a fun alternative to his regular war hammer, and well. It was. Got his head out of the clouds, thinking about the sharp silhouette in the Markarth throne-room. Hands-on. Messy. No time to think about no big, hulking man.

Lydia and that fool was at his side, and bluntly, Artan was sure he would kill the stupid dirt-farmer. He was screaming, whining, and bringing every bloodsucker in the whole place down on their heads. Eventually, Artan put a muffle spell on his mouth, and the silence was beautiful. Lydia visibly relaxed.

The three snaked further into the cave system, crouched low, sneaking, stealing inside amongst the bones, the flesh, the pulpy innards of the feeding room. God. All these freaks needed was the blood. Why eat the person too? Artan grimaced. It just seemed like having a bottle of wine and eating the glass as well.

When they came to a fork, well, a ladder and a ground path, Artan chose the ladder.

And thanked Boethiah that the vampire Mozarth was on the lower level, sat at a lavish table of human remains, small goats-heads and what looked to be a plate of rather extraordinarily large carrots. Artan got out his bow, and with a deep steady breath, took out the thrall on the balcony above his head. There wasn't even a twitch from the master vampire, picking at his plate of kidneys as if they were small unremarkable apple pies.

Artan killed three more before the alarm sounded.

The stupid dirt-farmer cried and fell to his knees during the fight, Lydia and Artan having to keep the fool between them, backs together, faces to the vampires, trying to keep him out of the firing line.

A short, stumpy vampire lashed out with that red magic, zapping Artan's leg, sucking it dry. The cat threw his warhammer. It crushed the vampire's throat, collarbone and some of his chest, the energy returning to Artan's leg, and the cat taking full advantage of it. Drawing both of the swords lashed to his thighs, he turned on Lydia's assailant, driving the golden blade through the thrall's gut with nail-through-thumb ease. The thrall at his back didn't have a chance. Lydia swung her battleaxe with a precision that made Artan rethink his witty banter with her. It floated over his head as he lunged; fully decapitating the fool trying to stab him in the back.

If this is what she did to vampires, imagine what she could do to him if he proper pissed her off.

The thought, unbidden, almost screwed him.

Mozarth had him by the other arm, the arm holding his mace, and in a flurry Artan was on his back, shrieking in that awful, vampire way, and the bloodied red aura engulfed everything in Artan's vision. Only one thing saved him.
When he first met the man, he didn't know what to think.

At first, when the Jarl told him the hold was to get a new thane, well. He didn't really think the hold needed it. They were imbedded into the mountainside, guarded by nature herself. They had repelled a few dragon attacks, and were far enough from Solitude and Windhelm that the battles didn't reach them. The only thing they had to contend with was the Forsworn, and the amount of sell-swords in the area kept them at enough of a distance.

They said he was the legendary Dovahkiin, which fought in the battle of Whiterun, who ran with the cannibals of Namira, that he was both daedric champion and daedra hunter, that he had one foot in the dark and the other in the light. That he was Thane in two other holds and that the crime rate had dropped to almost nothing during his ascension to the role. All bards folly. It had to be.

They still didn't need a thane, though.

Argis was disturbed from his reverie by a visitor to the Jarl's court, the recently ascended Archmage. The Bulwark simply took him apart, piece by piece. From the looks of him, he wasn't only gifted in magic. He held himself like a warrior, but he didn't have the build. He was lithe, like a runner. The feathery Archmage robes made him look birdlike, hood up and a strange bronze mask across his face.

But when he tugged it away, the court unanimously gasped.

Then the jarl stood, and opened his arms. The court bubbled with excitement, happy faces, and the usual. Argis was confused. A Khajiit? Why were they so happy to see a Khajiit as Archmage? Then he understood it, as Ondolemar clapped him on the shoulder, that this guy was the new thane. That it was this guy who put Faleen and that insufferable wizard together. That he had wiped most of the Forsworn from the hills.

This scrawny clod was the new thane.

The new thane was relatively short, maybe 5'7. Well, he was short compared to Argis. The nord himself was 6'3. A kitten really, Argis knew he wouldn't last a week. The Khajiit storms in, all grins, smiles, jokes and swapping small talk with Faleen. He didn't have the backbone to be thane. Not here. It was a bone crushing city, built on the backs of slaves, on the backs of barbarians that the guards threw into jail, Blood and Silver.

He had to have been loaded to afford one of the bigger houses in Markarth, but how this airhead managed to get his paws on that kind of dough was a huge question mark. If you didn't believe the shady rumours about him. This couldn't be the same khajiit that did all the things that the courts praised him of. What they cursed him for.

Argis just had to ask, "Who are you?"

The cat-man smiled, "I'm Artan. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Bulwark."
When the cat finally said the words, Argis was sat in the kitchen with a sweet roll a month from their first meeting.

"Follow me."

A day later, and they were up to their armpits in vampires. When one of them appeared at his flank, sword raised high, and the ugly red pulse of magic sapped his strength, forcing him to his knees, he cursed the damned cat to the gods. And then there was a yowl. Dumbass got himself kill-

The vampire hit the dirt with a black blur, and with a terrible shriek she was dead. The figure removed its hands from her hair, shaking fingers and claws free from the matted clumps atop the unnaturally floppy head, straightened and turned to Argis, tail flicking. Artan crouched by him, and suddenly his hands were glowing gold. Before the Nord could hiss out any expletives, he felt the pain in his side recede and the weakness in his legs fall away.

"Why?"

"I brought you here. It's only right to watch your back. Besides, you're my housecarl. Your duty is to protect me. I am your thane, so it is my duty to protect you, too," the cat smiled. Argis stared at him, and the khajiit laughed.

"Pick your jaw up, we still have more bloodsuckers to go!"

That was a few hours ago, and they were far from the pond-haven in which that particular coven called home. The cat was stripping a buck of its hide, humming some ridiculous tune about some warrior or other, and for some unbeknownst reason, Argis found it immensely irritating.

"Well, I think that went rather well," Artan smiled, throwing one of the antlers towards his pack.

"How?" Argis asked, not even bothering to keep the anger from his voice.

The cat scoffed, sounding incredulous, "we are alive, well, and have a set of awesome new robes to flog."

The Nord frowned, "fair point. But it shouldn't have got that tight in there. Aren't you Archmage? Couldn't you just incinerate them?"

The Thane seemed to fluff up, abashed, "Well, I sort of saved the college, and they elected me Archmage. I am actually a novice in magical endeavours."

The disapproval that melted off Argis was palpable, malleable. Artan could have made a waxen sculpture taller than himself if the stuff was material. The Nord crossed his arms, one ice blue, and one milky white eye staring at him over their meager fire. "So we could have easily died today. And you are meant to be Thane?"

Artan bristled, "if you want I can rectify that for you, Mr. Bulwark. I might not be able to smoke your ass into charcoal but I can still kick the living-"

The roar was monumental. The landing almost deafened them. Argis attacked first, the cat was gone. The sword didn't even dent the dragon hide, and in one movement, the thing swung its tail, shattered Argis' shield against him, wounding him, sending him flying, and the foot was crushing him. The blinding oh fuck flashed through him, and in that terrible, mind-numbing movement where the dragon reared its head, its throat and chest expanded, and the flames licked around its dreadful maw,
Argis knew he was going to die.

The dragon opened its mouth.

And howled.

The crack was loud, and Argis felt the toes around him loosen phenomenally, and as he watched the dragon flop to the ground, head landing heaving a few feet from his own boots, he took especial note of Artan, crouched low on the creature's head, battle-axe practically up to the hilt in the skull of the beast, tail twitching, eyes blazing, and completely awe-inspiring.

The cat straightened, and in a dreadful, twisting yank tore his weapon from the carcass of his kill, whipping his head aside to fling the blood from his eyes, before taking a gentle skip down from the dragon's head. With the head of his axe, he gently pried apart the claws holding Argis, and offered the other, free hand to the Bulwark. Shakily, stunned, completely bewildered, Argis took the hand, and allowed himself to be hauled upright.

"Next time, don't run at them head on. Weave, zig-zag, make a harder target. Knights always go for the straightforward approach, and it always gets them killed. So please," Artan patted a heavy shoulder, slightly bringing Argis back to earth, "be careful. I don't want to bury you too."

The Nord's ears perked, "Too?"

The feline soured, and returned to the fire.

"Too."

xxx

Watching Artan was an experience. That is being mild; astounding amounts of 'mild.'

The cat was an enigma, even three months on. They were still traveling, and Argis was intensely, utterly, and completely confused as to whether Artan was good or bad. One moment, the Nord was sure that Artan would never get into Paradise. And the next, he was all but assured that the cat was going somewhere nice in the next life. He did silly things, like kill and thieve and in one case run around near-naked in the neighbour's flowerbeds blind drunk. The next day he was running errands for the assistant in the temple of Mara, playing matchmaker for a farmer's daughter, and not forgetting his intervention between the court mage and Faleen, the Jarl's housecarl.

One moment he was giving oranges to starving children and the next he was sniping at a soldier from a pub window. Argis couldn't peg him, and doubted he every really would.

Even stranger, he was finding himself growing fond of the fluffy rat.

He checked his temperature, and it was normal.

Maybe he was going soft in his old age.

Or maybe, he wasn't the golem he always told himself he was.

Absently, the bulky Nord rubbed a thumb down the scalloped facial scar, the same one that claimed his sight. Artan looked to him, cocked his head, but the Nord shook his head in reply. Artan extended the stare, before shrugging, and motioning for Argis to stay seated. He called for more wine.
The next few moments were a blur, but when he blinked, the lanky elf was trussed up on the table, hog-tied with his own scarf. Artan had his thin, dark hand at the elf's throat, murmuring quiet, almost sweetly in the shivering creature's ear, and a quiet exchange was made. Argis didn't move throughout the exchange, even if a few barmmaids shrieked and the innkeeper looked ready to start kicking them out. He had grown rather use to people attacking his Thane, and Artan rebuking attacks before Argis even registered danger. He attributed it to magic, but he wasn't certain. Artan was too good.

The cat kicked the elf to the floor, before looking to Argis.

"Looks like I have pissed off another official. Argis, if anything happens; it's been a good run."

The Nord snorted, "What?"

"I am glad that the Jarl picked you to be my housecarl. Even if you are moodier than Lydia, you are a good man. And I am pretty damn happy I met you. Before you, my plan was to destroy the Nordic people, and maybe keep Lydia as a pet. But you have made me rethink that completely. If any of the other Nords are a fraction of you, then I wouldn't have it in me to hurt them. You are loyal, and crazy, and by Talos do you have a set of balls. But if anything happens to me, I want you to take care of yourself. Well. Live till you're grey, and for the love of Talos, don't throw your life away for some asshole."

The cat eyed him, before he stood, yawned, and led the bewildered blonde out of the pub.

The peace was short lived.

The temple was dark, and to be honest, Argis was completely and utterly confused as to why they were here at all. A crazed man was suggesting there were traitors in the aristocracy. That there were men in the court who were throwing innocents into Cidnha mine. That they were political prisoners. He was disgusted. And appalled at this stupid little man. But Artan believed him. It was enough for Argis to hear the man out. It was enough to make Argis doubt the city he had lived in for the last decade.

"I have seen many bad apples. I wouldn't be surprised to find another rotten one here."

The sweet, cloying and ultimately stuffy smell of the incense was overbearing, and Argis could see Artan practically stomping down the slope to where they were meant to meet the man. Argis forgot what his name was. But Artan stopped, and motioned for the big man to hide. Argis was about to ask, but the cat put a finger to his mouth, and motioned again. The blonde growled, but complied.

The feline loped down the short slope down into the belly of the temple, and Argis understood when the guards popped out.

"You have been sniffing around too much, Khajiit. Thane or not. To the mine with you, murdering filth. Spilling blood in the home of Talos. You should be hung for this."

Another guard snickered, and Argis could only watch as the four of them escorted Artan away. The cat motioned for him to stay where he was, and he did as told. But it wasn't out of choice. The spell held him fast, bottling and corking that rage inside him, the searing, almost volcanic heat that was bubbling in his guts. His fingers twitched to his axe, and too late, he was barreling up the stairs towards the entrance. It was much too late. Because Artan was already gone, and there was nothing he could do.
It wasn't his first time in prison. But it was his first time in such a ratty, disgusting place. He guessed it was because it stank of abused justice, forgotten heroes and a violated legal system. Might've been the intense body odor, decaying skeevers and human defecation. Could have very easily been either. He didn't know how justice smelt.

It had been three hours, and he had acquired four shivs, a bottle of skooma, a small sandstone dog sculpture that looked more like a duck, and what looked to be the remains of a small rodent. As well as making friends with who seemed to be one of the crazy cultists that he had made his entire fortune killing. It also seemed that the crazy cultists had crowned this guy their king. Artan didn't know whether to be impressed or terrified of their incredibly democratic hierarchy and voting systems.

It didn't matter much. Especially when the fool started leading him up the beaten path, through some old caverns and out into Markarth. And straight into the faces of the waiting authorities.

Corrupt, but authoritative none the less.

A huge, hulking Forsworn leapt forwards, bowling three corrupt guards off their feet, his fellows hurtling in after him, and Artan skipped away from the fighting. Back pressed to the wall, he tried his dandiest to keep out of whatever tiff staggered his way. That is, until something grabbed his threadbare shirt and hauled him into the sky. For a moment, he thought maybe Namira had taken pity on him.

That is, until he was greeted by thick arms, a puff of blonde locks and his sword.

Then he realized that Lady Luck had blessed him instead.

"Come on, my Thane. Let's get back to the house and some food in you. You're making the twigs look like trees right now," Argis grunted, half carrying Artan through the streets. He seemed more observant than usual, and was easily able to get them to the base of Vlindrel Hall’s steps without much effort.

"But what about the Forsworn? They're escaping," Artan managed to ask, in between the irregular bouts of blindness and feeling like his entire stomach would come out.

"The Guards will deal with them. And then the Jarl will deal with the traitors who have broken their vows to Lady Justice," Argis snarled, eventually just forcing his other arm under Artan’s knees and carrying him up the steps.

"You seem to have everything under control," the cat chuckled, patting the Nord’s breastplate.

"I learnt from the best," Argis bit out between dodging the guards barreling down the steps and towards the front gates.

"Lydia is a brilliant tactician. And… oh lord the sun is bright today…” Artan sighed, feeling like whatever eel had made a home in his gut had suddenly given birth and all her babies were just swimming upwards towards his head.

"My Thane…?" Argis didn’t look down; too busy trying to push his way up to the house. He had just about got to the door before he realized that Artan had fainted.

xxx

"Eat your eggs," Argis said, and Artan didn’t have to see his face to know he was frowning.
"But Argis-" the cat whined.

Argis cut him off, turning from the stove to glare at the cat. "I don't care. Eat them or I will make you eat them."

The cat pouted, and for a moment, the Bulwark debated on going a little easier on the cat. And then he figured that he escaped only two days ago from a prison that had starved him for the better part of three months. The determination came back, and he pushed the plate closer to Artan.

"What do I get for it?" the cat asked, claw tracing around his fork but not picking it up.

The Nord raised his eyebrows, looking like he had just found a three-headed unicorn that pooped gold and diamonds in his man-shed. "How about I don't hit you? That sound good?"

The cat pouted more, ears flickering down against his skull, eyes sparkling. It was a technique that made Queen Elisif melt, that stopped Lydia mid-rant, and thawed even Maven Black-Briar's icy stare. It even made a tiny, almost-buried part of Argis squeak with an equally miniscule fleck of happiness.

But the cat didn't expect a rebuke, and not such a powerful one.

He looked alarmed as Argis' hand shot out, but the moment the fingers began pressing, massaging, he was already arching, shivering, purring. Argis would have pumped a fist in the air, a victory against the enigmatic Thane, but that would have been demeaning. He carried on scratching the cat behind the ears, down his neck, under his chin. The deep, throaty purring didn't stop, and the feline got so completely enthralled by the feeling that when Argis stopped, he clutched at the hand with both hands, sending a vehement, borderline monstrous glare at the Nord.

The blonde gave him a pointed look, "not until you finish your plate."

The cat soured, frowning as if the Bulwark had puked in his mouth, "You are a monster."

"Monster, Housecarl. Potatoe, Potato," Argis shrugged, turning back to the stove.

xxx

"Argis, meet Lydia. She is my first, and took my Housecarl virginity a good year ago now. Be careful, she's like a wolf with a bear carcass," Artan stage-whispered to the Bulwark, cupping his hand around his mouth to better direct the noise. How Artan didn’t cut his face with his claws, Argis didn’t know.

"Better that than a kitten with a saucer of milk, my Thane," Lydia snorted, folding her arms across her breastplate and slouching a little in her armour. It was the sign of a young warrior, the slouching.

"I happen to like milk. It's not my fault you prefer blood," the cat poked his tongue out at her before he actually went to poke the icy woman in the stomach with a few fingers, ignoring her half-hearted swipe at his head.

"You are such a pussycat," she grinned at him when he dodged away from her, shaking her head.

"You are such a vulgar shit sometimes, you know that?" Lydia growled, pushing him a few feet away from her.
"Talos almighty are you blushing?" Artan half shrieked, half squeaked.

Argis didn't bother to help the Thane trying to patch the bloodied nose, nor help him up off the floor. He rather figured the Thane deserved that one.

Xxx

4E, 202 Second Seed

He had lost count of how long Artan had been his Thane. He had similarly lost count of how long ago the stupid infatuation started, too. Typical. Spend a little time with him, and as usual, the ridiculous critter had charmed him, the same way he had charmed the inexorable Lydia. The cat had actually made her smile, the last they were here. They were off to some witch nest or other. Argis just nodded politely, zoning out whatever the cat was saying, instead wondering how the silvery fur spread across his throat would feel. Whether his belly was soft and fluffy like real cat. He sighed, and tucked the ridiculous thoughts away. Artan was his Thane. Nothing more. Nothing less.

The crash almost shook the jars off the shelves.

He returned in a rush, carrying a bloodied lump in his arms and howling at the healers that followed him like sheep. Argis leapt to his feet, watching in shock as the thane swept all the things off the kitchen table with a deft tail, and placed the dripping mess on the surface. Then he swore and ordered the healers around the table and the glow started.

They stood and chanted for hours.

Eventually that bloated lump began to scream.

The day bled away into night, and eventually the screams turned to sobs, dry and cracked, and Argis watched as the healers filed out, passed out and puked up. Others always filed in, however, to replace them. Artan never left that room. His eyes were cold and brutal in his face, and every time his fur rippled and he dry heaved in the corner, he would bite out a roar and shake himself. Then he would straighten, down a potion or four, and go back to healing.

And eventually, when the morning sun rose and turned into a noonday blaze, the lump looked like a girl again. The healers slumped and rolled around on the floors, pale and drawn as if they had just run several miles with dragons up their asses.

Artan fell onto one of the stools littered through Vindrell Hall, eyes trained on the girl on the table. Then he huffed, once, and went to pick her up. Argis pushed his tired arms out of the way and picked her up, wandering out through the hall and out to where his own quarters were. The stupid Dovakiin had spent all his money on the rest of the house and had left a tiny nest of dry hay and a few jugs of wine as his own room. So Argis left Lydia in his bed, and simply closed the door on the way out.

"Now. You go to bed, Thane. I will see to the other healers."

"They have food. We sleep. Follow."

Artan simply grabbed a gauntlet and dragged the nord across the hall to his pit, and Argis was incredibly surprised to actually see a bed had been installed in the room. The wardrobes were still empty, and spiders still hung out in the corners. Still. The khajiit had thrown a rather haphazard sheet of fur over his bed instead of a blanket, and to be honest, Argis liked the concept.

Who wouldn't like soft fur compared to hemp?
The cat simply growled, and Argis felt the Thu'um wash over him. He was mildly surprised when his armour practically shuddered off him. The khajiit shoved him, and he landed square in the middle of the bed and for an instant, his brain did a back flip. That was before the dovahkiin yawned, stretched, flumped on the bed and passed out face down with his ass in the air.

xxx

Argis woke up to something warm on his chest, vibrating soothingly against him. The thing was fluffy, like his wonderful pet dog when he lived on the farm. It saved him from a bear, years ago. The thing had attacked him and his brother on a hunting trip, and when the bear turned on him after gutting his brother, the dog leapt between them. Somehow, the duo managed to kill the beast.

But this was softer. Leaner. It felt wonderful, all melted across him, keeping him warm. Then it yawned and stretched languidly against his side, mewling softly in his ear. Mewling.

He didn't want to believe it.

He cracked open an eye.

They had fallen asleep with the door closed. There were two of them. In the middle of summer. With furs sprawled all over the floor and bed. Where the dovahkiin had kicked them off. With most of his clothes. And was now laid butt naked across Argis and a few of the furred blankets like a furry sex god.

And for a moment, all those ridiculous thoughts were real.

Legate Rikke could have fucking knocked.

The woman didn't even flinch. "Get your ass out of bed. We need you to stomp out a small camp of Stormcloaks. They have taken-"

"Fus."

The woman flew from the room, and for an instant, the furs shuddered. Then with a growled "Ro," the door slammed shut. Then Artan returned to snuggling into the warmth underneath him, and that was that.

"Ta-Dah!"

xxx

4E, 202 Midyear

Three days.

Artan was bound by his vows to help the Legion, and Argis was bound by his vows to Artan. Seemed ridiculous, but sadly, such is life. They had sped to another meeting place, half a mile from another Stormcloak fort, the third this month, and got ready to start a siege. It was the last before they were to sweep Windhelm, and the air was palpable. But Artan wasn't looking at his soldiers, shivering in the dusty snow drifts. He was staring at Argis with those big green eyes.

"Are you okay with this?"

"Attacking a fort? We have done this three times already. I think I'm used to it."

"These men aren't bandits. They are Nords. Your brothers. Does that bother you? I will send you
back to camp if you don't want to fight them."

The Bulwark simply blinked, stupidly at the fluffy rat, almost like a fish would gape. "You're asking this now? Seriously?" Artan nodded once, and Argis resisted the want to shove him in the snow bank. "You are my Thane. I may share a God with those men, but we do not share an ideal. The Thalmor banning Talos is an outrage, but civil war is not the answer. Ulfric must pay for his crimes, against Skyrim and against its people. All of its people."

Artan seemed to shiver into alertness at that, before looking back towards the fort. "And once again, I have Talos to thank for putting you here, Argis."

Argis scoffed, ignoring the soft tone, "No, you would have to thank my mother for that."

"Maybe over tea and a Sweetroll," the cat glanced back, hopeful.

"More like a beer and a horker steak," Argis corrected, deadpan.

Artan grinned from pointy ear to pointy ear, "I think I will love this woman."
The Beginning

Chapter Summary

The beginning, and a few ends.

Chapter Notes

We dream the dreams
Now we will fight the fight
We will defeat the other guys

And we'll lead the dreams
Until they die inside
We'll raise their kids
And commandeer their wives
We'll curse their gods
And drink up all their wine
We will defeat the other guys
-
Battle Cry, Ludo

4E, 202 Midyear

The fort had been a mess. Artan and Argis split up, each in one of the two squads of men attacking both sides of the fort. The archers were quick on their feet, taking out a few of the imperial soldiers streaming through the demolished barricades. Even Argis was hard pressed with the fluttering arrows, one almost catching him across the throat. That was, until Artan intervened. The lightning lit up the stone as if the sun had suddenly appeared, blinding most of the melee fighters and almost bringing the scuffle to a standstill. But the men rallied, and the battle raged on, even as the Archmage set the world on fire. It finished almost as quickly as it began, only the stragglers left.

Rikke actually cracked a smile when they were dismissed.

That had been yesterday.

But today, Artan was gone.

Argis almost threw a hissy fit, worry creasing nearly every part of him. The Thane was an idiot, but he wasn't an asshole. He wouldn't have left Argis alone in Riften. FortDunstrad was a mental fight, but they had completely eradicated any Stormcloak threat in the area. They had only come here to rest. All of Artan's gear was still here, except his knives and the scraps of fur he used as armour. So Argis hunkered down, and waited. No matter how much it pissed him off.
The shack was cold, regardless of the soft yellow flames that bathed most of it. Artan came back to himself slowly, blearily taking in his surroundings. It didn't look good. The three people were on their knees, hands tied behind them, black sacks tucked over each head. They were shrieking, crying, and yelling. Well, mostly only the Nordic warrior on the far left was doing that, the old woman in the middle was growling out threats, hissing through what sounded like a gummy mouth. The khajiit on the far right was mostly silent, only once in a while suggesting pay offs, thin threats and trades for his life.

"Kind of pathetic, when you think about it."

Artan turned, and took note of the leather-clad woman sprawled across the wooden bureau at the back of the shack, legs dangling rather playfully over the edge.

"The kind of pathetic that the guards found Grelod in, if you think about it. She was soaked in her own shit too. But she was Ours, and you took her. That kind of thing is frowned upon among assassins, stealing kills. But you can repay your… inconsideration by completing a contract for me, in the Brotherhood's name instead of your own. You owe us, and by doing this, we will be even. One of these three people has a contract on their head. Pick them out. Perform the kill. That's it."

"Which one?" Artan asked, barely audible.

The woman seemed to smile, "You figure it out."

The khajiit frowned, and stood rather shakily before turning back to the three hogtied captives. She was one of the Dark Brotherhood. She could probably kill him if he dared to attack her, even if he wanted to. The best option was to do what she said to the letter. Maybe she would spare him. And if not, he would-

"Where is my companion?" he asked.

"The blonde? He is safe, back in Riften where we found you. But shouldn't you really be focusing on the task at hand?"

Artan turned around again, looking at the rather pitiful lumps on the shack's moulding floorboards. He drew his knives from where they had been thrown on the floor, and advanced. He was quick, and made it as painless as he could, but when he turned back to the woman, she was sat leaning on her knees, propping her head up on her fists.

"You didn't know which one it was, so you killed them all?" the woman sounded surprised.

"It was only logical," he replied, monotone and awaiting judgement.

"Indeed." She regarded him for a moment, after that, but Artan showed her no discomfort, gave her no inch. She straightened, "The Brotherhood is a family, first and assassins second. You seem to have a hard time in regular work, with regular citizens. You wouldn't have murdered a woman like that if you were. I extend the olive branch to you, Artan. Our base is near Falkreath in the Pine forest, beneath the road. When you reach the Black Door, answer it's question with 'Silence, my Brother,' and you're in. Your new life is waiting for you kiddo. I'll see you at home." She gave him a small wave, and he walked out.

He didn't stop running until he was out of the marshlands.

Argis was sat on the bench in the Bee and Barb, Marcurio opposite him, ale in hand and sweet roll in
the other. It had been three weeks, and no sign of the khajiit. Lydia hadn't seen him either, according to the letter she sent in reply. She said that the Thane disappeared sometimes, but he would be back. Just wait there. A small part of him thought he would be back at Markarth, but he figured to wait out the rest of the week here just in case.

Xxx

4E, 202 Early Suns Height

When the door opened, he was used to the false alarms. It was never Artan, so he didn't bother looking up. When the weight settled on the chair next to him, and Marcurio started swearing, he knew he was wrong. He looked up. Artan looked as if he had passed through the intestinal tract of a dragon. His fur was matted, splotched and his clothes stuck to him with the mud and blood. "You motherfucker."

The cat tried a smile, but it was more of a grimace than anything.

"Where is the nearest bath and bed?"

"The room is the first one on the right, and the bath is out back."

The cat nodded, "Glad you're okay Argis. I thought... it doesn't matter."

"I'm okay? What about you? You disappeared!"

The feline shrugged, "I'll tell you about it another time, but let's just say I hope to never, ever piss that crazy bitch off again."

Xxx

Artan never really explained where he went, or what had happened to him while he was gone. The Bulwark figured it to be a sore spot, so he let it drop. He was a housecarl; he had no right to demand anything of his Thane. So he kept quiet, and fell in line behind the khajiit, ignoring Marcurio's strange glances towards the cat's armoured back. He was used to the weird glances the Thane got, even if the subject himself didn't even notice them. He acted the same way around everyone, even the sleazebags. If he really thought about it, Argis had never really seen Artan lose his temper with citizens, always that calm, almost flippant mask.

Argis often wondered when it would break.

What kind of face was really under there? Or would it end up like a masquerade, just another mask? He shook the thought away. They were about to storm Windhelm. This wasn't the time for an epiphany.

The snow cascaded around them, not even tempering the fires that flooded the city. The night was black, but between the reflective snow and the searing flames, it became a sharp caricature of the place it used to be. Artan was stalking the streets, Bulwark and Marcurio prowling along behind him. He would have brought Lydia, if he didn't think she would cut him down to save Ulfric, that is. Instead, he was stuck with the talkative mage. And in some strange twist of fate, the mage seemed rather happy he was there.

Too happy.

Artan had seen that glint before, and it always ended badly. Especially when he was feeling weak. Argis was a distant dream, and well. Marcurio didn't give a shit about feelings or anything like that.
He was competent with a blade, but Artan was confident he could neutralise any threat. It was tempting. Very tempting.

He pushed the thoughts away, and they carried on trudging through the snow, imperial soldiers flanking them on every side. The battle raged on for hours, and Artan lost count of how many fools died on his war hammer for a fool man with a fool dream. He almost smiled when a few Argonians and dark elves flooded from the cracks, swords, spears, bows in hand. The soldiers appreciated the extra help. It gave them a few extra inches, and that's what makes a war.

That what helps you win.

When they tried the front doors, well. The Stormcloaks were everywhere. And in an instantaneous brainwave, Artan decided. He clapped Argis on the shoulder, motioned to the keep, and grinned like a kitten would around a dead mouse. The Bulwark nodded.

***

"My Jarl, the Imperials have stormed the main square! We must evacuate the-"

"No! Stall them! When the men return from the patrols we can crush the ones inside our walls, and go on complete lock down. We will survive this."

"We are trying to stall them, but-"

"It's a bit late for that, sweetheart."

The two brutish Nords turned, and in a moment of pure, impossible, just couldn't fathom how to speak to the intruding Khajiit. It was sat in black and red armour on top of the long table, tight fitted, helmet-less with no visible weapons, but obviously imperial. They would never recruit a Khajiit. The creature smiled, eyes practically closing in barely contained glee.

"You know, before I became a Legionnaire and invaded your city, I had quite the repertoire."

"Hold your tongue, fleabag, or I'll tear it out," the bear-Nord growled, stepping forwards.

The cat prickled, "turn this into a race matter and I will use your carcass as a scratching post and your shattered skull as a litter tray. Talos knows I will be adding some much-needed flair to that empty-"

The sword sailed over his head, flung backwards across the table, almost completely parallel with the wooden surface. The bear-Nord growled, but the cat was already making the deathblow. It somersaulted backwards onto its hands, out of range of the sword, onto its feet, hands aglow. The lightning streaked out, and in an instant, Ulfric wasn't looking at his housecarl anymore. He was staring at the smoking, charred remains of a man that had spend two decades at his side. His housecarl slumped to the floor, and the cat had the audacity to speak.

"My Jarl, supper is served," the cat jeered, fully expecting the old fart to fall to his knees in fear. If anything, he was banking on it.

"Ulfric! Stop!" someone was screaming, and the two were jolted out of their bubble. They turned to the doors, already open, Tullius storming in, Argis at his side, guards around them, and Lydia- Pushing through all of them, yelling and screeching. "Ulfric please! We can’t fight the Thalmor if-"

"FUS."
Lydia flew. Argis was sprinting towards her, Tulius was yelling. Artan snapped.

The next moments were tumultuous, but he remembers drawing his sword, but he couldn't feel it in his hand anymore. He feels the cold stone under his back, but it turns warmer as he feels himself chill. Feels the sting at his throat, and the warmth seep out. The last thing that danced in front of his eyes was the silvery khajiit, tail waggling, eyes ablaze.

"Meow motherfucker."

Xxx

4E, 202 Early Last Seed

"The only strange thing about Susana was the shape of her cuts. They looked like… well. The old Nords used these kinds of curved blades when embalming their dead. I don't know who in Windhelm would even know about these blades, let alone have some on hand. Except me, of course, but none of mine are missing."

"I promised Brunwulf that I would find the killer, when I first came to Windhelm. And even though I razed this city to the ground a month ago, these women are still getting slaughtered."

"And so you bring me to a rickety old house in the middle of the night," Argis frowned, the displeasure evident in every single word.

"I must have missed something." The cat was erratic, leaping over things, looking under things, zipping across the room. The dark floorboards were still crusting with black blood, the walls still dingy and close. Even with the house empty, it felt crowding. Artan's wisps were bobbling about, but even their cheery glow didn't quell the feeling in his gut. This place was bad news. But Artan was adamant that there was something else. Something more.

The house smelt bad. Not all the rooms, but the stink was nearly everywhere. Artan was fumbling around in the back, where the stench was strongest. When his claws slipped around the wardrobe's handles, pulled its doors open, the stench really flooded out. He gagged, but Artan only flinched. Argis didn't want to know where Artan got his steel stomach from. He just hoped it wasn't experience. The back of the wardrobe slid open, and the thickened air became almost unbearable.

Artan stepped in, but Argis had to wait by the door. The cat perused the remains, tapped the altar, picked a shoddy journal from the ground; as well as pocketing a strange amulet. "Lets skate, Argis."

They had barely gotten outside into the fresh air when the commotion rushed past them, towards the main square. Argis looked to the Thane, who simply looked grim. The Bulwark led the way, to where the crowd was completely encompassing the doors to the temple of Talos, shrieking women and shouting men erupting in the typically quiet city. But even as the scene played out, it was almost funny how that the silent forms of Tova and Torbjorn Shatter-Shield, clutching their dead daughter, Nilsine.

xxx

The house was even creepier than the eerie Hjerim. The old man was blathering on about something, but Argis wasn't a fool. He saw the way Artan's spine straightened, hardened. His tail was stock still, coiled tightly against his leg. But his face still had that regular smile, his eyes still softly crinkled at the edges. He was still relying as if they were talking about Ysgmor's spoon, or The Book of Fate. That they weren't really having a verbal battle about the murders of those women. "But please, I must get back to my other duties. You can come back any time for a tour of Calixto's Marvelous
"That would be wonderful," Artan smiled, before with a cheerful, "Argis?" they left.

"He's a monster."

The Bulwark glanced at his thane, "What do you mean? Apart from those drapes in his house, the only thing I saw out of sorts was you."

The cat chuckled, "He's hiding something. Something big, bad and ugly. I don't know if it’s these murders, but he's definitely no innocent."

Argis seemed to be grasping at straws, but still he tried, "Well he did say that-"

"You felt it in there," Artan looked to him, frowning. "It felt like-"

"When that dragon had me pinned," the Bulwark replied, quiet.

"See? You felt it too. There's something in him, something not right," the cat shook his head, almost as if it would dispel the thought.

"What's the plan?" Argis asked finally.

"Well," a shrug of the shoulders, tilt of the head, "his façade will break eventually. It’s already fraying at the seams. We just have to be there to protect the civilians from the fallout."

"Even Rolff Stone-fist?" The Nord prodded, smiling grimly down at Artan.

"Even him, yes. Although, they do say that 85 percent of accidents happen at home." Artan sighed, only half-jokingly.

Argis would have questioned why they were camped out in the shrubbery outside the White Phial, but he had long given up questioning Artan's logic. If he had it his way, they would have alerted the guards in the area and then done a stake out. He supposed that a heavy guard presence would scare away the murderer, but at the same time they would have witnesses to the crime. Otherwise, what was to say the guards would not just arrest them for killing the butcher, unknowing? Artan's tail twitched, hand already on his bow. "You know, I have a bad feeling about this."

"Oh? How so?"

"I just get the feeling that-"

"GET BACK HERE YA BLEEDIN' BOOT!"

A sudden burst of noise drew their attention, Artan motioning for Argis to stay. The blur whistled past, panting, crying, running. There were three of them running after her. Two of them were regulars at Candlehearth, and the last was the noisy drunkard that Artan beat up a few months ago. Shavee fell, landing in a shaking heap beside the molten basin of the forge, barely having enough sense to pull her hand away from the glowing coals. Her eyes were locked on the Nords advancing on her.

"Stealing my amulet like that, the nerve of you dirt-lickers is unbelievable!"

Argis gripped his shoulder, tight enough to bruise. "We have to stop them."
Artan turned to him, profile clear in the light from the lanterns. "We cant. If we jump them now, the murderer might scarper."

"If we don't, they'll-"

"They won't," Artan bit back, sounding sure.

Argis pressed his lips together.

"It is my amulet! My friend got it back for me many moons ago! You cannot take it from me!" she was shaking, all over, her voice thick. When the two, yelling Argonians made it around the corner, stopping dead almost at the sight, Argis felt Artan's stance tighten. "Fuck."

"Get away from Shavee, human," the taller, green Argonian growled, low in his pale throat. Rolff laughed, heavy and deep with mead. "As if you can make me, boot." The shorter, greenish-brown Argonian stormed forwards, only the taller, Scouts-Many-Marshes, clawed hand on his arm made the other stop.

"We will go to the Jarl," he growled, a deep leathery sound.

"Ha! Like they would take your word over mine. You have to remember, filth," a hand shot out, catching Shavee's wrist, hauling her upright. She writhed, but he pressed the tiny, silvery dagger into the underbelly of her throat, and she was stiller than the snowdrifts at their feet. "That no matter how many Imperial dogs you have at your back, the Nords will always be there to put you in your place."

"Move that dagger on her and I will feed you your own fetid pelt, Nord."

Heads turned, but it was too late. Argis had moved, thick arm taking out the shorter of the lackeys, shield cracking the skull of the other. But it was Artan's ridiculous, almost sickening retaliation to Shavee's treatment that made the struggling Nord drunk in Argis' arms scream. Even the taller, green Argonian gasped.

A paw flickered out, and in a crazed instance, the war-axe had knocked the hand holding the blade aside. The other paw drove a glass dagger into the arm holding Shavee. She fell to her knees between the men, as Artan hooked the curved lip of his war-axe around the man's neck, tugged him to be almost nose to nose, then driving that eerie green dagger into the junction between shoulder and neck. Artan didn't gag, didn't twitch as Rolff coughed out his lifeblood, even when the sticky wetness covered his face, smattered across his muzzle, absolutely drenched the sobbing Shavee. Artan didn't bother laying the man down. He ripped the dagger free, and with one of his steel-booted legs, kicked the nord straight into the forge's coalpit.

Shavee didn't hold back anymore. She screamed.

But what Argis didn't understand was how she clung to Artan, the man who just brutally murdered Rolff like it was picking jazbay grapes in a glade. "A-a-art-aannnn!"

"'Tsokay Shavee. We got you now," the cat sighed back, rubbing her back with a hand. She was sobbing, her long face folding easily underneath Artan’s chin, thin arms wrapping easily around his chest, even when the blood made it slippery.

The two male Argonians stepped forward, and surprisingly settled on either side of the cat, knelt with Shavee in the snow. "Thank you for saving our Shavee-"

"You! Cat!"
The scene was broken, and heads snapped to the frail, pale Argonian stood beside the smithy sign. His face was contorted with irritation, dark eyes settled entirely on Artan, who smiled sheepishly back. "I want my fucking skooma."

"Shut the hell up Stands. This guy-" the shorter male, Neetrenaza growled, arms flailing before Shavee caught one of his wrists.

"Neetrenaza, please," she murmured, rubbing at her eyes with a small scrap of fabric from one of her pockets, "He's unwell. Can we just go home?"

"Yes, Shavee. Thank you again friend. Finding someone like you in such a cold and harsh land is like finding amethysts in the quagmires," Scouts-Many-Marshes inclined his head, before tucking an arm around Shavee’s shoulders and helping her to her feet.

"Anytime. The Saxhleel and Khajiit are brothers in Skyrim. We gotta stick together," Artan smiled back, clasping the taller Argonians arm.

"You know, I have never wanted to hug a mangy cat so much," Neetrenaza growled, folding his arms across his chest.

"Again? Really? After the last time and all those scratches, I'd have figured you'd give up on the kitty-folk," Artan laughed, resting his hands on his hips and taking a few steps towards Argis.

Shavee actually laughed then, wiping her eyes and clutching at Scouts' shirt as he pulled her up to stand. "I almost forgot about that. Cleaning up the bunkhouse was absolutely terrible."

"Well, at least the guard was later than usual. Torbjorn is being incredibly thorough checking our rooms for the stolen crates. Imagine all the questions there would be if he walked in on that mess!" Scouts called out through his chuckling.

"Trust me; I think that is a story that would make even Ulfric wet his frosty knickers," the cat laughed out, finally reaching Argis and his prisoner.

"I don't want that image in my head, thank you honoured friend," Scouts made a weird, hacking sound and shook his head that took a moment for Argis to realize was disgust. The cat just cackled and slapped a paralysis glyph to the back of the man’s jerkin and helped Argis drag him to the nearest guard post.

The nights got colder, and longer.

xxx

Argis was almost ready to tell Artan where to stuff his Thaneship, find another housecarl. They had been doing a stakeout every night for a month, and no murderer. He was about to voice said opinion when Artan sighed, "Am I any different…?"

"What?" The Bulwark asked tiredly.

"What difference is there between this crazy ass-hat and me? We both have blood on our hands. Way too much; some of it innocent. What is the difference between me and him? If any at all? What makes my masks and his masks any different? 'Cause we both know," the cat hissed, leaning in closer, "we both know that motherfucker is living in this town, pretending to be a cute citizen, meanwhile when the lights go out…"

Argis growled at him, "What mask, Artan? All I see is some deluded cat that thinks he's some
criminal mastermind when in reality he's just a good kid that does stupid things-"

"I killed Nilsine," Artan said.

"You… what?" Argis forced out, head snapping towards to cat.

"When I disappeared, I didn't just disappear. Got picked up by the Brotherhood. They gave me a home, Argis. They didn't give a fuck if I had fur or what. They didn't look at me like I was some pond-scum looting their blind grandmother's house. They looked at me like I was a person. I started taking contracts, the same way I used to in Hammerfell, and it escalated. A creepy dead woman talked to me Argis! A dead lady! I'm scheduled to kill Vittoria Vicci next month for fucks sake. I am a paid killer, Argis!"

Argis half-smiled, "Funny joke-"

"HELP ME!"

Artan moved, almost instantly, throat expanding in that telltale way, before the thu'um washed over the two struggling silhouettes. The woman, by the look of her golden palour she was the Altmer stable girl, fell to her knees under the strength of the shout, whereas the dark man behind her was thrown backwards, against the stone wall of the market.

The Nord wasted no time. His axe almost cut Calixto in half, but even then the old man's eyes terrified him. Even in his death throes, the old man was cursing him in old tongues. In the end, slowly trudging towards Candlehearth Hall, Scouts-Many-Marshes intercepted them. They spent the night in the warm if cramped Assemblage.

xxx

4E, 202 Late Last Seed

The ginger man was a burden. A funny, loud, smelly one, but a burden none the less. Artan slammed the door shut, barely able to contain his surprise as he walked in on the scene. At first he thought they were getting amorous. And then he saw the weapons; a vase, and what looked to be what was left of a broom.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Calder and Argis were focused on each other, neither sparing a glance to Artan, bemused in the doorway. Argis snarled out, through his teeth, "We are having a debate." Calder just growled in affirmation, and Artan simply shrugged their stupid off. "Just don't break our stuff."

The two snapped towards him, "Our stuff?"

Artan glanced at them, hefting up the gildar cheese wheel while he stared at them; the infamous 'what in then blazes are you doing now?' stare. He put the thing in the pot, the whole thing, as well as three bottles of what looked to be ale, and a suspicious white powder. "Yes. We share our things here. My things are your things to a point. I do not share underwear, toiletries or partners."

He turned from them, and that was the end of the conversation.

xxx

That wasn't the end of the conversation.
The house was a fucking mess when he came back from the pub, and the screaming, fighting, brawling men were rolling around in the shards of table, grabbing hair, calling names, weapons long forgotten amongst the dust and debris of their "good vs evil" showdown of the mega important 'Stuff' quarrel. Artan did what he always did when there was a good fight going on.

The blonde and redhead sat up, staring bewildered at the feline, sat leisurely on a wooden stool that they hadn't broken, five bottles of wine at his feet and one already half gone in his hand. "Problem?"

"You just threw cooking oil on us."

Artan quirked an eyebrow. "Problem?"

"What the hell?"

The cat frowned, "Well this couldn't get more ridiculous if it was wearing a smore hat, got naked and fucked its best friend at a drunken orgy. But hell. If you guys want to fight about something stupid, that you still haven't told me about yet, then better do it in the right way. The way to show how ridiculous you're being. Hence the oil."

The two looked away from him, and if he didn't know any better, he would have said they were slightly flushed. He guessed the wine was already working her magic on him. It didn't matter much. But when he decided to return to Markarth with Argis, something changed in the atmosphere. Calder seemed to deflate, and Argis seemed to puff up. It was much like watching parrots.

"Don't worry Calder. I will be backing a few months, and we can go on an adventure."

He tried to placate the redhead, and it seemed to work, until he glanced at Argis, who seemed to sour at that. Must be a Nord thing.

xxx

4E, 202 Early Hearthfire

Argis was sitting quietly, reading over a sweet-roll.

Vindrell Hall was silent, except for the crackle of the fireplace, the hiss of the logs, the munching Argis. Then the waft of mead flooded his senses. His eyes flickered up, and Artan stopped dead. He was crawling, silently, across the table. His eyes were dilated, almost to the point were they were entirely black. His mouth was pursed, and his ears perked like a kittens. His tail was taut, and for a moment, he looked a lot like a cat caught by an owner doing something ridiculous.

Artan was clad in his dark red-black armour, hood long gone. His boots and gloves littering the ground, making a path between Argis and the window. Stupid cat. The big Nord smiled slightly. Even as Artan grinned back, lopsided and totally plastered, Argis wondered how in the world such a drunk could get into a house without even making the slightest noise. It was mildly terrifying, almost making Argis think back to the cat's confession in Windhelm, but at the same time it was oddly endearing. But when Argis put together the concept of Artan stalking him like prey, a small part of him quailed. But the bigger part of him found it oddly… arousing. Especially in that tight armour.

Especially when he was crawling across the kitchen table.

Just like that.
Argis caught him just as he was about to twist his way past the huge candlestick centrepiece, hands carefully pressing between plates, avoiding soups and bowls. And as Argis watched, Artan's interest waned. He had been caught, and he wasn't being scolded for being on the table. He did what all cats did. He pushed his luck, tested the boundaries. Teased.

Still silent, he arched his back like a cat would before stretching out on his belly, fingers spread out and gently clawing the tabletop, ass still waving high in the air, tail rolling and coiling fluidly from the base of his spine. Then he slowly, but surely, edged forwards. Until he was maybe an arm length away, eyes brightening, "what are you reading?"

Argis smiled as the cat's blurry vision didn't let him see the cover, "The Lusty Argonian Maid. The verse is actually quite well written."

The cat-man giggled - actually giggled - and leant off the edge of the table, towards Argis, and over the lip of the book to see its pages. He couldn't see a single word, just an ugly sluggish worm, but that wasn't the point. "Who knew I had such a raunchy little Bulwark?"

The cat whipped its head towards Argis, and where he had leant to look at the book, he was almost touching noses with the Nord. "Do I not keep you busy enough, Argis?"

By the mottled vermillion Argis goes, Artan guessed he kept his housecarl very busy indeed. He doesn't let this revelation affect his face. He hoods his eyes a little, lets a smile melt across his face, an eyebrow quirk. Tiny things. Doctor the face, make them believe the lie. Don't let them know how you're feeling. Recently, Artan would use this, use his body, use his smile, get people into a corner, and then leave them a molten mess in the morning. Usually, he used this to satisfy needs, and that was it. He would use it to get a bed partner, he would use it to calm down prey, and he would use it to get information.

This time, he used it to hide the fucking butterflies in his guts.

If he was younger, he wouldn't be doing this. Not to someone he actually liked. Even drunk off his ass. He would be in the other corner, blushing under his fur, until Argis said goodnight and they both went to sleep across the hall from each other. Then he would spend his night with Mr. Right Hand.

But the different form of assassin training, the run with the Legion, it made him better at hiding his crippling shyness. Kinda hard to be shy when you're in a set of barracks that lets everyone hear you shit. He thanked Stendarr that it had only lasted a week before the ground rent for the Hall was put down. It was why he didn't talk so much, why he just talked shit and hid when emotions got involved. It took a lot for him to stand up and be counted.

But right now? He could always blame it on the drink.

He leant in. The assassin in him said Argis gasped. Minutely. That he was crushing the remains of his sweet roll in a Nordic fist. A rough tongue lathed a stubbly chin, licking a thick stripe up to the base of the Nord's earlobe. A clawed hand pressed against Argis' windpipe, and as Artan breathed down on him, licking his black mouth. "You had some icing… on your face."

The Nord didn't reply.

Two large hands startled Artan, they gripped each of his hips, and despite the rage his inner assassin was in, he hummed and leant into the touch. Argis ran a hand up his spine, and when his big hand clasped around the base of his neck, the Nord tugged him forwards. It wasn't as harsh, nor as 'lets tear our clothes off and rut in the forest' as Artan thought it would be. He had opened his eyes.

The Nord was staring at him with those eyes. They had seen so much blood, so many battles, and
countless amounts of gore. One was blue, and the other a milky white with blindness. But they were soft. Even the scar tissue around his blind eye was wrinkling softly. "You're drunk."

Artan frowned. It was deep, dark and Argis felt a sad smile form on his face.

"You're an idiot."

Then he pushed his cat body against Argis, rubbing his furry head into the crook of the Nord’s neck, wrapping both arms around his shoulders, one leg draping around a hip and the other snaking between thick Nord thighs. The yawn shook them both, and in a moment, the cat was asleep, purring in rhythm with the hand stroking along its scalp. Argis once again thanked whatever god was listening that the cat was so vulnerable to an ear-scratch.

xxx

Artan appeared from his room the next evening, eyes like dark stones in his head, fur lank and furred blankets dragging behind him like funeral palls. He slumped at the table, groaning, hissing, and almost breaking the sound barrier with his whining. Apparently the ridiculousness the night before was forgotten, because the feline didn't mention anything. Didn't act any different. But he did look at Argis more often, and always when it seemed that the Bulwark wasn't looking back, or less likely to notice.

He tried not to give himself false hope. Kept putting it down to the booze.

he traipsed into his small room, where he shrugged out of the iron armour his father made for him, and pulled on the steel plated armour Artan had gotten him. The boots, gloves, and what looked to be a horned helmet that only covered him to the jaw line, a heavy silky fabric covering his throat, full of mesh. It was comfy enough, but when looking in the mirror, he looked sleek, intimidating, and overall not himself.

He was intimidating in a blocky way, and this was very different to what he was used to.

He sighed, and went to move to the front door of the home, waiting patiently for the crazy cat to be ready. They were going to Solitude so Artan could put down the rest of the money for the new house, as well as meet his latest housecarl. Argis felt a little twinge at that. It might mean he would get more time off, and he guessed he should be happy.

So why did the thought of Artan having another new housecarl bother him?

Or was it the fact that they would arrive in time for Vittoria's wedding?

He growled at himself, half-heartedly returning the warm greeting the cat gave him, clad in his Imperial leathers. Artan said it was to make him a little less conspicuous, in a town full of people who all owed him stuff. As if the short skirt was camouflage, Argis frowned. A small part of him suggested that Artan put that armour on for him. Another part said that old habits die hard. That and Artan had more sets of armour than individual hairs on his body.

It was just a coincidence that he decided to pick Argis' favourite armour.

Coincidence. Yes.

xxx

Argis almost died the first time he saw it, almost had a heart attack.
It was a tiny golden thing, on a shiny string hung around the Thane's neck. Artan obviously didn't know what it was. The Bulwark wasn't surprised. The Khajiit was incredibly new to Skyrim, and didn't know the culture very well. Nor did he know much about Mara, it seemed. The cat seemed to feel the eyes, because he turned to look at his housecarl. "What?"

Argis bit back a laugh, and shrugged, "I think we should hit Solitude before nightfall, My Thane." Artan rolled his eyes, as he always did when he was called Thane. The word was enough to make him retreat towards his dark horse. Still that thing creeped him out, but Artan was loathe to part with the beast. He said it was a gift from a dear friend. Argis didn't argue. The way Artan couldn't look him in the face, and the way his voice grew harder, the Nord knew not to press the issue.

They got to Solitude in the afternoon, the Thane being greeted by a myriad of happy citizens. Argis only got to travel with Artan for a few months before, and then he was left in Markarth for a month to get over a minor injury. Artan blew it out of proportion, and got a completely new servant in to wait on Argis hand and foot for a week to keep him from getting up and putting weight on the leg. He didn't know how busy the Khajiit was on his trip to Solitude. Until now.

Eventually the small crowd dissipated, and Argis was still waiting for one of them to spot the amulet. It was a beautiful moment when one did.

"Oh my," the old man tittered.

"Noster, what's wrong?" Artan asked, in full heartfelt-helper mode.

"Oh nothing my boy. It just surprises me that a strapping young man like you isn't taken already." Noster sighed, sounding a little breathless.

Artan practically froze, halfway into making a sympathetic smile to whatever ailment the old man was going to say. Then his kitty eyes widened, his tail puffed up and his ears twitched. "I'm... sorry?"

The old man smiled, taking a step closer, "that's quite alright my boy. I guess that just means you're available to be swept off your feet."

Argis could almost feel the cat hyperventilate. When the codger leant in and whispered in an erect, conical ear the khajiit shrieked, leapt backwards and ran the other way. Citizens leapt out of the sprinting Thane's path, sending fearful glances at Argis before they worriedly went back to their lives. And so began Argis' quest. To find the terrified Thane.

"Don't take it to heart; he doesn't understand what the amulet means," Argis said gently, patting the old man on the back.

The old man broke his pained stare to look to Argis, brightening slightly, "Thank you, my boy."

It took the Nord three hours to track Artan to a small bush beside the temple of the Divines. The world was dark by then, and Argis had to make a small mage-light to walk by. The bush was quivering, noticeably so, and the Bulwark zeroed in on it swiftly. He was silent when he pulled the branches back, revealing the wide-eyed feline underneath the leaves. The cat was freaking out, and had a shoe missing, as well as his hat. "Argis. The women. And the men. They wouldn't stop asking me to sleep with them, carry their children, marry them... what's happening to me? I knew money made friends, but I didn't know this would happen. I gave all the money in my pockets to the beggars, but it carried on happening!"

"Artan. Get up; we need to get you back to the house. I already gave the money to Falkbeard. It's
good you get me to carry everything, yeah? We can have a few sweet rolls, some wine and I'll explain everything."

The cat seemed to understand, because he let Argis haul him upright. He seemed to sour after that, barely answering Argis' questions. He only spoke in riddles, or short snappy comments. If he wasn't staring sadly at the cloudy sky, that is.

Proudspire was warm when they got there. The Shieldmaiden was out, obviously at the pub. Argis sat the Thane down in one of the oaken chairs in the dining room, even going so far as to pat his head in an attempt to comfort the obviously shaken male. Artan did something that made Argis stop breathing. It was a low, throaty purr. The bulwark coughed and slumped in a chair beside Artan, clinked clay bottles of wine together, and the pair drank deeply.

"The amulet you got off of that corpse is symbolic. In Elseweyr, it might be some pretty jewellery. In Skyrim it is a sign that someone is looking for courting, commitment, and marriage. That's why people were throwing themselves at you," Argis said gruffly, plonking his bottle down on the table and rubbing his hands together to warm them.

"They want a thane husband," Artan sneered, "And because I am a khajiit, they all think themselves the best of what I can get."

The Bulwark growled, '"You are better than any of them, Artan. You just need to see it in yourself." The blonde shook his head when Artan gave him a pointed stare, "People are always looking for something great to find them and see the greatness in them. They all want someone special like you to find them special too, pick them out of the crowd and show the world how silly it was to overlook them. It's selfish and crazy, but some need validation like that. They can't go and get it themselves, so they make someone else do it for them. Everyone wants someone amazing to love them. Even if it's just their own opinion, or that one is actually amazing. Everyone thinks they deserve the best."

"Some people just prefer to work for it," Artan spat out, taking another gulp of his wine.

"Indeed."

"What if the past stops you?" the cat asked eventually, resting his head on his free hand and settling a peculiar stare on the Bulwark.

Argis took a moment to gather his thoughts, and eventually replied, "Things change Artan. If they didn't, the world would grow stagnant. Everyone has the potential to grow, regardless of what they did in the past."

"Even a murderer?" Artan smirked, but it wasn’t his usual one. It almost unsettled the Nord.

"How many lives have you saved by killing one person? Like what happened with Ulfric?" Argis asked gently, unsure of what point Artan was trying to make.

Artan smiled, tight. "Ten. Children. From an old crone who ran their orphanage."

Argis didn't take that sip of wine. He stopped stock still, staring at Artan's face, looking, searching for a lie. A hint of a lie. Its tail. He found no hide nor hair of a lie. It had been a real confession in Windhelm. It wasn’t a stupid joke. Artan was an assassin. "You... killed Grelod? In Riften?"

"Yes. And Amuriel, the huntsman. And Narfi, the old beggar. And Nilsine. For no other reason than I got paid for it," Artan smiled, a cold, hard line on his face. "It paid for this house, and the others."

"What else?" Argis frowned, eyes hard.
"That's it. Just helped me get the ground rent down. Our armour is bought using treasure I find, or money I take from dungeons or caves," the cat sighed, settling back in his chair.

Argis let out a short breath. "Why?"

"It was an accident. Some kid asked me to kill her to save his friends, that she was a monster. She was a monster. So I did it. And the brotherhood leader finds me, drugs me, and takes me to a cabin. Tells me to kill one of the three bound and blindfolded people in the cabin. Kill the one who has the hit out on them. I killed all three. She gave me a destination. At first I didn't know what to think. And then I found myself in a family," Artan shrugged.

Argis grimaced, "I can understand that. But why are you still with them? You were already with the Imperials right? Couldn't they give you the family that you wanted?" The cat seemed to shy away from that question, seeming to sink further into his fur. If Argis didn't know any better he would have suggested the Thane was a mottled pink under all that fluff.

"Uhhhh. I joined the Imperials for a good few reasons. But the Brotherhood always catered for me better," the cat smiled shyly, shrugging his shoulders.

"Why did you join? You're working your way through the different holds, trying to instil peace. Then there was that business with Alduin. How can you do something so great and then something so despicable in the same month? How can you work with the Empire to try and unify Skyrim and then in the same month destroy that work? For money?" Argis asked, because he had to. He was confused. One moment Artan was refusing gold out of his own code of honour, and the next-

"I joined the Imperials because of my tail," the cat supplied.

"You what?" Argis couldn’t keep his confusion out of his voice.

The cat didn't answer. He was staring at his clenched paws, feet shuffling, grinding into the wooden floor underneath him. The fluffy tail was thrashing, as were his conical ears, eyes skittering through the room, pointedly avoiding Argis. Claws tenderised the wood on the table, the chair, the leather-bound sheath on the table. Eventually, he answered.

"I joined the Imperials because they didn’t really mind about the tail. When I went to Windhelm, I had to forcibly stop myself from going on a widespread killing spree. They disgusted me, with every slur and every look they cast my way. They keep any other race than Nord under their boot, using their religious dogma as justification. Talos was a man, a great man, but just a man none the less. He was made a God the same way all the other Gods were, and to be honest, I am quite the believer in changing fate, and the strength that ordinary people have. And that is what Talos is a symbol of; the power of the ordinary man. But using him as a shield to hide behind so a minority can brutalise people they do not like? Because of a few extra scales, some pointy ears or simply because of a tail?" the cat shook his head.

"Nords can be some of the most beautiful, powerful destructive forces that roam Tamriel, but they can also be incredibly closed minded, harsh, and huge bigots. But hey. They can also be incredibly loyal allies," Artan turned to the Bulwark, almost conspiratorially, "unless you have a tail. Then you have to trick them, blackmail them, or simply bewitch them. Because if they even look at someone who isn't human with anything but distain, well, it makes Talos cry."

Artan snatched the bottle of wine from the table, and in a show of pure determination, downed a good half of the bottle. Argis had half the mind to take the bottle off him, but the small voice in his head was saying no. let him drink. Let him talk. He never talks, not like this. He never expresses his thoughts, not his real thoughts. Witty, inappropriate rants, yes, but not actual emotions. The cat patted
his arm, a bit like an old fishwife would tap her friend before telling her the latest gossip.

"I understand that I am not perfect. But by the Sands! All they ever see is a tail, and some fur, and some claws, and they see a thief. A murderer. Maybe just a fun fuck. Nothing good. Never, oh my, it's the Thane of Whiterun! Never, Oh gee Samara, it's the Archmage!" The cat shook his head, and in a moment that Argis didn't really understand, the Bulwark slapped a hand to the feline's knee.

"I used to think that, too," the Bulwark conceded, swishing the wine around in his bottle.

Artan smirked, eyebrows twisting, "What? Fun fuck?"

Argis gave him a pointed look before he continued, "but then you are full of surprises, Artan. I never had any real opinion of Khajiit, or Argonians, or Elves. I never really cared, because well. Never had a reason to. I nothing'ed them. Didn't hate, didn't like. I heard a lot of stories about khajiit thieves, Argonian pirates, elvish pariahs slaughtering pilgrims. I guess it does colour opinions. And then I met you, you furred freak."

The cat fluffed a little at that, until he saw the strange, small smile on the Bulwarks face.

"And well, you have been proving me wrong since day one. You are not a bad kitty, Artan. You are just simply trying to get by. Mostly." Argis patted the Thane's thigh again, "You have proved many, many Nords wrong. And maybe one day, they will change. But-"

"You said they," the cat pointed out, brows raised.

"Wha?"

"You said they. Like you weren't a Nord. Like you were talking about a ridiculous drunken cousin that you see at family parties," the cat went on to grin and take another swig from his bottle.

Argis blinked, fully aware that Artan was leaning forwards now, eyes intent, tail flickering, ears perked. "Hm. Maybe I did."

The cat cocked his head, "Well, even though you are a very confused Nord that doesn't know he is a Nord, I am still glad I have one of you on my side."

"You have Lydia too, remember," the Bulwark pointed out, slumping back in his chair and throwing a foot over his knee.

"Ah yes. The Ice Princess, the Queen of the Winter Plains. The President of the Arctic Tundras," Artan gesticulated grandly, nearly tipping the last of his wine on himself with how wildly he moved his arms.

"Gee. If that's how you talk about her what do you say about me?" Argis huffed, moving the edge of the bottle to his mouth in preparation to swig more.

The cat sucked in and choked on the wine bottle, completely disarming Argis and making such a fuss over coughing and spluttering, that the question was forgotten. When things quieted down, a short, quipping remark about a gag reflex was made, and the ridiculous mess started again.

"But why the brotherhood?" Argis managed when the entire mess had settled again.

Artan winced, looked away. "After I jumped the border here and survived Helgen with Hadvar, I decided I needed to get in somewhere. I needed someone to protect, and someone to protect me. My old guild in Hammerfell sold me out to the Alik'r, and I spent the better part of five years running
from both of them. I might have accidentally given the Alik'r sensitive information about the guild, and well the guild is what told the Alik'r I was the assassin they wanted. The Brotherhood was an unexpected blessing. It was a job I knew well, and in a strange turn I had a family as well. Each one weirder than the last. It didn't matter what race I was, they had a werewolf and a vampire! The mage there could turn a man inside out at whim! A tail was nothing; for the first time in a long time, I was seen as regular, run of the mill. They didn't judge me for anything; except my kills. They praise my name to Sithis, the Nightmother, anybody."

"It was as if for the first time, my skill was actually being considered. It wasn't, oh look a cat with a butterknife, or oh wow look at the kitty trying to conjure a wisp. It was 'Artan, our brother.'" The cat shrugged. "It's a stupid idea. I should have gotten in with the companions, become a hero. But hell. You gotta stick to what you know. And debauchery and murder is all I know."

"That's fucking stupid," Argis scoffed, shaking his head.

The cat grimaced.

"You're a good kitty Artan. You show that with most things you do. You just slip between good things and bad things sometimes. Very bad things. But you aren't evil. You are… complicated. But don't write yourself off so fast. You have slain Alduin! You eat dragon souls! You ended the civil war! Everybody has a dark side, and this is yours. But you don't let it control you," Argis patted the leg closest to him, "and that's the difference between you and a common murderer."

Artan laughed, sharp and quick. "Flattery will get you everywhere, Nord."

"Good to know, puss-puss."
Adventure Cove

Chapter Summary

Realizations, contracts and so much goddamn snow.

Chapter Notes

My scar is from a polar bear, my curse is from a witch,
I've caught a giant squid in all the seven seas.
I've picked up rocks from distant moons astronomers will discover soon
But I would give them all back just for you.

I've gotten drunk and shot the breeze with kings of far off lands
They showed me wealth as far as I could see.
But their kingdoms seemed all shrivelly and they cried with jealousy
When I leaned in and told them about you.

- Anything For You, Ludo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

4E, 202 Frostfall

Artan was silent as he moved through the shadows of the ruins, barely disturbing the dust on its floors. He could already hear the loud, almost ridiculous conversation wafting through the heavy air. It was a wonder the draugr in the deeper tunnels hadn't heard them and come-a-venturing. Artan had worked his way through the tunnels already, before meeting the contact. It wouldn't do for the fool to be killed before he paid the Brotherhood. The khajiit tugged his cowl closer and stepped up into the room, eyes already condemning the-

What the hell was this?

The shaking, scrawny man turned to the door in a jolt, eyes wide and already babbling. His guard looked like the stern, boring type. Angular, tidy and moustached. Artan was already pegging them to be easy targets, but that wasn't the job. He tuned back into the still talking Amaund, and just at the right time he guessed. "-Someone of your disposition would probably find it enjoyable."

Artan frowned, "Go on."

And onward with the evil villain speech. Artan tuned out again, letting the man have his moment. It wasn't often that such-well groomed patrons asked for deadly assistance, and well. It was a surprise. But being honest, Artan proffered the more regular contacts. This one was already grating on his
nerves. Cutthroat this, murderer that. Turning his nose up. As if his guard could protect him from anything. Artan resisted the urge to smile.

"I seek the assassination of…"

And cue dramatic pause.

"The Emperor."

Artan couldn’t even find words for a moment or so, but eventually he managed to actually find something to say. "You what mate?"

"It is a shocking request, I know. But it is inside the purview of what you Dark Brotherhood types do. Isn't it? If history is to be believed? You must understand. So much has led to this day. So much planning, and manoeuvring. Now you're here, as if the very stars have finally aligned."

Artan grimaced behind his cowl. This guy almost sounded as if he were about to propose a marital union. Crazy as a cracker. And obviously a rank grabbing asshole, by the sounds of things. But it was when the cretin stepped closer, that Artan found himself unable to breathe. Amaund was most chest to chest with him before he pressed a wad of paper and a shiny amulet into his hands, dark eyes trying peering into the cowl.

"But I digress. Here, have these. As proof of purchase, as it were. Take them to your superior. The letter will explain everything, my assassin."

Artan frowned, "Duly noted."

He stepped back with a speed that should have startled the little bastard, but the man didn't even flinch as Artan turned tail and walked away.

xxx

"Hey Argis, how do you feel about going to Riften with me?"

"What's the game plan?" Argis asked, not bothering to turn from the stove. Artan didn’t ask why he had tied his hair into a small bun, but he guessed it to be more practical while cooking. He had always kept his own mane short, so he wouldn’t really know.

"Basically, I'm delivering something to one of the asshats in the Thieves guild. And I need a hulking strong Nord to scare the others while I talk smack to their merchant. Since Calder can't keep his mouth shut, Lydia would kill them all and raise the building to the ground and Marcurio is as scary as a horker in a dress… Well that means you're my man! Silent, stoic, scary, level-headed. Perfect for the job of making me look harmless."

"You could charm the pants off of Borghak the Steel Heart herself, Artan," the Nord snarked, pointing towards the cat with the ladle.

"I know, I know. Sometimes I have to beat off the ladies with a shitty stick I'm so good. You coming?" the cat asked, slumping down into one of the dining chairs.

"Well I very well can't have you running around without a minder, can I? What if you get kidnapped again? And I certainly cant trust you to not get into a wagon because an old man offers you a sweetroll, can I? Not after last time, anyway," the Nord sighed, sounding put upon.

"Thank you, Argis. That will be all."
"Right, are we good to go lads?" Artan rubbed his hands together and looked from one towering blonde Nord to a shorter brunette one a few paces behind him. The three of them were crouched in a small thicket of trees a ways from the Blackbriar estate in the early evening, the cat on point with the housecarls on either side.

"Yes, my Thane," Lydia nodded, drawing her waraxe and readying her shield. While she was crouched, Lydia rested the edge of her shield in the dirt beside her with her axe held with its head tapering out behind her. Apparently she found it easier to charge the enemy that way.

"Of course, my Thane," Argis nodded as well, adjusting his bow arm and nocking an arrow.

"Good. Now the reason we are all here today is to basically get some papers, steal a horse and fuck an old lady. We are going to run in there, give those mercenary thugs some hell and then disappear into the sunset like bats out of hell. Savvy?"

"Understood," the two murmured in unison.

"Let's lock and load, gentlemen," Artan hissed out, laughing as he broke out of the brush and into the open land between them and the estate.

Argis moved quickly from behind the small hill, bow drawn and already firing an arrow into the mercenary's face. The half-scream died in his throat, but it was enough. His fellows were running from their posts around the house in an instant, spreading out in a hasty line between the intruders and the Black Briar lodge. Lydia was already beating her axe through the skull of one of the mercenaries, Artan at her side, lightning dancing from one hand and sword in another. Argis kept them covered, taking out archers here and there, kneecapping others, and in one instance hitting one burly mercenary between the eyes with an arrow.

Artan muttered his next words, either ignoring or unaware of the golden glow of the thu’um around his throat as he talked. "Right, the men inside are either deaf or getting ready for an ambush. Be ready for either."

Argis drew his sword while Artan rapped his empty fist against his steel-plated armour, ready to enter the isolated cottage. The two Nords flanked him as he did what he was best at. He kicked the door off its hinges and started a riot. It took them half an hour to drive that tiny shack into silence, and Artan would have worried about how easy it was to kill an entire house filled with armed fighters with just the three of them, but he was busy driving the papers into the loudmouthed ox's hands. Lydia bristled behind him, tapping her feet and almost full out growled at Artan when he stepped back to stand beside her. Louis looked from one of them, to the other.

"But, where is the horse?" he asked gruffly, sounding more irritated by the minute.

"What horse? You wanted the papers. I got you papers. The horse is your problem," Artan poked a finger towards the man, who seemed one more step from exploding.

"What? I paid you for both."

"No. I distinctly remember you telling me to get you the documents naming you as the horse's owner. We didn't bargain about delivering the actual animal. Job done. Next time be more specific about what you want," Artan waved a hand flippantly, not even bothering to really look the man in the eye.

The Khajiit turned on his heel, grabbed Lydia by the elbow, and walked away. He almost got away
without drawing blood. The hand around Lydia's elbow lurched upwards, the khajit slipping around and under the flailing appendage so his back slid across her hip. His previously empty fist caught Louis' blade arm, driving it hard into the empty air above them, harmlessly cutting away at nothing. Artan pushed the man's arm higher, until they were both stood straight, and with a careful twist, had his legs behind the man's knees, throwing him onto his back, and Artan followed. Knees drove into an already empty sternum, dagger already pressing into the hollow under Louis' jaw, fist still clumped around the dying man's blade arm.

"Well that was exciting. Who knew he would snap like that? At least this saves the guards from having to catch him."

"What would they want to do that for?" Lydia asked, sounding a little lost.

"Stealing from Maven, of course. You know she would have pinned all this on him somehow, made some story up and some fake witnesses," Artan explained, wiping his blade off on Louis’ shirt.

"Probably. She's got the reputation for it. You think Argis got Frost to the meeting place yet?" Lydia sighed, rubbing at her forehead with a gauntleted fist.

"Probably. We will have to see," patted her shoulder and led the way.

xxx

4E, 202 Late Frostfall

The snow was fucking everywhere. In his boots, his hair, and even parts of his unmentionables. Fucking cat. Fucking snow. Fucking hermit. Artan had dragged the four of them into the snow drifts, apparently looking for some Dwemer ruin at the behest of some senile old clodhopper in the glacial cliffs around Winterhold. That was well over a month ago, and being honest, Argis wanted a beer and a bed, not a mountainside and creepy old ruins. The Thane had simply said he needed to man an expedition into Alftand to recover some ancient knowledge. Argis had been three sheets to the wind at the time, and agreed to go along for the ride.

Argis glanced behind him, shooting a glare at Calder before he trotted towards the khajiit, knelt by a black smudge in the snow. Lydia and Calder were arguing about Talos again, but somehow it seemed more muted than usual. The towering khajiit warrior wandering sleekly behind him was probably cause of that. About a week ago, Artan had left them at the tavern to run some errands before they braved the depths, and returned with Kharjo, a soft spoken feline that ran with the caravans as a bodyguard. How the Thane had managed to recruit such a powerful guy was beyond him and the other Housecarls. After he had brought a short, tough little woman called Eola home, they made an unspoken agreement to never ask where he found his friends.

Argis shook the thought away, and looked back to Artan. "My Thane, what… is that a body?"

The cat tail twitched, and Artan seemed to push more snow back to reveal the short, blackened woman underneath, still clutching a tattered journal to her hemp mage robes. Artan stood with the book, trying to be gentle with his plated gauntlets on, and flicked through a few pages, before clapping a hand to the Bulwark’s shoulder and turning to the mountain's edge. And proceeded to walk towards the steep, fatal drop.

"Thane!" he yelled, sounding more irritated than worried.

Artan stopped maybe an inch from the edge, sent a withering stare to Argis, before looking towards
the mountain to their left. He motioned for them to follow. And lo and behold, a thin, wooden bridge to another precarious ledge. "If we follow the catwalks, we will get to the entranceway to the ruin. Thank Stendarr that these poor shmucks got here first. We shouldn't have to swim to get there like last time!"

"Hopefully nobody else knows about it and follows us in," Calder grumbled, tugging his cloak closer and stomping after them.

"If anyone tries to sneak up on us, I will smell them. Or not. We'll see," Kharjo rumbled, squaring his shoulders and falling into step with Argis. Artan allowed a quiet laugh. It was quiet mostly after that, the four of them stepping after the Archmage in varying levels of interest. But when the dark hole loomed ahead of them, nobody had it in them to joke or complain. They had all been dragged into a ruin by Artan before, but never in this number. It only meant trouble. Especially if it's main entrance wasn't even a proper door, just a hole in a mountainside.

"Right kids, we need to be tight. So you two," Artan motioned at Argis and Calder, "no fighting. Lydia," the woman nodded, "Do not wander off alone. And Kharjo," the other khajiit tilted his jaw, "I'll definitely get you back to Dro'marash in one piece. You can tell him to stop sending those angry letters."

The feline chuckled, "baby brothers tend to be protective. Even when they are no longer cubs."

Artan grinned, before he turned away and strode into the dark.

xxx

"Where is it!? I know you're keeping it for yourself J'zhar!"

After that, Artan demanded silence, and the creeping began.

Argis never got used to Artan's silence. Or how efficient he could be. The housecarls were all used to carrying the Thane home after a drunken night at the tavern, or trying to pull him out of a ditch he walked into, or that one time he brought home a goat and let it eat at the table. The man was ridiculous, and that coloured their perceptions of him. Until it got like this, and they saw him work. He was like a snake, or a spider, small and unnoticeable, skulking along in the dark. They followed as quietly as they could in their armor, Kharjo the only one able to do it flawlessly. He only clinked slightly with his movements.

The voices grew quiet as they moved away, and eventually the wood gave way into golden pipes and altars, but Artan didn't quicken the pace. He kept it slow and easy.

They might as well have not bothered, since the screams were covering up any noise they might have made. At first everything was fine, they were quietly walking around a narrow set of tunnels, around crates of supplies, the wooden spider-work of beams and other such structures. Until they nearly walked in on the two khajiit, sat facing each other across a fire. Artan almost walked forward to say hello when Calder tugged him back. The taller, learner khajiit yowled and leapt on the smaller, brown one, dagger flashing in the semi-dark.

"BROTHER! STOP!"

Artan stepped back around the corner, both hands over his mouth. Kharjo sighed, and stepped out into the small pocket. Artan followed Argis and Kharjo out into the open cave, and almost wished he hadn't. He had seen a lot of murders, even some of the worst ones when he ran with the followers of Namira, but he still found his guts churning. The tall khajiit was crouched on top of the corpse, his
claws and face completely caked in warm, sticky blood. His eyes were half dead, crazed with knowledge or hunger or maybe the solitude, but it didn't stop him standing, leathery tongue already licking away at the wetness staining his hands, dagger already forgotten, deed already faded out.

"Who are you? Brother? And another of those naked freaks wanting a free meal?!

But then his eyes flickered in recognition.

"YOU ARE THE ONES WHO TOOK MY SKOOMA!"

He leapt, and Argis replied. He did a strange twirling dance past Artan, bringing his shield arm out and hard into the crazed khajiit's face, shoulder and chest. He threw all his weight behind the shield, crushing the cat against the wall and breaking more than a few ribs. When he fell, dazed, bleeding and half-crushed. Kharjo deftly slit his throat.

"Let's move on," the large cat murmured, hesitant to touch the rather grim atmosphere that had fallen over them all.

Artan frowned, and nodded. He stepped lightly over the body, only slowing to look to the younger Khajiit, J'zhar. He was dead, undoubtedly, and Artan left him. The others followed silently in his wake, through the strange network of halls, past all the gold pipe work and eerie, glowing generators. The Dwemer were well known for their strange rooms, lofty ceilings and generally creepy homes. Well, it might’ve been the insight that Artan had given them, stupidly, while they were camped in a small cave near Alftand.

That in the olden days, there was a mighty race called the Snow Elves, who excelled in magik, word and fighting. Their spears and arrows were formidable, even to the haughtiest Nord warrior. The Elves and Nords fought for decades, centuries, longer than either race could remember. Until one night, the elves attacked a human city. Saarthal. That night, because of the incredible sadness it evoked in the Nords, was dubbed the Night of Tears.

In retaliation to the Night of Tears, Ysgramor had pulled together the Companions, and drove the last remaining elves from Skyrim. One last battle was fought, and after their leader the Snow Prince was slain, the remaining elves were slain or scattered. They were thought to be completely eradicated from Skyrim. However, many of them sought refuge with the Dwemer in their underground halls.

It began as it always did. The two races squished together, a bond of necessity more than anything. Neither trusted the other, and eventually, the Dwemer began what an esteemed host always did. They gave their guests a toxic fungal pod, and rendered the snow elves blind. First servants, then slaves, until the snow elves became completely dependant on the fungus that was destroying them. There was no point in having slaves if their kids could come back and kill you, bright eyed and covered in frost.

It started a long and bitter war between the two races, and by the time Dwemer disappeared from Skyrim, the Snow elves had become Falmer. Brutal and bloodthirsty, they only took care of their own. "Funnily enough," Artan had said through a bite of cheese, "They are known to keep their own as slaves. And over the years, they have started attacking the surface world. I guess old habits die hard."

As the khajiit led them deeper into the ruin, Argis couldn't help but feel the awful notion that one of those blind, shrieking creatures were around the corner, in the tubes, hiding in a crate. He glanced back at Lydia, who was looking at everything, eyes widening as the creaking, howling blur of gold lurched-
Kharjo's sword drove into the space between its whirling wheels, jamming them into one position, making the thing totter on its strange legs. Calder swung his war hammer once, taking the thing's head off in a clean sweep, clattering uselessly against the wall before it laid forgotten on the dusty tabletop. "Well, I didn't expect the automations to be this close to the surface. Looks like this place is even older than we expected. Keep your shit together," Artan swept the room, before he waited patiently at the other door for the rest of the team to join him. "We keep together, and do not enter a new place without each other."

Artan turned, and with a push, had the huge golden doors open. To reveal the dark, murky corridor beyond. Kharjo growled, "Something smells foul." Artan shrugged back, his plated armor tittering with the movement. "Unfortunately, I left my smelling salts at home." The two moved flawlessly, almost as if it was rehearsed, as one into the hallway, loping up the stairs and up to the golden gate at the top. The Nords followed, war hammer, sword and shield and battle axe at the ready. Kharjo had his sword slanted, at his side, taught and ready. Artan had one hand engulfed in that strange wytchfire, his other back-gripping a thin black dagger. They turned the corner, and the pushing began. They tore their way through the strange, golden spiders and pushed through the daunting hallway with strange stone totems.

Even when they hit the room with strange tubes with moving, inner pipes that jolted unexpectedly in or out, Artan simply had them jump over and under the thundering machines, past and into another dank hallway. Calder pushed this door open, almost blinding them all with the bright beams of light that curled around the gaping hole. They pushed the door open fully, and pressed further into the glowing hall, the milky green light almost able to mimic daylight through a forest canopy. Argis shook his head.

Crazy thoughts won't stop automations running you through.

But when the hall became segmented by the golden trellises and the pipe works were hissing in warning, the thing almost took Lydia's head off. They scattered when the sphere suddenly threw a bladed arm around the trellis, Lydia throwing herself downwards, left, into Artan, clearing him of the blade. The automation rolled around, its other arm, the crossbow, already aligned with flesh. Already in position to shoot. Artan's hands were already casting. But Lydia had already brought her shield up, caught the crossbow with the under lip, yanked the sphere down, drove her sword through its centre. Pulled her shield up, smashed it straight into the sphere's shining face, pushed it straight off her blade.

It fell, broken.

"Holy fuck!"

The five of them gathered, most of them looking from the Nord woman to the Dwemer sphere and back. Artan patter her lightly on the back, "That's my girl."

xxx

They camped in a small alcove, between three walls with one narrow opening. Argis had pushed the elf corpse out of the alcove, and the group unanimously outvoted Artan's insane "lets try and give him burial rites" idea. He spent most of his time reading the journal that the Endrast fellow left behind, and as the night wore on, began telling them about a man called Sulla and being captured by the Falmer. A woman apparently had saved him after he had managed to pick the locks and let them escape. The expedition group split up, and apparently the Khajiit they had found near the mouth of the cave system had left the group to be taken by the Falmer.

What a great bedtime story.
Taking turns with who slept, it was a rather difficult night. When they eventually started moving, Artan decided he would go first. "I'll be able to look out for traps better, that way." Calder had growled back, "But what if one of those critters-

"I brought you guys here, so if anything bad happens, it should be to me," Artan said in a tone that brokered no argument.

managed to somehow talk both Argis and Calder down. Neither seemed to truly drop the matter; it seemed to be one of the only things they agreed with. Lydia had shrugged, "As you wish, Thane."

The traps were many, and even if Artan managed to fully disarm them, it didn't mean he could catch them all. Once or twice, only his speed saved him from impalement, or being cut completely in half by a set of whirling blades that erupted from the floor. But when they got to the gate, the lever to raise it a good ways away on the other side, the three Nords looked to each other dumbfounded. "How the fuck-

Artan pushed his backside against the bars, and with a deft little flick, had his tail around the handle. He quickly jumped forwards, and the gate shuddered upwards into the ceiling. "Ta-dah!"

"I don't even want to know how you found out how you could do that," Calder shook his head in disbelief.

They pressed on, eventually meeting the huge, snaking walkway downwards, having to take it slower because of the metal-plate boots most of the party had on. It would not do to fall to ones death right then. But when the walkway ended abruptly, leading to a sheer drop, a bunch of boulders and a dead orc, well things got sticky.

"Well what the fuck now?"

Artan slid forwards, until he could slowly lower himself down. With a gentle twitch, he was crouched on the boulders, tugging the dead orc onto a flatter part of the walkway, making it easier for the others to follow. "She's another one of the expedition crew. This must be the brave Yag…" he cut off, yellow eyes glaring off into the dark.

The others turned, weapons ready, to watch the tiny, hulking figure skulk closer.

The falmer trudged out of the dark, blind eyes searching, head twisting, hands rubbing across the old stonework as if it could tell its exact whereabouts just from the ancient whorls and dips.

"I don't know whether to pet it or kill it," Lydia growled, as the falmer whined, rolled its head, yanked the bow from its back all in one move, its other hand already clasping an arrow, feet spreading into an offensive battle form, throat already expanding into a warning scream. None of them reacted as fast as Artan did. The ice spike drove completely through the thing's head, pinning it to one of the gold pipes behind it. The others bristled. They had never seen Artan attack so proficiently, so abruptly before. Usually he let the enemy draw a weapon and initiate an attack first.

"Don't let them fool you. These things will kill you if you don't kill them first. They might have a terrible history, but right now, that has to be irrelevant. Do not let pity cloud your judgment." As he finished, another appeared, leaping straight from above them, axe raised. Argis drove his axe into the creature's chest, and with the momentum, swung it straight off the side into space. They didn't wait to hear the squelch; they carried on pressing downwards.

Even when they came across a camp, settled between the gold pipes, Artan showed no mercy. The Falmer had set up huts in between the Dwemer constructs, being only a hairsbreadth from what
Argis remembered regular camping to be like, with humans. Artan used the strange, sheer purple liquid on the floor, to fight for them. "Stand back." The fireball was tiny, but enough.

The khajiit pushed the back around the corner in time, the huge explosion singeing the ends of his tail slightly. When the fires died, there wasn't much left but smoldering remains.

But it would always be the uncharacteristic, halting movements that the cat made in that instance that would stick with the Bulwark. They had hit a long, narrow hallway and the Khajiit had told them to wait there, before he leapt forwards, arms over his head, feet and legs flailing. He surged across the hallway in a crazy, powerful dance. The hop skip and jump he made as he reached the end, snapped the lever and drove his dagger into the skull of a Falmer was a bit theatrical, Argis thought. He guessed it got the job done. Even with the traps disabled, Kharjo was careful, diligent and at times irritatingly slow.

Between them, him and Artan were probably even more cautious than a cat in a kennel.

It was when they passed that centurion that things went got a little stickier. Argis and Calder distracted the thing, Lydia skipping between them. Kharjo sent arrows into its softer, glass core. Artan backed them up, summoning one of those fiery specters from Oblivion. The woman was hardy, wreathed in flame, and somehow managed to direct most of the Centurion's attention, allowing the Nord's to skitter around its feet unhindered.

Calder managed the kill in the end. His war hammer landed a hit in the centre of the automation's core, smashing the glass and cutting the thing's power completely. It took the quick-footed Kharjo an instant to leap on the Nord, tackling him out of the way of the falling giant. They swapped quiet words, and pressed on.

Well. Tried to.

The two warriors were shouting, ignoring all else but each other, swords drawn. The woman bashed her shield twice with her weapon, "Sulla, I don't give a fuck. Even if these magical treasures could cure-"

"I brought you here to help me Umana! If you want to leave me like all those other useless-"

"They killed and tortured Valie! They probably murdered the others too! We need to leave before they get us too!"

"They will not get us if you do as you're told Umana-"

"I did as told, and look where we are!"

"In one of the most-"

"You know, if you had only listened to J'darr in the beginning, you might have been able to repel the Falmer attack and actually survive this together." The crazed pair shuddered into movement, both staring at Artan with their black eyes.

"Get the fuck out."

"More monsters to attack us? Divines protect us."

The two mad expeditors surged forwards, but they didn't manage to get to Artan. Calder and Argis met them on the way, weapons drawn. Argis frowned as the old imperial turned on him, eyes writhing in his face, mouth drawn. He was screaming again, but before Argis could even begin to
make a move, the old man's arm twisted, and that same terrible wytchfire engulfed the paling knuckles. He didn't have the time to warn Kharjo. The sudden burst of intense flames against the cat's shield him flying backwards, far enough that he went tumbling down the long staircase they had trekked up moments before.

Argis turned back to Sulla, who had already begun to lurch forwards, sword stabbing out in a wide arc. Argis glanced the blade off his battleaxe, eyes picking at every movement, every twitch. But none of it was registering as real battle techniques. This guy really was off his rocker. He was slashing wildly, hands twisting rapidly, shooting off fire and thrashing wildly in a parody of a circle. It was until the dark arm slid around his neck and shoulders, a flicker of blade between his armor and ribs, that he stopped flailing.

Artan pulled his blade free and let the man roll off his arm and onto the floor, not even sparing a glance to the dying Sulla. Artan's golden eyes were fixed on his face, seeming to be almost irate. The emotion was already gone by the time Argis began to decipher it. "Kharjo, you okay?"

"Fine, my friend. Seems like the crazy old man had a kick in him yet, yes?" the big cat chuckled, bending at the hip to lean on his knees and catch his breath.

"Yeah! Well if you want you can have his pelt. Might be able to cover up the scorch marks," Artan pointed out, patting down the dead man for valuables.

"Even khajiit have limits. I couldn't sell that to a blind man without nose," Kharjo sniffed, making a show of turning his head away in disgust.

"Ha! Kharjo! The only kitty I know who has the skill to pickpocket a Nightingale and refuse to do it in the same breath!" Artan huffed, shaking his head.

"That skill is only for when you actually take khajiit somewhere warm. So far all Kharjo has seen is snow," Kharjo sighed, voice lowering into a deadpan by the time he had finished.

"Didn't Sulla warm you enough?" Artan asked innocently, throwing the man's burnt gauntlet further away so the smell wouldn't bother him as much in his looting.

"No. It was like the breath of an ice wraith. Kharjo for one is unimpressed," the big cat shook his head, sounding bored. Kharjo went on to pick his sword from the stones beside Sulla and Artan, sheathing it back at his hip and returning his shield to his arm. Artan seemed to consider the dead man a loss and stood, moving towards the small altar in the centre of what could have been a throne’s old platform.

"Heh. Okay. Lexicon time." Artan turned from the other khajiit, now stood with one foot at the top of the stairs to a small altar, the other a few steps down. Lydia was at his side, Calder between the Nord woman and the Bulwark. But as Artan slid the bronze cube into is slot on the pillar, they all jumped aside. The floor fell away, leaving the steep, spiraling staircase open to their eyes, slipping away into the darker recesses of Alftand.

"Is the floor falling away?" Calder asked, incredulous.

"I doubt there are warm fires and smiling faces inside that door. Still. Lead on," Kharjo turned his head from listening to Calder, sounding resigned.

Lydia nodded along to Kharjo before simply shaking her head and squaring her shoulders. "I have a bad feeling about this….

"A tunnel. Dark. Dangerous…" Argis supplied, brow raising in question, but of course it was a
redundant one because Artan simply looked to each of them and chuckled.

The cat wiped the remains of Sulla’s burnt skin that had caught on his gloves off on his chestplate and smiled. "Get your shit kittens. Looks like this adventure just got a bit more fruity!"

Chapter End Notes

So. Being honest, this is a short and sweet one to get ready for the ultra rumble that I have planned for the next chapters. Like a baby step towards the edge of a swimming pool. Just be sure you're ready for the wave simulator and water slides kids. On a side note, apparently Kharjo refuses to steal things, and has a crazy moral standard. Yet he has a sneak skill. Higher than my level 47 khajiit, which kinda shows how boring I found nicking peoples stuff in Skyrim. I was an assassin. You can loot the body lol. But yeah, I found that kinda funny. Kinda like the way Zevran trolls you in Dragon Age : Origins by selling himself about being able to lockpick, and then when you let him live and join the team? "It cannot be done." Tricksty Elves man. I swear. And as for the starting song, well. Skyrim. Adventures. Giving stuff up for the one you love. Well. All kinda fits in, don't it? I thought so anyway.

Thank you for reading!
~Frog
Honey Badger

Chapter Summary

Realizing that your thane is a maniac is never easy.

Chapter Notes

"Until we have seen someone's darkness, we don't really know who they are. Until we have forgiven someone's darkness, we don't really know what love is." – Marianne Williamson

See the end of the chapter for more notes

4E, 202 Late Frostfall

Artan was bloody insane.

It was a simple concept that each and every one of his regular followers had to come to terms with, if they wished to carry on earning the money they could be swimming in after a job, or they were already emotionally attached to the fatalistic fur-ball. It wasn't something scary. It was something that was usually quite endearing, in some respects. Argis had never witnessed the bone-chilling kind of crazy from Artan. Until the third day in the admittedly creepy haze of Blackreach.

It's funny how all this mundane shit came back when he was about to die.

On the first day, after they had descended into the dark after the cat, wisp bobbing happily before him and stepped into the blue murk of the caverns. In the beginning, it seemed as if Blackreach was just a simply pretty, glowing cavern system. That hypothesis fell through pretty quickly. They set up shop in an old outpost, made by a botanist in search of red nirnroots. When Artan started bleating about his "ingenious field notes" and "spectacular findings considering he was alone down here," Argis nodded politely and carried on eating his sweetroll. Calder would simply say, "Unless he made a special type of booze from it, I doubt most Nord's would care for it." The other khajiit, Kharjo would outright laugh and say, "Like a cub frolicking in the grasses." Lydia would frown, "You know I hate your mumbo jumbo," in which Artan usually replied with a sarcastic, "you loved my jumbo mumbo last night." A long, often caustic battle of wit would ensue, always in good jest.

The end of their breakfast led to the slow decision to break into two teams, one pair and one group of three. "If anything bad happens, use the magelight staff to send up a flare. We'll come running. Keep together, protect each other, and for the love of all that is holy, don't do anything stupid. I swear to god, I'll get Sithis to let me cross the Void border to kick your asses. I've been to Sovengarde before; I know where you fucks go when you do something heroic and ultimately deadly." With that, Artan turned, followed by Calder, into the mists.

They lasted an hour before the flare went up.
Lydia hit the water hard, bright shard of ice still sticking out of her leg, her shin guard shattered and by the looks of it the bone underneath. Kharjo and Argis were back to back, the fallen Nord woman between them in the water. The murky shallows were around shin height, tepid and strangely clear, considering the amount of filth-caked Falmer wandering around in the dark. There were five of the ghostly apparitions, randomly flickering around the shallow lake; throwing ice shards, doing mad somersaults and keening to each other.

Their close-knit circle didn't stop the thing bursting from the water a scant two feet behind her. It almost happened in slow motion, Argis thought. The shade reared up high, dress freezing the waters underneath it and effectively pinning the three of them where they were. Argis felt the ice staple his legs in place, started as it nearly fully encased Lydia's prone form, and full on yelled out in fear as the shade shuddered violently towards her, fangs out. Then suddenly, as if all the sounds had been sucked out of the world, it went silent. Then with a fierce howl, everything was back in a cacophony of sound.

A boot hit it in the face.

With a flicker of wind, Artan was there, between them, arms spread and legs akimbo, Calder's arm caught in a flailing fist, boot neatly slamming into the critter's head. Flames unfurled from the free hand, melting the ice and making the other advancing shades fluttered backwards, away from the sudden heat. He let go of Calder, the huge redhead landing at Lydia's feet, Artan between them and the shade. With a flick of the wrist, he sent a fire bolt into the creature's chest. "DUCK."

The three warriors fell to the water, and in that instance, Argis thought a simple "Thank fuck," would suffice. Artan did something crazy. He spun, both hands wreathed in flame, catching each of the shades in widespread, orange arms. The splashed water from their hasty movements more than enough to protect the housecarls and Kharjo from the flames, and as the embers quickly drifted into nothing, they all thought it was over.

The high pitched, shriek made each snap their necks towards another pale woman, tiny whispers of light flickering a colder, deeper blue around her. It was only a moment. She moved, and Artan let the Thuum wash out. That same silence, and mind-numbing crash of sound as the khajiit thundered through the air at the Wispmother. Both boots planted easily on either of her shoulders, overpowering her momentum and sending them both crashing into the waters. The lake froze around her and Artan's feet, pinning her to the lakebed easily. He didn't hold her long. He snapped up straight, hands to attention, both glowing once before a loud, cringe-worthy boom made Argis close his eyes.

Fire bolts. Straight to her face.

The wisps were gone, as was the rolling mists surrounding the glorified puddle of a lake.

"I tell you not to do anything stupid, and here I find you playing tag with a ghoul." The cat turned, and in that moment he knew they were good to go.

They had managed to get Lydia on her feet, and back to the outpost.

She was still there.

They had carried on scouting the second day, but as a team of three with Artan included. Calder had stayed behind with Lydia, in case something else tried to get in. Today, Kharjo had stayed behind. He didn't know why all these things were taking precedence over the here and much more important now, but they were.
Calder and Artan had been ahead of him.

It wasn't long until they had been ambushed by Falmer. One of the Shadowmasters had caught him with a spell to the chest, sending him flying. Somehow, he had slammed straight into the back of one of the Dwemer automations. If it had been a spider, that would have been do-able. A sphere would have been okay. A centurion, during a battle with two Shadowmasters and enough archers to make Alduin himself pause, well that was fucking catastrophic. Especially since he woke it up. It was a blur after that. There was a flare in the sky, he knew that much. All he knew was there was a babbling in his head as he staggered to his feet, brushed to frost from his chest plate and readied his shield. Sentences and words and phrases and ridiculous encouragements bombarded the forefront of his mind, telling him about Centurion's being mostly impervious to weaponry, that they were weak to fire, and that when they used steam attacks you-

He rolled forwards, under the barrel's sight, and somehow dodging the thunderous jet of steam billowing from the automations wrist. It was jerky, and he was shaking, all too aware of the battle happening a few metres away. Did any of them realise what was happening? What the fuck was happening? He wasn't meant to be over here.

The thing pulled back a step, and he knew what was gonna happen. He threw himself back, fast enough that the thing's foot missed him, instead crunching down into ancient stone, splintering the rock around its instep. He couldn't breathe. The frost had sapped whatever stamina he had left. He could barely even lift his head, let alone his sword. He was fucked. And thinking of all the stupid campfire conversations, all the times at the pub, all the play fights and tag battles in Vlindrel Hall. He wasn't dead yet. What was he doing? It brought up the other leg.

A loud, splintered roar from behind him and that familiar silence snapped the daze. The sounds rushed back, as did the winds as Artan's flickering form entered his vision; straight above his head. The cat collided with the cage mounted around the automation's head, hands rippling with fire before it completely engulfed him and automation. The yowling, the screeching tear of metal and the groan of waning strength filled the air, and within a few seconds, Argis watched as the first molten puddle hit the floor at the Centurion's feet. It faltered, steam seeping out almost lazily now, hammer-arms wind-milling comically before it tumbled with a metallic squeal. It landed on its back with a crash, Artan's grip unrelenting, easily staying on his feet as the entire thing ground to a stop. He turned, slowly, eyes bright and glowing with the residual essence of the Thuum, fangs bared and hackles up. And in that second, Argis believed all the stories about the assassin, the cannibal, the dragon-killer. He knew Artan was crazy. He saw the edges of it when he brought the charred Lydia to the Hall after a bad run-in with a Briarheart.

He just had never seen it.

The cat's eyes were still glazed when he surged forwards to kneel at the Bulwark's side, hands swift and gaze sharp, already cataloguing the scratches, eyeing the bruises and testing the joints and bones. Argis heard more than saw Calder and Kharjo finishing up. The other khajiit was sniping the farthest of the Falmer while Calder overwhelmed the closer ones. The remains of the Shadowmasters were pulpy and scattered, and Argis was slightly glad that he hadn't seen their demise. Especially since he could only see Artan with a similar pulp on him. "You have some guts on you."

"Might have gone a little overboard. Apparently one of the Thu'um shouts can cause people to explode when in point blank range. You're lucky I can recover so quickly. I don't think I'd have made it without the whirlwind sprint."

"You'd have made it. You always do," Argis nodded, sounding resolute.

"Not always," the cat's eyes flickered up to look at him before darting away. "I lost my second

"Did you ever find out…"

"Yeah," The cat grinned, hard and cold. "Guards found the two of them hanging from the Bee n' Barb's signpost outside."

Argis' eyes widened, "That was you?"

The cat nodded, "It was a few months after I buried her, when I did a few of the Brotherhood contracts. Told Astrid, the leader, what happened. Asked if there was an information network I could use to find the bastards. She led me to a guy in the Ratway, and from him I found them." His eyes flicked up, and held on to the Nords gaze. "They deserved it. Hurting her that way."

"Yes. They did."

"Artan. Khajiit suggests a swift retreat. We are in too open a place here," Kharjo broke the moment from where he had stopped a few feet from them, sword still drawn and shield still high. The Dragonborn nodded at Kharjo, stood, and dragged Argis to standing with him.

"Let's get back," the smaller cat sighed, not sparing a glance for any of them.

The three of them followed Artan. Some in awe, maybe with a little fear mixed into that. Argis didn't know whether to feel proud that the cat figured he was someone worth protecting, and in such a violently calculated manner. Proud, or terrified that he was in the employ of a crazed khajiit assassin with a relatively strong grasp of destruction magic, as well as a regular habit of eating dragon souls. He shook his head. The Thane would do the same for any of his housecarls, and nearly all of his random hirelings. A glance twitched behind them, to the molten remains of the Centurion. He wondered how long he would let that reasoning slide before he lost his mind.

xxx

4E, 202 Early Suns Dusk

Artan stumbled out of the room with the lexicon in hand, mumbling about crazy Dwemer theatricalities. He had been in the chamber for at least an hour, after telling them he would be five minutes and to stay put. They had finally reached the Tower of Mzark, using the same tactics they had to get through Alftand. Artan went first, Calder behind him, Lydia in the middle, Argis behind her and Kharjo bringing up the rear. The cat's strategy worked pretty well, considering Kharjo could hear anything coming up behind them while Artan kept an eye out for traps ahead of them. Except, he was smothering every single one of them in a protective bubble. He had nearly passed out while healing the last of the aches and broken tendons in Lydia's foot, and then told them to head out of Sinderion's house.

None of their concerns reached him.

Not even when they were knee-deep in the snow banks outside, Elder scroll in one hand, Lexicon in the other.

That glaze, almost like the sweet white icing on a sweetroll, was still there even when Artan staggered out of Septimus Signus' outpost, Oghma Infinium in a tight fist.

xxx
Argis forced himself to be there.

He wanted to know everything about his Thane, even the shitty parts. This was probably the worst he would see of his Thane. His mind flickered back to the demon in Blackreach, and re-evaluated that sentiment. Still. He sat in one of the pews, Lydia at his side. She had similarly agreed to come along, wanting to see the assassin hiding behind the kitty mask. Nobles milled around them, sipping sweet ciders and twittering away at each other. It was kind of sickening, seeing them so unaware, so vulnerable. Neither of them saw Artan, not even a whisper of him. It was mildly terrifying. They were used to the drunken, stumbling fool. Every once in a while, they would see the edges, the outline of a warrior during skirmishes; it was always smothered by the easygoing air that seemed to permeate the Thane. In moments like these, it was a surprise to know that they might not even know the man at all.

Vittoria Vicci stood from her throne in the marital alcove, her husband astride her, eyes bright and cheeks pink. Argis couldn't even hear half of what she was saying, the blood was thundering in his ears. When it happened, he couldn't help. Even if Artan was cornered like a wild animal. It would out the assassin, and they would both be on the run. But the question wasn't whether he could or not. Would he try?

The woman was an Imperial, cousin to the Emperor, and according to Artan she was also doing sneaky deals with the Thalmor to line her pockets. Her husband was all for the rebellion, however, and the wedding of such influential people was seen as a step towards soothing the still high tensions after Ulfric's death. Artan was about to shatter all of that, with the swipe of a blade.

"You have all helped make this a truly extraordinary wedding. All of my dreams have come true. So thank you. Thank you all," Vittoria smiled, and Argis noticed the edge of a businesswoman. She was pitching them, even now. He wondered if he would have noticed it without the near year he had spent with Artan. Would he be so perceptive if he hadn't had to deal with the lockbox made of mirrors that was Artan?

Lydia gripped his arm guard. He gulped around the stone in his throat.

"May you all be as happy in your lives as I know I will be in mine. Thank you again for-" At first it just looked like she burped. Until the sharp edge of a blade shone in the midday sun, blood flooding from her slack jaw like the water from a fountain. She floundered, until a black and red figure behind her lifted her with ease, her pale fingers scrabbling at the blade, and kicked her over the edge of the balcony. The guests were too startled to even scream.

Asgeir dumbly reached for her, almost falling over the edge himself. The proud outline that Argis knew as Artan leaned back on its heels, flicked the blade in a parody of a salute. Its shrouded head turned to the groom and when the assassin did a slight bow, and that's what snapped Asgeir. He roared, loud and long, startling the guests and frozen guards into action. "MY WIFE IS DEAD." There was a lightning swift leap at the assassin. Lydia pulled Argis up, eyes ablaze, but Argis slapped a hand on top of hers, holding her back. "We can't. They'll know its us. We will all be outlaws."

The woman shuddered in suppressed rage, but when a huge pillar of ice sent the man up into the air, jolted him hard and threw him into one of the trees in the courtyard, the crowd scattered. The Frost Atronach roared into the sky, making the guards jump to action. It was chaos. Elisif was crying on her knees, rocking, the beggar man was screaming that he didn't kill Vittoria, the parents of the groom were scuttling around the tree, Alexia Vicci was howling for blood. And all Artan did as the atronach jumped from the alcove was stand up, dust himself off and leap onto its back as it landed.
He slid down, broke out into a run before slapping an open palm to an Argonian, dressed in the same Dark Brotherhood armour.

The green lizard roared, blades dazzling in the sunshine, already dripping.

When all that was left of the duo was the dust they left behind, the wails of parents, guests and the broken hiccups of the Queen, did Argis let Lydia's hand drop. It wasn't until they sat down, alone, in Proudspire Manor that she spoke. "I can't believe that just happened."

Lydia shook her head. "It's scary to think that's the same man that's saved so many times."

"It's not. That was an assassin. Remember that. Artan isn't just a bloodied blade. He's our Thane. He wouldn't be Thane if he was just another criminal."

Lydia hissed back, "I know that. I know. But that isn't what scares me. What scares me is that when those guards rushed at him, I wanted to rip their guts out. Even knowing that he's a murderer."

"He's not a murderer. He's-"

"He killed Ulfric. Alduin. Now an innocent woman. There is no continuity," Lydia cut him off, sounding conflicted.

"She was selling out to the Thalmor behind the Emperors back. And you know that Lighthouse shipwreck a few months ago? She had the two ringleaders in her pocket," Argis grumbled, reaching for a wine bottle.

"What?" Lydia hissed.

"Not so innocent now, eh? Blackblood Marauders are renowned for being ruthless murderers. Fun to know that one of the most influential people in Solitude is pulling the strings. And don't even get me started on all the crap the groom has done. He's in cahoots with Maven after all. It's kinda understandable that Artan would jump at the chance to cut the legs out from under her business partner."

"Holy fuck," the woman grunted, rubbing her temples between her palms.

"Yeah."

xxx

"Well done brother," Astrid inclined her head.

"Well, it would have been a lot harder with out Veezara," Artan smiled, patting the Argonian on the back

"Nonsense brother, that atronach would have easily given you all the time you'd need to escape. By the time I got to cutting men down, it had already decimated most of the Imperial Guard," the Argonian shrugged, returning the grin with a small smile.

"My boy! Using such a mundane spell for a getaway! Why didn't you blow someone up? The guts would have blinded and scarred most pursuers!" Festus exploded, sounding more wistful than actually angry, though.

"Not all of us are as eccentric in our tastes as you, Festus," Gabriella pointed out, before settling into a cross-legged seat atop the dining table.
"He has a point though Gabriella. Though I'd have ripped them apart in the blood mist. The normies are still pretty fucking scared of weres," Arnbjorn grunted out, tearing a chunk out of his steak with his teeth.

"You could have pulled the sweet and innocent card. Give the woman a poisoned basket of apple pies. I have a wonderful touch-based poison that would have aced the entire thing. She would have been puking her guts up on the crowd. Literally," Babette trilled, a hand delicately patting her own shoulder when she giggled at the thought.

"Next time, kick that asshole flutist in the nuts before you go. Or completely just take his balls. They'd make nice bookends for Vlindrell Hall, am I right?" Nazir ignored them all, tugging at the lip of his headscarf to pull it back into place around his throat.

The conversation went on into the night, until the other mismatched members of the brotherhood wandered away and Artan was left alone. He let the guard drop, slumping slightly. He knew he saw his housecarls in the crowd, and even though they were sworn to him by oath, he still worried he had broken something more than just Asgeir and Alexia's hearts. He wandered out of the main room, nodding to a dancing Cicero as he went, and into the back room, rubbing a palm against the arcane enchanter as he went. A few steps and he was in Lis' holding pen. He was quiet as he sat down, the frostbite spider making small whirring noises with her mandibles. It took a few strokes to her thorax, but she was soon curled against his side, asleep. It surprised him that Gabriella's unorthodox pet acted a lot like a dog, but then again, this place was a freak show.

His freak show.

He just hoped he hadn't closed the book on the rest of his life like he had to Vittoria.

xxx

Solitude was quiet. Really quiet at 2am. He had left Gaius' body to cool in the barracks, 'hidden' behind a plant pot in the mess hall. 'Hidden' in this case meaning with his legs hanging out and the uprooted plant atop his bent back.

He chuckled darkly to himself as he pushed open the door to his Manor and dusted his feet on the mat. It wasn't until he put his satchel down on the table that he noticed all the blood.

"My thane… please..."

"OH MY GOD."

xxx

"ASTRID."

He was a lightning bolt through the sanctuary, cloak billowing out behind him in a flurry of movement. He was already in the main chamber when he ran straight into the assassin, grabbing a fist into the leather of her armour and howling, point blank in her face, "YOU TOLD MAVEN I KILLED THE WIFE OF HER BUSINESS PARTNER?! WHAT KIND BITCHASS STUNT ARE YOU PULLING? THAT MAD BITCH TOOK ONE OF MY OWN! ONE OF MY HOUSECARLS IS IN INTENSIVE CARE AND THE OTHER TWO ARE FUCKING GONE. WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU GONNA DO ABOUT THAT?! HUH?!!"

"This isn't the time for-"

"MY HOUSECARLS ARE MISSING. IN THE HANDS OF A CRAZY OLD BITCH OUT
FOR MY FUCKING HEAD. THIS IS THE TIME FOR THAT, OR I SWEAR TO SITHIS HIM-FUCKING-SELF I WILL KILL YOU RIGHT NOW."

The woman frowned, "She asked for who killed the Vicci girl so she could hire them to bump off one of her competitors. I had no idea she would do something like this. And right now, I can't help you Brother. Cicero broke rank and attacked the Family."

The cat made a jagged, harsh look into the room finally, the blood thirst fading slightly, until Veezara's prone form came into view. "OH FOR FUCKS SAKE." He turned on Astrid again, "WHERE THE FUCK IS THAT CLOWN?"

Her eyes narrowed, but she didn't flinch away, "He's in the Dawnstar Sanctuary. Arnbjorn is on his heels. Please, make sure my husband is safe. And the clown? Kill him for his treachery."

The cat simply smiled, "It's funny how it's treachery when he attacks you, but when you attack me, it's suddenly a fucking accident."

"You know I didn't." Astrid began, but Artan cut her off with a wave of his hand.

"No, Astrid. I don't. Consider Cicero dead. But when I return? I expect a lot better than fucking excuses."

"You might be Listener, but you are not the master here!" the Nord yelled as the cat turned to leave, his cloak making a odd shape in the dust at his feet.

Artan didn't even turn to reply, just shouted over his shoulder as he strode out, "So says the deposed mistress. Say Goodnight to Mother for me. She likes to see a dedicated servant of Sithis before lights out."

xxx

Lucien sighed deeply, eyeing the khajiit's back.

The Listener had simply let an entire tide of emotions free since he had summoned the shade, and all Lucien could do was pat the cat on the back, and remind his Listener that it was at least a week's ride to Riften with a cart. Maven wasn't the type to ruin a message like that by botching the job and getting the hostages killed. Artan had burst through the house after he killed the first mercenary and knocked the other unconscious. There were three more, and Artan saved the most commanding-looking one to interrogate. After healing Jordis, of course. The woman was a shield-maiden. She had seen a lot of blood, guts and war. She had never seen an assassin extract information, however. She threw up twice.

Artan had set off on a fast road to Dawnstar. He had three days to get to Riften.

Then the cart holding his Housecarls should get there. That's what that merc said anyway.

The one upstairs, in his ruined kitchen, said the same.

He nearly walked past Arnbjorn. "Brother."

"Get yourself home pup. There are no free scraps for today," Artan said, voice monotone. He didn’t have the energy for much else.

"What happened? Is Veezara…?" Arnbjorn looked around the cat, almost as if Artan would have brought him along too.
"Fine. But give your wife a message. I'm sorry for yelling. Things are really tight. But if I find bodies in Maven's house, and she had anything to do with it, anything at all. I'll end her reign and leave the brotherhood to rot. So," the cat flicked his gaze to the prone man, "Pray to the Dread Father for mercy. For within me, there will be none left to give." He carried on walking, ignoring the shocked hiss of Arnbjorn, and stepped into the Dawnguard Sanctuary.

Lucien pushed hard, but his Listener was a tight whirlwind of chaos.

It was over quickly. Even the frost troll couldn't hold a wytchlight to the Listener, in his full glory. The Mother chose well. In the end, he knew that his quiet utterances to spare Cicero, that this was not right, none of what he said had influenced the Listener. He knew that what influenced him was a world away, probably bloodied and unconscious in a cart.

"Next time, make sure you kill her properly," Artan snarled, oblivious to the way Lucien’s eyes flicked at him.

The clown seemed to forget he was pretending to be hurt. "You are not here to kill poor Cicero?"

"No, I'm here to conscript you. Trying to steal another assassins kill is considered bad manners. Keep your head down, and when I rip that bitch's heart out, I'll bring you back. You're the Keeper after all," the cat managed a small, malicious smile by the end.

"But… the others?" Cicero prodded, sounding skeptical.

"When they simmer down from today, they will realize her for what she is. A traitor who set her own up for slaughter to protect her position. While I'm the Sithis approved Listener. Gabriella is probably already brainstorming with Babette about how Astrid will take out anyone in her way. She's always been the sharpest one. Maybe when I get back, Festus will have already roasted her," Artan shrugged, sounding almost hopeful.

"But still, I'll be the one who tried to kill her."

"You're crazy as a box of frogs Cicero. We just tell them what they gotta hear. That Astrid took a long walk off a short pier. Even better, she simply doesn't come back. I'll burn that sanctuary to the ground if anything has happened to-"

"Listener. We have to go. We are cutting it close as it is," Lucien chided quietly.

"You're right. We'll talk later Cicero. Keep your head out of the shitter," the cat turned away from him, and being honest, Cicero didn’t know if it was arrogance or confidence that let him turn his back on the jester.

xxx

He was watching from the trees as the cart came back out through the gates. They had already been to the Blackbriar manor then. He was silent when he fell from the leaves, already tearing across the short expanse of grass when the guard had barely gotten the front gates closed. Artan was already over the wall, sliding down its sides, flickering through the night. It was in the market that he got intercepted.

"Ahhh there you are! It's been a while! I thought you had actually died!"

"Now isn't the time, Brynyolf. Tomorrow is much better," Artan bit out, barely slowing down to greet the thief. He could feel how close he was, and th-
"What lad? You are usually up for all the games. The guild has gotten much better when they play tag with you," the redhead laughed, slapping a hand to Artan’s back. He didn’t try to stop the cat, but instead strode alongside him. It was obvious Brynjolf knew, since he had a tightness to his calves that wasn’t usually there. It was obvious that he wasn’t going to get involved, and Artan appreciated that. They both knew what Maven was up to, tonight.

"I've got a job. Someone's taken-" Artan began, but a woman cut him off.

"Family," a velvety voice hummed, and as the two men watched, Gabriella stepped out of the dark, followed by Festus and Nazir.

"Brothers? Sister?" Artan asked, actually surprised.

"We came to lend a hand, Listener. One who attacks our own gets crushed into the dirt. It's the assassin way," Nazir smiled, short and wild. Artan didn't miss the way his eyes flickered. They knew about the thieves being in Maven's pocket. They didn't need a faction war on their hands.

"Thanks," the cat nodded, turning back to start walking again.

The four bade farewell to Brynwolf, who just watched them disappear into the dark. It was when they were out of earshot that Gabriella clicked her tongue, "We've already taken out the thieves watching her manor. They copped it five minutes ago, around three minutes after the beginning of their shift. We have four hours before they have to report in. We need to get in and out before that happens. All that's left is pushing the target over the edge."

"Understood. They're most probably keeping the hostages in the basement. Easier to hide screams there." At the heated glare Artan sent him, Festus shrugged and put up his hands, "being honest."

"I need you to be fatal, not honest," Artan cut back.

"Well, fatal is without even asking. The honesty is just a perk. We should hit them while we can," Festus shrugged, pulling his hood up and his scarf down.

"Agreed."

The four assassins rounded on the back of the manor, and the poor bastard guarding the backdoor was practically torn apart. Artan swiftly walked past him, the man in mid stride and mid sentence. Artan punched a clawed hand into his armpit as he went, not even stopping to look at the agonized face. He didn't even turn when he heard the sudden pops and crunches of Festus wringing the life from him.

"Do what you want to the guards. Maven is mine, wherever she is. And after this, I owe you all a lot of fucking ale," Artan couldn’t even keep the heat out of his voice, idly realizing he didn’t have to. They knew him better than most, they knew he was on a thin thread.

"This night will be paid for in blood, dear brother. The blood of those who have wronged one of ours. But I do like the spiced wines they brew in Solitude," the Dunmer cooed, hands already twisting a dagger in her playful fingers. Festus was practically vibrating in anticipation, while Nazir wordlessly pulled his curved sword from his hip, eyes ablaze. Artan kicked the door from its hinges, sauntered in and screamed, "Maven sweetheart! I'm home!"

The guards practically leapt from their skin.

He swiftly hit the floor, feet parting gracefully into a split, hands pressing into the wooden planks under him, elbows folding in to flatten himself against the smooth surface. Three of the guards flew
over him, through the front door, and from the screams he knew Festus was at play. Gabriella leapt over him, hopped onto the table, and the knives started glinting. Artan rolled into standing, already barrelling up the stairs. He found her.

"Hello. Where are my housecarls?" he asked, politely. It was a façade.

The woman snorted, "As if I would actually-" she choked on her words, the air crushed out of her lungs by the fist in her solar plexus. She fell almost instantly. Thankfully, he hadn't hit her hard enough to kill her. Just enough to wind her. With a rough tug, he had her ankle and had begun dragging her down the stairs, towards the basement. He passed an already bloodied Nazir on the way, and nodded once. "Happy hunting."

Artan practically kicked her down the stairs.

He had toughened the bones in her neck and back before he did, so she wouldn't snap something vital on the way down. She landed in a heap of wheezing, coughing fine silk and jewels. Artan practically kicked the old woman out of his path on the way to the dungeon. He didn't bother with a key. He wanted to scare the old bat. With a fist against the metal door-handle, he fired a single charged firebolt into the door. The thing nearly blew inward with the force.

He stepped in, and almost turned to kill the fetid old wench where she lay.

Argis and Lydia were in chains, and when the Bulwark lazily lifted his head, seeing-eye blackened shut and blind eye staring murkily back at him, he almost lost it. Lydia didn't even bother to look up. "I told you. We aren't gonna crack you godless cur. We won't tell you jack shit about-"

Aran threw himself at the heavy Nord, hands scrabbling at the manacles, already crusted with worn away flesh and blood. He was talking, babbling really, and as he did, he felt Lydia stir beside him. With a mumbled word, she became ghostly, falling straight through her shackles. A few seconds later, she became physical again. "Thane. You came." She sounded like a hag raven who smoked enough skooma to suffocate a mammoth. "I was too late. You guys look… oh god… oh god….

"ARTA-"

The cat was on his feet in an instant, throat expanding and contracting with ease, familiarity. Maul was thrown back, battleaxe barely kept in his slackened grip. "Maul! Kill that idiot! Actually! Don't! Take him alive!" Maven crowed from the hallway, "We can make him watch the other two! The girl seemed really upset when you worked on that half-blind beggar earlier! Teach them some humility!"

"Is this the dick that did this to you?"

The quiet, almost unheard sentence was nearly enough to make Lydia start crying again. She shook her head, and to an outsider it would have looked like she was trying to defend them. In reality, she was trying to stop him. "My Thane…"

"Tell me. Did he do this to you?"

"He was with the thugs that jumped us in Solitude. He nearly… oh god Jordis…" she bit out, lowering her head. She didn’t want to see it, when he snapped.

"Sometimes, it's not the act that scares them, kitten," the man growled, "It's the possibility. It cracks them quicker than shit through a goose."

There wasn't even time to breathe.
Maven actually started screaming.

Argis tried opening his only good eye, but couldn't. Lydia was working his manacles off, crying still. He was surprised she could even work her nail-less right hand. It had only been half an hour since they got here. They worked fast.

Artan worked faster.

Lydia made a loud, almost-animal screech and stumbled back, into Argis’ side. Maul's own screams were mellowed, as if his entire face was covered in cotton wool. It wasn't until the roar split the air, the heavy stench of big animal hit his nose, and the ugly sound of tearing meat overtook his ears did he realize what was happening. He didn't turn away when Lydia buried her face in his chest and cried brokenly.

It seemed to take an eternity to stop, but when it did, Argis noticed Artan talking to someone. Quietly, but the words were laced with a heavy threat.

"You get to keep your life today. But if you ever, EVER touch one of my own again, then I'll make sure your dirty little secret gets over Skyrim quicker than syphilis. Are we clear? Nobody will want anything to do with a incestuous old tart like you. You'll be destitute; your family bereft and out on the streets begging like the scum you are. They'll spit on you as they walk by. People you used to torment will be out for your head. If you're lucky, they'll kill you. But if you were a lucky woman, I wouldn't even be here in the first place, would I? Wouldn't be threatening to out your nasty little secret? You know, I've been meaning to ask, how the fuck hasn't Sibbi and Igrun not got webbed feet? Well, they are kind of special. A psychotic serial killer and a crazy bitch who likes to watch animals squirm. I guess it comes with the trauma of knowing that big brother Hemmy is really big Daddy."

"I get it. Take your—"

"Good. Now, it's late. And you're an aging woman. I think its bed-time, don't you?"

"W—"

There was a loud crack, and then only the sound of Lydia's faltering sobs.

Argis didn't know when it happened, but he decided he didn't like the eerily silent Artan huddling into his chest. One of Lydia's arms slunk around the Thane's shoulders, the mumbles of "Thank-you… You came…" and "I wasn't fast enough…" carried on into the night, until the three assassins wandered into the dungeon. He guessed his deadpan look was funny, because the Dunmer laughed lightly. "That is the first time I've ever seen our Brother silent. Usually there is a sarcastic comment about being a better dog than Arnbjorn, even though he's a cat!"

"Haha! That is true. Well Listener, we have ten minutes until the thieves rotate shifts and the bodies are discovered. Time to clear out. Is there anyone alive to tell the tale?"

"Maven. But she knows better than to talk," the colder, monotone voice was back, covering up the rawness in Artan’s voice from before.

"If she still can piece together a sentence then she can get a hit out on you. Kill her. Leave no loose ends," Nazir snapped out, waving a hand in a cutting motion to emphasize his point.

"Killing the Jarl is c-" Artan started, but Nazir cut him off.
"And killing the emperor isn't complicated?" A dark brow rose.

"I'm giving her the chance to back the fuck off. And besides, she has her hands in the thieves' guild and Astrid's pocket; I can't just kill a superior," the cat continued.

"What?"

Artan blinked, "Astrid and Maven have dalliances, you could say. Maven gives Astrid the nod, and she sends one of us to get the job done, more so than what you know. Maven has been sending assassins and bounty hunters after me for ages. It makes it hard to keep up the appearance of Thane. Didn't you know that?"

"Is that new recruits have been dropping like flies?" Gabriela spat out, sounding more amused than anything.

Artan shrugged, "It doesn't matter now. But we can't just knife Maven." The cat turned to look at her, "Even though I do want to use her leathery skin for the Armour I'll wear while burning her house to the ground; each of her crooked guards and filthy associates inside, of course."

"And there is the Brother we know and love," Gabriela chortled, holding out her arms in welcome.

"Give me a minute, and I'll get these two ready to move," Artan shook his head to hide his smile.

"Done," Festus stepped back, allowing room for Argis and Lydia to shakily stand.

"What?" the cat blinked, looking from Nord to Nord to mage.

The destruction mage glanced back, "Healing comes easy to an arcane prodigy like me. Just not as entertaining."

"Right, to Honeyside. You guys can restock and head out the back way into the wilds. Easier than taking on the guards." Artan shrugged, the group moved single-file up the stairs, the cat giving a prone Maven a quick kick for good measure, before the assassins led the way into the night. It was quiet as they slipped out the back, and Argis was barely able to keep the three of them in sight as they hastily made their way behind the houses. A quick glance, to give the statue of Talos a quick nod for the timely rescue, was enough for them to disappear completely. "Don't worry, they do that a lot." He looked back to the khajiit, who was pointedly not making eye contact.

It remained that way, even after they saw the dunmer, redguard and mage leave the glowing Honeyside behind.

The silence stayed.

xxx

4E, 202 Late Suns Dusk

"Artan?"

"Yes?"

The cat didn't stop moving plates around the table, not looking up at Argis. It was almost a week after the rescue from Maven's basement, and the cat still hadn't looked at him. Answered shortly, but lightly. As if he was playing light. He healed all of their wounds, even if Lydia was still shaken. They were in a tiny tavern in Ivarstead, Lydia outside in the bar, while Argis had managed to corner
Artan in their room. The three of them somehow managed to fit between two beds and the floor, even if it was a little tight. They were set to leave at dawn, but Lydia still thought it was too far away.

"What's wrong?" The Nord asked, voice still a little gruff.

"Nothing," the cat answered in an even tone, "Why?"

Argis had had enough. With a swipe, he had caught a wrist in his hand, forcibly turning the cat around so he could actually talk face-to-face. Artan's gaze flickered away. "Tell me."

The cat looked like that same, cornered animal again. Except, when it was in Solitude at Vittoria's wedding, that animal looked in control. Artan looked as if Argis was a troll seasoning his hide for the pot. "I..." It was less of a squeak than a mouse would make. It, along with the avoidance and the never looking but always there, it was all shredding away at the Bulwark's already frayed nerves. He tried to be patient. "You...?"

The cat frowned.

"You... And Lydia got dragged into my mess. I'm your Thane, I'm supposed to protect you. Instead you get captured... and all I can see when I look at either of you is Iona getting dirt shoveled on her face!"

Argis almost took a step back.

Artan was blaming himself? For a hit someone else put on him? They all worked on nabbing that horse together, the heist that was probably the trigger to all of this in the first place. They had left Jordis behind for a reason, he'd thought. It was an old war with Maven, but them being involved in the theft is what most probably brought the crap down on their heads instead of his. Apparently Artan wasn't in the mood for logic.

"It wasn't your fault. You saved us when the going got pretty flaming tight. But you pulled through, like you always do," Argis nodded, half expecting the cat to nod back and agree. He had seen Artan use it on dignitaries when he wanted them to do what he wanted, and typically it worked.

"I think we need to end this. I relinquish you-"

Argis couldn't help it. His hands moved alone. His gentle touch turned into a fist around the khajiit's wrist, his other slapping across the open mouth, shutting it with a snap. "Don't. If you were there, maybe things would have been different. Maybe we would all be dead. But in reality, you came when we needed you. We are all safe now. That's what matters. Not all this gobbledy-gook about not protecting us well enough. We are warriors, Artan. We sign up for this shit. Except, unlike all those bodies we always turn up where someone got in too deep and ended up a footnote," The Bulwark dared a small smile, "We're doing all right. And that's because of your impeccable timing. Never doubt that."

The Nord pulled his hands away slowly, Artan's eyes changing from its dead gaze into one that seemed softer, more... kitten-like.

"When I found all the blood and Jordis nearly dead, I thought the worst. I nearly got booted from the Brotherhood because I tried to kill the leader in my mad-daze. I'd figured it out that she gave Maven my details, and the old witch had retaliated harder after all that crap with Asgeir. I've been booting her in the leg for nearly a year now, and then I emotionally cripple her business partner? And Astrid is just trying to secure her position as leader, especially after all this Listener business." The cat's ears perked, "I'm going to-"
"Save the threats. We both know that they'll get what's coming to them. It's just how we roll. Just
make sure you keep those three assassins that came with you on side. They seemed pretty good.
Creepy, but good."

Artan laughed, a sharp, quick sound, but Argis would take what he could get. "Just don't piss them
off. I've already saved your life too many times already in this month alone," the cat joked, waving a
hand.

"Yeah, well. What would you do without me?" Argis asked, brows raising.

The cat seemed to sober all of a sudden, eyes softening even more. Argis couldn't for the life of him
figure the expression, but it did make his sternum twitch in retaliation. It was the soft press of the
other's palm that started the sudden breathlessness off though. "I'd be a very, very sad kitty." Did he
really just hear that? He knew his eyes were wide, but his head was so light. He really needed some
water. Ale would make his head float...

Artan.

"Guys," Lydia stepped into the doorway, eyes tired. "I know you're doing that sexual tension shit,
but I need sleep. We have like six hours before we gotta be on the road. We all know one of you are
gonna trip out and run away and tomorrow will be spent in awkward silence. Can we skip the
theatrics and just get some sleep? I don't think I can handle more ale."

The abrupt silence returned, and the Bulwark barely staggered away before Lydia stumbled in and
launched herself at the leftmost bed, landing neatly in a heap. He spared a glance to the cat, which
was mumbling to himself and setting up the warding runes. "Well…. Uh…."

"She's lucky that they outlawed flogging of housecarls by their Thanes," Artan sneered, sounding
bitter.

"You don't mean that," Argis clucked his tongue and carried on stuffing his armour into a slot of
space between the bed and the wardrobe.

The cat sent him a look, "Can I at least tickle her till she cries?"

The Bulwark sent a look back, "As long as I get a running start. When she stops crying, she's gonna
be out for balls."

The cat laughed, "That's fine. All I have to do is run faster than you."

"Well isn't that nice?" Argis frowned, trying to sound affronted.

"Fine. I'll ask the flame Atronach to distract her. That daedra sure can cook up a good mug of tea.
They can talk about shoes and-"

"Shut. Up." Lydia snapped from her nest on the far bed, sounding almost like a hissing snake in a
hollow.

"Yes ma'am," the cat squeaked, going back to making noise and pretending to be busy.
AN: Oh Lydia. I love your blunt ways. That was super fun to write. Like, super fun. For some weird reason, whereas everyone else loves killing their followers, I spend stupid amounts of time trying to keep them alive. Especially after I found out that Argis and Calder fight over the stuff you drop if they live together. A bit of a long time for an update, but I'm working on getting Its Complicated updated, as well as AU and Eaglet into gear again. And then my cousin forcing me to watch the Eragon movie (sigh) and making the sequel to Yarn start bashing around my head. God. Never let your family get you drunk and watch movies. It'll ruin your life. Replaying Dragon Age Origins isn't helping like it should, either :T

Did you know Honey Badgers are actually pretty terrifying for their size? Nearly nothing messes with them. They're like ninjas on crack.

Ah Well. Happy reading

~ Frog
Skoomy Skooma

Chapter Summary

Artan is an awful influence on people.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

4E. 202 Beginning of Evening Star

Artan almost felt sorry for the guy.

But he was a total creep.

He had left Argis and Lydia to their own for the evening, and supposed they were in the pub again. If he was honest with himself, he could have had Argis beat the information from Anton. But, well. Things there were awkward, to say the very least.

He shook the thought away and crept into the kitchen; after the siblings had left, of course. But he had barely been in the man's peripheral when the sudden jumble of words lashed out.

"Before you say anything, no, I am not from the Reach. I'm a Breton from High Rock, and I refuse to be mistaken for a filthy native. I don't care if we share the same ancestors, these people are savages. Half of them are Forsworn barbarians, and have you seen what they eat? I have meals to cook for the entire castle and almost no help. The Jarl gives me two incompetent assistants. Worthless. What have I done for the gods to take me so far from my beloved Daggerfall? Yes. The finest court in all of High Rock. You think politics here are something? Well, we Bretons invented politics. That is where I learned to cook, and where I belong. Not here, with all these dogs."

There was another ten minutes of inane shouting before Artan finally snapped. There was a loud crack as the assassin pinned the chef against one of the kitchen tables, a clawed fist at his throat and a dagger pointedly resting against the lip of his belt. "I am not here to be an agony aunt. Tell me who the Gourmet is. Now."

There was a tense moment, while the shaky Anton tried to lean further away from the blade at his gut. Artan didn't give him an inch. He was almost tempted to just-

"I'll take his identity to my grave, filthy ass-licker."

It took three fingers and a leg to make the chef talk. Artan kind of hoped he was more resilient than that, but alas. It was only a matter of time before he got his man, and well, if he got a grateful look from Voada as he kicked the chef's corpse under the bed and then a ten minute head start before she started screaming, well. That was just a bonus.

xxx

"What the hell is going on?" Argis asked when he found Artan rummaging through one of the kitchen cupboards. To be honest, the Nord hadn't even heart Artan get home, let alone appear in the kitchen. It was only when the cat had started dropping shit and swearing that Argis had even noticed
another person in the house. Lydia was at the pub, apparently ‘taking stock of the local ale,’ in which Argis suspected it being more ‘I can only handle so much of you.’

"We are having a small party, Argis. Tomorrow I have to travel to Nightgate Inn. And being honest, I'd rather do the journey hanging out of my ass than sober. It'll numb me to the cold," the cat shrugged, throwing the wine bottle to Argis. Vlindrel Hall was quiet, especially at this time of night. "And besides, it has to be time to celebrate the finished balcony to this place now! It's already been a week!"

The bulwark couldn't help but smile back.

"Stros M'Kai Rum. Nicked it off Falkbeard. You know you want some, so don't bother trying to deny it," the khajiit laughed at him, throwing another bottle to the Nord, and thankfully Argis managed to catch it without much effort.

Artan had sunk even more money into this place; adding on a curved little patio to extend the entranceway of the Hall. It jutted straight out from the mountainside, held up by pillars that he had specifically commissioned from the same stone the rest of Markarth was made out of. Artan had spent maybe a fortnight on decorating the thing, decked it out with chairs, a table, and flowers for the stone tub. He spent an entire day carting dirt up all the steps just to plant them right. Argis didn't ask how much it set his Thane back. He didn't like heart attacks.

And besides, they were finally getting along again.

Neither of them wanted to broach the elephant in the room; and if Artan was going to avoid it like a pox then he sure as hell wasn't going to lumber in and make it worse. He was a warrior, not a wordsmith. Yngvar had already pointed out that he was terrible at anything involving romance and the like. He had dalliances in the past, sure. He was a hot blooded male; it kind of came with the territory. Nights had gotten cold and lonely in the army, and it wasn't unheard of for young soldiers to seek companionship.

But they had all been women. And Nord.

"Argis? You're spacing out on me," the cat waved a clawed hand infront of his face, making Argis snap back to the now.

"Sorry. Kinda lost myself a little there. The rum any good?" Argis pulled back, walking away from the cat and around the table to the fireplace and the small table next to it.

The cat stood, and with a deft few steps, was around the dining table and beside the Bulwark, eyes narrowed in scrutiny. "You're holding the bottle, Argis." Well fuck a-

"Of course. Ha-ha…” he put both the bottles down on the small table, pushing side one of the forgotten books and straightened, rubbing a palm against the bun he had tied his hair into. It made cooking easier when his hair wasn’t in his face.

"Okay," the cat pressed a sweetroll into his hand. Argis squashed the tiny sparks in his fingers. "You eat, drink, de-stress. I'm setting up my pipe." Artan swept away, humming quietly to himself. Argis let himself fall back into a chair, absently sinking his teeth into the sweet-bun. "What pipe?"

Artan returned before he replied.

The thing was at least a foot tall, consisting of one part glass jar and three parts elegant metal piping; all flowing together in a series of waves that smoothed down into a large conical base. The top lip of the metal pipe was covered by a waxen fabric, twisted around and around itself until it made a long,
airtight tube. On the other end was a long, silvery pipe with the etchings of a sun and moon upon its surface. "A skoomy skooma pipe, friend."

"Oh really?" the Nord asked, giving the cat a look.

"If you don't whine about it, I'll answer any question you have for me," Artan sniffed, rolling his eyes indignantly.

"Will you be honest?" Argis hummed, taking another bite.

"Of course," the cat nodded, fiddling with the pipe’s tubing.

"Any question?" Argis asked dubiously.

"I swear upon the Mane's holy whiskers," Artan huffed, placing his middle and index fingers against his temple in a mocking rendition of a salute. Argis ignored it.

"Mane?"

"Like a leader for khajiit. He's like a spiritual leader for my kind, as well as Elsweyr. It is said that he isn't just born; he is reborn. As in every time he dies, he is reincarnated into a cub with the same birthday. If it is true, I cannot really say." Artan threw himself down and practically lounged across the shallow dip in front of the fireplace, setting the skooma pipe to his left, plate of grapes to his right. He took one of the tiny fruits before continuing. "It might just be that he kills any cubs born on the day when a third moon appears in the sky. But it doesn't stop khajiit everywhere—no matter their beliefs—from worshipping him. Even after everything, I still shave my own mane out of respect."

"You are supposed to have a mane? Like a lion?" The Nord asked through a mouthful of roll, reaching for the wine.

"Yes. It kind of carried on after the tradition of the Mane tying the fur from every Khajiit into his own mane. But since the baby-boom that plan fell through. So now he just has clansmen and guardsmen fur braided into his mane. Still takes him a week to get down a flight of steps, and he has to have a cathay-raht give him a piggyback everywhere."

"Cathay-what?" Argis asked, deadpan.

"It's a breed of khajiit. Just imagine me, but with an extra torso and a half added on for good measure," Artan explained, sounding a little incredulous in spite of himself.

"Holy shit..." Argis breathed out, slumping back into his chair with the wine.

"Yup." The cat slid a finger over a hidden catch and pressed it inside, effectively starting the skooma off with a flicker of magic. "Kind of makes you laugh, really."

"Why don't you talk like Kharjo? Or the other Khajiit I've met?"

The cat didn't reply. He took a deep inhale from his pipe, eyes settling on the rug underneath him. Argis had almost finished the bottle by the time the cat broke the awkward silence. "I wasn't born in Elsweyr, and my parents spoke in broken Ta'agra, meaning I didn't pick it up the same way other Khajiit would do. I was born in a tiny village in Divine knows where. I don't remember most of those days, but I remember when I left them. It's a long and ugly story. Are you sure this is the time...?"

"If you don't want to talk about it, you don't have to. I understand," Argis said quietly, rubbing a
thumb down the scar through his eye.

"It… is a hard time. Another day," Artan replied, running the tip of the pipe over his lip. The cat sighed, before taking another draw from the pipe. As the silence stretched out, Argis had figured the subject closed. But Artan eventually let loose a sentence that broke whatever quiet air there was between them.

"I was born in a slave family."

Argis' head snapped to the cat. He hadn't moved, still sprawled haphazardly across the rug and taking casual drags from his pipe. "Larethius didn't like the way most of them spoke, so he made sure to teach the cubs how to speak properly. The way he wanted. So when he brought us up to wait on his guests we wouldn't speak like barbarians. I never understood how messed up it all was until one of his Justicar friends brought their assassin to one of the banquets."

Artan blew out another waft of smoke, jaw flexing the pale cloud into vague rings. "The most well-dressed khajiit I had ever seen. His pelt was burnished gold, with jade beads in his braids. At the time I thought I had met the Mane himself, with the way he held himself. He spoke to his master like he was equal, as if they were partners in the dance of politics and murder. I was lucky, since Master brought them in to try and disillusion us towards wetwork. It worked really well. Three of us begged the Larethius for assassin training."

Argis couldn't help it. "What happened?"

"He wanted the best of the best. So, he got us trained by a runaway Brotherhood member called Za'nir. Apparently there were no Black Hand Sanctuaries in Hammerfell, so he had to look elsewhere for someone to teach us. Eventually, he found an old friend working out of Cheydinhal after the Corinth Sanctuary closed. A Khajiit so to better train us cubs."

"It wasn't until maybe half-way through training that Master became cruel. Before that, he was hard, but fair. Za'nir trained us harder, after that. Before he disappeared, anyway. Apparently Za'nir got a letter through courier, and now after basically raiding one of the Keeper's journals, I know that it was because during the riots in Bravil. Apparently the Night Mother's crypt had been raided and the Listener killed. In the Brotherhood, that's like someone defacing Tiber Septim's grave."

Artan shrugged, "apparently the leader of that Brotherhood had sent Za'nir out in the first place to basically take all of my Master's gold, kill him when we became proficient and take us back to be new Brotherhood members. But when he reported the desecration of the crypt to Za'nir, the Master caught wind of it, and put up a bounty on Za'nir. Everything else kind of flew out the window when Larethius got us to go into a three-way death match. It was kind of like dinner entertainment for his friends to show something or other. I think it was to point out that the Brotherhood couldn't control him or something. I didn't really pay attention, and by the time I figured out that something was going down we were already in our leathers and told to kill each other. It ended badly."

The shiver wasn't missed by the khajiit. Artan's eyes were on him, and in that moment, Argis knew he was being tested. He had been testing his housecarls all along. He had swapped notes with Lydia, and Artan had told them both around the three month anniversary of becoming his underlings that he was an assassin. He had tested them both again by letting them see the assassination of Vittoria. He had pointed out over and over that he wasn't the cute kitten he seemed, and they never seemed to grasp that knowledge.

Artan had flat out killed two other khajiit because-

Well why?
Artan seemed to be able to read his thoughts, since he continued. "Because it was either that or die. By then, we were old enough and ugly enough to take on contracts. It was hard. But in the end, we managed to kill them all."

"What?" Argis was still shaking his head, still sounding completely lost.

"The three of us managed to catch them out. They were a bunch of drunken old elves in dresses. Za'nir had taught us to always be alert. Be ready for anything. Roll with the punches," Artan shrugged. "We all figured that we would rather fight and die on our feet then be pet dogs at a Master's whim. Za'nir wasn't like that. He wasn't like the other khajiit we had grown up with. He was wild and free. And we could be like him."

Argis was beginning to connect the dots. Beginning to see how Artan always spotted the danger first, how he was always one step ahead. Za'nir had trained him to be that way, and for good reason. "You… What happened then?"

"Well, I took my baby brother and ran for the fucking hills!" Artan forced out a laugh, sounding a little wavy from the skooma.

"Brother? You have a brother?" The Bulwark glanced back at the cat, who nodded through another take on the pipe.

"Yeah. He managed to put on a good enough show to distract some of the guests while me and Arnsien systematically killed them. He would dance around with one of us while the other killed an Altmer, and then it would rotate again and again until they were all dead. Stupid ass wanted to join a Dibella Convent, so I left him in the nearest temple. He knew I'd probably die if I had to spend my life cooped up in a convent, so he let me go. I send letters every once in a while, and sometimes I get ones back. He's somewhere in Cyrodil the last I heard. After we parted ways, I set up shop in Hammerfell. A rag tag group of the best, drawn together by a Guildmaster. Guy made his money selling and buying knowledge. And after he got a reputation for selling to assassins, he became kind of like a Sithis-Free Brotherhood. It was also were I met Iman."

"Who?"

"The reason why I'm in Skyrim at all, my friend," Artan frowned, pinning a spot on the wall beneath his glare. "That wily bitch is the reason I'm being hunted by Alik'r, and the reason why my name is renowned and spat upon by nearly everyone in the province."

"I have never heard them-" Argis shook his head again, trying to think.

"Artan isn't my real name, Argis. It's a name I came up with on the spot so I had a chance at not dying in Helgen," the khajiit said gently.

"What?"

"They asked for a name. If I told the truth, I'd be a charred corpse right now. I lied. Artan is actually a Nordic name, funnily enough. They probably figured I was a slave-cat from one of the other provinces and given the name as a kind of joke. 'Artan' actually means 'little bear,' or 'bear keeper."
The cat took another draw from the pipe, already goofily smiling at the Bulwark. Argis had put the wine down a long time ago, but it hadn't stopped the leaden feeling the drink caused. He shook his head, tried to focus even more. "Haven't you ever wondered why Nord's let me into their cities? They think I'm one of their pets. The way I speak, the way I move, and down to my 'name,' all of it makes them think of me as an honored dog of some kind. It let's me move around, allows me to kill on their behalf without them looking bad and lets them think that they rule the roost. It's like the
Bosmer and Altmer. The Bosmer can do what they like because they let the Altmer think they are top dog, when in reality…. Well in reality when the axe comes down on the Thalmor, it will be on Altmer heads and not Bosmer. It's like having two turkeys in a pen, and one feeding the other so it doesn't get eaten by the farmer.”

"Basically, one of the Master's private guard turned up on the Guild's doorstep looking for me. Iman answered, and told the Justicars everything. Most of the Guild members just saw her as a noble bitch who liked to hang around assassins. She always brought money and good booze with her, and back then I wasn't as tight as I am now with my real identity. I had told her about me and my baby brother's escape, and about Za'nir. She told them everything. Even told them what underwear I proffered, how I ate my sweetrolls, what time I like my hot milk. Everything she knew. I had a bunch of Altmer in my crappy rented room within a day, and at the time, I'd have given anything to get away from them." The cat's head swiveled, landing with a loud thump on the rug.

"I told them everything I knew about the city, and well. It might have caused a little invasion. It raised her shitty little townhouse to the ground, and all the rest. It didn't help me, even at the time. I killed two and jumped out a window to escape. A naked Khajiit on a Lorendas Morning running down Market Street! Oh the Criers had a lot to scream about that day. Heh. When I caught up with Iman I nearly killed her, but she had the Alik'r guard at her heels. She told them she would bring the bastard who sold out an entire city, and lo and behold I show up. I told them it was her. I was convincing enough that they chased us both."

Argis couldn't help but frown as the giggle-fit overtook the cat, nearly knocking over his pipe with his shakes. "Now we're both being chased by huge guys with curved swords." The cat sat up, nearly startling Argis of his chair. "Curved. Swords!"

The Nord couldn't help it. He laughed.

"Even if I do regret it, I can't take any of my actions back. Before anything, before even being a Khajiit, I am a survivor. It's why I'm still alive. Za'nir put that into us early. Do what you have to do to survive. You can make up for it in your later actions. No point in being a good dead man. Better be a living bad man who does good things."

"So why do you keep throwing yourself between us and danger?" Argis asked, sounding a little more than a little indignant.

"What?"

The sweet smell of the skooma seemed to clog the entire room all of a sudden, making Argis cough. He shook his head, waved his hands, anything to get a little fresher air. The cat was staring at him again, and he remembered he might have to elaborate. Artan was observant, but not always the sharpest tool in the box when it came to why he did things. "You're always doing stupid things to defend me and Lydia. Kharjo said as much when we were in Blackreach. And then that centurion and even Marcurio has stories of you throwing him into cover."

"I still don't get it."

Argis squinted and clenched his fists. The wine and the stink from that pipe were fogging everything. Focus. "You say you are a survivor, but from what I keep seeing, you aren't very good at it. You keep putting yourself in danger to protect others. If you were a true survivor, you wouldn't have joined up with the Legion. You definitely wouldn't have helped them retrieve that crown and you wouldn't have spearheaded the attack on Windhelm."

"I had to do that," Artan griped, folding an arm across his eyes.
"Why?" Argis asked, a sharp little word in his mouth.

"Lots of reasons," the cat grumbled, the fluff on his neck bristling at the question.

"Like what?" Argis kept on pressing, eyes still pinning the cat to the floor.

The clawed fist that held out the pipe swayed, but the intent was clear. "I will answer if you take a drag."

Xxx

The world was strange. Big, blue, strange. Lots of green, too. Some gold, but a lot of black. He doesn't pay attention to the lines, but when the silver comes, he can focus. There is a hand, tight, around his. He thinks it is a hand. Someone's laughing, that sharp, happy laughter that seems to permeate everything else. Making the colours burst. He crushes the silvers to his chest, making more of that bubbling laughter come out. So he lets go. The silver grabs his hands, pulls him along, until all the colours blur and his focus starts to wane. He pulls the silvers closer again, and the world sharpens into shapes. The laughing is sharper now, and he can hear words. He can't make sense. They are just words, bouncing along in that sea of giggles. The silver thing drags him further into those colours, until they begin to wane, give way until black and green shapes overtake everything.

He feels his heart stop.

But when he feels that fear tear at his chest, he can feel everything stop. As if it could feel his fear. The silver thing presses close, and hands are on his face, pressing into his hair, tugging on his braids. The fear is still there, tearing at his feet, but the silver thing pushes it down, drowns it out.

"Argis."

He knows that name. Is it his? He can't. He shakes his head, makes the world twist ad reform. The silver this is pulling at him again, and again, making him climb. He follows. Until they are at the top of the mountain, and the colours have returned. They are muted, quiet now. Less gold, more deep blue, more green. No black. No dark. No fear. He pulls the silver thing close again, making that happy, wild little laugh come out. The world seems to thrum with it. The thing leads him into the mountain, and the colours are back. But he is warm.

The smell is familiar. Warm, heavy with yum-

The silver thing tugs him past the colours, and suddenly the hand is gone. He is gone. There are tiny little lights in the air, around and everywhere. He calls out to the silver thing, but all he can hear is that laughter. He presses his hands against the lights, his head and heart suddenly erupting with life. He can feel his lungs expanding, and his chest is so light and he can-

The silver thing is at his side, pressing something cold against his face.

A bear growls. His chest is shaking. Did he make that sound? He doesn't know. He pushes against that cold, completely overtaken with the trails of wet slipping down his neck. He has to remember to breathe. He presses a hand against that silver thing again, and everything shifts. It's not just a shape anymore. It feels fantastic-

There's something hard against his knees. He hadn't realized he had bent them. An elbow hit something hard, but he didn't pay that much attention. It took him a long while to realize he was on the floor. But the silver thing was laughing again, practically vibrating with those colours again. He pressed his face into whatever he could, bringing both arms around the smudge until he was practically smothering the thing. Like a cage.
His lungs stop.

Something is hissing, and he can feel his shoulders shake above him. But the silver this is pushing, pushing against it. And then its not. It's tugging him close, and the hissing stops. His lungs are still. But the thing against his chest is swaying. Not swaying-

Deep and slowly. Argis copies. The fear, the nonono-

"Argis."

It melts away. He pulls the silver thing closer, rubs his fingers into the smooth grass underneath his hands. He presses his face harder into the silver grass, harder until the words all just jumble up and fall around each other. No cage. He doesn't know why anymore, but he keeps saying those words. The grasses are swaying again, gentle. The silver thing raises its arms, awkward. Wrapping. Argis feels arms around his head, cradling him. He doesn't know when, but the fear went away. He can just feel the swaying –no, breathing- and the soft grass around his face.

His lungs take a stuttered breath in.

At first, it's just nice. Until it just explodes with a whipcord laugh, like butterflies in a field, startled, going up and whirling higher… He can smell the light, sweetness of the lavender, the bite of the wine, the harsh slice from the snowberries, and he can't help it. He bites. He doesn't get a nice taste; but the silver thing laughs hard enough-

Something grabs the back of his shirt.

The world blurs, and he doesn't know when, but the silver thing is behind him now, both arms around his shoulders, still breathing in and out, slowly, like the pull of the ocean. Whatever grabbed him stumbles away, landing hard. He looks, and only sees a halo of dark hair. He feels the rage, the blind attack fade away, and soon he's back, swaying with the wave at his back, head too heavy so he lets the silver grasses hold it up. The laughter blurs the colours again, shaking him.

He runs his hands along the arms of fur.

Fur?

"I lost Artan."

Something bubbles at the edges of his vision, and the halo-thing returns. He knows he can keep the ocean safe, so he lets it closer. "What?" The halo-thing speaks. He regards it, before simply shrugging. "I found the ocean, but Artan isn't there." The Halo-thing laughs, high and bright. It doesn't make the colours burst, but it does make him smile. "But-

The arm around his shoulder moves, but he grasps it, clutching it closer, back, to his chest. The silver-ocean at his back laughs, and the colours burst this time. "He's away with the fairies right now kitten." He shrugs again, it feels nice. Makes the grass rub against his back. "I tried to tell the ocean about the fairies, but it wouldn't listen," he tells the Halo-thing. The ocean giggles, "See?"

"Sea?" Argis sighs. Instantaneously, his grin, he can feel it split his face.

"IN THE BLACK BALL LINE I SERVED MY TIME!"

"Oh my-"

"TO ME WAY-AYE-AYE! HURRAY-AH!"
The ocean is laughing at his back, crackling energy rumbling through him, making his singing shake through the bellows, and the halo-thing falls backwards again. He can't even contain the sudden rush of happiness as the ocean roils behind him, that sharp laugh cuts off and a giggles through the rest of the shanty with him, the clawed hands tapping against his wrists. He isn't distracted much. "Artan has claws too." He sighs, suddenly cutting off the song. The ocean laughs again. "Oh, does he?"

Argis nods. Well, he thinks he does. "But yours must be made of seashells."

"Oh. And why is that?"

"You're the ocean. Swaying grass…. Silver….

The halo-thing laughs. He blinks at it, fully ignoring the conversation that the ocean has started with it. He is staring, and he knows it. Doesn't care a fig for that, though. He reaches out a hand, and-

"Tweet tweet."

"What?" The halo-thing asks, but Argis shakes his head.

"You're a bird, right? That's why you have all those feathers. Sparrows have halo's like that." He shrugs, and it feels good. The grasses slide against his back, making him sigh again. The ocean and the sparrow ignore him, as for some unfathomable reason, he decides to carry on tweeting, that eventually cascading into whistling. He doesn't know when, but his mouth is dry. Dryer than anything before.

The sparrow shrieks when he turns to bite at the ocean, growling. The ocean laughs, and something is pressed against his face. He shakes it once, and presses the wine bottle to his mouth. "I don't even know how you would know that is what he meant by that."

"Take a drag, and come back to me. You'll know then."

"Maybe. But I don't want-"

"You know I'll take care of you. Nothing bad will happen. Argis somehow managed to get outside, but if you lock the door and then come back, well. That will solve it, right?"

"Okay," The sparrow nodded. "But I'll leave it unlocked. You know, I wouldn't if it was anywhere else, and anybody else, my thane."

"I am going with the sparrow."

The ocean laughed, "Can you even stand?"

"Of course I can. I am a bear. Bears can withstand anything." Sometimes, vaguely, he wondered if he fucked up. His mouth always ran faster than his head. He tried standing, but the wave was knocking him down, even with the ocean pushing against his chest to try and hold him tight. "This is a bad idea Argis…"

"I am emperor. And emperors do whatever they do! Sparrow! Lead forth!"

He almost fell when the crazed, gasping laughter racked the ocean, nearly collapsing them both. The laughter bursts.

He's flying again.

He tells the ocean.
The sparrow is leaning on him, his back to the wall, and the ocean is coiled on his other side. The laughter is infectious. The ocean moves. His hands are too weak to hold on, but the ocean isn't gone long. It rolls until it meets the table, seashell claws clacking against glass. It returns with something round, and something green. It presses the round thing to his face, and he eats. Sweet.

The green thing, clack-clack-clack, is pressed to the sparrow. It draws the glass to its face, drinks deep. The laughing continues, throughout his old folk stories, and through the move. Someone said garden. He grabs the ocean. The sparrow is already flitting out the door. "I need to find Artan first."

The ocean laughs, but Argis shakes his head.

He pulls at the ocean, but there's that laughter again. "I need to find him first."

"Okay. Let me go find Lyd- I mean the Sparrow first. Yeah? I'll help you find him."

Argis mumbles and the ocean is gone.

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It takes half an hour to find Argis in the Hall. Half an hour. Artan seriously didn't think that a bear-sized Nord could hide in such a place; a place that Artan had noted every single hidey hole or exit. He was a fucking assassin. He was due to murder the emperor for Sithis sake. A baked blonde Nordic man was like finding a sheep in a pen. Or, so he had figured. He managed to catch Lydia, dancing a strange kind of twirling jig on the balcony. He didn't question why he could only lure her inside at the promise of finding her a pet dog of her own, and mentally noted to buy a dog for her. He sat her down, wrapped her up in a blanket and ordered her to stay where she was.

She straightened like a soldier, nodded once, and fell to the fur rugs on the floor, giggling.

He had started looking for the hulking slab of Bulwark in the random room in his house that he hadn't made into a proper room yet. It was kind of like a dusty empty hole that he just couldn't figure out a use for. So he left it alone, going through his alchemy lab, the housecarl's room, and even his own.

Somehow, he didn't even notice the wardrobe door inch open.

He did notice an entire brute man slamming into his back, flinging two huge arms around his waist and lifting him into the air like a father would a child. But the lightning didn't come, and instead he felt himself rolling along with the giggles Argis was wracked with. He had stopped wondering why all his sharp little ticks were softening, and guessed it was because he wasn't really running anymore. He was expecting an explosion in the morning when Argis sobered up and realized that he was a douchebag who sold out a city to save his own hide.

But thinking about it, he felt the tightness in his shoulders even out. He had set up a good network here in Skyrim. Some of the bartenders talked about him as if they'd been friends for years, and he was Thane in three cities. He had a new name, and a completely new entourage. If the Alik'r came looking, they wouldn't find Garma. They would find Thane Artan, a well-rounded servant of the Jarl.

But some tiny part of him was kicking himself for telling the Bulwark. Wine, skooma, whatever. He shouldn't have gone all soft-touch and put his innards out on a plate for the guy to peruse. But then again, he had always known everything about his housecarls. It was second nature to ask or simply take information about the people he surrounded himself with. He had done it for years. Za'nir had said it was what kept people alive; being in the know.
He knew about Lydia's orphaned state, about how she was taken in by the Jarl's court at a young age. How the men there trained her up and made her into the crazy bush-woman she was today. He would have put all his money on her becoming a barbarian queen one day, and he would win that bet. She had the heart and the drive to do it.

And Argis, well. Artan knew all about the smithy, and about leaving home at a tender age of fifteen. Joined the army, checked out the local caves. Always Nord, and always women. But Artan had seen the burly man have many firsts. Artan was his first Thane, and first khajiit friend. He set up the Bulwark for his first try at skooma, and they walked into their first Falmer together. And that's were the wall began. Because no matter how great it sounded on paper, Artan could never push that little bit further. He guessed he already had, since he basically told the Nord about his shitty past.

And even though the blonde was high as a kite, he was still looking for Artan.

The khajiit tried not to feel a little smug at that.

The arms tightened, and Artan knew he had been ignoring the Bulwark.

"What's up big guy?"

"I found you."

"That you did."

"You're claws aren't seashells though, Artan."

"Finally caught on then?"

The big man simply hummed, hands pressing into the fur across the khajiit's chest. H had lost his bloody shirt when he had ran off into the dark after Argis, shredding it on the rocks around the waterfall. He didn't know how the big guy could move so quick, but he had. He didn't know if it was a bad thing or a good thing, but it was deffinately becoming a thing. In the height of his skooma buzz, the Bulwark was bloody fascinated by all the fur. It was what happened to people when they were on it; everything that's soft becomes fucking fabulous. Water becomes almost orgasmic in feel and texture.

Artan was not surprised in the least when he found the Nord by the waterfall, hands in the air and nearly drenched.

"Argis, I need you to stay here." Artan shrugged, "And maybe put me down."

"Why?"

The incredulous, whiney growl almost made the cat laugh. "Because Lydia is alone in the living room." He almost lost his head at how quickly Argis set him down on his feet, big hands turning him around by his shoulders so the Nord could look him in the eye. The terrified, almost tearful look the blonde was shooting him made his chest ache. He didn't delve too deep into that.

"Lydia's alone? You need to find her!"

"I know, kitten. Stay here, and I'll bring her back here."

"Okay," the bulwark nodded, sounding almost childlike with the simple admission. Trusting. Artan pushed down the nausea. Until tonight, the Bulwark had only thought of him as Artan. Well that was going to spin right down the shitter, wasn't it?
The khajjit pressed Argis down until he was sat on the bed, a glancing caress of the man's rumpled braids and he was turning to collect Lydia. She was still lying where he left her, soft tunic twisted up around her ribs where she had stretched out against the furs. "Come on Princess. Time for a nap."

"No nap."

"Snuggles then."

He pushed down the fondness he felt when she gave him a bright smile. He rarely saw it on the woman, but whenever it happened, he always made sure to treasure it. She was a hard little nut, but had a big heart inside her. She put up with all his bullshit that was for sure, and that took more than a sword and a bodyguards training. He slid his arms under her knees and shoulders, easily lifting her up, the sheet he had practically bundled her in still coiled up around her stomach. It didn't matter much, just trailed along behind them to the bedroom.

He was gentle in admonishing them when they got restless, and somehow he eventually managed to calm all the energy they had. The static, crazed need to move was slowly leaving them, making the two Nord's like squishy little cubs during Flower Day. Somehow he got sandwiched between the two of them, one arm coiled around each of their shoulders with legs and arms thrown across him and stupid faces snuggled into his chest. He would have scratched them both if they weren't so Talos-Damned sweet about all of it. He would have made an oath to never ever let them get high ever again, but he couldn't really bring himself to.

They clasped hands over his chest, murmuring things in another tongue, not common like the usual. It wasn't until the snoring started that he let the tenseness leave his shoulders. He did make a single promise that night. He was never going to be a father. If this ridiculousness was what fathers had to deal with, then he wanted no part in it.

They don't stay cute and squishy forever.

xxx

She wakes feeling like someone had stuffed cotton wool in every hole in her head possible. Someone was snoring, and there was a soft hand running through her hair. It was probably the only thing keeping her from screaming in rage. She sat up, and the hand slid until it was gently patting her shoulder. "Awake at last, sleeping beauty."

"Yeah yeah. Shut up."

"I told Argis about Hammerfell last night," Artan sighed, sounding rather resigned.

"What? Oh fuck really?" Lydia sat up even straighter, causing a head rush, before she made a groaning whine and slide back under the covers.

"Yeah. And Za'nir. And Larethius," Artan carried on, running a few claws along her scalp.

"Yeah. And Za'nir. And Larethius," Artan carried on, running a few claws along her scalp.

"Well shit. What did he say?" Lydia asked, twisting her head until her neck cracked. She seemed to settle a little more, after that.

"I really can't remember," Artan said honestly, shrugging only a little. "I don't think it sunk in."

"Well fuck a duck, Artan. Did you tell him about Iman?" Lydia growled, barely able to keep her head up long enough to glare at him.

"Yeah," the cat nodded. He expected a thwack around the ear.
What he got was a quiet, "Well shit."

"I think he basically called me a soft touch," he chuckled after a few moments of silence.

"What?" the woman snapped, but there wasn't any heat in it.

"Said that I throw myself between you two and danger," Artan grinned down at her, expecting her to laugh too.

Once again he was surprised. She seemed reluctant to actually answer, but when she did it was an even quieter, "Ah. That."

"Oh fuck you see it too?" Artan whined, sitting up a little more in the bed. As much as he could, anyway. Argis’ head and shoulders were pinning his entire torso to the bed. Lydia was barely out of the man’s grasping range, thankfully. Artan said thankfully, because he himself had one of Argis’ hands grasping a fistful of fur on his shoulder, and it was walking a fine line between painful and pleasurable. He still wasn’t sure.

"Artan, my dear blind beggar man living on the streets of Stupid. Of course. You're like a dog with a bone when it comes to your followers' safety. It's even more scary and dragon-like when it's a friend. I fear for the day you get married and someone threatens your spouse. I think the world might just explode," Lydia sighed, sitting up again to slide out of the bed. She made it half way to the door before she slumped to the ground, her foot still caught in the bed covers.

"Lydia. Your jokes scare me so fucking much sometimes," Artan carried on whinging, ignoring the narrowed eye peeking out from underneath her mop of hair.

A voice came out of that angry mop to say, "Welcome to Pre-breakfast Lydia, my Thane. Congratulations that she hasn't broken both your kneecaps yet."

xxx

He wakes slowly.

Argis knows he should move. There is a warm fluff under his face, and an arm around his shoulders. He’s practically crushing the body underneath him, with both arms around the other's chest and his face pressed into the hollow between throat and shoulder. A part of him doesn't care. The other part is asking who the fuck it is. "I know you're awake, you know."

The voice sets off the fireworks.

He sits up suddenly, eyes practically bugging in his head. From Artan to the door to Lydia sprawled across the floor and back. "What happened?" The cat shrugged and stretched. He was oblivious to the eyes watching the arch of his spine, the twist of his dark feet in the bed sheets, and the way he pushed back into the pillows when he was done. "Well basically, we had a long talk. And then we got really high. And then Lydia showed up."

"What?"

"Well. Basically you took off into the night, and I had to catch you. Took a lot to get you back to the Hall, that's for sure. You almost had a panic attack when I led you under the waterfall, but you were okay after some pokes with a stick. I brought you back here, and you had this strange affinity for my fur. Almost killed me with how bloody hard you were hugging me. Very sweet. Lydia was just as bad, so don't worry." The cat looked up at him, rubbing at one of his eyes sleepily. "She shows up, and you start calling me the ocean. She is called sparrow, and well yeah. You started singing sea
shanties, and we finished the pipe. You started telling her about how I wasn't listening to you about all the fairies, and she agreed that I was a prick. So then she runs off, you run off and I end up having to bring a dancing Nordic woman in by promising her a pet dog."

The growing grin on his face is nearly completely related to how red the Bulwark got. He carried on, that sharp little cat-smile still across his face. "So I go look for you, since you have run off, and guess what?" Artan sat up on his elbows, ignoring theiggling little shard of embarrassment that he was shirtless in bed with Argis, and Lydia's feet could barely be seen where she was lying on the floor. "I come in here to look for you, and you jumped out of the wardrobe to tell me that you found me. Yeah, apparently while I was the ocean, you wouldn't leave the house without me. Because the ocean wasn't me," Artan gave the Bulwark a consolatory pat on the arm when the embarrassed blush battled with the confused twist of his brows. "I don't get it either, but it was very…"

"Well, anyway, I tell you we can't leave Lydia alone, and you say 'oh Talos no!' so I find her, bring her in here, and then the both of you assholes molest me and my lovely pelt! I am very appalled. Appalled I say," the cat tried to cover it, but the flustered bullshit he was saying and the flapping movements with his hands were not fooling the blonde. Lydia shakily stood, sky-eyes snapping towards Artan before she stalked from the room. "I'll find food, you bloody pansy ass cat."

"Something meaty!" the assassin called after her, trying with little to no success at avoiding the steely stare the other was sending him. Nords. Who knew they would be his downfall?

"I know you're freaking out somewhere in that crazy head of yours, so tell me. What is it?" The grumble was low, gravely, and not surprising at all. Not after all that crap they smoked, that is. And all the wine. And shouted sea shanties.

Artan barely flicked a smile, eyes pointedly staring at whatever wasn't Argis. "Because I know that you are going to ask for a transfer, or whatever the hell Housecarls do when they don't want a Thane anymore."

"What the fuck have I missed?" Argis half-yelled, but seemed to regret it when he started off his own headache.

Artan couldn't help it. His eyes settled on the ceiling. "I told you practically everything about my past last night. So I'm guessing you think I am a terrible waste of-" the hand snapped his mouth shut easily, fingers pressing against the top of his nose and underneath his chin. Slowly, almost painfully slow, the hand turned his head until he was glancing at Argis's eyebrows, nose, anything that wasn't his eyes.

"And why would I?" the Nord asked, sounding more like he was taking the piss than anything.

The mumbled growl that left Artan's throat wasn't really enough to go on, so the Bulwark let his mouth go. Not without a finger gently clipping his cheek in apology, however. Artan stifled the irrational hitch in his throat at the affectionate little extra. Stifled it like you stifled a mark with a pillow during the night.

"Because I basically sold out a city to not die. Or get dragged back to whatever shithole we lived in. After Larethius' guards showed up, everything just kind of snowballed into a giant bag of fucking dicks."

"Larethius?" Argis asked, more for a little reminder than anything.

"My old master," the cat bit out.
"Artan, from what I can gather from what you've told me, you were a dumbass kid trying to hide from Justicars that can basically turn people inside out with magic. I don't even want to think about what they can do with knives, or whatever else they do to runaway slaves," the blonde's mouth turned down harshly at that. "You've been running for how many years?"

"A good few. Maybe three. Five if you start counting from Death Match Night."

"Well then. That makes you what? Nine and ten years old when you started running? That's barely a man," Argis waved a hand, before he pressed the palm against the side of Artan's head, fingers scratching at his scalp. Artan might have purred and rolled his head a little, but in reality he knew the score. Argis was telling himself what he had to so he could-

"Stop that." The hand spread across his head, fingers clamping down around the crown of his skull to physically move his entire face around so Argis could stare him in the eye. "I know you're doing that mental mumbo jumbo where you degrade yourself and make it seem like I'm talking shit, and I swear if I see you do it again I'll tickle you until you cry."

Artan had never heard something sound more like a challenge.

Xxx

4E, 202 Early Evening Star

Argis is laughing and joking with the barkeep when Artan returns, eyes bright and fur dusted with snow. He's quiet when he takes a seat at the bar beside his housearl, ignoring the questioning lilt of the man's brow, and soon all the white flakes across his armor have melted away. The quiet words and strange half-conversation the assassin had with Balagog gro-Nolob was wearing on the back of the khajiit's mind, weighting him down.

An hour after he had kicked the Gourmet's body into the lake, and he still hadn't shaken the clinging feeling of guilt around his craw. Argis had pointed out that Artan had been out of sorts, but the cat had shrugged any and all concerns off.

It wasn't until the two settled into one of the tavern's rooms with two beds that things came to a head. The Bulwark had simply stroked the back of the cat's head, thumbs pressing out all the bad thoughts, fingers kneading all sorts of lovely feelings back in. They settle into their separate beds across from one and other, both men facing the nearest wall and pretending the ridiculous lightning that seemed to always creep up on them now wasn't there.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Oh my God. I'm actually not sorry. Fun! Oh my Lord so many giggles to be had while doing this chapter! Writing that was actually really exhausting though. It's surprising, but there we go. This chapter was brought together by the fact that Artan is an assassin, and a cat, and a mischievous little carrot. Therefore, skooma. Argis and Lydia are crazy enough to just roll with it. I hope that it comes across that they have eventually learnt that Mama-Bear-Artan would never let them do anything too stupid, and he kind of creates a safe place for them to be stupid in. He would probably skin whatever poor soul offered them skooma outside of his little nest of safe. But if its his
stuff, well then that's fine. Apparently.

But yeah. This chapter was thanks to a few friends who do stupid shit on stupid shit, and they told me a few fun stories, experiences and such that I might have embellished. The wardrobe thing is true though. And the fairies. Not so much the giant talking cat that walks plantigrade and basically wants to bump ugliest with Skyrim's equivalent of a snowman. Sometimes, I like to think such things so the seriousness doesn't get too suffocating.

I just hope that this is still somewhat believable. Somehow.

Even though that's just madness.

I might have forgot what else I was going to say. Except that it might be getting a little difficult to keep up this kind of tension. Yarn did it for a little while, [and I actually kinda laugh at that because a while was like what? a chapter?] and for bloody hells sake I hate slow builds. Unless all the chapters are there and done, anyway. Waiting always takes the wind out of my sails, so I try to get stuff done sharpish. I know it's annoying to wait for stuff, but since I don't have a beta I have to kind of wing it all and hope to the great Cupcake Fairy that it doesn't sound like crazy babble.

But yeah. Kinda ran away there. The shanty is a real thing. There's more at shanty . rendance . org

And the house can actually be modded that way. Check out nexuxmods skyrim /26856

I hope you enjoyed this one as much as I did. Happy reading!

~Frog
The New Life Festival

Chapter Notes

"It is a risk to love.
What if it doesn’t work out?
Ah, but what if it does?"

Peter McWilliams

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

4E. 202 Mid Evening Star

The silence.

It let the thumping of his heart drown out all of his thoughts, made his furry tongue feel even nastier in his maw, made his eyes itch and his mane prickle. He knew it was coming. Didn’t stop it being hard. Astrid’s eyes were flat, empty, just staring at him without even a hint of that old familiarity they had. It wasn’t the first time he had cursed the Night Mother for picking him. “I never asked for this.”

“We never do,” Astrid said, voice tight.

“I don’t want to be master, Astrid. I don’t want to be Listener. I just wanted to do what I’m good at, and not be looked at like I’m a giant cat that learned to talk,” Artan shook his head, his gaze settling on Liz’s holding pen. They were sat in the enchanter room at the table, one on either side. Only the frostbite spider’s shuffling could be heard, and the distant laugh of Arnbjorn from the training area.

“You know that has never been the case here. We have considered you a brother since the first time you walked through the Sanctuary door. And after your first contract with us, ever since then, that feeling has only grown,” she said, quiet.

“I know. And that’s what I like so much about this place,” Artan sighed, rubbing a hand against his head.
“Hmm?”

“I’ve done a lot of nasty things in my life. Stuff that would get much worse than a simple beheading or hanging. But here? That shit’s never mattered. The past is the past; and only what you do for the family matters. It’s… refreshing,” he smiled shyly, turning away from her a little.

“That’s why our family works. Because we have all done such things and we all know what it’s like. This Sanctuary is the only place in all of Tamriel that we don’t have to hide who we are. All the lies and blood, all of it, disappear here. They are not nasty memories where we mark ourselves as monsters. They are just memories,” Astrid smiled back, patting his shoulder.

“Yeah.”

“I never meant for Maven to hunt your housecarls, brother. She usually asks me to send the best assassins after her enemies, and has met a few of the others. The Thieves guild and us have worked closely for years, and it wasn’t really all that odd for her to want to meet a new edition. In a way, they are like extended family. Cousins,” the woman sighed. “I have managed to broker a kind of peace treaty since your attack on her estate. She says you threatened her business and livelihood. I had to pull all my strings, and managed to get her to agree to leave you and yours alone. I think it was more of a survival instinct than anything, but it’s worked. The thieves may be a little wary of you for a while, and keep clear of Maul. He’s still pissed at you for turning into a blighted werewolf in his face.”

“He’s lucky,” Artan smirked, all teeth.

“Heh, I know. I remember a time me and Arnbjorn got into a huge fight. He nearly gutted me before he gained enough control,” the woman smirked back, just as fierce.

“Wolves, eh?” Artan rose his brows, shrugging.

“You still haven’t fixed things with the Companions, I take it?” Astrid asked, sounding tired.

“They blamed me for their ineptness at keeping Kodlak alive. I was barely in the circle for a goddamned day before he sent me off on a private mission. I come back, the whole place is in the shitter and somehow I get blamed? They are a warriors guild. I am not a nanny,” the cat griped, folding his arms.
“And yet you tore apart Maven’s mansion to save two arguably disposable housecarls,” she pointed out, obviously trying to hold the humor from her tone.

Artan actually laughed, “What can I say?”

“Do they know yet?” Astrid pressed.

“Lydia does, but not Argis and Calder. I think they would go batshit if it went public that I dropped out of the Companions. It’s weird though. If I hadn’t dropped out after the fight with Vilkas then I wouldn’t have gone to the College. I wouldn’t have ended up in Windhelm after hearing about the Aventino kid through one of the professors, and I wouldn’t have taken the contract. I would have never have met you.”

She shrugged, “Do you regret it?”

xxx

“Did you know someone’s working through the Theive’s guild? Setting it back on its feet again? They say this new guy is like a thieving prodigy!” Nazir chuckled, pressing a honeyed cluster of grain to his mouth. Babette cackled from her corner beside the fireplace, “Don’t say that in front of Festus, or-“

“I tell you what’s a real prodigy; making a human piñata. It takes a lot of spell control to get the skin and flesh to gain the right consistency. And then you have to slow-cook the insides to get the right flakey-“

“Festus Krex everybody! Available for Weddings and children’s parties!”

“Don’t get him started on children’s parties, brother,” Gabriella chimed in response to Artan, eyeing the easy-set stance of both Khajiit and Nord as they returned from their talk. “He will probably make even Arnbjorn turn into a vegetarian.”

Arnbjorn ignored all pleasantries entirely. “Did you guys sort it out?”
Astrid nodded, “I think we have, yes.”

The khajiit smiled, “Of course, all is forgiven.”

The Master Assassin looked at him, storm-grey eyes a strange burnished gold in the light. “Completely? I honestly-“

“Oh course I forgive you,” Artan smiled, slightly soft around the edges. “It’s what families do, right?”

xxx

“You are a flaming idiot,” Lydia snarled, slamming her tankard down on the table. When she pulled her hand free of the mangled cup she then proceeded to glare at it. Argis presumed it was because the cup was weak that she was disappointed. It was a long shot, but he still hoped.

“Well I know that. Now what do I do?” he rubbed at his bad eye before looking at her and her angry face. He could handle Faleen’s angry face, but Lydia was an entirely different kettle full of sharks. Not even fish, _sharks._

Lydia gave him a deadpan stare. “I think you are just too stupid to help. Sorry Argis.” She looked away from the other Nord, brow twisting in irritation. For a worrisome moment, Argis thought she would just get up and walk away.

“Lydia-“

“He became an _Agent of Mara_ before you knew him. He has even done missions in her name with you as his follower, and he even played matchmaker for people in the Jarl’s court _in your own hold._ And yet you didn’t think him wearing one of Mara’s amulets was on purpose? You didn’t think he knew what it meant?” Lydia pinned him with a look, and Argis couldn’t help but flounder a bit at that.

He was still drowning in excuses when the stormy blues caught his eye again, and he got a little lost in the complexity of the woman’s stare. “Or maybe, you’re scared of the implications. Maybe you’re scared of what you’ll do if you look over and see him looking back.”
Argis put his mug of ale down, instead running both hands through his hair. “Until I got assigned to him all I ever saw when I looked at khajiit was skooma dealers and thieves. Whenever the caravans showed up outside the walls, I used to joke with the guards about keeping the sabre cats out to keep the kids safe. Last week I ended up inviting the whole group into Vlindrel Hall for a hot meal and a safe haven to wait out a rainstorm.” The burly Nord sighed, shrugging his shoulders. “Lydia everything’s so different. I used to think of them as just talking animals, but now I see them as people. And even with that revelation Artan is… he’s like… I can’t explain it.” The Bulwark shook his head, frowning.

Lydia nodded, “A blade. You look at him and see a weapon, or just another one of those masks he likes collecting. He shows you flickers of the person underneath all the words and the wizardry, and then that aura is back and he’s the weapon again. He’s cutting at the enemy, and all those flickers are gone. It’s always work, and you find yourself wondering what he would be like if he had stayed a farmer or became a smith or a barman or something. If he would be just like any other. You wonder if those flickers you like so much wouldn’t be just…”

“Yes.” Argis looked back up, into the other Nord’s eyes. She wasn’t looking back; just staring at her cup of tea with a blank expression. The Bulwark smiled, just a tiny quirk of the mouth. “What’s his name?”

Lydia smirked back, short and sweet. “Hrongar. Stoic, always wants to take out the enemy before we have to bury a comrade. Best defence is a good offence. He would make an amazing Housecarl to the Jarl, but Irileth is on a whole other plain entirely. Do you know how mad he got though after hearing what happened in Windhelm?”

“I heard. Didn’t Farengar have to put him to sleep to stop him from going on the hunt?” Argis barked out a laugh and took another swig of ale.

“Yeah. But it’s weird, how angry Tulius got after Artan killed Ulfric,” she shook her head and reached for a new tankard.

“They wanted to capture him. Maybe hammer out an agreement. It would have been better, and less people would be dead now,” Argis sighed, filling up her empty mug with the last of the wine.

“Mmm. Did you ever hear what Artan’s excuse was? I was a little-“ she made a roiling wave motion with her hand and arm; it was enough for Argis to catch the jist of it.
“Ulfric’s Thu’um nearly killed you,” he said seriously. “It took months to get you back on your feet, and that’s even with Artan’s College friends helping with the healing. Artan told Tuliuss it was because Ulfric desecrated the Thu’um by using it in such a disgraceful manner. He said it was meant for fighting dragons, not killing women. Tuliuss called bullshit, and that if it was anyone else hit then Ulfric wouldn’t be dead and they would have an alliance.”

Lydia took a sip of wine, and a few moments to collect herself. She was idly swishing her wine in her tankard before she quietly replied. “Sometimes, I wonder if it is really us who protect him.”

“Sometimes, I wonder that—”

The conversation cut off rather abruptly when a series of bangs came from the front door. Solitude was the more prim and proper of the Holds, and it was late on a Sundas evening. Lydia almost fell out of her chair when the huge ball of sunshine that was Jordis swept by her, humming an inane tune as she went. The brunette stared after the blonde as she all but skipped by, the tune still echoing when she was gone. Argis barely caught the wary, almost incredulous flash across the woman’s face before she carried on. “He didn’t even tell us why he wanted us in Solitude. He said Calder should be here in a day or so, but he never even-“

“Um, of course! Come in!” The high pitched chirp floated in from the front porch, making both housecarls turn about in their seats. The weathered old man wandered inside the living area, looking dazed and fumbling with his cloak. It took a few moments, but Jordis followed him in, still looking out of the front door to the manor. He seemed to find himself when Lydia cleared her throat, looking up finally to regard the two of them.

“Oh, hello. You must be Argis? Yes? And of course, hello Lydia. Glad you are looking so well. I have never seen a muscle re-grow quite so well after… What? No. Tell him…” The old man turned away from them at the searching, almost snarled question from outside. Momentarily stopping the searching of his cloak to send a chilling glare back through the entranceway, Tolfdir dropped all pretence of being a harmless old man. Even Jordis seemed to take a step away after a heavy, cold atmosphere enveloped the old mage. Toldfir’s cheerful disposition was long gone.

“I told them to leave their experiments at the College.”

An elderly orc stepped into the kitchen to answer him, short and curt. “You’re the one letting in useless students. This batch has to be the most ridiculous mages I have ever seen; and I saw that book-burning cur Festus through his apprenticeship. That liver-lillied, brain-rotted piece of-“

“J’zargo and Ogmund keep trying to set the citizens on fire,” a monotone altmer sighed, pushing past the rattled old orc to settle herself against one of the kitchen’s side boards. Argis looked to Lydia, who just sent him an incredulous shrug back. Tolfdir didn’t miss a beat.
“You told them that some of the citizenry are apparitions, didn’t you?” the old man groaned, sounding even more tired and old than he did before.

The altmer shrugged, “I didn’t think they would actually believe me.”

Another walked in with her arms full of bags, looking mostly tame, except for her hard golden eyes. “You made quite a convincing argument Nirya. One might think you wanted them barred from the festival.”

Nirya sneered, moving to cross her arms and lean heavier against the sideboard. “And why would I want that, Faralda? Making the Fireworks would be harder with less able hands around.”

The elderly man sighed, and shook his head, finally tugging out a wrinkled letter from his cloak. He pressed it into the recently returned Jordis’ hands. “Artan said that we could take up board in Proudspire until the end of the New Life Festival. Apparently the inns in the city are still sore about a rampant Atronach that got loose last year. All it did was hide in Elisif’s orchard for the night. Didn’t even blow anything up. Unlike some of our more… gifted. Gifted students,” Tolfdir’s mouth hardened into a line by the end, eyes tired.

“No worries. I’ll get you guys set up,” sunshine trilled out, and Jordis handed the letter to Argis with a meaningful look before she started herding the chattering mage folk downstairs into the basement to discuss rooming and set up bedding.

The Bulwark flicked the letter open, before glowering and throwing it to Lydia, who groaned and slumped back into her chair. “Can we transfer to a different Thane?”

They couldn’t even look up when Calder stalked in, eyes downcast with four Argonians in tow. Argis couldn’t even find it in himself to pin the redhead with a glare. Calder looked more dispirited than a Saturnalia turkey. “He told me a week ago. And then gave me a bunch of gold and told me to escort everyone here.”

Lydia sat up. “Who else is coming?”

Calder didn’t answer, instead sagging down into a chair beside her and making grabby hands at the wine; three huge gulps and the thud of his head against the table was enough of an answer. Neetrenaza laughed. “Looks like this year the Festival will actually be fun!”
Artan had weird friends. His letter had said that there were a few people coming, and to keep them in line with the law until he arrived. As per the usual, he neglected to mention that they were slippery little devils. The mages alone were nearly catastrophic, and eventually the younger ones were banned from the enchanter completely. Tolfdir, Faralda or the librarian were to accompany each other and the three apprentices whenever they left the house; especially after the glowing tree fiasco. The guards didn’t know what had set the trees of Solitude into a creepy, Black reach glow during the middle of the day, but thankfully the court wizard managed to fix everything. Just as thankfully, nobody found out that it was the college’s apprentices that had turned a group of guards on the morning shift into horkers to rampage through the market street. Faralda managed to get it under control before even Melaran felt the flicker of magica.

It wasn’t until Kharjo and Dro’Marash got there that things became remotely bearable. They somehow managed to keep things happy and level and without anything exploding or coming to life. The four housecarls came to the consensus that the khajiit were actually mind-bending wizards themselves; replacing the mad mages with aspects from Oblivion. Well, that is until Jordis had managed to stop the students from conning the cats out of large quantities of hallucinogenic herbs and salts, which Argis still couldn’t get his head around. It was after that when Argis somehow ended up having to rustle up a secure place for the caravan workers to hide their stock. He didn’t even want to think about it, but eventually they showed up on the doorstep and all problems quadrupled.

They came about a week before the festival, and even Lydia knew who they were.

They were in the traditional brown thieves armour, hoods up and smiles in place. Brynjolf tugged his down when they got inside, grin actually looking sincere. “Maven sends her deepest apologies.“

“So an apology puddle, really,” one of his followers twittered, rubbing at the side of his head.

“Lad, seriously,” Brynjolf rolled his eyes, before pressing a letter into the nearest housecarl – Calder’s- hands and rubbing at the back of his neck. “Artan came to Riften with Astrid to bang out a peace treaty with Maven. Said that the Thieves were more than welcome to hole up in his house for the Festival. Only me and Delvin here could get away for a working holiday, and we ran into our newest recruit Jakk on the way.”

A scarred balding Breton raised his hand in lazy greeting, flicking his hood back into place over his head with the motion.
The other, still hooded and with his face completely covered by a long white scarf around his neck, did a little wave before Jordis captured him in a jubilant conversation that Argis had already tuned out of. It was, thankfully about a ban on teaching the apprentice’s lock picking and pickpocket techniques, which he wholeheartedly agreed with. Calder shoved the letter into his hand, and once again, Argis nearly screamed.

Xxx

The snow was thicker, this time of year. Especially in Windhelm. It was like Winterhold usually was; covered in a thick blanket of white, pressing everyone into their homes to huddle with their families. Always by the fire, with hot mugs of tea and sweet cakes. Even the poorer families, and the dunmer. Their fires were always hearty, and a few times Artan would come across a drunken dark elf. They would be sat outside the Corner club, mead in hand with a patch of melted snow around them, their ancestor’s blood keeping them warm. But he didn’t expect to see a tiny blossom of colour where he did. It was tucked behind the barrel that the thieves used as a kind of cache, full of weapons and poisons that the guard would probably lose their shit over.

But it wasn’t a sack, and it wasn’t even an animal.

It moved, and shivered, and when he padded closer, he realised it was sobbing. It only took an instant before he decided, and no sooner had tapped the barrel, the little girl started and sat up. The snow that had settled on her head burst up with her speed, just adding to the heavy fall from the skies. She was so pale that he was actually weighing the idea of her being dead and a thrall. The girl looked him straight in the eye, her huge chocolate eyes red and puffy with tears. “W-who are you? Is this your barrel? Oh I’m so sorry! I’ll-“

“Don’t worry, kitten. It’s not my barrel. Why are you out here? And alone?” Artan said gently, and it seemed to calm her down enough. She settled back into her meagre nest, and rubbed at her face a little less fiercely.

“I… well. This is kind of my home,” she supplied eventually.

“What? Where are your parents? Who is looking after you?” Artan asked, and he guessed he sounded a little angrier than he had thought because she seemed to shrink a little. He softened his stance and sighed.

No matter how softly or not, she visibly recoiled from the question. Her eyes filled with water, and
snot slid down her face. “I… I take care of myself. My… mother died a long time ago. And my father left to join the Stormcloaks. But he never came back. I try to sell flowers and buy food but…. It’s not much,” her tears stopped, and her eyes fell. She seemed to think, for a moment, before she lifted her chin and gave him a bright little smile. “But I get by.”

Artan couldn’t help it; he smiled back. “My name is Artan. What’s yours?”

“Sofie.”

She smiled, again. He couldn’t help it. He held out a hand. She looked dumbly at it for a moment, confused. A tiny fist wiped at the snot on her upper lip, almost considering. “It’s just a warming spell. It should make you a little warmer.”

She timidly placed her hand in his, before letting out a quiet sigh. “It’s… strange.”

“What is?” He asked, unable to not sound curious.

“Father used to say that cat people were mean. But you,” Sofie looked up again, rubbing at her nose with her other hand, “you’re the nicest person I’ve met here.”

He laughed, quietly. Sweet kid. He was supposed to be running in and out of the city; grabbing a few bits from the house and then off to Solitude to help with setting up the fireworks display. The College put it on every year, with the aide of the Bard’s of course. But he couldn’t…

Something in his head flicked on.

“I could adopt you, you know,” he said eventually.

Sofie gasped. “B-but… I-I’m sure that there are better kids out there you know! Some of the old people here said there is an orphanage in Riften. You could have any kid you want! I just sell flowers-“

“Sofie,” Artan sighed and smiled at her again, squeezing the now-warm hand.
She pressed her lips together. “Are you sure? I mean…”

“Yes I’m sure…. Daughter,” he tried out the word. It sounded right.

Artan had never heard a child cry so much until that night, but for the first time, he didn’t feel like battering the parents or setting something on fire.

xxx

The thieves didn’t do anything bad, but they didn’t help with the mages, either. When Ogmund and J’zargo had an argument about fundamental casting –Lydia refused to ask whether or not they were making shit up or not- and started a prank war, well.

The thieves sat on the side lines and drank ale. Well, Jakk didn’t. He didn’t seem to ever remove his scarf and hood, and was still covered from head to toe in leathers. Only two sharp gold eyes could be seen from his hood-slit.

It wasn’t until a strange debate between Kharjo and Brynjolf that Jakk even said another word.

“Skyrim belongs to the Nords? All the snow and Nord mead? Khajiit thinks you can keep it. All of it,” the cat laughed, the deep chuckle rocking the bench he was sat on and jostling Delvin a little. The Breton simply took another swig from his mead.

“Well fuck a duck,” Jakk said in disbelief.

Jordis looked over from the cooking pot, half ready to reprimand the hooded thief for his language, when the reason stepped straight into the kitchen. The two newcomers were cloaked and hooded, but Argis only felt the undercurrent of danger when Toldfir stood and cast ebony flesh. The flicker of magic was enough to bring nearly all of the other mages into the large room, Faralda skidding in from the small patio outside with Urag at her back. The altmer threw an arm across the doorway, settling herself between him and the apparent danger.

The only people who didn’t go for weapons were the thieves and Dro’Marash. Argis wasn’t close enough to the weapons plaque on the furthermost wall, beside the bookcases. He couldn’t even be sure he would make it before something bad happened. But nothing did. Nobody moved, or even breathed for a few scarce moments. Until, that is, the tallest woman Argis had ever seen tugged down her hood and shook her hair free.
“I’m guessing this is Artan’s new house, yes?” She asked, sounding more like a bird than an actual person.

The altmer woman flashed another one of the cat’s *despicable* notes in the air, bright green eyes not even wavering an inch. It was as if she didn’t even care she was facing down an entire college of mages and some of the more scary khajiit guards. Even Neetrenaza was holding a short scaling knife. Argis looked to Jordis, who looked confused and rather worried. Lydia was her regular stony self, hands clenching and unclenching one of the glass axes from the Thane’s cache. Calder was undecidedly glancing at a nearby mace, weighting the level of threat from the new arrivals.

But it wasn’t until her eyes settled on that enigmatic little thief in the corner did her face light up and a laugh rang out. “It has been a long time, riel riel!” There was even a sharp, surprised laugh when she barreled through a few people to get at the man, flinging both her arms around his neck and neatly lifting him clean off the floor. It wasn’t until her companion coughed that the bubbly elf put the choking thief down, looking somewhat abashed. The elf threw her hair out of her face and pressed the note into Jordis’ hand, smiling briefly.

“Um… Artan said to give you this, and that he’s sorry. And that he will definitely get each of you housecarls a present. He said you are…. What’s the…. Ah! Unsociable. Unsociable? Something like that. I don’t know. I am Eirian. Call me Eri, it’s just easier and I forget my name sometimes. But yes, this is Melka, and we are here to enjoy the festival! And riel riel! I can’t believe it! *Eltbet* will be so happy!”

“Twenty sovereigns say he doesn’t recognise me,” Jakk laughed, gold eyes flickering under his hood.

The two old thieves that had vacated to the kitchen to eat laughed when, ridded of all light laughter, the altmer replied with a sharp, curt growl. “Deal.”

Xxx

It took about an hour for Eri to persuade the mages to sit down at the table, and even then it took Calder and Lydia to threaten them to make it at all civil. The dockworkers didn’t seem all too fazed by the proceedings. The hag raven looked awkward, completely unhappy at the glares sent at her, even after Jakk started up a conversation about her life. “My sister stole my tower, made herself several Briar hearts and locked me in chains.”
“Briar hearts?” the thief asked, sounding politely curious.

“They are abominations,” the hag snarled, a wretched hand slipping out to catch a rather delicate wine glass, and in a rare show of softness, sipped and placed it gently back down. “Half dead monsters that sell their souls to gain power. My sisters use fools as cannon fodder for when knights and adventurers come for their heads, instead of fighting themselves,” Melka shook her head. “Always more. Always hungry. Never enough power, never enough women, never enough drink, never enough song, never enough blood. More, more, more always more.”

“I’m guessing you’re-“

“Angry? Yes. I was very happy when Nibble let me out. I got to squish that filthy…”

The growling carried on, at which most of the dinner table seemed to shy away from the grumbling thing. It wasn’t until Jakk put his own glass down that the mumbling turned to shouting, at which things like, “She ruined them with weed-hearts! Any hag worth her salt knows weeds ruin the taste! Void curse that unbelievable wretch… may Namira lay eggs in her eyes and…”

Argis simply looked over the table at Lydia, and with a simultaneous nod, they came to a unanimous conclusion. She wasn’t as bad as Eola.

Xxx

“So you’re a thane? Really? Of where?”

“Well I have a thaneship in Windhelm, Solitude, Whiterun and Markarth. I resigned from Riften after a bust up with the Jarl there. A couple of thugs attacked my home and killed my housecarl, and the Jarl tried to have me tried for murder when I strung the two of them up. Apparently trying to find justice in that neck of the woods is as difficult as making a rock grow legs and walk,” Artan sniped, setting down his bowl of food to stir the stew pot a little more.

Sofie’s eyes widened, “But your housecarl, weren’t they in the court for years? That’s what my ma told me. So wouldn’t the Jarl have gone out themselves to avenge them?”

“Jarl Maven isn’t you’re regular Jarl, sweetheart,” Artan said gently.
“Hmm. Well, at least your housecarl is in Sovengarde now, right? They’ll be feasting and dancing and hunting,” Sofie said after a few more bites.

“Yes. She will be happy there.”

“What was her name?” the girl asked, wiping at her face with her sleeve.

“Iona,” Artan smirked, before spooning second helpings of rabbit stew into the little girls bowl. They were maybe a day from Solitude, and even though it was slow going with a little one in tow they made good enough time. He was worrying a little about the state of Proudspire with all of the… crazy. Nope crazy was a good word. All the crazy guests holed up there with only his housecarls keeping them in line. Between Festus, Gabriella, Nazir, Arnbjorn and Babette, well they weren’t getting caught by the regular guardsmen. Then there were the two thieves, who made dodging the law a game for all the family. Talfdir, Faralda and Urag were probably tearing their hair out with the apprentices and Nirya wouldn’t help any when it came to disciplining them. She would be the one pointing them towards the danger and just sitting back to watch the mayhem. The only ones he could actually trust to not cause a province-wide disaster was the khajiit caravan workers and the Argonians from Windhelm. Marcurio would probably just drink and whore until the festival ended. Easy enough to deal with; just keep his ale topped up and the coin flowing. At least Kharjo and Dro’Marash would try to help keep order.

The last time Artan dragged Marcurio out for a run in the wilds, well. They ended up at a quiet little town in which the mage managed to upset many a miner. Apparently the reason for the mage to wake the cat up at holy-fuck-what-time-is-it in the morning was because there were a group of miners looking for him over a misunderstanding with one (or two) of their wives. To be fair, it did answer the question as to whether a mage can cast when blind drunk on Argonian Bloodwine.

Sofie took the bowl back, before settling into her summer cloak. Apparently even Nord children were rather comfortable in snowy old Skyrim. “What was she like?”

“Tough as nails. She took no prisoners when it came to fighting. If she saw even a glimpse of a thief or an outlaw she would sprint over and bodily drag them to the nearest guard. It’s funny when you’re just stood at the market buying lettuce and you see this crazed red-headed Nord dragging a screaming orc mercenary towards the Markarth Guard Barracks…”
“If you set up one more frost rune underneath the dinner table, I will castrate you,” Lydia growled, fist tightening in the mage’s collar. Festus laughed in her face, making the woman turn her head to avoid the spittle.

“I would love to see you try, little Snow Queen.”

The assassins arrived with three days to spare. Artan had given them fake identities, as well as new clothes and hair dyes. Nobody was any the wiser; even when Arnbjorn started talking about salted steaks and the like. Thankfully, his and Melka’s conversations about meat and tenderising techniques was cut short when Faralda snapped one day and froze their feet to the floor. It took both of the khajiit guards, Lydia, Calder and Argis to diffuse the situation as well as a newly appointed ‘Time out’ room. It was a new clause in the verbal contract that Artan had set up with each of the free- loaders, in which the Housecarls had last word on fights.

Argis was only angry that it didn’t come with the first note.

If Gabriella hadn’t started pointing out which tea was spiked with moon sugar he would have spent the entire week running up to the New Year high as a kite. It was strange how well the assassins scrubbed up. They almost looked… tame. Even so, he was thankful that Artan had enclosed a key to the neighbouring house for them to stay in. Proudspire an already full, and with the extra house things became easier. Especially with Melka following them to the other house. The thieves made a quiet agreement however to move their things in with the assassins the same night. It was a general rule, however, that nobody asked any questions about the recently vacant home.

Similarly, Argis didn’t want to know what Artan had to do to get them here. Gabriella had simply shrugged and said when Jordis asked, “He promised free beer if we put away the knives, teeth, hammers, pliers, knitting needles, daggers, arrows, were-beast forms, atronachs and magic for the night. Naturally, it has been a long time since any of us have participated in such a Festival. It’s nice to shake things up sometimes. And it is highly amusing to be a snake in the ducklings nest, as it were.”

It wasn’t until maybe a day before the Festival that the last two assassins showed up; a tiny girl and the Redguard that saved Lydia and Argis from the basement. The Bulwark was about to shake the little girl’s hand when the Sword-Maiden swept in and smacked his knuckles with a doughy spoon, eyes terrified. “Don’t tempt her, stupid!”

Babette only laughed, “I have already fed. But good rules to live by, if any!”
“So why don’t you tell him then?” Sofie asked, sounding confused.

“Because… well…. I’m his thane, and well… I’m a giant cat…” Artan tried, but the girl just waved his sputtering away.

“Thanes can marry housecarls. It’s not that uncommon, really. And besides, from what you’ve told me, it sounds like he likes you for who you are. Tail too,” Sofie shrugged easily, before stuffing the sweetroll into her mouth and readying Shadowmere’s reigns. “Talk to him about it. But remember, adults are stupid.”

“What?” Artan laughed, looking back at the girl. She was quiet for a moment while she tugged herself into the saddle and swallowed the entire roll whole. “Adults make up reasons not to be happy. ‘It won’t work out’ and ‘we are too different’ and ‘the world doesn’t work that way.’ In reality, they would be much happier if they listened to their hearts and proposed a way to make it work rather than rely on Aedra to make it happen for them. They think that they will be handed something on a plate, and forget that they can reach out and make it for themselves. That’s what Talos did, and he became revered that way.”

“You… are a scary kid.”

Sofie laughed, and urged the horse into a trot.

xxx

“Well, actually human saliva contains opiorphin that acts as a natural painkiller. It’s several times more powerful than morphine if healers gave it in the same quantities. But because our Makers have a sense of humour, it doesn’t effect humans. It degrades quickly in the intestine and therefore can’t penetrate the blood-brain barrier,” Festus sighed, sitting back in his chair.

The palpable, heady silence that encompassed the room was almost suffocating.

Urag broke that like a mammoth through a window. “I fucking hate you.”

xxx
The night before the festival had both houses buzzing; and Artan had barely been back a moment before it all went up in the air.

Someone had set up a card game and ridiculously let Brynjolf and Delvin play. Ogmund was already down to his pants, Kharjo was missing his tunic, and Neetrenaza was practically sat naked in the kitchen save for his gloves. The recently arrived Marcurio was the only one who had come off lightly. He was only missing a boot. Calder was down to his breeches, and Lydia was sat, somehow still fully clothed. “Snow Queen has a poker face to be reckoned with,” a hearty cheer broke out, and Lydia raised her mug in answer. Naturally, the thieves took that as a challenge.

It was strange, but the entire house had settled in a way. There were less fights, and mealtimes had developed a routine to get everyone fed. The khajiit mostly took care of cooking, since they were most used to making lots of food for lots of cubs.

Jakk had finally taken off his hood; revealing himself to be a coppery-black khajiit. There was a shared look between the housecarls and several others at that, with lots of speculation arising.

But that was neither here nor there, since he was currently in a quiet conversation with Scouts-Many-Marshes in one of the living room’s corners. It was strange how many unlikely alliances had built up over the week. Gabriella and Brelyna had started a quiet friendship, and mostly bonded over Morrowind. Festus had restarted the old rivalry with Urag, the shouting matches loud enough to bring the guards own on the manor more than once. Nazir had gotten into long conversations with Kharjo and Dro’Marash over proper sword techniques. Scouts-Many-Marshes and Jakk ended up in longwinded moral discussions with Stands-In-Shallows and Nirya. Jordis had managed to start up a cookery debate with Babette and Arnbjorn; no matter how disgusting such a conversation would end, considering. Brynjolf and Delvin became fast friends with Marcurio and surprisingly Faralda, each trying to one-up the others with their stories. But the most terrifying was the friendship between Eri and Lydia. The elf was all bubbles and rainbows in one second, but the zone she slipped into whenever she saw a crime made even the Snow Queen applaud.

Surprisingly, nothing was life-threatening. The worst was when Delvin persuaded Ogmund to levitate Brelyna on a patch of grass in the city. But when he did so, the dumner pretended to be floating away after a spell gone awry, screaming and howling while ‘struggling’ to hold onto various market stalls. It was only Eri’s quick work that saved one of the female citizens from a heart attack. The Bulwark shook his head, absently rubbing one of the rough cloths across a wet plate. Artan had the most strange assortment of friends from across the province. It must be an adventurer thing.
Jordis had barely passed another wet plate to Brelyna when it happened.

“I’m sure if you wiggle your ass a little it’ll make her pigtails catch on fire,” Delvin stage whispered, hand half-covering his mouth as he spoke to Ogmund, who was already a bright cherry red. The Nord almost exploded.

“Talos Almighty what is wrong with-“

“Either that, or if you can do that fire and wax thing she will most probably propose to you,” Gabriella piped up, flexing her long fingers in a flashing, sudden poof shape.

“What wax thing?” Brynjolf snorted, before taking a long draw from his tankard.

“Well you can get a variety of different candles, and each one has a different property. Some burn at incredible temperatures for the masochists out there, but-“

The door slammed open, breaking up the crows of laughter billowing through the room. A brisk chill swept through the entranceway, its salty undercut and the faintest hint of flowers sweeping straight into the house. It wasn’t until Argis stepped around the door that he saw her. The remnants of their conversation was on the girl’s lips, sounding high and bright.

“You think I could be a bard? I really like singing… especially the Tale of the Tongues! Oh do you think the Bards will sing that tomorrow? I hope they do. It’s really nice…. And… u-um…”

The shying child was in a well made grey dress, and a large flower basket in her grip. Her summer cloak was tucked inside, with the absence of flowers of course, alongside a short dagger and various sweet treats. But as usual, Artan dressed like a blind man on skooma. He had on his bright red tunic that had holes in it, with a yellow coat, high-knee boots and his leather pack across his shoulders. Artan finally looked up, using the hand he had around the little girl’s to lead her inside and the other to close the door behind them. “And here I had thought that Jordis would have had to break into my secret hoard of harmony scrolls to keep you in line!”

The jeers floated out, but they were more muted than before. “Who’s this?” Jordis twisted around from the washing bowl, rubbing her wet hands on her smock.

“Well, everyone, this is Sofie,” Artan declared between taking the little one’s velvet cloak and
hanging it up on one of the many wall hooks. “She’s my daughter.”

The girl was still practically shaking all over, first looking terrified. But after just those few words, that vibrant sunshine was back, and she was smiling fiercely at the cat. “Go check the place out, kitten,” he grinned back, rubbing a hand across the short fluff on his head. She ran off, through the various adults and almost made it to the stairs when she saw the Argonian.

“Neetzy!”

“Hello, Princess,” the Argonian replied, inclining his head in greeting. All of his prickly personality was gone. Even more jeers rang out, and the little girl started her rounds of hugging the four Argonians present, well.

Argis was honestly curious, to say the least. He pressed one of the ales into the cat’s hand, bringing the khajiit’s attention to himself. “Hey there.” He nodded towards the girl who had begun chattering away to Neetrenaza and Scouts, showing them the flowers she had found in the drifts outside. “You adopted a little nipper on your travels?”

“Heh. You see, I found a little flower buried in the snow, and I’m sure with sunshine, a little care and a place to set down some roots, it’ll grow up to be the loveliest of them all,” the assassin smiled. It was probably one of the softest smiles that Argis had ever seen Artan take on, and he had to take a step back as to not crush the critter in a hug. The khajiit was about to say something else when his eyes suddenly shuddered into tiny black splinters in his face, and the tell-tale gold wash of the Thu’um rocked through the usual green. Artan slapped a hand to Argis’ own hand, nearly crushing it to the countertop before gripping on and almost making the huge Nord grunt with the pressure. “Art-“

“That’s…” Artan began, but he had already drifted off into silence before he really started.

“Hey,” the other khajiit said.

Argis looked back to see that Jakk had been replaced by Sofie on the bench beside Marshes, and had now wandered forward to stand beside the dining table. The khajiit almost looked settled against the wood, but his face was almost akin to the child’s in its bubbling excitement. “What a way to find out I’m an uncle.”

The shriek nearly burst many eardrums in the room, but what Argis couldn’t fathom was why when
Artan had burst forwards to wrap a one-armed hug around his baby brother, his other hand was still clenching rhythmically around his own.

Xxx

“So you’re looking for the Sybil? And instead of getting on that, you joined the thieves guild and… what?”

“You can talk. I’ve heard a lot about your little adventures here,” Jakk snarked back and tipping his ale towards his brother.

Artan deadpanned. Sofie was asleep on his bed upstairs with Lydia and Jordis. Thankfully, the two had taken on sister rolls to the young girl, and instead of the awkwardness that Artan feared, well. It was just like a weird ass family. She was completely tuckered out; even after all the excitement of seeing her dock friends.

When she had left the room, Scouts explained that the girl was left in the city by her father as a means to protect her while he was out at war. It’s just, he never came back. The other Argonians, especially Shavee, had spent time with the girl, even fed her at times. They had asked some of the Nords in the city to look after her while they were gone, but there was only so much anyone could do. “I cannot believe they left her out in the snow.” Stands simply started shouting expletives and various insults towards people’s mothers, and the conversation was abruptly ended.

“What adventures? And why did you pick ‘Jakk?’” Artan asked, sounding a little less mocking than he should be.

“Well,” the burnt-orange khajiit leant forward conspiratorially, “I heard that you’ve been doting on a blonde bombshell for the better part of a year and a bit. Even broke into my boss’ house to save the guy.” Artan’s embarrassed hissing made quite a few people look over from the card game. But Jakk wasn’t done. “And I picked that name because it’s funny. And ironic.”

“I thought it was because it’s short for something. Like jackass,” Artan sniffed, sipping at his wine.

“You are usually less scathing. Maybe, if you were smart, instead of wasting time calling me a jackass you could start tapping that ass—” the other cat leered, nudging at Artan with his free elbow.
“Oh my god, shut up!” Artan hissed, not even acknowledging when he had slipped into Aldmeris.

“Is it because he’s blonde?” Jakk hissed back, grinning.

“What?” Artan asked, confused.

“Then what is it?” Jakk pressed, oblivious to the group of men sending them confused glances. They still hadn’t realised they weren’t talking Common.

“I’m a cat-” Artan pointed out, licking the stray drops of wine from his mouth.

“Your eyes have not failed you after all. Praise upon the Divines!” Jakk sighed, raising his hands up in appraisal to the heavens.

“And he’s a human,” Artan continued, deadpan.

Jakk eyed him as if he had grown a second head. “I still don’t see the problem.”

“If you like him and he likes you, then there is no problem. Nobody here seems to care about the interracial thing; even when you two were practically giving each other the bedroom eyes all through the card game earlier. And that, that was seriously awkward. Seriously. I’m actually surprised someone didn’t call you on it. You have stupid inside jokes, and the way that snowwoman teases you both for it and god, even the dumb fairy girl got really giggly when you two are next to each other. I still don’t know how she can even swing a sword with all the sunshine and unicorns falling from her mouth. The only people who give a shit about you being hairy and him being the abominable snowman are people who don’t actually matter in regards to your lives. You might never be able to go back to Windhelm hand in hand without a crazed Nord trying to kill you for watering down the gene pool—yes I know but you know how stupid some people can get— but other than that...” The khajiit shrugged, lifting his tankard to his mouth.

Artan didn’t have anything to say to that. Jakk had always been the crazy one. Always did what he wanted and screw the consequences. He would rest when he was dead. When they were younger and given tickets to pick up ordered items in town, Jakk always flirted with someone while they were there. A guard, or a merchant, or a shopkeep. It never meant anything, and never led anywhere. But Artan had always kind of envied that ease; in which Jakk had always been able to look at someone and know they would be happy together, however long that might be. In the years on the run, and before he had stayed in the convent, Jakk was prolific. He loved them, yes, but life was hard. Life
was short. When one left him, he didn’t mourn. He liked to look at the good times.

“Fusozay var var, Do’Garma.”

Artan looked up, eyes wide. But Jakk was always discreet. Nobody looked over; nobody jumped up and started killing indiscriminately. They had barely noticed that the cats had swapped languages again. The only people left in the kitchen were Delvin, Brynjolf and his two male housecarls. Festus was propped up against the wardrobe, saying something about it being better for his nerves.

Nobody here knew what Jakk was saying. It was all just gobbledygook to them.

Artan smiled, soft and sweet.

“Fusozay var var, S’eta.”

“Fuck you guys. I’m giving up,” Calder stood, throwing his last remaining sock on the table before storming off, eyes downcast and face redder than his hair. “Careful, it’s going to be a cold night, Firecracker!” Brynjolf called after him, Delvin shaking his head and taking a deep drag from his wooden pipe. “Right, it is time to turn in, I think.”

“Heh. Okay. You guys are going next door, right? Don’t put lock the front door on your way out, yeah? I’m going for a quick walk. Only around the town and back,” Artan stood with them, ignoring the pointed look Jakk sent his way. The other khajiit rose while he finished his ale, fully intending to make another joke at his brothers expense, but he was beaten to the punch.

“Need some company?” Argis yawned, standing from his seat at the table.

Artan started off some ridiculous joke, and the Thane and Housecarl wandered straight out the door, oblivious to the half-question forming on Delvin’s mouth and the dung-eating grin across Jakk’s face. “You know,” the old thief turned slightly in his chair, “I’ve been wondering something, small-fry.”

Jakk looked up from his pack, settled by his chair at the table, smiling as he did, “Oh, and what’s that old man?”
“Why haven’t you started on that one yet? Usually you won’t shut up about ‘chiselled jaws’ and ‘buns’ and ‘bosoms.’ What happened? Lost your appetite after that Hag raven?”

“Ha! No. I just don’t have a death wish. And besides,” the cat shrugged, “Artan already has his heart set on that ‘chiselled jaw.’ He rarely ever genuinely likes somebody, and even then it’s even more rare for him to be making moves. It’s sweet. I am definitely not messing around in it. And if I find either of you trying to ‘help,’ then I swear,” Jakk’s gold eyes narrowed, “I will tell Vex that you two keep peeping on her.”

“You jest,” Brynjolf whined, half pleading.

“No sir, I do not jest,” Jakk replied snottily.

“Well shit,” Bryn looked to Delvin, who looked dejected.

xxx

“Where did you find her?” The Bulwark asked, cracking a few bones in his back into their right positions while he walked.

“Windhelm. I was stopping by to grab some stuff at the house and I found her huddled in the snow by a barrel. That was a week ago, and well, it took about that long to sort everything out. Got her some new dresses, a couple of dolls, and she was nearly fainting. Said that it was too much. I had to explain that’s what parents do. Almost cried in front of a snotty clothes merchant,” Artan scoffed, lightly stepping around the sharp little corner around Jala’s house, the Bulwark keeping the slow pace easily.

“Heh. She seems like a cute kid. But…” Argis was about to point out the fact that her family might come after her, but Artan just shrugged awkwardly in the following silence.

“Her parents are both dead. Daddy was a Stormcloak,” the cat said.

“Talos Almighty,” Argis blew out a big breath and ran a hand through his hair.
“Yep. But what I don’t understand is if he was a Stormcloak wouldn’t she be living in the barracks or something? That’s what they did with some of the kids, right? Whenever their parents dropped them in Windhelm so they could fight the war they got left in like a group playpen for Stormcloak kids. Yeah, after the war most got sent home to other family members or even their parents if they survived. Marshes said she’s been around only a month if that. The war has been over for months now, but she popped up after that. So what the hell happened?”

“Well, sometimes parents do just abandon their children in places. They can’t cope or won’t cope, and decide its better that way. Who’s to say her father didn’t just leave her to spend his life whoring? Who’s to say he didn’t run off and join a coven? You just never know in this day and age. But it doesn’t matter much, now,” Argis sighed, clapping a hand to the other man’s back. “She has you now. And that’s more than enough.”

“But she won’t stay that age forever. What happens when boys notice her?” Artan turned to Argis, looking stricken.

Argis staggered suddenly, muffling his snorts with a fist. Artan glared at him, “What?”

“My guess is, you’ll spend so much time going around threatening to break knees and castrate young men to do much adventuring,” Argis snorted.

Artan was about to retort, but he eventually conceded with a huff. Argis couldn’t help it, he smiled at that. “Think of it this way; nobody would dare mess with her out of fear of you. She’s going to have a much better life now. You’re gonna love that kid to pieces.”

“…. We did promise to go flower picking… you know…. After the festival. Not to sell them, but to decorate the house. She thinks that because I’m a boy I don’t like to decorate…” Artan pouted and crossed his arms.

“Heh, see? Sweet as a button,” The Bulwark shrugged, the unsaid ‘I told you so,’ hanging in the air between them.

The walk was short, and soon they were back, the cat sitting lightly on the stone window ledge framing the patio. It was a lovely view over the ocean, especially with all of the house’s rowdy and often violent guests in bed. The chairs and table had all been taken inside, leaving just a rather sweet plant alone on the stonework. “I just hope I can protect her well enough. I couldn’t just… leave her there. And when I thought about dropping her off at the orphanage, I just kind of hated myself for thinking it. And the last week has been so amazing! She’s a clever little girl.”
The Bulwark couldn’t help it; he smiled. “Fatherhood suits you.”

The cat grinned back, “I just hope she’ll be happy. I didn’t even set out to adopt a child, but then I just…. I don’t know. She was sat in a snow bank behind a barrel and I just… couldn’t leave her there. And the thought of taking her to Honor Hall just made me feel sick. I could set her up with just about anything she wanted to do, and well. That seemed like a better idea than sending her to an orphanage. And besides,” Artan sighed, head shaking, “Now that I’ve made the commitment to her, I’m going to do whatever I have to be a great pa to her.”

“That’s all any parent can do, Artan.”

“Talking of parenting, how did the week with your own horde of adult-children go? I see nobody is dead, but I could be wrong,” a claw absently scratched away at the masonry beside Artan’s seat, and it took maybe a moment of deadpan staring for the cat to understand. “That bad, huh?”

“We wouldn’t have made it without Jordis.”

“Really? Well see, after all this time thinking she was an airhead, you guys finally realised she is actually a master when it comes to subtly manipulating people.”

“It… is a bit of an eye-opener, yeah,” Argis admitted.

The cat laughed, sharp and bright. “What I’d like her to do is magic up a bed to sleep in tonight. The house is full, and next door is too. The tavern is completely bursting, and I’m guessing the four of you have already given up all your beds and put out all the bedrolls.”

“Yeah. I have a plan though, don’t worry.”

xxx

In the end, Argis had set up most of the upstairs sitting area with the various animal pelts they had acquired. It wasn’t the comfiest, especially with Urag and Tolfdir snoring heartily in their bedrolls a few feet away, but it was good enough. Artan got downstairs to most of the household awake, with Lydia and Jordis well into making the third batch of breakfast. Sofie was sat beside-
“Eri! Oh my God! When did you get here!?”

“A few days ago. Eltbet! Your daughter is so sweet! She re-braided my hair! So well done too,” the elf carried on, but she was murmuring again, twitching like mad between running a hand across the fishtail running down her back to Sofie’s own braids, completely gone in her own world. Sofie just shrugged and smiled. “But yes!”

Artan nodded back at the elf, waiting for whatever nonsense she would come out with next. She was mad, truly, but a good friend. She was probably the only reason he and Jakk got out-

“I joined the Companions!” Eri shrieked, breaking Artan’s reverie.

“You what?” He managed when he finally collected himself.

“Yes! Made honest worker of me!” She laughed that high, harp-like trill.

“But what about your plans to go back to the Isle?” he asked, careful.

“Ne. I am not going back. Talwinmath is full of… ugh. There is lots of infighting about the Dominion there at present. Many riots and other sorts are happening. The Beautiful have been wrecking havoc amongst the old monuments, and have murdered the princess. To’bra,” the woman growled, features twisting in disgust. “Much better ways to rebel. Destroying heritage to make a point?”

“Well, at least you have your studies to fall back on, right? And besides, Eventually someone will take out the extremists.”

“Which ones?” Eri frowned, brows taut.

Artan couldn’t help but chuckle at that.

xxx
The Bard’s College set up an entire orchestra outside in the streets, one that went the entire length of the main street. Naturally, the mages were spread along this line, showing off various magical feats. People flocked to see Tolfdir’s telekinesis at work; the elderly mage managed to lift the frost Atronach Urag conjured with a scroll while his own head was in a bucket full of water. Faralda set up a ‘Bring me something I cannot break’ challenge, and showed off a high-level blizzard spell that dusted the entire city with a gentle inch of snow. But it was the Ball hat got people really talking. Artan had only shown off his conjuring skills a few times to each of his housecarls, and being honest, they all figured he was a novice at magic.

It didn’t last that much longer.

“Ladies, gentlemen and little ones!” The cat smiled, a good few metres from Faralda in the marketplace. It was enough space with the stalls pushed aside, but after the two other conjurers stepped out of the crowds and into the limelight, it was a bit more of a squish. “Welcome to the Festival!”

It took maybe thirty seconds, but the end results were still mildly terrifying.

The Atronachs appeared from Oblivion in clouds of purple fire, dusting off their shoulders with claws, stumps and in one case boulders. Falion himself stood behind his own summonings, two heavy-duty frost Atronachs, both easily hulking over the nearby bottom level of a house. They lumbered heavily away, patting at each other in friendly airs. “This is Dawn and Dusk. They are potent Frost Atronachs from the plane of Oblivion. Do not get too close, since their hides exude a powerful frost cloak. And do not let the near the wine barrels. They turn pink and I have to hear about it!”

The jeers broke out after a wary, quiet murmur. The crowd shuffled back, giving the Atronachs the entire marketplace to wander inside. Faralda had long since packed up her things to party herself, so it was just Falion, Artan and Phinis left to entertain. The cat stepped up, hands aglow with that purple
wytc'hfire, before he snapped them once in a line, and two huge coils of purple smoke leapt up from the cobblestones.

They were much smaller, but no less unnerving. The two flame Atronachs skipped from their own portals, but instead of doing the tiny acknowledging bow to the crowds, they ignored the spectators entirely. One let out a high, birdlike giggle and leapt at the other, already squeaking in joy and zipping as fast as she could in another direction. The two chased and ducked around each other through citizen, guard and mage alike, until Artan called them back.

“These crazed little monsters,” he tried to frown, but even the two fire Atronachs could see the smirk. The two leapt from their perches atop the various houses to float behind him, pushing and punching at each other behind his back. “Are Penelope and Valencia. They like to play, dance, and eat things that they will spit out later.”

“And these,” Phinis sighed in amused exasperation as Valencia moved to pick his pocket. He waved her away, and carried on, “are Nsami and Msami.” The mage’s hands flickered, and two huge storm Atronachs slipped from the purple void behind him. The two of them crunched along behind the old wizard, lightning crackling between their joints. They looked almost regal; until Penelope decided to float behind them making ridiculous faces.

The citizens bubbled with laughter, before Nirya swept through them, proclaiming, “Everyone has a magika resistance ring and the other mages are set up through the city. Set the Atronachs loose.”

xxx

Lydia laughed, almost spilling her ale. The Winking Skeever was packed, but somehow the burly old bear she was with meant that they got served, or so help the Beer God. Hrongar himself stifled his own giggles in his gauntlet, before rubbing at his beard and straightening his knot. “Oh, Talos that’s just….”

The woman smiled heartily at him, eyes ablaze, “I know. To this day I have no idea what possessed him to do such a thing. But alas, that is my Thane. As ridiculous as he is adept.”

The older man quirked a brow, “Ridiculous indeed. What kind of maniac tries to ride a bear?”

The woman shrugged, “My Thane when on a hunt for alchemy ingredients. He literally takes anything he finds from the ground and eats it to find its properties. He thinks it makes him sound
smart when he visits the town shaman.” The old Nord snorted, before chugging back the rest of his mug. He seemed to sober, after that, face growing softer around the edges.

Lydia couldn’t help but feel scared.

Until-

“I have something I need to ask you,” The burly old Nord said, rubbing his hands together nervously. He seemed to sink a little, before his back straightened and he looked her dead in the eye, seeming to have steeled himself.

“Hrongar?” Lydia asked, carefully.

“I… We have been friends for many years, Lydia. And well-“

The screams shattered any sort of question he had meant to pose.

xxx

“Well that’s-“

Valencia screamed, clutched at Penelope and made a break for it, swiftly gliding out into the fray of people. The other followed, if only a little more composed. The other four Atronachs moved after them, letting people wander up close; poke them, even spouting out a few words here and there.

But it wasn’t until Eri dragged Vilkas over that things got hairy.

Xxx

Argis was used to armour. They all were. But Artan was having none of that, today. He strictly adhered to his guidelines of the New Life Festival, those being it was their day off. They were no longer housecarls, and were free to do whatever they so pleased. He said so over a huge sack full of new clothes in their respective sizes. “Consider them gifts, and leave the armour at home today. Go
enjoy yourselves!"

So, they did. Lydia donned her light blue dress with a fitted leather bodice. Jordis had pulled on a bright green dress, re-braided her hair into a bun and disappeared off; but not without a peck to the Thane’s cheek in thanks. Calder wore a regular, fine cut yellow tunic with green embroidery. And Argis, well Argis went with blue. He liked the blue set best, even if it had a ridiculous built-in jacket and a high collar. Calder looked just as ridiculous in a high collar, so it was fine. And even if the fit meant he looked ‘like a steak when done really fucking right,’ according to Eri. It was the first time he heard her swear. Jakk had laughed at her, and they had picked up a conversation in Yoku, strangely enough.

But it was Artan who he wished would get back into armour.

He was used to the short leather skirts of the Imperial armour, and the tight-fit sin of the khajiit’s Brotherhood ensemble. He even learned to live with the cat accidentally stealing the female version of the Forsworns’ armoured pelts. But fine clothes?

They were Daedric interference, they were.

The cat wandered in, after most had already left, when the Bulwark was finishing the ties on his boots. He had barely looked up when his breath caught, and he had to remind himself that he wasn’t a small child meeting his first love. He was an old bear. That had become rather hard of speaking since the Khajiit had wandered in.

The tunic was fitted, and cut to show off. Artan’s shoulders looked broader, more defined in his new clobber. The shirt swept in neatly at the waist, and finished mid-thigh. If it was possible, he looked more lethal this way; trim, proper, sleek. He had trimmed his fur again, unlike Jakk who only let the hair at the tips of his ears grow.

But it wasn’t how stupidly good he looked that caught the Bulwark off guard.

A simple smile, a joke, and he saw it.

The flickers weren’t just flickers.

Everyone was gone, and Artan had let down all the walls, ripped off all the masks, and even wiped off the face paint.
Argis couldn’t explain it, but he figured that was the first time he knew he was ass over teakettle.

xxx

“You!? You are the friend my Shield-Sister brings me to meet!?” Vilkas asked, sounding more like a bursting volcano than a man.

“And here I thought your brother kept you on a shorter leash!” Artan retorted, hand whipping the air between them.

“*Kaoc’!* *Eltbet!* Shield-Brother! Stop this right now!” Eirian snapped.

The elf practically vibrated, from head to toe, eyes on fire. But somehow, the torrent of insults stopped, and the two ended up glaring at each other. Farkas rolled up to stand beside his brother, eyes almost sad. Argis was already behind Artan, a hand on his shoulder in an attempt to reel in that temper. He didn’t think he wanted to know why Artan was arguing with the Companions, but he made an oath. If it came to it-

“*Eltbet.* The Silver Hand murdered the previous Harbringer. They still have parts of Wuuthrad, the-

“Legendary axe of Ysgramor. I know,” Artan seethed, folding his arms across his chest.

“You know? Well, I hereby call in my favour to ask of you, *Eltbet.* Help me retrieve the blade,” Eirian collected herself quickly, falling back into that sure stance with her strong voice.

“This cur owes you a favour?” Artan growled.

“You owe someone a favour?” The Bulwark started, hand twitching on Artan’s shoulder.

Argis looked to his Thane, whereas both Farkas and Vilkas were trained on Eri. But the two of them paid nobody else any heed save for each other, almost as if the world had narrowed to just them. The Bulwark might have imagined it, but he felt Artan stiffen.
“You’re going to waste your favour on the Companions? Really?” the cat scoffed. Argis was unsure whether it was in incredulity or actual humour.

“It’s not a waste, Eltbet. They are good people. Much like you when you were Ja’Khajit.” The elf raised a hand to stop the slew of retorts from both brothers, pacifying them with a gentle smile.

“They are your friends,” Artan smiled back, soft. “Well, keep the favour. I’ll help you for free.” The cat sighed, eyes bright. The elf seemed to sag a little, in relief at that. Vilkas sent his brother a surprised, incredulous stare.

“On one condition,” the cat continued, but Eirian wasn’t phased the way the brothers were.

“Name it, Eltbet,” she nodded, still smiling widely.

“I have the Glenmoril coven’s heads in my house in Whiterun. I want to bring Kodlak peace. There is a ritual that kills the beast inside a soul and allows a were to walk into Sovengarde. Let me free him, and I’ll get you whatever you please.”

“What?” Vilkas was openly staring now, eyes wide. “You…?”

Artan shrugged, “No matter what arguments we have had, he is still my Harbringer. He took me in after I first got here from Riverwood, and beyond that Hamerfell. He is a reason why I like Nords.”

Vilkas seemed to frown, at that. “You aren’t the person I thought you was.”

The khajiit smiled, timidly at that. “We never are.”

xxx

Jakk sighed, pressing the wine to his mouth in an attempt to quell his frown. Artan had forced him into some high end finery, and to be honest, he looked amazing. It was laughable when the two of them entered the tavern earlier that night, and the hungry stares they got as they passed. Artan was
still as oblivious to romantic advances; especially from strangers. He sent them packing, confused as to what had happened. Jakk enjoyed being the fun brother. The crazy brother.

But, it was at times like this that he wished that wasn’t all he was.

Another wandered over, and Jakk sent them away with a scathing remark about mutton. He was tired, truly. Getting bed mates was easy if you did your homework and knew enough body language. He had never regretted his life, nor the way he had lived, until now.

Scouts-Many-Marshes was very good at listening, and an even better conversation partner. But the Argonian was a master at turning Jakk’s world upside down. What made it funny was that the other man didn’t even know he had done it. It had been week, and they were fast friends. The quiet, soft support the Argonian dolled out had been a surprise. A very good surprise.

The old Jakk would have rolled the lizard into the nearest hay bale for a romp. The new one, well the present one, was rather shocked at how much he did and didn’t want to do that. He sighed again and downed the last of his wine, readily depositing it on the nearest table. He settled back onto the bench, not surprised to find the source of his confusion sat on the bench next to him.

“You seem troubled, friend. Anything I can help with?”

_Give me a way to be soft like a house cat. Give me a way to be someone worth settling down for, someone able to make you happy. Give me a way to become worthwhile to you, friend._ The cat smiled, “It’s difficult trying to keep wandering hands off my ass. To be honest, I don’t see myself lasting the night without cutting off the insulting appendages.”

The Argonian tilted his head in thought, before he rumbled to himself. It was a few moments later when a weathered, scale-adorned hand slid over his own, resting on the bench. “A way to keep the riff raff off you without being vulgar about it.”

“You… you’re going to hold my hand to keep the weirdos away?” Jakk scoffed.

Scouts shrugged, “people only see with their eyes, these days. Most won’t interfere with a couple, and instead search for other single people looking for a roll in the sheets.”

Jakk tried to stifle the giggles with his free hand, and failed miserably.
Scouts was about to make a retort when the flood of people rushed by their bench, pressing in hard with their fear. The cat managed to stand, and had to forcibly stifle the childlike delight at the Argonian beside him that had stood to tug him close and protect him from the worst of the panicking throng.

That delight died when the first burn of magic sliced the cool night air.

xxx

Argis squeezed the khajiit’s shoulder, beating down a silly smile when he felt the purr rumble through his arm. Vilkas and Farkas turned to each other, talking animatedly for a few moments with the trilling interjection from Eri every few words. Artan had barely turned towards him; eyes alight with the regular mischief, before the words tumbled out.

“We have something to discuss, my thane,” Argis asked, his own voice sounding strange to him.

“Oh? What is it? There is nothing wrong is there?” Artan asked, looking a little worried.

“No, just something that has been long in waiting,” The Bulwark smiled, small but still.

The cat’s head twisted in curiosity-

The screams shattered the rolling aria of a nearby bard.

Heads whipped towards the surging wave of people fleeing the city’s front gates, the flock of people pushing in close in their attempt to run. The flashes of lightning tore the night sky.

xxx

“And that is how you make a flower crown!” Sofie giggled, placing her creation atop Jordis’ head with a flourish. “You can make bracelets, necklaces and brooches too! Just be careful what plants you use. Otherwise you can get a rash.”
Jordis roared, grappling the tiny girl until she was laughing at sat upon the Sword-Maiden’s shoulders. “You are a little treasure! Come! Let’s find one of your fathers wandering Atronachs. They love things like this!”

Sofie giggled, hands pressed tight against the woman’s shoulders. That is, until Solitude’s front gates exploded inwards. Jordis was fast, hurtling the girl backwards, behind her, and took the brunt of the wooden splinters flying through the air. People were screaming almost instantly. Urag was down, bleeding from a splinter in his shoulder, hands barely able to keep enough pressure on.

Sofie was barely sitting up before the first came through the huge hole where the doors used to be.

They were human, as far as she could tell, with octopus masks on their faces and ugly magic in their fists. They were yelling, taunting, and easily fending off the Solitude militia. The rush of citizens and the push of soldiers trying to intercept the invaders made a chaotic maelstrom of movement, but Sofie could see, even from Jordis’ prone side, that the octopus men were reviving dead soldiers as thralls.

She knew enough.

She was quick on her feet, turning to Urag’s side before anybody noticed her, and tugged the scrolls free from his pouch. It took only a glance; she had seen a lot of them when pa and her were on the road, so she knew which ones she needed. It took only a flicker of magica to open them, and then everything was done.

Three Guardian Circles emblazed themselves onto the ground, bridging from one of Solitude’s walls to the other. Any dead that were around were thrown completely aside like rag dolls, making horrible crunching noises when they hit buildings. The dead mage that had decided to walk towards Jordis was thrown hurrying back into Soliude’s guarding wall, dead on impact, already ash. The enemy casters were slow on the uptake, but eventually realised the error. Especially when the Mass Paralysis scroll engulfed them. Only three of the twenty were out of range, and were already howling in frustration. But Sofie didn’t stop, even when the soldiers and various warriors and mages inside the healing circles were standing and readying themselves to fight.

Jordis stood, shakily pushing the wooden stake from her shoulder, and welcomed the Rallying effects of another scroll. It only took a few moments, but already the citizens were pushed back into the deeper sections of Solitude, and other warriors had wandered out from their drunken stupors.

“Good girl, Sofie. Run, quickly, back to the house. We will take it from here,” The maiden growled, easily catching a battleaxe thrown to her. Sofie nodded, and ran.
She had barely turned when Lydia and Hrongar had burst from the tavern, Marcurio at their heels. She nodded once, and carried on going. She almost creamed when a rampant hand grabbed her. Pa. “Pa! You need to help Jordis and Lydia! We were by the gates and they caved in and she got hurt and oh my Divines it was so scary but I remembered the thing with the scrolls and she’s okay I think but they broke the paralysis scroll and they’re fighting-“

“It’s okay,” Artan drew the girl to him in a hug, petting at her hair. “Good girl remembering the scrolls. You probably saved their lives from the sounds of it. But run to the house. I’ll send Penelope with you. Keep safe, and keep out of sight.”

“Yes,” she nodded, and patted his arm with her small hand.

She ran, and Artan was barely able to stop himself from running after her.

“Artan-“ Argis warned, looking from the back of the running girl to Thane and back.

“Yes, I know,” Artan swallowed.

“Let’s go,” The Bulwark grunted back.

The two of them somehow managed to get past the last of the crowd, pushing their way through until they hit the brunt of the defending soldiers and mages. It was a full out brawl between the invading – mages?- and the various warriors in Solitude. Tolfdir was setting up basic hardening spells on armour, Faralda was trying to push back the enemy mage adepts, and the housecarls were keeping the dead thralls from overrunning the ranged fighters. The Atronachs had started a battle in the distance, between enemy summonings and-

Someone was howling, above even the din of the battle.

“Deceiver!”

There was a gentle lull where the fighting slowed to watch the maniac stand atop the executioners stage, hands fisted at his sides. “You are but a shadow of the true dragonborn! Just a liar hidden in Lord’ Miraak’s shadow!”
Artan couldn’t help it; he laughed.

“How dare you! Lord Miraak-“

The Atronach caught him unawares, magma-encrusted fist closing on his windpipe with an easy grace. Valencia didn’t waste time; it was why Artan contracted her. She squeezed. His head burnt up like a raindrop on a tin roof; quickly just ashes in her grasp. The man’s body fell to the wooden planks, headless. The Atronach shook the ashes from herself with a sneer, and turned to add her roar to that of the other Atronachs fighting in the distance.

The battle was quickly won, with their leader dead.

xxx

4E, 203 Morning Star

Artan slumped, exhausted, against the sideboard. The manor was quiet; it’s other inhabitants already asleep. He had managed to get the full story out of Jordis, and was openly proud of his little girl. He didn’t think that another kid could have pulled it off. She was still twittering to Penelope when they got back, bloodied and tired. The mages were quick to retire, alongside the eerily quiet Jakk. He simply stated that he had gone through an epiphany. Artan had asked him if it was different than all the other “phanys,” but that only scored a giggle.

Jordis and Lydia had gotten the little one to bed, so he had no worries there. Calder and Argis were still wandering the streets, helping with the last of the fortifications. It was nearly time for the city to awaken, and yet the entire household had barely gotten to bed. The mages had spent all night healing, the thieves had been doing reconnaissance on the cultists after Jakk had offered half his yearly pay check, and the assassins had been hunting down stragglers.

But it was the Companions who got hit hardest. They were the frontline keeping the brunt off of the regular folk during the first few moments of the attack, as well as fighting their way through to the end. They were tired, burnt, and had to fight entirely human. Artan was surprised nobody turned. It was weird, but he understood. They were attacking homes, families, small businesses. It boiled his blood, and even he had a hard time keeping the beast on a leash. Hopefully, after freeing Kodlak, he could-
A hand pressed to the nape of his neck, and was already gently tugging, rubbing along that tight little knot there. He couldn’t help it; he started purring, deep in his chest. There was a low chuckle, and in a spark of fear and joy, he thought ‘Argis.’ Jakk had found it bloody hilarious that a giant blonde Nord knew how to make him purr, but Artan had just hissed at him and it shut his brother up. It was-

The hand flattened, rubbing hard and slow down his spine, large fingers spread wide, pressing into the lines of muscle, making that purr break off into a growl. He arched, pressing into the feeling, rolling his shoulders, barely aware that he was in his kitchen in his house full of people. A body was close behind him, close enough he could feel the heat rolling off them, hot enough he could feel the sympathetic burn, feel his fur prickle with warmth. The hand stopped at his hip, another coming to join it, a mouth pressing an open kiss to the junction where his ear met skull.

His fingers dug into the countertop, won a startled chuckle when his tail coiled tight around a thigh, tip pressing hard against the inner seam of breeches. The fingers on his hips clutched tighter, catching in the fabric of his tunic, tugging him closer. A thick chest pressed against his back, a heavy, thundering heartbeat hammering against his shoulder blade. But it was the gentle touch of a wet tongue against the inside of his ear that did it.

Artan couldn’t hold in the groan, even when his ears picked up the front door opening.

It was embarrassingly loud, even to his own ears. “Argis… Please…”

“What?”

The hands flew away, as did the man, as if he was on fire. For a dazzled moment, Artan didn’t move, thinking that whoever had come in had startled the Bulwark away. He had barely turned before he realised what clusterfuck he had just entertained. Calder was glaring at him a step or two away, with Argis stood dumbstruck in Proudspire’s doorway.

It was explosive. Calder was swearing, Argis was swearing back, and the entire house woke up in various states of irritation. Tolfdir wandered upstairs, before taking one look at the two Nords screaming at each other before he turned on his heel and went back to bed. But it was Lydia who solved the problem. She walked downstairs, still in a light nightdress, and with a thundering fist, cracked both men across the face. Calder nearly started on her, next, but the cold aura she exuded made him think twice. He shook his head, and stormed out the door, almost cracking the wooden frame with the force at which he slammed it closed.

Lydia retreated to bed with a soft hand upon Artan’s head, who had slumped to the floor with his knees to his chest, face buried in his breeches and hands pressed into the crease under his knees. It
was quiet, after that.

Argis pressed a thumb to his busted lip, before sighing.

It was slow progress, walking towards where the cat was sat against the drawers of the countertop. Eventually, he made it, and knelt at his Thane’s feet. “Want to tell me about it?”

It took until the daylight streamed through the windowpanes for Artan to talk, but even so, Argis didn’t complain. “I came in, and someone came up behind me. I thought… I thought…”

“Hmm?” Argis didn’t press too hard, and was rewarded for that.

“I thought it was you. You all smell different today. Different smells with new clothes…. And I thought it was you…” Artan continued, almost too quiet to hear.

Argis nodded. It explained well enough why he walked in on Calder pinning Artan to a-

He frowned at the thought. He touched at the cut across his mouth again, and nodded once to himself. Artan didn’t see, and he didn’t need to. “Did you want it to be?”

The silence was thick, thicker than any that had ain between them before. Even in the beginning, the silences were long but never so…. Heavy. In the early days when Artan saw another Nord obsessed with Talos and Ulfric, and when Argis saw another Khajiit with a pair of stolen underwear in one hand and a bloodied blade in another. It was an old joke between them now, two years later. Well, he guessed it to be a bit longer, but he hadn’t counted. It was more of a whirlwind than his cadet days.

Artan was almost unheard when he eventually said it; “Yes.”

Argis nearly fell on his head when it processed the simple word.

He didn’t know what the hell had happened to him, since he was stock still, in the exact same position as before. Knelt in front of Artan, but it was as if he was filled with lightning. He almost had to blink twice to recognise his own hands lifting the khajiit’s face up, his own thumbs pressing away
the knots between his brows. The lightning felt as if it would break through his skin when the thu’um washed out from the cat’s throat in a gentle murmur, the flicker between gold and green in his eyes more pronounced with the proximity.

He couldn’t help it; he chuckled. “You’ll find this night funny one day, cat.”

The tiny smirk across Artan’s features made him sure that the lightning palpitating in his chest would break loose sometime soon.

He was slow about it; pressing his own smiling mouth against that smirk.

Hands pressed up, against his chest, claws testing the flesh underneath. Fingers pressed hard, into the tiny dip under Artan’s skull, drawing out that much loved purr, the rumble flooding them both. He didn’t know when the hands on his chest hand left, instead decidedly coiling his hair into odd patterns against his skin. Similarly, he lost track of the thu’um addled breaths rolling across his jaw, the lithe thighs pressed against the solid stone of his own. What he did understand, however, was the exact moment a sleep-depraved Lydia stormed in to throw a bucket of snow on them both, making both of them scream like little girls.

Jordis was the only one who found it funny.

Chapter End Notes

Aldmeris

Riel = Beautiful. Eri is literally calling Jakk beautiful beautiful

Eltbet = Holy Beast

Ne = Never

Talwinmath= The Home of Summer

Jel

Ka’oc = A swear word
Yoku

To’bra = Useless, thus evil.

Ta’Agra

Fusozay var var= Enjoy life

Ja’Khajit = Kitten, young desert dweller
Two Artan’s were sat in Proudspire by days end. One was threading his daggers into sheathes on his hips, the other pressing his thieves guild armour into his pack. Sofie could barely tell the difference, and even then that was only because Artan and Jakk moved completely differently. Jakk had brought in a merchant on the way to Riften that could change a person’s entire physique, and the brothers figured that having someone pose as her pa would protect their little group better. All she did was dye his fur with Artan’s markings, but that was deemed enough. Anyone who actually knew the Thane would see through it most probably, but Argis said he would handle it. Appearances, and all that. Guards on the road were more likely to aide a Thane than regular travellers, Artan had said. She didn’t believe that, but she agreed with the outcome nevertheless. Pa moved on to briefing the three amassed Housecarls, another Artan at his side.

Creepy, more than anything.

Thankfully not many people were killed during the attack; mostly due to the fact that Solitude had been a hotbed for the prominent guilds on the night of the Festival. It was still a bitter send off for those who did die; a quiet service a few days after. Pa promised to bring the dragon priest cultists to justice, and his word was enough for the Jarl. Sofie pressed her doll further into her bag. When she saw him the first time, she saw an adventurer. She didn’t expect any of this. Dragonborn, Thane, and Archmage.

She had seen enough already to know that he was gifted. Sometimes he would mumble to himself, and that strange golden mist would roll out of his mouth. Never common tongue, always an old, guttural language that made her hair stand on end. Penelope floated closer, batting at one of the candlesticks with a blackened claw. The Atronachs were still around, to her surprise. Usually Atronachs would return to Oblivion after a while, but Penelope and Valencia stayed. Artan said it was a lengthened contract and they would come and go as they pleased. Jordis wouldn’t let them into
the house until they dampened their flame cloaks, but after that they wandered the house in a daze, curious about even the smallest things.

The mages were leaving tomorrow, and the guards were a bit testy about that.

Funnily, they had lamented about having to house a bunch of mad men, but after the attack they were a rather welcome sight. Dusk and Dawn, the frost Atronachs had been patrolling the wilds around the city, with Nsami and Msami taking to the battlements. After rooting out what seemed to be the last of the straggling cultists and minimising the guard’s own losses, they were praised.

She sighed, and took the doll back out.

They were heading to Whiterun where Pa could pick up all his unfinished business with the Companions after he finished up business here. Lydia and Argis would be protecting her there while these cultists were running around. Pa said that he extended the contract with Penelope so she would follow Sofie wherever she went, which on the one hand was great. On another, entirely different hand how could she make new friends with a molten woman following her?

“Hey kid,” a hand pressed to her shoulder, and upon looking up Lydia nodded at her. “We’re heading out soon. Got everything?”

“Yes,” Sofie nodded, looking back to her doll.

“Good. Artan’s about to leave for the wilds, best to say goodbye now,” Lydia jerked her head towards her Artan and slinking away into the house.

Sofie nodded again, before putting her doll back and moving to place her bag with the others beside the front door. Argis wandered past her, nodding in greeting. It was sweet how he was still embarrassed about her catching them in the basement a few days ago. Adults were silly.

The night was already quiet, with the merchant stalls already closed and most already in their homes or the Winking Skeever. Maybe it would be her closing up a stall one day, before heading home for supper.

Another hand pressed to her shoulder, pulling her around into a hug. “Pa?”
“Hey kiddo,” Artan smiled down at her, giving her a quick squeeze.

“How long until…” Sofie wanted to ask, but she lost her nerve half way through.

“I’ll see you in Whiterun before the weeks end. And then we can go flower picking like we said,” Artan reassured her, roughing her hair up in his hand.

“Can you teach me to fight?” She asked.

He asked a question of his own, instead of answering hers, “Fight?”

“I want to be able to fight. Better prepared than…” She didn’t need to say it.

“We’ll see, kitten. Until then, bed time,” he smiled back, looking more tired than she ever remembered.

xxx

Artan had barely shooed Sofie out of the living room and upstairs before Galathil’s grumblings finally got to him. ‘Just dying fur? I am a fact sculptor of the highest regard,’ and ‘Faculty of Cirurgeons’ and ‘Hollow-Faced Men,’ and ‘backwater hicks and their ridiculous’-

“Well, all you have to do now is finish my fur off and that will be all, Galathil.”

“Yes, yes. Sit still, and close your eyes. I won’t be able to replace them if any chemicals get in there. It’ll rot your head from the inside out,” she snapped, pushing her sleeves even further up her arms.

“Hmm.”

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“Three hours until she wakes up and we set off,” Argis huffed, folding his arms across his chest.

“Yep. Take care of her,” Artan said.

“As if she were my own,” Argis nodded.

“Hmmm,” Artan smiled, a secretive little thing on his face.

“Still worried about Calder?” The Bulwark asked, trying to sound nonchalant. He uncrossed his arms and started stuffing more food into Artan’s pack.

Artan shot a smirk at the Nord, brows raised. “Of course. He’s like a troll when he gets angry. Pummel first, think later. And he had the furthest to go, alone, and through the wilds. He didn’t even… he just left. No talking, to explaining. It’s going to be an awkward reunion.”

Argis gave a half-hearted shrug, not looking up from stuffing various wrapped meats into the food packs. “He knew the risks when he-“

“…? Risks? What risks?” the cat asked, taking a few more steps toward the Nord.

“Nothing, Artan,” Argis waved him off and stuffed the last few bites of his stolen Sweetroll into his mouth.

“Tell me,” Artan bumped his hip against Argis’, nearly taking the Nord off his feet when a bony bit dug into the socket.

“Mm. Let’s just say that it wasn’t a one horse race when it came to you… and your… well…” Argis bumbled out, shrugging grumpily when he ran out of words.

The cat poked his head between the pack and Argis’ face, going even so far as to simply collapse down until he was just lying across the entire thing as well as most of the table. Even the unimpressed stare the Bulwark was giving him didn’t make the cat budge. “Comfy?”
“Yes. You?”

The Nord huffed out a laugh. The ridiculous Khajiit had spent irrational amounts of money furnishing Proudspire. The seats alone cost more than Argis liked to think about; of course they were comfortable. But the cat, sprawled across the table with his head buried in one of the backpacks, well that looked much less comfortable. Even with all of his usual mannerisms, seeing an Artan with pitch black fur just like on Vittoria’s wedding day made him feel uneasy. He pushed a hand against the back of the khajiit’s neck, thumbs pressing into the muscle just right. Artan arched against the hand, moving until he had his shoulder and side plastered flat against the armoured chest. But Argis wasn’t really paying that much attention to the mumbling sentences about safe routes and maps and things. The Bulwark slid his other arm under Artan, pulling him close enough that the Nord could simply bury his mouth and nose into the ruff of his neck, hands no longer massaging, only holding.

“Argis…?”

“I don’t care what you have to do. Come home safe,” the Nord bit out.

“Even if I have to leave a mountain of bodies behind?” Artan asked quietly.

“Just don’t leave them at the foot of the bed like real cats do,” Argis leant back, patting the side of Artan’s head with his palm.

“Aye sir. I can do that,” the khajiit nodded with a smirk.

xxx

Sometime in Morning Star…

*Be ready for anything. Expect everything. Never rule anything out.*

When he first properly saw Commander Maro, well.

*“By Azura! The Gourmet!”*
He never expected such a snake in the grass, but in retrospect he should have. He had felt the fur prickle at the back of his neck as he handed over the Gourmet’s Writ, trying hard to ignore the dark circles, pale complexion and overall dead aura the Commander exuded. He had actually felt bad when the sour face turned shocked and almost abashed.

“I didn’t quite expect the gourmet to show up in such a… strange outfit. We were never told what to expect, you see. But there we are. Don’t let me keep you. Proceed to the kitchen straight away. Gianna’s the head chef here at the castle and can get you any ingredients you ask for.”

He didn’t think he would regret the quiet apologies for his loss, the actual sincerity of his words. He didn’t think he would hate this man more than Tavan, one of the nastier bodyguards that Larethius employed. Why think about that now? Eyes on the game. Keep focused.

He had been quick to leave the entryway and practically ran to the kitchen, barely there when the redguard gave him some snotty remark about hairy soup. He had let himself go, in that moment. Forgot that he was an assassin, and actually tried to make a good soup for the Emperor. Just to make the woman eat her words. A khajiit could have easily been the gourmet; they just had better things to do. Like join the Mercenaries Grin, or become merchants. There were probably many khajiit chefs out there, but their food would most likely never leave the borders of Elsweyr. Food in Elsweyr was for families, for friends and honoured guests. Not for common inns and eateries. The fondue… well that started as a fun joke about Elsweyr being a moon sugar capital, to the point where it even got included in food. But then as all things do, it became a staple that travelling khajiit found funny.

“By the Gods I’m nervous! Please, just a moment,” Gianna gushed, smiling brightly at him. “Please, I’ll serve. You just stand there, and well… Be amazing!”

Artan couldn’t help but smile at her. He shouldn’t have worried about a random woman like her, but he did. He might very well be finishing her entire career with this. What kind of chef lets someone poison the Emperor right under their nose? He should not have been worried. He shouldn’t have even had a second thought about her other than possibly using her as a human shield if things came down to it. Assassins don’t worry about nobodies. But he still felt guilty. He still had the irrational want to throw her aside, scare her into running, sparing her life. He didn’t know if having such feelings made him good, but he knew that letting her walk into her doom regardless of such things made him bad.

“Ah! My friends; The Potage le Magnifique! So delicious! As Emperor, I of course reserve the right of first taste.”

The feeling of guilt melted into anger when the stout little man started verbally degrading the Commander’s son. Even though he had known it would happen because he had planted the bloody
note on the lad’s body; he knew it would shame the family. But to slag the boy when the father was outside, on lookout for assassins? With a squeaky clean record before that? It made his mouth taste bad.

The nobles laugh.

He didn’t think much about how few guards were around the Emperor. He didn’t think. He just thought about his escape routes; about how best to get away from Amaund without getting groped up or sitting through another speech. Even when the shit hit the fan and he was wiping blood from his dyed-black fur and slipping out onto the stone walkway to freedom he couldn’t focus.

“Oh! How marvellous! Just delicious! It is everything I had hoped it would be! I… I…”

He couldn’t remember feeling joy; even though he had just completed the biggest contract of the century. In retrospect, the only thing that was in is mind was this whole thing is wrong.

He didn’t like getting proved right.

“I think something’s wrong… I”

The room had erupted; he knew. Gianna was screaming, bumbling in her run to the door, eyes white like a terrified horse. The Penitus Oculatus were quick, he gave them that much. But then, they knew what would happen, didn’t they? The moment the Emperor’s brow met the table, the froth started pouring from his mouth, and they were on the move; swords already drawn.

“The Gourmet and the chef have poisoned the Emperor! By The Gods! Get them!”

Artan didn’t even have to think to jump the table, nearly brain one of the guards with his boot and drive a dagger into the other. The third, bloodied sword raised high, was quick enough to dispatch. The nobles had huddled together on the floor, one of the men having an iron dagger presented in warning. Artan didn’t even bother with them.

He had still been in a daze when he pushed that heavy door open, and inadvertently closed the book on his life as he knew it.
“That man, by far was the most infuriating decoy we have ever employed,” Maro had laughed. Tight and hard. His eyes were cold, even as his face burned with grim glee. The guards on either side of him were fidgeting in their stances, uncomfortable with the commander’s apparent loss of his senses. It took an entire minute to regain his composure and stop chuckling, but his mad grin never faded. That sallow-skinned man who had welcomed him into the Fort was still there, but harder. Crazier. “I’m glad you murdered him, you fucking idiot. An assassin of the Dark Brotherhood just attempted to take Emperor Titus Mede III to the void; almost would have, if it had been the real man.”

Artan couldn’t help it; he had chuckled.

“Let me guess; someone ratted me out? Who? Maven?”

Maro couldn’t hold it in, he roared with laughter.

“You mug. If I had known she was in cahoots with the likes of you, I’d have gone to her first! No, your own Brotherhood sold you out! We made an exchange, you see. A life for a bunch of lives. You; in exchange for them. We would leave them alone if they gave you to us.”

Artan didn’t let the surprise colour his face. “I never knew I meant so much to you, Maro. You should know your wife won’t like the idea of a khajiit lover. She will probably try to assassinate us both,” he had forced a smile, “irony at its best, when you think about it.”

The human sneered, “Think what you like, cat. You’ll be dead or worse soon anyway. It doesn’t matter what you do now; you’re finished. And as for your friends, well,” the commander had shrugged, nonchalant. “I changed my mind. They’re being burnt alive in their little nest as we speak.” Sighed, almost wistful, “tortured, cut open, flayed alive. They’ll get what they deserve, as will you.”

“What?”

“The melting bull, the rack, Boethia’s cradle; they will beg for death before the end. Your ‘family’ are going to be husks in the wind by months end.”
The soldiers around him seemed to wilt as Maro pushed and shoved his way through them; eyes alight with that same insanity that Calixto had, in the end. “YOU MURDERED MY SON! AND YOU WILL PAY THE PRICE YOU GOD-FORSAKEN-

Maro had broken off, suddenly, his head cracking to the side and his mouth clamping shut. He waved a hand, and turned away, “Kill him. And make sure there is nothing left to bury.”

The Commander had already begun walking away when the two oculatus swordsmen leapt into action.

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The first he knew of any trouble was when Penelope flared into life, that brittle, sharp roar shaking the windows. She flew, straight through Lydia and burst out of the inn’s front door, molten sparks sent shuddering through the night. She roared again, making the nearby townsfolk buckle and run in fear. Before she flitted, up and over the nearby stable; gone.

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They couldn’t do anything, even if they knew where Penelope and Artan were. Vittoria bloody Vicci’s goddamn wedding all over again, as Lydia so politely put it that morning. It was the second day since they had left Solitude, and Sofie was practically inconsolable. She was silent throughout breakfast, and didn’t reply to anyone verbally, rather just nodding and shrugging at questions aimed at her. Not even Lydia could make her speak proper sentences. The dusty road near Dragon’s bridge was quiet enough for a sunny afternoon; even with the various merchants passing them by.

“Do you think it’s because Penelope left in a huff last night?”

Argis looked to Jakk, sat upon a beige colt from Solitude’s stables. The cat had been jumpy since the Atronach left in such a manner; as had they all. Argis himself was going through all the worst scenarios that came to mind, and Lydia’s cold aura was not helping matters at all. Out of all of them, Lydia was the best gauge of Artan’s singular power, since she was the one who had spent the most time on ridiculous missions with the cat. But if even she was worried, then-

“Hey,” Jakk snapped, bringing Argis back to himself.
“Sorry. I think so. But to be fair, we are all on edge after that. Penelope has a direct line to Artan and his commands, so something must have set him off about the mission,” Argis sighed, no wiser than Jakk.

“Hmmm. Maybe. But knowing him, he’s already-“

The moment went by in a blur. Lydia yanked so hard on the reigns of her horse that the animal reared sideways, nearly colliding with Sofie’s own horse and startling them both. Two black masses surged from the tree line, flickering leaves and snapping branches exploding in a swirling whirlwind of embers and foliage around them. The black, thin silhouette turned in midair, sword a sharp stab of lightning easily slicing the head from the shoulders of what looked like an Imperial Soldier. The black thing landed backwards on its feet, skidding slightly, and almost falling over when the body hit the dirt and another Solider burst from the trees, battleaxe held high.

A sudden burst of flame knocked his shoulder, jolting his stance and sending the blade careering to the side, the soldier stunned but still blindly holding on. His war cry broke with a gurgle as the assassin’s blade drove through his sternum; just under the ribcage.

The Atronach had swept from the woodland, gliding sharply around the duo, before flitting to the assassin’s back. The man himself threw the soldier’s body aside, before without even a glance in their little party’s direction, sped across the road and into the wilderness; two more soldiers and a wildly shrieking flame Atronach at its heel.

Sofie’s surprised squeaks were the only noise save for the wildlife after the commotion was gone; assassin and assailants long disappeared. Lydia took a few moments to try and calm the girl; whereas Argis and Jakk were having a quiet, fast-paced conversation far from the child’s ears. They left the dead Penitus Oculatus agents where they were, bleeding out on the road.

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He hadn’t felt much.

Just the beast-blood boiling in his head, making him want to just tear his skin off and run. He would make it there fast as a wolf. But he wouldn’t be able to fight; not after such a long run. And besides, he wasn’t in the right frame of mind for it. He would go rabid, for sure.

He had barely remembered to hit the weapons cache in the woodland beside Solitude’s stables
before making an all-out run to the Sanctuary. He hadn’t even taken off the Gourmet’s hat until he had very nearly pulled his cowl over the top of it. It took him two hundred seconds to take off the fine clothes and put on his brotherhood armour. He had to think twice to remember the cowl after tearing off the chef’s hat. He took barely any breaks between running, stealing food, and sleeping only an hour in between runs, and was only half aware of Penelope prowling along at his side. He had the mind to thank the Divines that he had taken on the Steed Stone blessing; otherwise the exertion would probably have killed him. Penelope was equally wild, her flame cloak nearly setting the grasses underfoot alight in her rage. She was a sharp, cutting knife through the fogs of the woods. It was only in retrospect that he realised why he hadn’t hit any resistance while making his way to Falkreath; Penelope was blasting anything vaguely threatening out of the way before he even noted the possible danger. It wasn’t even until he finally started running through the pines did he actually pay enough attention to realise that even the forest was off. It didn’t feel like a home away from home, in that moment.

The pine forest had never seemed that way, before.

Maybe it had been the mist; mixed with foul-smelling smoke and ash, that was giving it its unforgiving, threatening ambience. Maybe it had been the light rain, slicking his fur and making the mud clump to his legs and hands. Out of the corner of his eye, he had thought he had seen a woman. She had been crying, dragging an axe behind her through the rain. Artan didn’t have time for her, or her mystery.

He didn’t feel real enough for that.

It wasn’t until he got to the thicker woodlands and stood amongst the taller pines and ran into the first soldier with bloodied hands that he felt real. The man was laughing at his friend, parading around the small clearing with a shrouded hood around his head. Artan was quick, silent and efficient. The ebony dagger bit through the slats in the mans armoured back, thick blood gushing straight out and over Artan’s legs and feet. His friend hadn’t even noticed yet. He noticed when the same dagger slid home into the soft hollow under his jaw. Penelope growled in annoyance as she crushed the third’s head.

Artan had never felt glee when he killed before, but right then, he was starting to see stars.

He held in the howl he wanted to make when he finally noticed the body pinned to the tree outside the Sanctuary door. Festus was long dead; the ground underneath him and the stones around them burnt almost to high hell; but not his clothes. Firestorm spell, maybe? The powdery black bones and charred leather in the blackened dirt was enough to confirm that. Sick fucks had to head-shot him to stop him; the arrows in his hands were molten twigs now.

Badass uncle Festus, a mother-fucking tank until the end.
Artan stormed away, towards the black hole of a door, towards the thickening, black smoke billowing out, and towards the sounds of cackling laughter.

Finally, clarity had hit him.

It was harsh and hard, but he had welcomed it. The entire persona of Artan melted away; Thane, Archmage, Dragonborn, whatever. And Garma came back; survivalist, bloodied, merciless, calculating; The Assassin he had been trained to be. In retrospect, maybe that was what had scared him the most.

Two men. One axe, other archer, both turned away. Ignore the talk about the rat, and about the smoke. Inane babble; not useful for intel. Garma slid his dagger into a kidney, a clawed finger into the back of a neck. Claw severed that thick cord in the spine; made the soldier flow down like a fish, mouth flapping inaudibly. Left his dagger, pulled both swords free from leg-sheathes.


Steps over the body, naked and bleeding still. Tail is gone; just like Larethius used to do when-

**Neck broken; he’s dead** and you can’t do anything. **Mourn later, avenge now.**

Skip down the steps; into the main chamber.

Arnbjorn is in wolf-skin. Ignore him, kill his attackers. Eight men; four swords, one sword and shield, two war axes and one battleaxe.

Slams into the nearest man; throwing him straight into the Atronach. Garma doesn’t even twitch at the screams, the howls, the cries. He moves on, nearly completely beheading one of the war-axe wielders. He tugs his blade free, half-dead to the noise Arnbjorn makes when he dies. He is dead. **Mourn later, avenge now.** He barely even recognises Penelope when she bolts into his field of vision, the enraged Atronach colliding with the soldier wielding the battleaxe. He considers the man dead.

Moves into range, and plants the steel-capped toe of his boot into the knee of a swordsman who turned to face him. The man goes down, roaring in pain. One of Garma’s swords plunge into the man’s sternum; shattering the breastbone with the force. The khajiit doesn’t bother to retrieve it,
hand flickering with fire instead. Penelope has killed three, already. It’s funny how they can’t hear him over their own cries of joy; of victory.

He files away the terrible hilariousness of that for later.

He comes back to himself when a particularly nasty scream breaks his thoughts, and he finds himself stood in front of the last soldier, flame-engulfed hand fisted around one of the metal lips of the man’s helmet; melting the thing against his head. Vaguely he thinks it’s gross. He pushes down one of Artan’s undecided shrugs and throws the dying man aside to walk up, into the Alchemy and Arcane lab. Gabriella is dead, laid broken atop an equally broken table. A quick scan of her reveals legs broken, a ruptured nose and several axe-wounds to her chest.

He doesn’t even flinch away when the soldier leaps from behind one of the towering pillars of flame. Garma vaguely wonders if he should feel hotter. Maybe he’s in shock. It would explain the lack of empathy.

He dances under, around and behind the man; easily dodging the hodgepodge attack. It’s only when an arm clamps around the soldier’s throat, the sword slides in too easy and he’s practically plastered against the man’s back that he feels it. His face is pressed against the soldier’s neck, and he feels the thunderous pulse against his cheek, feels it flutter and slacken away into nothing. He pushes the body away and stomps the reeling emotions down.

He follows Penelope into the kitchen, and finally hears the yells.

He’s already past the table, up the stairs and staring the Penitus Oculatus soldier in the eye when Nazîr fells the other soldier. The Redguard is about to turn and kill the other, but Garma is already two claws deep in the man’s throat, already wiping the sticky red blood off on his thigh. “So you live.”

A head turns to the other assassin, eyes barely taking in the beard, the scarves and the scimitar. Garma forces his tongue to work out; “It was a trap. One of the family betrayed us.”

Nazîr frowns, “Considering most of us are dead I figured as much. But,” the redguard looked away, eyes flickering closed for a moment. “I had briefly thought it was you. Until you saved my hide, that is. Kind of erased my doubts,” Nazîr shook his head, almost to clear a nasty thought. “Thank you, brother.”
“We need to leave.”

Following Nazir was easy.

There were only a few soldiers left; the others either burning away in their own flames or trying to make their way through the wreckage. They were like rats in a trap, now. Well, they all were. The timber was crackling, the beds all alight and choking smoke everywhere. Nazir’s plans were all wrecked, and they were slowly getting pushed into smaller and smaller spaces. Thought was fracturing, more and more until all he could think of was pictures, sound and the thick smell of burning hair and flesh.

Penelope was screaming, throwing herself against the wreckage, something, something…

**Bright, bright gold, with a few hidden braids woven in. A bloody red wave and two moons; one blue and one grey**

Nazir was yelling.

**Deep mahogany slabs framing two sharp blue crystals and the sharp smell of sword polish on steel**

A soldier was grabbing at his feet.

**Soft little hands, quiet laugh and flowers Dragons tongues, lavender sprigs and daisy petals**

The coffin looked better than ever.

**Bright gold eyes and burnt gold fluff all wrapped up in a clawed and fanged little bundle**

xxx

“Listener…”
He doesn’t even know he is awake yet. He just feels cold. Cold and tired. It eats into his bones; this cold. His face feels half-crushed, and maybe it is. He finds himself drifting in between memories, and they never hurt like they did now. Just more to be added to the razor sharp “Before I was Free” box in the back of his head. He promised himself he would lock that box; never let anything happen that could be filed away in there. Now, he guessed he would have to rename it. But that is neither here nor there, now.

_The hard, twisting forms of the Shadow Scales, while training with Veezara._

_The light press of hands against his when crushing alchemy ingredients for Babette._

_The sharp prick of needles when knitting with Gabriella goes wrong._

_The twisting, deep hunger when sat in the Pine Forest with Arnbjorn after a long run under the moon._

_The sick feeling when Festus starts teaching him how to tear flesh from bone with Telekinesis._

“Hurry Nazir! He’s in the coffin!”

_The quiet talks about her uncle and stabbing him to death while he was still fucking into her-_

“I can’t move any faster leech! This thing is as heavy as-“

_The hushed talk of Gabriella, telling him how she is going to die, broken upon a table in the-_

“I’m not exactly built for manual labour-“
The growling of Arnbjorn when he explains about the Companions. The smoky, almost beef-like taste of the whelp-

“One-

The whispers that he shared with Veezara about the Shadow Scales. The way the young were locked in a tomb for a month and only the strong, only the hungriest-

“More-

The laughs as Babette explains away one of her survival strategies. The way they break off into frowns when she talks about the Volkihar vampire that stalked her for years-

“Pu-

“You must speak with Astrid. Here, in the Dark Brotherhood Sanctuary.”

The ache stops, leaving just a dull nothing. A hand is against his neck, but it isn’t Argis. Too rough, too desperate. Doesn’t smell like snow. He falls back, and the hands are around his back, lowering him to the ash-clogged floor. Nazir.

“Artan!”

The khajiit manages a small smile, “Hey there sandy knickers. How’s the world treating you?”

“Well, at least you haven’t lost your sense of humour, fleabag,” the Redguard smiles, hard and small. “Now I know why you decided to study conjuration. Want to make the cold ones a bit more responsive?”

“Ha-ha. You’re just jealous I got to cuddle with the night Mother. She’s just there if you want a go.”
“Sick fuck,” Nazir spits on the ground before throwing a hand out to help Artan up.

“How did you survive?” the cat bites out when he’s standing, glancing between vampire and Redguard.

“Your Atronachs busted in here expecting to find you. The one that was in with us went practically mad digging at the walls, and when she broke through another had cleared the way. Most of the fires were out by then, and Babette managed to set off some blizzard scrolls to combat the rest.”

“Speaking of that, we need to leave. This place is no longer structurally sound,” Babette spoke up, giving the entire place a wary little glare and stepping towards the exit.

Artan glanced at the vampire, before sitting up fully and pressing both hands against his knees. “First I need to find Astrid.” The shocked stares he got from the two of them meant only one thing. They hadn’t found her yet.

“She’s still alive?” Babette asked, hopeful.

“By Sithis I thought we had lost her!” Nazir slapped a hand to his thigh and let out a breathless laugh. It only took a moment for him to pick his sole surviving sword from the ashes beside the Night Mother’s coffin and sheath it on his hip.

The khajiit grumbled under his breath before pushing himself into standing straighter, sending a quiet order to Valencia to head towards Breezehome. Argis and Sofie were probably clawing their hair out after Penelope left them, and he didn’t even want to think about Lydia. Absently, he began picking away at the dried blood in his cheek-fluff, ignoring the chattering of Nazir and Babette behind him. He hadn’t even really realised where he was until-

“You… you…re…. alive…. Thank Sithis….”

The cat looked down to the charred, half-dead woman sprawled across the old Brotherhood Sanctuary cobbles, eyes burnt-blind and hair completely gone. He didn’t know why, but he couldn’t bring up enough energy to hate her. He couldn’t find it in himself to yell, or scream, or kill her. She was shaking, maybe with the chill but most definitely because of the pain. Artan coughed out a few times before he knelt at her side, readying his magika for a healing spell. “Don’t…. just don’t.”
“Astrid…” the cat bit out, angry.

“Please…. I have… to say this…. But not enough…. not enough time…” she pushed his hand away again, barely strong enough to do even that.

Her head fell back, thunking quietly against the rocks. Artan couldn’t help it; he gathered her up in his arms, wrapping most of his gloves and leg-guards in a light dust of frost to ease the pain of him touching her. “Astrid if I don’t…”

“I’m sorry.”

Artan glanced up at her face, focusing on the clumped, oozing wounds there instead of the rest of her. “For what? You were trying to protect the things you love. I can’t knock you for that.”

“Maro said he would leave the family alone forever. If we gave him you….”

Artan sighed, and tugged her closer. She was so frail, like this. He had seen her behead a man at thirty paces with a thrown battle-axe. He had seen her wrestle Arnbjorn to the ground in his wolf form by using subtle disabling techniques and his own strength against him.

“I was a fool, trusting that… I have killed us all… I nearly killed you…. you… you only tried to protect us… even… Everyone is dead because I… because I believed him…”

“Sithis will judge you in the Void. I hope he treats you fairly,” Artan said, the words tasting bitter.

The woman jerked in his grasp, blind eyes attempting a glare through the pain. “Don’t pity me. I deserve whatever… whatever I get… I betrayed you… and the dread father…. And was betrayed in kind…. It is fitting…. It has to be this… this way….”

“Astrid…”

“No. I wanted things to… to go back… before Cicero… before the Night Mother…” The Nord
snarled, shaking her head, arms giving out so she crashed back down into the Khajiit’s arms. She frowned, eyes hard, but voice sad. Unbelievably sad. “Before you…”

He didn’t know what to say to that.

“But you’re alive, Artan.” He glanced back into her cloudy eyes, rimmed with dirt and angry, painful tears. “So this isn’t the end…. Rebuild us…. From the ground… up… make the brotherhood something to be… feared….”

“We can do that. Together. Let me-“

“Don’t you see? I prayed to her!” Astrid pushed away, feebly, but away none the less. Until she was lying on her back amongst the dirt and debris, she didn’t stop. “I am the black sacrament. She was right. You were right… the old ways… I was wrong to oppose them. We are a family… but… I am not its head…”

“I don’t… I don’t understa-“

“I am your first contract as the Leader, Artan. Finish… this. Now…” she snarled, and for a moment, Astrid was back.

Artan didn’t move. The Blade of Woe was a mere reach away, and the mark before his eyes. But it was Astrid. The woman who had tied him up, gagged him, and hauled him off to an abandoned shack in the woods to see if he could be a Brother. She welcomed him here, to her home, to become someone more than just another mask to get by. She gave him his first stepping stone into becoming Artan. Before her, he was just Garma in an Artan mask, going through the motions. She let him into their world where nothing mattered but actions. His tail, his fur, his ears, his race, none of that mattered. Only what he did mattered. He wasn’t a pet to be collared, or a blade to be unsheathed for battle.

It was them that made him want to actually settle here. It was them that made him think he could actually have a life here. That he was more than just a tempered blade or a pet. He wasn’t a nameless Thane, or another sell sword. He wasn’t a skooma dealer. He wasn’t just a cat with a butter knife. He wasn’t a slave. He wasn’t property. He was Brother Artan, not Garma. Larethius’ legacy wasn’t mirrored in their eyes the way it had been in others. Ulfric had looked at him like one would look at a stay dog. Ralof looked at him like Tavan had looked at him. And from then on, all Garma could see was one lofty Nord after another that hated elves with more passion than they had for their wives.
It was funny, because they acted just like the elves they hated; Nords are the one true race, Nords deserve better, Nord land, Nord pride, Nord women, Nord Brothers, Nord Sisters. All the same things that the elves had preached when he served Larethius. Elves are the superior race, elves deserve better, Aldmeri land, Aldmeri pride, Mer women, Mer Brothers, Mer Sisters. Same, same, same. But when he met Lydia, he had met the first, and supposedly only Nord that he had ever thought he could consider a friend. She was like Eirian, in the sense that he had never thought he could ever befriend an elf after everything. But Lydia had surprised him, again and again. She looked at him in the same way Eri did. Lydia treated everyone the same, regardless. And when she had punched a man for muttering ‘pelt’ under his breath as they passed, Artan knew he had made a mistake in judging her. He was her Thane, and now her friend. And he thought she would be the only Nord he could call a friend. And the ridiculous love-hate relationship he had with Iona after that.

Iona was the first Nord he actually murdered a bunch of people for. She was the main reason why he had even considered becoming friends with Argis in the first place, rather than just using and abusing him. He knew he could have done the walk, talked the talk and gotten the man into bed within a month, but after Iona, he found that he couldn’t. When he first saw the brute in Markarth, that was what he wanted. Wham, bam, thank you man. But after all the business with Iona, well. He found he couldn’t actually do it. Because he had already surprised himself by befriending his second Nord.

Once is a coincidence, but twice?

And then the beginnings of a tentative friendship with The Bulwark, and meeting Astrid…. It snowballed. Astrid was the one to make him want to stay. She didn’t give two shits if he was seventeen feet tall and had a pineapple for a dick. If he was loyal to the family and did his job well, then he was alright in her book. And within a few months, he had realised that he had once again surprised himself by having a strange arrangement of friends that actually would stick by him. At first it was duty, and then it was because of friendship. In the College, in the Brotherhood, and even with his housecarls.

All because a rag-tag bunch of assassins took him under their wing.

But without them, he wouldn’t have bothered signing up for multiple Thaneships. He wouldn’t have actually begun trying to court Argis. He wouldn’t have adopted Sofie. It was only because they gave him the option, gave him a reason to stay that he did. They let him realise that he could actually have a life as Artan. They were the stepping stone to him realising what he had actually accomplished in his time in Skyrim.

Lydia had been an accident. They had thrown her at him with a title and a house, saying it was because of his great deeds. He didn’t do much at all, really. But even then, even when they became tentative friends, he would have eventually left. It wasn’t until a few months in, after a few contracts, a few meals in the sanctuary, a few conversations, a few more friendships made, a few more
Housecarls in his service…

He noticed he wasn’t just pretending to be Artan.

He was Artan.

He had a daughter, several Thaneships, an honorary title at a prestigious college, a new courtship with a Nordic man, and enough scattered friends throughout the province that he could roll into near enough any town and have a free meal and bed. Unwittingly, he had actually settled in Skyrim.

And this woman was indirectly the cause of where he was today.

A woman who had set him up to die because she wanted to protect what she loved in the world. Something he had done many, many, many times. He killed Ulfric in a rage for attacking Lydia. He killed Rolff Stone-Fist for attacking Shavee. He had nearly murdered Jarl Maven of Riften for kidnapping his housecarls, and that was only the tip of the iceberg. He would be old and grey if he had to list every single person he had sent to the Void for hurting or even threatening the things he held dear. He had even madly dashed in and melted a dwemer automation that had attacked Argis. Trying to explain that one had been nigh impossible, especially since Faralda’s destruction-magic expertise only went so far.

“Astrid. I’m sorry, but I’m not sorry I came here.”

“You know… I don’t regret meeting you…. I know that you will keep the Brotherhood safe…. Artan… Thank you…” The blade slid home with ease, and strangely, Artan actually felt sick when the blood gushed out. “Goodnight, Astrid.”

“My Listener…” The khajiit stood, sliding the Blade of Woe into his empty leg-sheathe, and stepped forwards, away from the corpse, and into the main entryway for the Sanctuary. He turned to face Nazir and Babette, the girl sat upon Astrid’s old desk, and the man slumped against one of the scorched bookcases. He shook the tiny, grasping voice from his head, and met both the vampire and Redguards eyes.

“This…. This is a fucking mess… I guess this is the end…” Babette sighed, eyes wrinkling at the edges.
“Not yet. The Contract on the Emperor is still on.”

“What? There is still a chance? But... the plan has gone to hell, and everyone is dead,” Nazir growled, hot-coal eyes drilling into Artan’s own. The cat was silent a moment, simply shifting from one foot, to the other, and back.

He eventually sighed, flattening his ears with a palm. “Our family lives on, Nazir. We aren’t down and out just yet. Trust me to do this.”

The redguard growled, and rubbed irritably at the scarf wrapped about his crown. “Fine. Fine. Go see that wretch Motierre and send that shit-stain Emperor to the Void. Don’t bother coming back here. We’ll make our heading the Dawnstar Sanctuary. I’ll try to set the place up as best I can. I’ll pull in a few favours and move the Night Mother,” Nazir snarled out, pushing himself up onto his feet.

“Cicero will be there to greet you. I had him begin setting up a hideout there,” the cat sighed again, pointedly not looking behind him.

“You spared him?” Nazir shouted in surprise, looking from a slightly surprised Babette to an unrepentant Artan.

“On the Dread Lord’s command. He spoke through Lucien, the spectre that we can summon,” the cat shrugged.

“Well, it looks like that was a good choice then. At least we will have a somewhat friendly face. It’s a shame that a Jester is one of the only ones to survive, but we will have to just persevere.”

“As always,” The cat smiled.

“Babette, what are you-“ Nazir looked to the girl, who cut him off easily.

“I’ll head with Artan until Whiterun. After that, there are lots of glens I can pass through to get to the Sanctuary. I think it best if I meet the Jester first. I can... calm him down.”
“Good idea. Just don’t let him have any carrots,” Artan made an ugly hissing sound in his throat and shook his head to dispel whatever image that memory cooked up.

“What…?” The vampire looked less than impressed.

“He… gets a bit… weird,” Artan shrugged.

Babette stared at him, deadpan. “I will take that under advisement.”

“Hmm.”

Lydia sighed and put the cabbage back into the wooden box by the stall’s foot, mentally writing off the idea of a cabbage stew for supper. It had been maybe three days since they had made Whiterun, and still no word from Artan. After seeing the cat on his run from Solitude, she had felt uneasy. They had expected him to meet them at Breezehome yesterday. But still there was no sign of the critter.

Argis was jittery, Sofie was on edge, and she had no way to console either.

Jakk was the only one who was able to relax in the slightest. He had washed out the dye in one of the lakes around the Hold in preparation for his brother’s return, and had that regular brown-gold colour once again. He couldn’t, however, hide how much he had begun to drink. Hopefully-

“Did you hear?” a nearby guard tittered to his fellow, stood beside Belethors general goods. “They’re saying the Dark Brotherhood has been destroyed. Wiped off the face of Tamriel by the Penitus Oculatus. Apparently the Solitude Guard uncovered an assassination plot by one if the Emperors Elite guardsmen, and they managed to corner the assassin he employed in the Tower. They say that Commander Maro managed to send another group on to their nest and killed them all.”

“Really? By Talos, I never thought I’d see the day without a Black Hand.”

“Yeah, but you know it’s not the end.”
“Oh?”

“Yeah. They have Sithis at their backs.”

“The Nords had Talos, and look where that Rebellion ended up.”

“To be fair, the Imperials had a Dragonborn. That might even up the field.”

“Yeah, but Ulfric could use the thu’um as well. It must have been a whopper of a fight.”

Lydia didn’t even notice when the guards had wandered away into the Cloud District. She was still dumbstruck, a clump of meat dangling from her slackened grip.

xxx

4E. 203 Late Morning Star

The world was quiet and dark when he finally rolled up to the Honningbrew Meadery. He only felt slightly bad for stealing a hunter’s clothes from his hut, but he couldn’t return to Whiterun in Brotherhood Assassin Armour. He would have been a stuck pig already if he had. The dye had washed off pretty easily, and he felt… normal. His irrational bout after Solitude… that was gone. Whatever had happened, he was back to normal now. He would lock that little piece of madness away in his mind, just like the other things that disturbed him.

He sighed, and pressed forwards, regular Artan again.

The guards welcomed him home, cracking jokes, making vulgar remarks, and one even threw him a bottle of mead. “Sorry lads, I would stay but I have a daughter to return to.”

“Oh? That sprightly tot? Sweet one, that kid. You adopted her?”
“Yeah. A Blessing upon me, right?” the cat grinned back, slapping a hand to the guard’s back.

“Definitely, Thane,” the man nodded back, grin in his tone.

He stepped into the city proper, waving behind him at the guards on the gate. Breeze home was quiet, even when he was stood upon the doorstep. His key was barely in the door when it swung open, almost dragging him inside. Lydia was stood in his face, practically screaming in rage, which bled out into joy, back to rage, and then tears. Her arms locked around his neck, and he found himself with an armful of crying Ice Queen.

The house exploded in an instant.

A huge, hulking Nord flew out, catching them both around the waist and lifting them from the floor in a monumental hug. The burnt-gold khajiit behind him slipped out, before simply leaping up to attach himself to Artan’s back, both arms wound around his chest. Sofie’s screeches added to the symphony of sound, quieting only for the moments she spent climbing Lydia and Argis to wedge herself between the Nord woman and the Khajiit.

And in that crazy, crushing moment, Artan figured out why he had bothered jumping into the Night Mother’s coffin at all.

xxx

“We heard that the Sanctuary had gotten attacked, and the assassin in the Tower at Solitude was cornered and killed on site,” Lydia hissed quietly, trying in vain to keep her voice down.

Artan wove a clawed hand through Sofie’s hair, her head pillowed on his chest. He had barely managed to hustle them all back into the house, let alone make them all let go and sit down. Tea was nearly impossible. Sofie had passed out at some point, cuddled into his side on one of the chairs. “They tried to. But they didn’t have the firepower to keep me there. Maro disappeared, and I couldn’t find him. So I high tailed it back to the Falkreath sanctuary. I was late. Nearly everyone was dead. Festus was stapled to a tree with arrows, Veezara had been… they cut off his tail and… Ambjorn was slaughtered with silver swords. They broke Gabriella’s legs and killed her slow. I barely managed to save Nazir. Babette had been on the hunt during the attack, and was trying to get back when I got there. I had to kill Astrid in the end. And now?” The cat laughed, sharp and dry, “I am the Leader of the Brotherhood. I’ll be designating jobs, sending out assassin pups to kill for coin, and Dibella knows what else.”
“Shit,” she growled back, rubbing a hand through her hair.

“Yeah,” Artan agreed.

“What… what can we do?” she asked, folding her arms across her chest.

Artan looked from Lydia to Argis, since Jakk had already gone to bed in the back room. “What do you mean?”

“What will make all of this easier,” Lydia said, eyes intent.

Artan smiled. “You guys have already done more than enough.”

Lydia glared at him, huffing into her tea. “Whatever. I’ll leave you to sleep on it.” The woman set her cup aside before standing from the rug beside the fire. Before Artan had even properly processed it, she had picked Sofie from his chest and begun ascending the staircase. “Don’t stay up too late. There’s a lot to do tomorrow.”

“Yes mother,” the cat snarked.

She blew a raspberry back at him, and then she was gone.

Argis’ gruff chuckle sounded out, but Artan barely had a moment to glance over when the Nord was already beside him, tucking his thickset arms under knees and around the khajiit’s back. “I’m guessing you’re exhausted, Thane.”

“Artan, you ass.”

Argis’ entire chest vibrated with his quiet laughter, ignoring the snide growling of his Thane. Artan was a bit lost when he suddenly appeared in his own room, already laid out on the furs with a retreating Argis in the hall. “Oi, Nord. Where are you running off to?”

“The Bannered Mare. I’ve slept next to you when you’re dog-tired before, and well… Let’s just say it
wasn’t as pleasant as advertised.”

“Hey now, that was Rikke who ruined it all. If she hadn’t appeared in the doorway at a ridiculous hour then it would have been the best sleep of your life,” Artan waggled his eyebrows, tail flickering in pleasure when the Nord grinned back at him.

“That’s mighty big talk from someone who had to be carried to bed,” Argis smirked.

“Don’t leave,” the cat said, almost inaudible.

Argis smiled, faintly. “Is that an order?”

“It’s a request,” Artan sniffed.

“Yes, my Thane,” the Bulwark bowed slightly, and was rewarded with a quick slap to his flank when he settled on the free side of the bed.

“Artan, you goddamn ass,” Artan grumbled.

“Yes, Thane Artan,” Argis replied as seriously as he could.

Even more growling and half-hearted poke to his ribs was worth the needling.

xxx

“When were you going to tell me you were an assassin?”

Artan looked up from his fried eggs, catching Sofie’s eyes with his own. She didn’t look disgusted or angry; just curious. As if she was asking about Conjuration or sword techniques. He didn’t have any idea how to play it.
“Because you didn’t trust me?” She frowned, then.

“What? Of course that isn’t the reason! I didn’t tell you because if you knew it would have put you in danger. It’s a parent’s job to protect their children,” Artan tried, but her eyes set into a sharp little glare.

“…”

“What?” He asked when her jaw clacked shut instead of replying to him.

“Some people need assassinating. Just… please… promise me that you will always return home,” she glanced away, unable to retain the eye contact. “I don’t want to bury two fathers,” the girl looked up from staring at her plate of food, eyes holding that strange, dark little gleam it had on the road to Solitude. They had just finished the dried meat he had kept in his pack, and had been talking about survival. She had taken on a similar hunted look then, a look that made him want to kill everything nipping at her heels. It made him train her in basic conjuration, and agree to teach her sword fighting. He saw a battered little cub that hadn’t grown into its claws yet.

“For you? Anything,” he nodded.

“That is what I am afraid of, pa,” the girl smirked at him, brows raised.

“Yeah, yeah. Finish your breakfast and go explore. Lydia says you didn’t leave the house once.”

“No. I was waiting for you,” Sofie smiled, all sunshine.

Artan didn’t have anything to say to that, and instead shooed her off. He Shovelled the last of his food into his face, waved goodbye to Lydia and swept out into the sunshine. First, he would hunt that fuck-bag Mot-

The Alik’r warrior breezed past him, muttering insults in Yoku.

The guard leading him to the Whiterun Gates just yelled some kind of insult his way and threw him out of the threshold, two other gatekeepers laughing lowly at the sprawled warrior. “She is a snake,
Guard! You might very well be writing your city’s demise with your inaction!”

Artan couldn’t even move.

He could smell the spices, and the incense that came with their militia, the delicate undercurrent of desert flowers and open sandy hills. The Whiterun guards were milling around him, unaware of his world falling apart.

“You,” Artan yelled, pointing to a now very nervous guard. The cat strode towards him until he could poke a finger into the man’s leather chestplate and settle a hearty glare on him.

“…? My thane?” he asked, looking the cat from head to toe. His watch partner didn’t seem to want to jump to his defence, which in hindsight wasn’t that surprising.

“What did that Alik’r want?” the cat hissed.

“Oh. Apparently some traitor from Hammerfell has fled here. They said she was…. oh Talos what was it? An exile from house Sada? Suda?” The guard shrugged, a tight little thing. If only he had listened better when the Captain was telling them this morning.

“From the City of Taneth?” Artan asked, sounding even more highly stung than before. How that was possible went over the guard’s head completely.

“That was it. Bastards don’t even know if she is here, but it didn’t stop them harassing the locals.Fuckers,” he snarled, forgetting how terrified he was a moment ago.

“Thank you, guardsman. I will make sure they do not bother you or the citizens again,” Artan smiled at him, and the guard noticed how the pressure the cat was exuding before was suddenly gone. The Thane slapped him on the shoulder and gave him a reassuring smile before taking a few steps back.

“Blessings upon you, thane,” the guard nodded, thanking whatever deity there was listening that he was not the Alik’r warrior that their thane was looking for.

The first thing he did after waving the man off was turn on his heel and head outside, into the
surrounding plains. He practically ran past all the guards until he saw the man, meeting up with his fellows beside the Whiterun stables.

“Oi.”

The warriors turned, and in an instant, he wondered if they would actually try to kill him.

“Don’t bother. You kill me, and the Whiterun guards will have your heads on pikes before you can say ‘Oh shit.’” The cat snarled, in no mood to be fucked with today.

“What do you want, cat?” One of them asked. He guessed it was one of the ones furthest from him.

“I want to help you catch Iman,” he supplied, as if it was obvious.

“Why would her partner betray her?” Another asked, this time a deeper voice.

Another man in their tight nit, readily-drawing-their-swords group growled, “It is what monsters like him do. Betray the ones closest to them.”

“She betrayed me first,” The cat sighed, crossing his arms. “After she got caught stealing from her family vault in Taneth she ran away to a nearby merchant who safeguarded her. He was my patron back in the day. We had too much to drink, and I was foolish enough to tell her about my slave background. She connected the dots, and figured out that the Dominion would pay her handsomely for my head. So she sold me out to the nearest Justicar, and I got hunted down like an animal. I figured it to be her, and so told them everything she had told me about Taneth.” Artan shrugged, “If she hadn’t have given out that kind of information, then your city wouldn’t be ash right now.”

“You are the one who told the elves our weaknesses,” the leader sighed. “You are as much to blame as she is; slave or no.”

The khajiit laughed.

It had a strange effect on the Alik’r. They shuddered in their boots; only slightly, and it was quick enough that it might have been a trick of the eye, but it didn’t matter. Their eyes told enough. He was
“I was a slave to Eldunarto Larethius, high esteemed advisor to Ambassador Elenwen.” He paused, just to let it sink in. The warriors seemed to sink into themselves at that, eyes on the ground, on the sky, on the trees; just not looking at him. “Everyone’s heard of him, most likely. It’s elves like him that make people like you join the Resistance. He’s not as famous in Skyrim, but it looks like you guys know him well enough.”

“We have heard… the rumours…”

“The rumours pale in light of the truth, warrior. I spent nearly nineteen years as a pet to that man. I saw a lot of disgusting things there. You can only imagine. Do you still wonder why I decided to sell out Taneth for myself? Why I gave the Dominion that information?”

“Coward.”

Artan’s head flicked to one of the warriors, easily the youngest. A few of the others glanced at him, eyes half-white. “A real man would have fought them off.”

Artan smiled at him, “And risk getting dragged back to that man? No thank you.”

“He is broken, now,” the man bit back, reeling for some kind of foot to stand on.

“He is not broken; he is hibernating. Would you go near a dragon with a broken leg?”

The Alik’r glared at him, young face not even slightly wise yet. “You are still wrong. To give up an entire city to save your own hide?”

“I will explain, so you, a stupid child, will understand,” Artan said, and he knew the sweet tone he had taken had lulled the boy into some kind of security.

The other warriors didn’t even bother trying to stop him. They had already heard enough, it seemed. One of them looked ready to puke, run or cry. Maybe a mix of all three. This one, well this one needed a little lecture to help him along. It only took a flicker of shock magic to make him drop his
swords, and even then only a gentle current to stop him from running or fighting. Artan had his hand in the hollow of the man’s jaw, thumb pressed into his jugular for more security. He needn’t have bothered; the boy wouldn’t run.

“Larethius is known for his cruelty throughout the Dominion’s underworld. He is known as a butcher, and the only things he spares are elves. I will tell you a little of the man, and then you can judge whether or not I am still a monumental asshole for never wanting to see his forsaken face again.”

“When I was ten, we went to one of his many hillside cottages for a vacation from his work. Elenwen gave him a month off for excellent work done, and he took me and most of the other khajiit slaves out with him. He had enough bodyguards to fill ten wagons, and even then some had to walk. We ran across a group of fleeing Argonians. Apparently they were on the run from Dunmer mercenaries who wanted to sell them on to slavers in Morrowind.”

The boy twitched, hands attempting to rise in order to push the cat away; Artan ignored the effort.

“He said, ‘a slave belongs and its masters feet.’ So he had his men skin the entire lot of them alive to make boots and armour to wear for the hot weather. After the ‘main entertainment,’ of course. They cut off their tails to make things… easier. Swords, brooms, ladles, whatever was on hand. And only when they were screaming for mercy, begging for death, did he left the first de-scaling blade be used. He left them to die like that, shaking, cold and skinless in the woods for the wolves to eat.”

The boy’s eyes widened in shock, and Artan let his throat go. He didn’t even try to move away, instead just paralysed with… fear? Pity? Artan didn’t care.

“When we got to the cottage, Larethius’ blacksmith had already treated the skins and was taking measurements for the armour. But some bandits had taken up refuge in the cottage while they were gone. Killed the elven soldiers put there to defend the place. They were on pikes outside that he usually had the national flag on. His men killed most, but a few were taken prisoner. Larethius had his men uproot the pikes and move them further away. Said he didn’t want the screams to ruin his dinner.”

The boy stumbled backwards, until he was sat upon one of the haystacks in the stable. The other Alik’r were similarly stricken, but Artan didn’t stop. He didn’t think he could, after going so far already.

“He had them impaled like skeevors on a spit. They took days to die; he had the pikes made specifically to draw out the pain, and was mildly surprised to find out that the badits knew what they
were for. It made him feel less lonely to know that someone else was as cruel as him. The smell of their dying practically stunk out the slave shed, to the point that nearly every cat there was sick before the end of the night. The bandits begged for death to anyone who passed, and only one was stupid enough to try and grant them mercy.”

The boy looked up at him, wiping away the beginnings of drool-sick from his chin.

“My father tried to kill them, or at least drug them. Tavan, one of Larethius’ personal bodyguards found him needling them with drugs to make them pass out.”

“What… what…”

“Larethius had my father thrown up on a neighbouring pike. And when he was dead, Larethius permanently enthralled him to make a point to the rest of us. That we were alive on a whim; and he would be the master regardless of if we were dead or alive.”

“Oh… oh my…”

“Every day when we walked the halls, tending to the guards or to the master himself, we ran across my father. Thralls don’t decay. They stay frozen as they were. They don’t moult their winter furs, they don’t cry or scream, and they don’t talk. They just walk around, do as their told, and that is it. On the last night in the cottage, he gathered us all up; me and my baby brother included, and showed us why we were his slaves.”

The boy threw up everything in his guts, everything.

Artan didn’t even spare him another glance, instead looking to the far-off plains that bordered the city. He didn’t have it in him to feel bad about the boy. He figured he was a sick old fuck.

“He had my father’s dead body murder my mother in front of all of us.” The boy was still shaking when Artan looked back to him, eyes downcast. “Don’t you get it? It doesn’t matter if I told the Thalmor or if she did. When it comes from one of Larethius’ men, you do what you are told, even if it means throwing away all of your morals. Otherwise, you end up as a set of armour, or as a decoration, or as an example to other unruly things that displease his eminence,” Artan didn’t know when he started snarling, but there it was.
“You…” the leader seemed at a loss for words, shaking his head in a mix of disbelief, disgust and fear.

“Are going to bring Iman to you. She nearly got me caught by his men. If she hadn’t told them my whereabouts, then I wouldn’t have had such a close shave. If her father had killed her like my patron suggested he do, then we wouldn’t even be talking right now. Taneth would still be intact and safe. Don’t try and pin all of this on me, because I refuse to be a scapegoat for your ridiculous shit.”

“Why are you helping us?” the leader ground out, teeth clacking together at the end.

“Helping you? I am simply protecting my city. I am a thane here, and I don’t need Thalmor banging on the door because she is here. They want her too, remember? And they’ll use her to try and get to me. They’ll have had her tailed, and if a Thalmor in-line with Larethius appears here, then I’m fucked. Let alone what would happen to a city that harboured someone like me, especially one in Skyrim so soon after the treaty. It would be a fucking field day between the elves barging in and the Nord populace going batshit over the-”

“My Thane.”

Artan turned sharply to face Argis, stood with the sabre-cat stance he had when Artan had first ever seen him. It was a stance that the Nord took when on the offensive; when he was first enlisted as a housecarl, on their first outing together, and one of the staples of their early relationship. It had been forever since Artan had seen the ramrod straight stance, the glitter of ice-cold Nord rage in his eyes, and the sharp, almost clipped tone.

“Lydia has found Motierre. Directions?” Argis said, and Artan knew from his tone that the Nord was at a unknown level of rage right now.

Artan spoke carefully, “I have to talk to him, and then I will proceed. Alik’r, come back to this spot in two days. I’ll have your goods by then. Good day, warriors.”

The cat surged forwards, hand clapping to the steel-plate gauntlet on Argis’ arm before leading the way back to the city. The silence as they walked was heavy, and sharp like broken glass. Artan couldn’t even find it in him to ask how much the Bulwark had heard, but it was obviously enough.

“Why didn’t you kill Elenwen when you were at the Embassy?”
The khajiit turned slightly in his stride, looking back at the prowling mass of rage behind him. “Because if I had, it would have brought Larethius down on our heads. He would have known I had something to do with it, or at least Jakk. Arnien was too much of a pussy to have done something like that, so he wouldn’t have been a possible suspect. If it wasn’t for me and Jakk guiding him that night, then he wouldn’t have escaped at all.”

“They are never going to take you.”

Artan stopped, looking back at the now shaking Nord man, oblivious to the stares from the gatekeepers, as well as their subtle shuffles away from him. Argis was shuddering all over in barely contained rage, so much so that the cat himself almost took a step back. The khajiit took a step towards the Nord, hand gently squeezing one of the tight fists until it opened. He slid his own fingers in before Argis could clench them again, and instead tugged the bubbling Nord towards the market. “Let’s go find us a traitor.”

“What?” Argis growled. It was a fully fledged one that a cat might be proud of.

“Iman is here.” Artan jerked his head towards the town proper before taking a stride into the lower market.

“That woman? Where?”

“Somewhere in the city,” Artan motioned around them, tugging again at the Bulwark’s hand to make him keep up.

“It would be rude to not pay an old friend a visit, Artan,” Argis chided, almost sounding light and bubbly.

The cat laughed.

xxx

Lydia sighed, glaring daggers at the seated nobleman. “You know, if you hadn’t been a glory-grabbing guttersnipe then we wouldn’t be in this situation.”
“I beg your pardon?” Amaund sputtered, straightening in his seat.

“Instead of climbing the ladder yourself, you try and cut the competition? Where is your honour? Where is your morality? You kill a man that has only tried his best for his Empire, and yet sit there confused when I insult you,” Lydia sounded a mix of irritated and confused, which in turn confused Amaund.

He eventually gathered himself, because he half-asked “How do you-“

“Because I do,” she spat. “Just thank Talos that I am bound by my own creed. You would be dead otherwise.”

“So, I am safe?” Amaund seemed to slump a little, at that.

“With me keeping you alive, yes,” the woman griped, sounding put upon.

“Then I am-“

“STOP. WHAT ARE YOU-“ a scream broke their tight little argument from the main room, making the already jittery Amaund squeak loudly.

“Thane business, my good lady. Please, ignore us,” Artan’s voice filtered through the hubbub and quietened the room.

Lydia stood, looking out into the main tavern to see Artan with a fistful of a woman’s hair, promptly dragging her back into the kitchens. Argis sent them a dark look, before he spotted Lydia. She hadn’t seen him so…

He looked like…

“Lydia,” the other Nord nodded jerkily in greeting.
“What happened?” she asked.

“He ran into some Alik’r,” Argis ground out. And it was then that she realised his Western accent got thicker when he was angry.

“Fuck,” she settled on, since she couldn’t find any other words.

“Hmmm,” the Bulwark grunted, settling to lean on one of the bedrooms many, many wardrobes.

xxx

When he spotted her, she spotted him.

She tried to scream, but he was already in her face, a fist in her hair, and the innkeep was already screaming. Utgerd went to stand, but Artan yelled out about thane business and they all begrudgingly let him drag her into the kitchens. If he had known how beneficial it was to be Thane he would have become one sooner. It would have solved a lot of problems.

“Hello, my little dove,” he cooed out, but she didn’t even appreciate his kind tone.

“Fuck you, you goddamn-“ she snarled, but it cut off pretty sharpish.

Artan slammed her head into the desk, sending the inkwell, books, papers and other such desk paraphernalia into the air. She shrieked, but nobody came running. The khajiit didn’t dwell on *that* nasty little thought. He carried on in Yoku, “Why? Why did you sell me out to them? Did they attack you? Drug you up? Threaten Dhaji? What?”

Imran snarled at him like an angry dog, “What? They are only rough with monsters like you! Do you know how much they offered me? I could take Dhaji to Solstheim and live as a mining baron! I had all of the paperwork set up, and even got ready to sign the deed to the place!” The redguard growled again, a low rumble in her chest that was dwarfed by her struggles. They died away eventually, when she noticed that the cat hadn’t replied.

“What? Did you really think we were friends? As if I would lower myself to being friends with a
“dirty ass-licker like-“

Artan slammed her head against the desk again.

Stunned, she was unable to stop him from dragging her back into the main drinking hall, throwing her to Argis with a rather bored expression. “Take her to Dragonreach Dungeon please. If they ask, tell them that it’s under my orders. We will deliver her to the Alik’r in two days.”

“Artan, I don’t understand what my barmaid-“ Hulda asked, sounding more irritated than anything.

“Your barmaid has been lying to you about her identity, Hulda. Her real name is Iman Suda, of House Suda in Hammerfell. She is expected in Hammerfell within the month to appear before a trial for treason. Iman here sold out the city of Taneth to the Thalmor so she could run away with her lover. She is the reason why the city fell during the Great War.”

“Wha-What?” Hulda stepped back, eyes wide.

“He’s lying! I would never-” Iman growled, but Artan cut her off.

“My information is always on point, miss,” he said.

“Why the hell do you think you are, arresting me like-“

“I am one of the Thanes here,” Artan grinned as her face fell.

“You…. they… You-“

“Yup. A dirty ass-licker like me. Argis, if you please,” Artan motioned to the door, and the bulky man nodded primly in response.

“Yes, my Thane.”
A tirade of Yoku insults flowed from her mouth, and Artan figured the conversation was pretty much over. He turned away, ignoring the pointed stare that Argis was sending him. The cat still had Amaund to deal with. The man himself was shaking visibly by the time Artan sat into the opposing chair, Lydia taking point behind him after closing the doors to the main tavern. “Surprised?”

“I… I heard the Brotherhood had been wiped out…!” he stuttered out.

“You heard wrong, good sir. Now tell me where the real one is,” Artan asked, cutting away all the fat from their previous conversations. He wasn’t talking shit, he was getting some proper fucking answers.

“You… The Brotherhood will honour the contract?” Amaund looked up at him, surprised.

“Yes. Now tell me where he is,” Artan bit out tiredly.

“The Katariah, moored just off the Solitude inlet. He has already gone to Vittoria’s funeral, and is getting ready to return to Cyrodiil. You won’t have long.”

“And where is Maro?” The khajiit asked, narrowing his eyes.

“The Commander? Heh, I would expect you to want to settle that score. Last I heard he was at the Solitude docks arranging the Emperors departure,” Amaund seemed to settle a little more with him in the room.

“Good. Stay here until I return,” Artan finished, standing to straighten out his robes.

“Yes. And then I can tell you where to receive your payment.” Amaund said, eyes flickering worriedly between Lydia and Artan when she didn’t follow him out.

“Keep in touch, Amaund,” the cat called when he had passed through the doorway, leaving them alone.

Xxx
It was dawn a day later when he finally arrived. Sofie had been angry, but she eventually relented. It was his job, after all. He had told her he was hunting the men who had hurt his friends, and she said no more. She didn’t have to; Sofie had liked Gabriella. Maro was stood at the end of the pier with a weak dawn light bleeding across him; eyes resting on that point on the horizon where the huge stone archway underneath Solitude framed the entire landscape like a painting. The Katariah was floating on the waves a little past him, almost silent in the early morning air. The scene looked kind of poetic, if one thought about it.

Artan moved quickly and quietly, just like always. Shadowmere had gotten him here with a breakneck pace that would have killed a normal horse. He was lucky with the gifts he had been given. He shook the thought away and instead swept into the Commander’s field of vision. Said man almost had a heart attack, upon realisation.

“You… YOU!!”

The knife slid in, and Maro jerked. He still tried to draw his sword, commendably, but Artan twisted the blade deeper into the man’s gut and shut down that option. “Blood and fear, you dog. Blood and fear.” The whisper made the man cry out, but Artan didn’t hear more. He had already pushed Maro away, absently watching him sink into the depths under the pier while he wiped his blade clean. A small, nasty part of him had wished that Maro was in the warehouse, or in the inn, or somewhere that wasn’t so open. But then again, he wasn’t looking to become a baby Tavan or a burgeoning Larethius. He was gone a moment later.

The swim was easy enough, as was the initial penetration. The Katariah was supposedly one of the best guarded ships in Tamriel, and yet a lone khajiit managed to get aboard without even a whisper. The first sailor goes quickly. The second is already covered in blood when Artan kills him, and the two already dead bodies in a nearby cabin have told enough of a story for him.

“I’m getting tired of looking over my shoulder all the time…”

Artan gave up on stealth. He leapt out into the main body of the ship; a large room with empty cells, a few tables, and most importantly two agents across from him. With a lithe little jump, he was stood on the railing overlooking the lower level of The Katariah, and with another he had leapt across, grappling the chandelier with both hands to swing across. One of the agents had barely mouthed out a warning to his fellow before he had landed on the nearest one, dagger jammed deep into his spine. Artan slammed his fist into that barely-screaming throat, silencing the other.
The cat gave a small wave in farewell to the choking Oculatus soldier, before skipping off the table and noting that the room had several adjoining rooms. And each of them, most probably, their own guard. He sighed, and eventually decided that he would show these fuckbags how to properly raid the enemy. Valencia and Penelope appeared like stars from behind the clouds, ready and already moving into position. Artan smirked.

“ATTACK.”

Xxx

The world is a blur, after that. He is hacking, blocking, jumping and sending spells out in a jumble, but they hold their own against the Penitus Oculatus. The drunken sailors are more of a hindrance than a help to the men, but still they tried anyway. Artan had killed the ship’s captain and the Lieutenant before he properly took stock of the situation, and was stood in front of the Emperor’s door within minutes of alerting the guards.

He had sent the Atronachs downstairs to start setting things on fire, but now… now he didn’t know. He shook the discontentment from his mind, and pushed open the door to the Emperors quarters. The old man behind the desk chuckled, and set his quill down. He didn’t scream. Didn’t beg for mercy, or offer money or gems. Just looked at Artan as if her were another politician. Calm and guarded. “And once again, I prove Commander Maro wrong. I told him you cannot stop the Black Hand. He is dead, I presume?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm. For burning your sanctuary to the ground, I expect,” the old man sighed, shaking his head.

“Yes,” Artan nodded again in affirmation.

“Hmm, I guessed as much. Assassins are people, under all that armour. It’s not surprising you retaliated as you did. Still,” the elderly man sighed lightly. Then, he almost looked confused. “You didn’t come all this way to stare at me, did you?”

“You… you want to die?” the cat asked, confused,
“No. But I know why you are here, and why this must be. I must die, and you must be the one who lands the blow. It is simply the way it is, child. One of my own men has ordered my assassination, correct? Maybe even a chancellor? An advisor?” The old man asked, sounding more like he knew and was being coy than actually asking.

“You’re still quick, old man,” the cat smiled, tight.

“Not quick enough, it seems. Would you allow the ramblings of an old man, before the deed is done?” Titus asked, smiling softly.

“I am listening,” Artan joked, but the old man didn’t know to laugh.

“And I thank you for your courtesy,” Titus inclined. “You are going to kill me, and I have accepted that. But you… I sense something more. An ambition. So I ask of you a favour. As an old man’s dying wish, if you will. There are many who have wished to see me dead, but one set the wheels in motion. Kill them. Whoever they may be, they must pay for their treachery. Do you not agree?”

Artan smiled, “Treachery must be punished. In that, we agree.”

“Good. Once they reward you for your service, kill the one who ordered the contract.”

“I will,” Artan nodded, resolute.

“Thank you, child.”

“For what it’s worth, I wish you were a different man,” the cat offered, voice soft.

“As in, you wish another was Emperor, or you wish I were a garish, monstrous fiend?” The old man cackled, running a hand across his balding head.

“The nobles I met in the past deserved to die. But you… You are different. I regret taking this contract. But The Night Mother will have no less than your life, Emperor.”
“I know. It is the way of the world,” he seemed to shrug a little at that, as if he were saying ‘ah well.’

“Different lives….?” The cat smiled, soft.

“Maybe. Maybe,” the elder smiled, shrugging the furred cape from his shoulders. “Maybe we were, in different lives. But right now, I am Emperor Titus Mede III, and you are my assassin. Let us on to business, yes?”

xxx

Iman cried when Artan threw her down between himself and Kematu, asking forgiveness, begging for her life, for mercy, for anything. Artan held back the sick feeling in his gut. Kematu was a tall, ebony skinned man that stood at least a head taller than the Khajiit, eyes like dark pits in his face. He was unbelievably happy he had the Ice Queen and Bulwark at his back to look intimidating, too. “Larethius will eventually find you, you know. The same way we found her.”

“Yes. I had figured,” Artan replied, deadpan.

“An enemy of an enemy is a friend, or at least an ally. Do you not agree?” Kematu offered.

“One of us will run into him sooner or later,” the cat grinned, shrugging.

“My money is on you, first,” the huge man nodded towards the cat.

“You’re the ones fighting the people he works for. I’d say we both have an equal chance of seeing him first,” Artan replied evenly.

“Hmm. Five hundred gold, for your service, Thane.” Kematu plopped the bag into Artan’s arms.

Artan tilted his head in curiosity, but still accepted the gold. “Service? I simply helped you track a traitor, Alik’r. It was my pleasure to offer aide. She will be tried and punished for her crimes?”

“As will we all.” Kematu nodded, sounding grim.
When he stepped into the backroom of the Bannered Mare, Amaund nearly yelled out in joy. He sent a quick glance at Lydia to make sure she hadn’t moved—which begged the question how much had she scared him?—and rubbed his hands together nervously. “You… he is dead, correct?”

“Yes. The Emperor is dead,” Artan sighed, rolling his shoulders.

“Good, I had heard that the Katariah was seen burning to a cinder in the Solitude bay, and well, I was nearly overwhelmed with joy. You do not know the service you have done for Tamriel, my friend!”

Artan refrained from glaring at the shaking man.

“Ah, but you care little for politics, right puss? You just care about the money. Your payment is inside an urn within the chamber in which we first met. Inside Volunruud.”

“You used to call me that.” Artan snarled, but Amaund wasn’t listening.

“I wish to extend our negotiations.” The man smiled, bright and clear.

“Excuse me?” apparently Artan sounded really fucking funny, because Lydia took one look at him and had to stifle her giggles in her fist.

“Become mine.” Amaund continued.

“What?” Artan asked lowly. Lydia actually laughed, then.

“My assassin. Work for me, exclusively. I still have many enemies, both within the court and
beyond. They work against the Empire, attempting to take the Throne for their own ends. Both Mer and man alike—“The man looked very surprised when the dagger slid in between his ribs. He had enough mind to grab at the khajiit’s clothes, eyes searching Artan’s for a reason, an explanation. “We… we had a deal…”

“I also had a deal with the Emperor. Kill the milkdrinker who ordered his assassination. And after meeting him, I couldn’t very well say no,” Artan sighed, twisting the dagger a little more. Lydia didn’t even bother to wait for him, and had already walked away. “And the funny part is that if you had been even a little more moral, we would never have met, and this wouldn’t be happening.”

“Curse… cuu-“

Artan threw the Breton backwards onto the bed, leaving the dagger in his gut. “It’s such a shame. But who knew that you had fallen into such a deep depression and wanted to end your own life? I wonder what your fellow Chancellors will say.”

The cat threw the forged note onto the bed, and with a little wave, walked away.

Xxx

The cat had barely set foot outside before Vilkas was in his face. The Nord was stood against the Bannered Mare’s sign, face like thunder under his stylised wolf helmet. Artan didn’t even have the time to curse his luck at the Companion finding him so early. He at least wanted to have a full nights rest without another issue dive-bombing into his life.

“We have business, khajiit,” Vilkas grunted, sounding like he wanted to be anywhere else.

“Indeed. Where is the Silver hand then?” he tried to sound interested, but apparently failed spectacularly, since Vilkas sent a fierce glare his way and bit out a curt response. “A ruin near Dawnstar.”

“Well that is convenient. I have business in Dawnstar. When shall we leave?”

“Tomorrow, I will bring Aela and Vilkas. Meet me at the front gates of Whiterun tomorrow at noon, and be on your best behaviour. I still do not know if I trust you, and won’t be as charitable this time around if I think you’re going to pull another disappearing act on us.”
“Aye-aye,” the cat pushed past him, ignoring the lupine growl. He didn’t have it in him to argue.

Vilkas and the other two companions were at the gate on time, with Eirian at their heels. Artan could hear her chirps above even the bustle of the market, which wasn’t all that surprising, really. She was trying to explain the history behind the Silver hand, their tactics and other things that they would have to look out for, but her lecture died in a scream as she noticed the cat. “Eltbet!”

“Heya Eri. Coming with us?” the cat asked, trying to sound cheerful.

“Yes, yes. Seliffrnsae. Who’s this?” She shook her head, waved her hands in an attempt to stop all the silly kittens’ questions, and almost pushed Artan over in her attempt to get closer to Jordis and Argis. “Ah. Mirie rielle. And you? Ah, never mind. You are Pelin-el. Never mind, I recognise them. We are going, then?”

“What did you say?” Artan asked, sounding more confused than Jordis looked.

“Nothing of import, Elbet. Ready?”

“Yes… well, yes,” Artan blinked, shaking the thoughts away.

“Then let us be off, on our wondrous journey!” Eirian crowed, clapping her hands and making a pointed little nudge with an elbow to make Vilkas start walking out onto the plains.

“We are going to kill a bunch of people, Eri.” Artan shook his head, deadpan.

The elf glanced at Artan, that hard, sharp little edge in her gaze. Her jagged smile made the cat laugh, although, none of the gathered knew why. The group made a slow, wavy stride towards the open plains of Whiterun, most of them missing the elf clapping the cat on the shoulder, and the giggled, “Just like old times, yes?”
“You lost an entire day?” Aela frowned. It was steep enough to make her words sound like they were frowning too. Artan shook off the chill.

“Yes. When I woke up, I felt cold, and I was in pain,” he muttered, making a throwaway motion with a hand.

“And you went on a rampage? Did you turn?” Aela still sounded monotone, neutral. Artan was glad for that.

“No. But it was as if I felt absolutely nothing. Everything became really distorted.”

“It sounds like another effect of the beastblood,” she grumbled. “When under enough stress, or when we get angry enough, we can fly into rages without even turning. It ends, but with incredible amounts of damage to surrounding citizens and even property. You’re lucky you didn’t hurt anyone.”

“Hmm,” Artan shrugged, looking from Aela and back to his plate. “I’m just glad I snapped out of it. It felt like it would never end.”

“Sometimes, it doesn’t.”

Artan left the lot of them in the Dawnstar inn, citing he needed to go see the nearby Jarl about buying land. He did, but ended up with an even longer errand-list that he just didn’t even want to look at. He had nodded, agreed to help the Hold, and was given the deed to the land. He thanked the powers that be that he remembered someone talking about the new plots up for sale at the New Life Festival, but now he was beginning to think that it was all an elaborate trap to bring in newcomers to sort out the Hold’s problems. Nobody in their right mind would let a myriad of monsters, bandits and the recently more insistent vampire hordes to rampage across their homesteads. It brings in coin for local lumber mills and more armoured guards to fit between the citizens and the riff raff; most importantly without encumbering the Holds own budget.

Or maybe he was being paranoid.
The sanctuary was as quiet as ever, even in the gentle tirade of snowflakes. The intimidating black door was a sharp smear of coal in the snowy landscape, so much so it was almost impossible for it to be a very secret hideaway. It was a badly kept secret in Dawnstar, especially since people with bloodied cloaks and lots of weaponry had started moving through again. It almost looked like Saturnalia in Hell, if there even was one. The smooth, almost otherworldly voice that echoed from the door was less jolly, however. He smiled to himself, and nearly fell ass-over-teakettle when the tripwire caught his boot. He flew, and landed hard on his face. Artan was quick to rectify himself, and instead, began creeping along the stone floor to the main chamber. He was silent, like a ghost amongst the ancient ruins. That entire tactic crumbled like stale bread when he spotted Nazir, bloodied on the main hall’s floor. Artan was on his feet in an instant, already trying to run down the nearby staircase, eyes ablaze.

“NAZIR!” he screamed and bolted.

Something caught his leg before he reached the redguard, and he once again landed hard on his muzzle, growling softly to himself. He was kicked, harshly onto his side, so he could look up, and saw-

“Cicero saves the day! Ha-ha! You fool! Sparing me, haha! What kind of assassin spares a mark? Tee-hee! I guess you thought I would be grateful, no? Kiss the feet of the man who spared me? Well, no. I won’t do that. I should be Listener! Not you!”

Artan barely managed to put a hand on his sword belt when the Jester kicked his hands away and knelt hard on his chest, legs straddling both arms, hand pressing hard on his collarbone to force him down. Artan pushed towards Oblivion, but his magika was completely gone. Poison? “No. None of that. Now, you DIE!”

Artan couldn’t even flinch.

The blade stopped, just above his throat.

And for a moment, Artan thought something Divine had saved him.

Until the Jester broke into a hearty laughter and Nazir’s prone corpse leapt up to break into its own laughing fit. Babette released her invisibility spell, appearing beside the staircase to fall across the lower two steps, cackling madly into her sleeves. “GOT you! Tee-hee!”
“Oh my fucking God, you scared the living shit out of me!” Artan shrieked, pushing at the little shits chest.

“Tee! Oh, if you could but see your own face, Listener!” The jester shuffled back until he was knelt over Artan’s knees, letting the cat sit up and rub at his shoulders. “Cicero has returned to serve. Not to kill the Listener, no, but to serve! Serve our Mother until one of us dies an agonising death! Ha-ha! Best friends forever!” The jester lurched forwards, throwing both arms around Artan’s neck to crush him against his chest, unwittingly pressing the dagger hard into the cat’s back.

“Ahhh. Well that’s nice, buddy. Can we stand up now?” Artan grumbled, waving a hand.

“Yes, yes, yes…” Cicero nodded, almost to himself, and stood.

“I am sorry, Artan. But when Cicero brought up the idea of spooking you, we just couldn’t resist,” Babette called out, dabbing her laughter-tears from her eyes. “It seems that the jester isn’t as much a fool as we pegged him to be.”

“Yes. Well, I have the blood money. If you guys get a list together, I’ll have Delvin set up a building schedule,” the cat grumped, shoving at the Jester’s shoulder again.

“Right, right. When will you return?” Nazir pressed, waving Cicero away from him when the fool got too close for the Redguard’s comfort.

“I have some business with the Silver Hand. I’ll return in maybe a week to pick up our shopping list. Until then, we need to start recruiting. The three of us will be joint Leaders to this place. We need to work together to make sure what happened will never reoccur again.”

“Yes, Listener.”

xxx

When Vilkas began leading the way to Driftshade Refuge, well.
Eirian had caught up with Jordis about cooking techniques –some kind of way to cook troll meat, and if they could make it less poisonous- and Argis had begun a tentative friendship with the wolf brothers. The first they realised that something was wrong was when Aela’s head snapped aside, eyes focusing on something in the woodlands. She was off point by a mile.

The blur collided with Artan’s side like a boulder from the top of Hrothgar, it was so strong. He hit the ground hard, winding, grasping limbs coiling around him, an inane singing tune rolling out from his captor.

“STAND DOWN,” Artan yelled, loud enough to make a few birds take off overhead.

Cicero poked his head up from its nest in his Listener’s shoulder, eyeing up the various swords, bows and axes drawn, before huffing and leaping up into a rather energetic dance. “This fool is an old friend that I ran into while in Dawnstar. He’s a bit… strange, but a good man none the less.”

“Cicero just missed his best friend, yes. Best, best, best, best!” the man snickered, rubbing at Artan’s ears with a palm.

Argis glanced from the cat to the jester and back. Artan sighed heavily and shrugged. “Yes. Cicero, where are you heading?”

“With you, of course! I need to find oils for mother. Where best to procure some than from the fat of heathens?” the jester broke from a jolly chortle to whisper the end of his sentence, pressing his nose against Artan’s as if that would make the cat believe him more.

“What did he just say?” Jordis asked, but Artan waved her off.

The cat shook his head and pushed the jester back a little. “Nothing. Cicero, you can’t make-“


“You… you have weird friends, my Thane,” Jordis sighed, slamming her axe back into its sling across her back and falling back into line with Eri. The elf herself, laughed, “Well, at least he’s
loyal.

The dancing, frolicking jester didn’t even glance their way until nightfall, when they made camp. The suspicious Companions were thankful for such a blessing.

xxx

They were awoken to Cicero singing, loudly. Vilkas was staring at the fool, circling the campfire with a jolting, erratic dance. The wolf didn’t even look impressed. His brother had a similar deadpan expression, but Aela didn’t even glance the Jester’s way. "Oh! Hee! Hee! Hee! Break that lute across my knee, and if that bard puts up a fight,” the Jester did a strange, twirling pirouette, before throwing what looked to be some kind of flour into the fire, “I WILL SET HIS CLOTHES ALIGHT!”

The flour caught aflame, causing a huge fiery inferno above the camp, singeing most of the trees in the surrounding glade.

Trying to calm down the equally explosive Nords in the camp was much, much more difficult than dousing the forest fire that had erupted in the melted snow’s wake.

xxx

“…And he says to the man, ‘That’s not a horker, that’s my wife!’ Ha-ha! That one never gets old…”

xxx

“And then, she said ‘so do you want to build a snowman with me, honey?’”

“Oh divine, really? What did he say?” Eirian asked, and many others at the makeshift fire wished she hadn’t.

“Well, ‘tis the fastest I have ever seen a man drop his pants. And the first time I ever saw such a small carrot. I was most disappointed. They still tried to build a snowman, though…”
“I’ve got a lovely bunch of coconuts, Do-be-de-doo! There they are, all standing in a row! Big ones, small ones, some as big as your head! Give them a twist a flick of the wrist, that’s what the showman said!....”

“Mother will need a bath when we get home. Long... long bath. Humble Cicero will get out the rose petals and scented oils. Make it a nice reunion.... Mother... it has been so long... Has to be special...” Cicero hummed, completely oblivious to Jordis shuffling away from him in disgust.

“Heh. Hehehe. HEHEHEHEHEHEE-“

“I will DESTROY THAT TALOS-FORSAKEN JESTER IF HE EVEN SO MUCH AS UTTERS ANOTHER WORD.”

The Silver Hand sentry turned on Vilkas’ hiding spot like a trained dog, eyes on the Nord and already drawing an arrow. Aela’s own arrow pierced his eye socket before he had even drawn it from its quiver. Cicero giggled, and with that, was gone. Running straight at the ruins, screaming to high hell “stabbity stab!” Artan was hard pressed, but he managed to keep the man in sight, or at least within earshot. The Companions and his housecarls were weighted down by all of their armour, save Aela and himself. When Cicero broke upon the first set of men, well. Artan almost tried to stop Aela from jumping in to aide him. Eri had no such qualms.

The elf was already on the battlements, sending archers, swordsmen and in one instance a rather brutish-looking Orc flying with bouts of magic. She didn’t even need to draw a blade.
The warriors managed to sweep the last of the enemies, and they entered the fort together, with most of them save the cat and Eri giving the shaking, giggling jester a wide berth.

“You brought a maniac on a mission like this?” Farkas grunted, eyes settling on the back of Artan’s head.

“Yes. Because when you go up against maniacs, you gotta have one on your home team. And besides, he knows traps better than anyone I know. Between me, Eri, Aela and Cicero, we have no chance of getting caught out,” the cat sighed, almost as if he was tired of trying to believe that.

“I hope you are right,” Farkas sighed back, before taking point at the head of their group. The entryway was surprisingly free of guards, but that would not remain so for long. Cicero made a tight little squeaking sound, making most of the group glance his way.

“Cicero. I order you to remain profession throughout our… house cleaning, here. I do not want you to have even a scratch when we are done,” Artan said seriously, raising his index finger in front of Cicero’s face as if he were instructing a child.

“Why yes! Cicero and the Listener, on the hunt! Tee! You too! You have to play the game too! Only professionalism today, brother!” the Jester sang, grabbing Artan’s finger. Just like a really big child.

“Only professionalism? Fine. All out, on both our parts?” The cat couldn’t help but grin.

“They will rue the day they crossed us, Listener. Are you listening?” Cicero whispered, making a few of the wolves glance to him.

“Yes, I’m listening,” Artan grinned even wider at the joke.

“Good,” Cicero nodded.

“So we are playing a game?” Aela growled from her crouched stance at the door, eyes bright in the gloom. Artan grinned back at her, “Yes. Whoever kills the most, wins.”

“Wins what?” Vilkas grinned, almost invisible in the murk.
“Free drinks for a month. The others pay,” Artan banged his sword against his chest plate.

“Get ready for me to drain your gold dry then, brother,” Farkas barked, and with a twisting lurch, booted the door off its hinges.

xxx

Argis himself didn’t know what to make of the Jester. Not much more than ‘handle with care,’ at least. It got a little more than hairy in Driftshade Refuge. Aela, Farkas and Vilkas all changed into two-metre-tall werewolves, and even that wasn’t the scariest part. Eri, Cicero and Artan would sweep in first, taking out archers, mages and traps with flickers of barely conceivable movement, leaving the way clear the the warriors and wolves to surge in unscathed.

Scary, scary people.

Especially when Cicero began singing again, in which the biggest of the wolves started snarling, and the Jester actually looked hungry for more fighting. It had taken a lot of coaxing to get the two to leave each other alone. He and Jordis had sent each other several incredulous looks throughout the entire length of Driftshade Refuge. But even with Jordis’ strange humming, Argis was glad that she had gotten Artan’s letter and arrived in Whiterun in time. He didn’t know how he would have coped with Eri’s mad babbling, Vilkas and Farkas’ hard glares at the cat, and now with the Jester’s inane singing.

He thanked the Nine that he didn’t have to find out.

xxx

4E, 203 Late Suns Dawn

“Aela. Take these shards back to Eorlund. He can repair Wuuthrad. We will wait here, so it will be easier to get to Ysgramors tomb. We would just slow you down.”

“Aye, Vilkas. Talos knows that you old dogs are slower than mammoths. Take care.”
"Aye, you as well Shield-Sister."

The woman downed the last of her pint, before standing and throwing the tankard at the dancing jester’s head and sauntering away into the snow outside. Windpeak Inn was still as warm and hearty as ever, the three various bards wandering around the patrons, offering tunes and the like. Cicero was an unexpected addition to the entertainment, after Artan had lain out explicit instructions to act as an entertainer only; with no stabbing or other such naughty things. The Jester found the idea charming, and somehow agreed to be just a simple entertainer tonight.

Argis didn’t even bother shaking his head again. Jordis had been vocal enough about letting the assassin into a crowded place, but Artan just sighed out an excuse or two. If Cicero returned to the Sanctuary, then he would be expected to do the same. But by keeping him here until tomorrow, it meant that they were still ‘travelling’ tonight.

A quiet night.

He wanted just one.

"Hey, what’s the face for?"

The khajiit glanced over at Argis, sat on the bench at his side. The Nord had been quiet since they had left Whiterun, but would not explain why. Artan had given up asking, but not stopped worrying. The hulking Nord had even called him out on it a few times already. It hadn’t stopped the cycle, however.

"Nothing, just appreciating a quiet night. We rarely get those now."

"Yeah. It has been a hard month,” Argis murmured, eyes flicking back to the fire. “Could have been worse, I suppose,”

“Well-“

The cat broke off, instead turning to the source of the sudden, loud lute music coming from the large empty space beside the inn’s entrance. The bard started up a sharp, jaunty tune, soon to be joined by
a rather enthusiastic flute player and a seated drummer. But it was the skipping, clapping Cicero that made the two turn fully in their seats. Eri was beside him in an instant, clapping alongside the Jester and the drums beat, with Jordis appearing at her flank in record time. And just like that, the tavern exploded into life.

“Argis…” the cat whined, wriggling in his seat.

Argis chuckled, shoving at the cat with a free hand. “Yeah, you want to dance. Go.”

“You sure?” Artan asked, giving his best sweet look.

The Nord sent him a smirk, and waved his hand. “I get to watch while you do your thing. A win-win, in my opinion.”

“And finally I have witnessed the traditional ulterior Nord motive.” The cat grinned, sliding a leg over the bench so he was facing Argis completely.

“And soon I’ll get to witness the legendary khajiit flexibility I keep hearing about,” The Bulwark clinked his tankard against Artan’s offered one, and the two took deep swigs from their mugs.

Artan licked the stray wine from his mouth and gave the Nord a wink, “Win-win, in my opinion.”

Argis laughed, before the cat bounded off of his seat and leapt into the newly appeared throng of dancing patrons. He didn’t even hear Vilkas approach, but was ready for when Farkas appeared. “Not a dancer, no?”

The blonde chuckled, “No way. There are enough stupid asses dancing in this inn that the world needn’t be scarred by my ridiculous dancing.”

The younger, Farkas grinned back, “We figured the same thing.”

“More you than me, brother. We both know your dancing makes the maids puke.”
“And yours makes the elves cry, brother.”

“Har-har, pup.”

xxx

Argis didn’t know how he did it, but Thoring managed to coax a drunken Jordis and Eri from dancing across the tables. Farkas yelled for a medal to be given to the man.

xxx

“Thirty septims says I look better in that dress than you,” Artan stated, flicking the hem of Karita’s dress.

“What? I am the prestigious Karita of Dawnstar. My looks are only d-dwarfed….overcome? Outshone, by my angelic voice.”

“Well love, if you think you’ll lose then-“ Artan started, but the barmaid cut him off.

“Thirty septims, you say? I have a spare outfit in the back.”

xxx

“List-hic! That, that outfit looks comfortable as anything! I want one!” Cicero leant across three women and an elf to grab at the strap of Artan’s dress, almost taking all of them down to the ground in his haste.

Eirian leant over him and pushed the flat of her hand into Artan’s face.

“Me too! Eltbet! Mee too! Don’t forget me!”

xxx
“That dress… it looks so comfy…” Jordis sighed, rubbing the edge of Eirian’s skirt.

“Oh, it is mirie rielle! Want one? I found it in one of the back rooms!”

xxx

When Argis turned around, wanting another set of pitchers from Thoring, well. He didn’t expect what he saw. Vilkas made a strange, grunting noise when he caught sight of what had made the blonde begin to giggle like a small child. Farkas didn’t giggle; he howled and nearly fell off his chair. The five of them were slumped with bottles, tankards and an array of food around them, each in a ridiculous set of tavern-wench clothes that barely covered anything at all. Jordis was lying across Eri, her head in the Altmer’s lap while the elf braided some kind of wildflowers into her hair –apparently ignoring the irrationality of finding such flowers in the snow- and jabbering on about Ehnofex literature, of all things. Artan was slumped against her, casting various mage-lights to stick against the opposite wall, interjecting with Eri’s random mutterings here and there. Cicero was slumped next to the cat, arm slung over Karita’s shoulder, explaining proper moisturising techniques and anti-aging therapies.

Only the loyal lute player was still at his post, playing a slow, calm solo, with everyone else already retired or left for home. Save for a lone dunmer, sat in a set of brown monk robes in a far corner, chuckling to himself. Even Thoring had retired to bed, leaving keys on the inns front desk.

“Holy balls,” Argis supplied, Vilkas nodding.

“I know. What a weird ass picture they make.” The old dog grunted and took another swig of ale.

“Well, after seeing an elf braiding a Nord’s hair, we can finally report to the Nord Council about how to finish the war between man and mer,” Farkas offered once he had calmed down. He still hadn’t made a move back to his chair at the table, though.

“Ha. Get everyone drunk and have a dance?” Argis looked to the younger brother, who lifted his drinking arm high and almost tipped his ale on himself.

“Yes. Lots of that!” Farkas grinned back.
“Oh my Et’Ada! Do Nord’s really have a special counsel? Like, every Nord has a membership card?” Eirian appeared at Argis’ side like a ghost, except she was vibrating from head to toe.

“Yes, Eirian. That is totally what we do. We convene every year, swap meat, drink lots of mead and kill a bunch of wild animals,” Farkas nodded, face like slate.

“That sounds amazing,” she cooed dreamily, before her eyes took on a wild look and she shrieked, “Invite me!”

Vilkas laughed, but soon stopped when the elf appeared in his face, practically pressing her sharp nose against his. His head was pressed against the stone before he knew it, and then he had no room left to run from her. “I want to go! Please!”

“Sorry shield-sister. Only Nords and esteemed guests may participate,” Vilkas sighed, shrugging his shoulders in apology.

“Haeliakynd!” she snarled, before leaping to her feet and stalking away to Jordis, murmuring about ‘smuggling’ and ‘nobody will know if I wear a hood.’ The blonde woman just laughed and let the elf drag her into one of the inns rooms, listening to the Altmer’s mad ramblings all the while.

“I think you just made an enemy,” Argis sighed, taking a swig from his tankard.

“Careful, she knows how to make genitals explode,” Artan called, throwing his magelight against the ceiling this time.

“You what?!” Farkas turned to look at the cat, flicking another magelight against the ceiling.

Artan shrugged easily, “It was something Larethius taught her in the early days, when she was still in his favour. After she helped me and S’eta escape from the main house, she had to flee the Summerset Isle with us.”

Argis couldn’t even begin to start chastising the cat for that one. Artan was simply picking at the fraying skirt now, pushing Cicero away when he slumped against him. Completely oblivious to everything he had just revealed.
“What’s a seta?” Vilkas asked, looking a bit lost.

The cat’s eyes practically vibrated that golden thu’um colour, and when he spoke, the mist rolled out. “How do you know about S’eta?”

“He doesn’t, Artan. It’s a plant, right?” Argis frowned, fully ready for the cat’s glare.

The cat’s eyes landed heavily on Argis, almost understanding the Nord’s wavelength. “Yes. An extract only found in the Isle. Larethius believed it had healing properties, and when we left, we didn’t want him to keep it. So we stole it.”

“Hmm. Interesting. Well, that’s enough for one night, don’t you think?” Argis said gently, nodding to make Artan nod too.

“What? But-“

Argis put his tankard down and rolled up onto his feet, ignoring the quiet conversation the twins were having. Artan didn’t need to get paranoid about the companions; well, any more than he already was. It was testament to how little he trusted them that he had two housecarls here rather than just one. “Artan, you are in a wenches dress on a tavern floor. What part of that is normal?”

“I am never going to answer that question, snowman,” Artan giggled, poking his tongue out.

Cicero broke his conversation with Karita to laugh, hard enough that he fell over into Artan, taking them both to the floor. Argis sighed, and picked the Jester from the cat, sitting the still giggling mess back next to a tired-looking Karita. With the other arm, he dragged Artan up until the cat was stood, albeit scantily, on his own two feet.

“As if I want an answer from a Bengal like you,” Argis puffed out when he was upright, leading the cat with a hand at the small of his back.

“Did you just make a reference to a housecat breed?” Artan snapped, sounding half peeved and half amused.
“Yes. Yes I did.”

The Bulwark smirked, slinging an arm around the cat’s shoulders to guide him into a nearby room. The cat was more than happy to let someone else walk him around, a small titbit that made the Nord chuckle lowly to himself. Control-freak thane who had a million ‘evil’ schemes on at once, allowing himself to get led around like a child? Argis shook his head at the improbability. He gently pushed Artan towards one of the two beds, before waving a goodnight to the twins, who returned the gesture.

“You’re lucky that they outlawed Thanes flogging their housecarls,” the cat sniped.

“And you’re lucky that they outlawed tickling Thane’s until they cry,” replied and gently closed the door.

“Oh, the déjà vu,” Artan slurred, twirling around on the spot.

“Yeah. Well, that will all have to wait until tomorrow. It’s bed time, Artan. Big day and whatever tomorrow.” Argis stopped the cat’s spinning with two big hands on his shoulders.

Argis pinched at the bridge of his nose, already feeling the headache that tomorrow would bring. And ultimately, this simple action led him to believe that his Thane was an evil villain in the making, regardless of intoxication level. A pair of claws flicked the buckles on his cuirass free, and begun tugging his already loosened gauntlets from the rest of his armour. “What are you up to, khajiit?”

“Nothing that concerns you, Nord.”

Argis sighed deeply, ignoring the strange, light tune that Artan was humming out. The cat pulled both of his gauntlets free, and the Bulwark made little more than a grunt when the ebony chest plate followed, but he drew the line when the cat pushed him onto the bed so he could work on the Nord’s boots. “It’s starting to concern me. Why aren’t you using the Thu’um like last time?”

“Two things. One, I am too drunk and might kill you. And two, I get to casually groove you without looking like a rotten pervert.”

“Ah.” Argis said smartly.
“Indeed,” Artan nodded back.

The cat made short work of the heavy boots, making a snide remark about sweaty, hairy feet, in which Argis asked if such a thing was from experience, and yanked the heavy chain mail -dress. It’s a dress, Argis- over the Nord’s head. “Okay. All done.”

“And now? Has that bloody dress broken your brain? Made you into some kind of maid?”

“Pfft you wish, asshat. Do you think I have the right temper to be a maid?”

Artan stepped back and away, throwing the mail across the opposing bed alongside the plate. The cat moved the gauntlets from Argis’ sides, and placed them beside their armour set, the boots finally getting set at the foot of the bedside table, Artan dutifully ignoring and avoiding the Bulwarks stare.

“No. Not at all,” the Bulwark replied, honestly.

“Hm.”

“What’s the face for?” Argis asked.

The cat sent him a wary stare before he shrugged, and pushed the Nord until he was lain out fully on the narrow bed, eyebrow still quirked in question. Artan settled himself across Argis’ chest before even uttering a single word about what worried him. “I thought I would be happy after handing Iman over to the Alik’r. I know they were probably hired by her father, and he will probably be either judging her or one of his friends as her judge for the trial, but shit. It feels like I just did what she was going to do with me and Larethius. She didn’t look like she was going home; she looked like she was-”

“Larethius wouldn’t have a single clue about where you were if not for her. She told his men that you were in town, and you told them about Taneth in order to try and bargain for your freedom. If not for her, you wouldn’t have needed to do that, and Taneth wouldn’t be in ruins. She will get what she deserves.”

“You barely know her, and you hate her that much?” Artan chuckled lowly.
“I don’t need to know her. I know of her, and that’s enough for me,” Argis sniffed, sounding resolute.

“Hmm,” Artan sighed, pressing his muzzle harder into the Nord’s rigid collarbone. He had obviously heard most of his conversation with the Alik’r, to the point where now his anger made sense. Argis had heard everything, near enough. And instead of disgust, he had reacted a lot like Lydia had. Rage, white hot rage with a side of tundra ice. But not at him, like he had feared. At the situation, at the people involved, at the world, at the system, but not at him. There was no pity, no sympathetic stares, none of the shit he feared to be lumbered with. Just that sharp, burning ice-storm as if Festus had set off a blizzard inside a firestorm scroll again. The bite, the burning, the way the snowflakes made the flames burn even hotter against flesh. All of it focused on the guards and the master.

Argis’s hair smelt like crushed ice and snowberries.

The khajiit snuggled closer; pressing his tummy up against the Nord’s side and sliding his knee up and over the thick thighs to hook an ankle around the Bulwark’s calf. He ignored the jumble of words that fell out of the human’s mouth in favour of basking in the heat rolling off the brute man, going so far as to simply untangle his claws from Argis’ rapidly fraying undershirt and slipping both hands underneath to press against the searing skin. He absently wonders if he blacked out for a few seconds, because all too quickly he’s drowning in that heat, in the scent, in-

“You seriously want to do this in a shabby inn?” the man laughed.

“‘Hmmm. Do what?’

“Pfft. Sure, sure. Sleep now. I’ll yell at you in the morning.” Argis sighed, sounding like Artan had just asked him to eat a bug.

The khajiit growled, and with a playful nip to Argis’ jaw line, settled in to rest for the night.

xxx

Someone was screaming.
It was so loud, that he had to cover his ears. But it wasn’t until he opened his eyes that he realised why. Argis was gone. He sat up, and looked, but still no Argis. But there were screams. He ran outside, but the tables were all overturned, the food burning to a cinder in the firepit, and the bard was dead-

Artan didn’t even feel his feet slapping against the floor, but he did feel the ache in his arm when he busted the inn’s door off its hinges. There were five of them that weren’t in uniform, but the rest were easily able to keep the Dawnstars local Legionnaires preoccupied enough. There wasn’t even any fighting, but stares, and ugly glaring. Even when one of the heavier looking elves in glass armour threw Jordis into the snow to bleed out. It took him a moment to realise that Argis was yelling at him, telling him to run, to get out of here-

Larethius has the same sword as always. Cruel and sharp.

He was precise, and incredibly fast. But Artan was faster. He could make it. He could save one of them. Maybe even Jordis too, if the Legionnaires decided to pitch in. he threw the thought away.

Artan bolted. He couldn’t see much, in the haze, but he could hear the yells, the screaming as he-

“Wake up, son.”

Something hit him, hard, across the head, making his sight gutter and the world tilt on an axis that Artan would have considered impossible before. The snow leached away into dark, stained old floorboards and the sharp, sweet smell of snowberries and crushed ice. The hands are on his shoulders, pressing tight with fear? Desperation? What?

“I see you’re back to your senses. You had a nightmare. No?”

The cat looked up, at the dunmer kneeling beside him, but didn’t reply until both clawed hands had practically glued themselves to both of Argis’ wrists. It took a moment, but he found himself on his knees in the inn’s main drinking room, Jordis knelt at his side and Argis behind him, pressing the patrolling guard back with a glare. “What the fuck was that?”

“Vaermina,” The dunmer said, sounding grim.
“And why the fuck did she target me?” Artan snarled, trying to push the thu’um back down his throat. He could see the little speckles of magic flickering around in the air.

“She targets this entire town, and has done for the last few months.” The dunmer said, not even bothering to wave the flecks of Thu’um magic away from him.

“They have… nightmares like that? Every night?”

“Yes. But they don’t get up half way through and trash an entire inn.” The dunmer chortled, before coughing heavily into a fist.

“I’m-“

“Don’t be. Nobody told you about the risks, so you have no reason to be sorry. I would, however ask a favour of you. You seem to have quite powerful friends, and from that display I can see you are a fighter, also. Help me send Vaermina back to Quagmire. There is little I can do alone, you see, and-” The old elf tried to find his words, and seemed to be running around himself, so Artan just placed a hand on the dunmer’s waving arms and said;

“I’ll help.”

“Really?” the elf sighed in relief.

“Yes.”

“Well then, we need to direct our focus to the source of the problem, in the nearby NightcallerTemple.”

“What’s there?” Artan asked, attempting to stand. Argis tucked his hands under the cat’s armpits and lifted him easily. The cat nodded thanks and turned back to the crinkly old dunner being helped up by Jordis.

“One of her artefacts,” the old thing sighed, thanking Jordis for the aid before continuing. “Destroying it should lessen her hold over this town.”
“Good,” Artan nodded sharply.

“Yes, Lady Mara will be pleased as well. Thank you for your assistance…?”

“Artan,” the cat smiled, “And you are a priest of Mara?”

“Yes. Many years now, in fact. I am Erandur,” the elf inclined his head slightly and coughed into his fist again.

“Nice to meet you. I’m an Agent of Mara.”

“Then in that, I am blessed,” Erandur smiled, all Grandpa and no bite.

“Let’s get some breakfast, and sort out this leech,” Artan smiled back, motioning towards a nearby table already filled up with food from the innkeep.

“I can drink to that,” the old elf laughed gruffly, shuffling towards the offered table.

Chapter End Notes

Ayleid

Pelin-el - star-made knight. [Ayleid]

Haelia – terrible

Kynd – child

Together, they make Terrible child (I hope)

Aldmeri
AN: And this chapter might just be the sole reason why I marked this fic as mature. Larethius is a dick, guys. And now I know that people actually read the ANs, I’ll try and stop swearing as much. (ha-ha) So yeah. I’m super glad you are enjoying this fic, even though I clam up and don’t reply. It’s not that I don’t want to, it’s just I have no idea how to explain how bloody happy I am that you like the stuff in this. I just can’t without sounding like a maniac, and tbh, it took a lot to get out of the asylum the first time; I don’t need another stay. I’m just a shy, shy soul. Seriously, I nearly head-butted a commuter on the train today. I nearly had a panic attack because of the proximity to another human being.

I got the Legendary edition of Skyrim, so expect all sorts of fun to appear from there soon. You already have Sofie, and well. Yes. She is my favourite. Can’t explain why, because the interactions are strange with Skyrim kids. I don’t understand why the girls can’t capture mud crabs as pets. I really just don’t get it. My sister would have a mudcrab farm if she lived in Skyrim. I wish I was joking, but alas. And Lydia is polite now. I don’t like it. At all. I miss sassy Lydia. She’s a pussycat now. And is it obvious that I really like Titus? I wish you had the option to smuggle him into Rorikstead as a farmer or something, but alas, the Dread Father is all-knowing. If I made the half-crazed part where Artan is heading towards the sanctuary too mad, then can you please tell me? I’ll try and tone it down, but it is a kind of plot point for later. I wanted it to be all kooky to make the point, but if it’s illegible then I’ve missed my intended mark.

As always, Thank You for reading, and I hope you enjoyed this Chapter!

~Frog
“You can’t be serious.” Artan didn’t even ask it. He stated it, sounding angrier by the second.

“We aren’t here to play hero. We are here to put Kodlak to rest, and that’s it,” Vilkas replied, making a harsh chopping motion with his hand at the end. Farkas didn’t say anything at all, sat stonily beside his brother on a bench in the inn.

“These people need help, and the Companions are warriors of the people—“ Artan argued, but Vilkas cut him off with a growl.

“We fight for each other,” the Nord grunted, “For our Shield Brothers and Shield Sisters. And until Kodlak is in Sovengarde drinking mead with all the others we will not abandon our mission—”

“All you guys are doing is waiting here until Aela returns,” Artan tried, waving his hands around in irritation. “All this will take is a short walk, some stabbing and letting the monk here do his magic thing. I’m not asking you to—“

“As if it will be just that. Daedra always have extra strings—“ Vilkas snorted, throwing his head back.

“Eltbet, don’t bother. Vilkas, wait here for Aela. I’m going.”

“What? You—” Farkas sat up a little straighter to set a stare on Eirian, who waved off what was considered to be concern.

“What? You—” Farkas sat up a little straighter to set a stare on Eirian, who waved off what was considered to be concern.

“Are in charge of yourself. No?” She supplied, picking her glass from the table and downing the last of her wine. She almost seemed to forget him after that, humming and with an appreciative lick of her lips set the glass down.

The wolf brother glared at her, but Eri seemed to actually remember him then and didn’t shy away from him like the other whelps did, even without seeing the man’s furred trump card. “I’m going, because I joined the Companions to defend the people without restrictions. How… umm… s’wit!”
You are!” she snapped eventually, when she couldn’t find the word in Common. “These people need help, and I am not going to ignore them because you’re too paranoid to be alone with Eltbe in a ruin! Waxhuthi, pakseech!”

“That’s—” Vilkas shook his head but Eirian stormed on.

“We both know you still don’t trust him, oegnithr, but being a Companion means ignoring your own feelings and doing what is right for the many. If I die, then I died on my feet defending my own beliefs.”

“He will get you killed,” was the last that Vilkas said on the matter.

“Var var var.” the elf snarked, raising her chin and slouching her shoulders before she walked out.

xxx

Jordis stared hard at the two brothers, one shifting uneasily whereas the older one was just unblinkingly stared back. To keep Vilkas happy, she stayed behind. It was a kind of safeguard, them having her while Eri was with Artan. She would have pointed out that it was pointless if the cat was as honourless as the old dog considered him to be. He would kill the elf and leave her to die. She didn’t point it out. That and she had to wait for Cicero to bring back a mysterious ‘something’ for Artan. Where the Jester could disappear to in this wilderness she had no idea, but that wasn’t really the issue to focus on right now.

The younger brother was fidgeting guiltily, and in contrast the older was being a stoic rock. “Who is Larethius?”

“She is none of your concern, whelp,” Vilkas replied, irritated.

“A threat to my Thane is my utmost concern,” she said evenly back.

“Now that is your concern; but not mine.” Vilkas conceded, tapping his fingers on the table. It helped him shift some of the annoyance at the girl’s constant poking.
For such an old fellow the dunmer was quick on his feet. Both Eri and Argis were easily able to keep up with him, slogging through the snow banks as if they lived there. Maybe they kind of did. But Artan was not so graceful; there was reasons why he limited their excursions into snowy terrain. After about half an hour of stopping and starting to wait for the cat to catch up, Eri eventually got annoyed enough to trudge back, throw the cat over her shoulders and stomp the rest of the way to the temple, ignoring the shrieks and the complaints.

“This it?” Argis looked to the Tower and back at Erandur. Bless him, the dunmer didn’t even glance back at the bickering cat and high elf. He made a minute nod, and with a deft kick to the base sent the old wooden door inwards. “There’s a small shrine to Mara that I set up inside the entrance hall. I was hoping to seek guidance from Her, but I have so far received silence on the matter. But before we enter, I must tell you about the dangers within.”

“Well, naturally,” the cat sniped as he struggled down off of Eri’s shoulders, trudging through the last of the snow and into the temple’s entrance, shaking until he was near enough clear of all the white fluff. “Let me guess. Mad cultists?”

“Yes, and no. Years ago a group of orc bandits attacked the temple in an attempt to rid themselves of the nightmares they suffered from. In retaliation, the cultists set off a magical trap called the Miasma. They were all, both enemy and friend alike, put into a deep sleep. Whether or not they are still alive is guesswork. But when we dispel the Miasma, anything can happen.”

“Okay. So just don’t wake them up. I’m guessing they made it to help with their nightmare Queens feeding, no?”

“Correct. But since the rituals may take months or even years, it also slowed the aging process. A few too many died from old age before they added such a property, I would assume. That is why I suggest caution; regardless of how many years have passed the people inside could still be kicking. The orcs will think we are mercenaries hired to defend the priests, and the priests will think we are aiding the orcs, or even a part of the Vigilants of Stendarr here to purge the temple.”

“Great. And I’m guessing that if we breathe in too much of this gas, we’ll die painfully, right?” Artan huffed, sounding half parts bored and amused.

“Yes. It damages the mind the longer it is inhaled. The people inside will most probably not even be human, anymore.”
“Mad?” Artan poked.

“Indeed.” The dunmer nodded.

“Well, no time like the present,” Eri cut in, shooing Argis inside. The door closed behind them, but it felt more like a crypt door shutting. The air was thick and stale with mould, as well as the rotting pews lined up throughout the room. As the elves wandered further in, Artan stepped up beside the Bulwark, and with a light tap, muttered, “keep close and keep quiet. We don’t know what we are dealing with, and this is your first time on a Daedra with me. Don’t attack unless I give the go ahead. I don’t know what this monk knows yet, but he isn’t just a simple man.”

“I guessed as much. He knows a lot about this place to be a mere do-gooder.”

“Hmm,” the cat pressed forwards, ignoring the sharp glance from Eri as Erandur pressed a hand against the huge tablet behind the dais dedicated to the Dreamweaver. A few murmured words, and made it ethereal. “Done. Follow me.” The elf stepped through easily, Eirian following close behind with the cat and Nord on her heels. The corridors were darker here, to the point that the high elf waved a hand across her hair, alighting small mage lanterns woven into her braids. With another wave, she set a few in Artan’s ruff and the edges of his mage robes, as well as the steel plate of Argis’ armour. With a press, she even set a small light into Erandur’s brooch, nodding at the quiet thanks. Even with the lights, the corridor was creepy. The dark leched into every corner, every random object or innocent little dip in the cobblestones made Artan’s hair turn on end.

It wasn’t until the dunmer led them up to a small step overlooking a huge, well-lit chamber did he understand why. “The Skull of Corruption. The source of all Dawnstar’s woes.”

“Lamor,” Eri snarled, before sweeping down the nearby steps and deeper into the tower. Erandur nodded gravely, before stepping into line behind her and descending into the murk. “It’s why we are here to destroy it. Even with all the rock between us, you can still feel its presence, no?”

“Well-“

Eri’s head snapped backwards, her whole body going on a tilt to avoid the blade aimed at her neck. Two ice spikes went through the orc; one through his gut from Eri’s fist, and the other through his neck from Erandur’s outstretched arm. A second orc leapt in, but with a quick smash of the Bulwark’s waraxe and he was left in a similar, prone and bleeding position as his friend.
“You didn’t joke about them being cranky after their nap, did you?” Argis chuckled over his shoulder before wrenching his weapon free.

“No, but- damn,” Erandur cut short, sounding dejected.

“Oh,” the cat stepped down lower into the next corridor, eyeing up the purplish sheen across the archway into the next chamber, fluctuating warningly with mauve lightning. “Barriers. They always suck.”

“Indeed. Nearly impossible to… Bypass…. There may be a way actually. But I need to check their library to see if it can actually be accomplished.”

“You seem to know a lot about this place,” Artan pointed out gently.

The dunmer sighed, crackly and deep. And for the first time since the tavern, he actually looked old. “Because I grew up here as an initiate to Vaermina, and then lived here later as a priest.” With the hand not wrapped around his mace, he pushed into his hood and scratched at his head, shoulders slumped.

“You should have told the truth.”

“I couldn’t risk you not helping. The townsfolk need help, and what could I have said? ‘Hello sir, I am a cultist of Vaermina that needs help desecrating her temple to save a town.’ Would you have believed that I actually wanted to help, or that I was just leading you into a trap for a daedra? When the orcs raided this temple, I left by brothers and sisters here to die. I have spent the last decades in regret, and attempting to repent for my sins under the guidance of Mara.”

“You sound sincere.”

“I am.”

“Then I’ll help. I don’t know about you two,” Artan motioned towards Eri and Argis, who either shrugged or nodded. “Looks like we’re all in. But first, how can that staff affect Dawnstar with the barrier in effect?”
Erandur motioned for a nearby door, and led them through into another room. “Lore states that the skull is constantly hungry for more memories to feed on. The nightmares are just a symptom of its feeding; an echo if you will. I fear that it was learnt to reach out on its own and attempt to feed. Such a thing would explain why Dawnstar is being affected so, but also means we will have to be even more careful.”

“Because these people have probably been bled dry of memories, as well as having the miasma messing up their minds?” Artan sounded hopeful that he was wrong, but Erandur just grumbled a grim word in reply.

“Exactly.”

The corridor was short, this time, but it was compact. Bottlenecked, they had to take it relatively slow. Artan at the back, with the elves in the middle and Argis at the front, the latter three ignoring the cat’s complaints about being last. He could barely even see when another waking orc stumbled to his feet and attacked. Argis quickly dispatched him, as well as the shaking mage trying to send out gouts of fire from his hands. “These guys aren’t…”

“Yes. But these are the initiates. The priests themselves will be further in,” Erandur explained, motioning towards the prone figures with a hand.

“How did you make it out without getting caught up in the Miasma?” Argis asked gruffly.

The elf huffed gently and stepped up into one of the toppled bookcases, shuffling forwards until he was on another ledge that hopefully started leading down. Only when he had started walking past the luckier bookcases that lined the walls did he turn back to the Nord and chuckle, “Fast legs.”

“What book are we looking for?” Eri skipped after him, ignoring the angry creaks of the bookcase bridge under her feet, as well as Erandur’s grimace.

“A tome called the Dream Stride. It will give us an alchemic recipe that we can utilise. From the recipe we should be able to identify a sample of the potion itself, and use it to aid in breaking the barrier between us and the skull.”

“It will break the barrier?” Eirian asked; voice strangely level. Argis forgot she was scarly clever sometimes.
“It will let someone lift the barrier,” Erandur corrected.

“Hmm.”

xxx

“Ah.”

“What?” Artan asked, turning back to Erandur, hunched over a book in the corner chair.

“It will not work for me, since I am a sworn priest of Mara, and nor for Artan, who works as her Agent. The torpor will only work on a Priest of Vaermina or the unaffiliated,” the elf rubbed at his short beard, blood-red eyes flicking the length of the page again to try and find a loophole.

“But you used to be a priest of Vaermina, isn’t that enough?” Argis was the one to ask this time, settling a tired stare on the elf.

“No. When I left this place I forsook every oath I took to her, and threw away my priesthood. And since I am now affiliated with Mara, the Dream Stride will just make… ‘Make my organs explode on ingestion.’ Lovely,” Erandur smacked his lips and shuffled to his feet.

Eri and Argis looked to one and other, before Eri simply sighed, “Well shit.”

xxx

Thorek snarled, “The orcs have breached the inner sanctum, Brother Veren.”

The elf just simply sighed, his beard fluttering in irritation, “We must hold, Brother Thorek. We cannot let the orcs get to the Skull.” The nord turned on him, face like a sabre on the hunt. “Most of us are dead, and the handful of us left are not enough to push them back. What use can we be to our mistress dead?”
“Then we have no choice but the miasma.”

“But Brother….”

“No. We have no alternative options now. It is Vaemina’s will,” Veren frowned, running a hand across the bridge of his nose. His dark eyes settled, before he turned and appraised Argis. “And what of you, Brother Casimir? Are you prepared to follow the will of Vaermina?”

Argis folded his arms as the disambiguated voice of Erandur answered the other dunmer, agreeing wholeheartedly. He himself was conflicted. On the one hand, these people were maniacs selling peoples memories to a Daedra for power. But on the other, Erandur betrayed his brothers to save himself. But then again, if he took the moral high ground like that, then wouldn’t he have done the same with Artan? Erandur had quietly informed them all of the haunting past at his heels while looking for the book, and well. In essence, he couldn’t see much of a difference between the cat and the elf.

Both dragged into crazy situations against their control, and both deciding to sacrifice others in order to survive. As a warrior who fought against countless Forsworn alongside the others in Markarth, he couldn’t really get his head around such things. He had never been in a place where he had to pick between himself and another. As a Housecarl, he was sworn to always put another first. The idea of-

His feet started moving, and he knew that Erandur’s mission was in motion.

And what a mission it was. Bounding over fallen cultists, slipping past berserker orcs, and stumbling through the old ruin as if the world was on fire. In a way, he supposed it was perspective. In Argis’ eyes, it was. The strange, yellow glow on everything made him feel even sicker than the torpor, but Erandur’s feet kept moving. He didn’t even bother to ask himself why he could move his hands but now his feet felt like they were moving alone, he just contributed it to the ridiculous magic-nonsense that usually took centre stage with Daedric interference. He had heard about the bloody nonsense that Artan went through with Sheogorath, and to be honest, he was glad Vaermina was just a dream-vampire rather than a goat-cheese hoarding maniac.

He only felt better when his hand met that heavy, iron ring and he tugged the chain, nearly apart, and the barrier slid away into the Void. Erandur’s quiet coaching to return him to his own senses was strange, as well as the jittery, irritated press of Artan’s hand against the back of his neck. He guessed the shoe was on the other foot; now the cat had to watch as he did something dangerous. He shook away the chuckle, as well as dismissing the parade of questions from all three mages, and they eventually started the trip into the inner sanctum.
“How can you kill these people?”

Erandur looked over from the next door, down at the cat stood beside one of the initiates beds. “You mean, because they used to be my friends? Well, to be honest, it’s unnerving. But they stand between us and Dawnstar’s nightmare-free future. Vaermina’s influence is detrimental to the town, and that alone is reason enough to stop her. My feelings for these people are irrelevant. They will not repent for their sins as I have. They believe wholeheartedly in Vaermina.”

“But what if they are trapped, like you were?”

“Then luck is not on their side. My feelings are irrelevant, but the people of Dawnstar’s wellbeing is. They are my priority now.”

“I can understand that,” Artan nodded.

“Those who turn to Mara usually do,” the elf smiled faintly.

xxx


“No thanks to you, Traitor.”

Artan was barely listening to the arguing men, eyes set on the ugly staff on a pedestal behind them. They were snarling and sniping about Casimir leaving them to die, and Erandur’s stuttering explanations, but eventually the brutish Nord behind Varen leapt forwards, lightning lacing his palms. Argis moved to meet him. It was strange, how easily the elves paired together and Artan leapt to the Bulwarks side. Almost as if they choreographed it. The cat and Nord alternated attacking and defending, Artan with wards and Argis with Spellbreaker, until they had Thorek pinned against the wall by the Nord’s axe. The elves were just as ruthless, Erandur and Eri alternating defensive wards and various lightning and ice attacks until Varen was thrown backwards several feet by a combined thunderbolt attack from both dark and gold palms.

“Well shit,” The cat huffed, looking to the dunmer. Erandur didn’t even glance back, his red eyes
settled on the slightly smoking form of Varen, slumped on the steps to the Skull. “They were my friends, once,” the elf shook his head, eyelids fluttering shut and both hands raising to press against the sockets. “I wonder, is this punishment for my past? Is it Mara’s will to torment me so?”

“If they lived, Dawnstar would be lost,” the high elf pressed a hand against his shoulder. “We came here to destroy the staff, not play rescue and save them from their poor choices. They chose to submit to a Daedra, one that actively threatened Dawnstar.”

“You have a unique way of looking at things,” the other snorted.

“It comes with experience, Erandur.”

“Hm. Let us be on with our mission, then. If you will stand back, I will perform the ritual Lady Mara granted me.”

Xxx

4E, 203 Late First Seed

Sofie was bored. And tired, but mostly bored. Braith wouldn’t come near her since Valencia was still floating around, albeit breezily and oblivious to the humans sending her aghast stares and the muted whispers between themselves. She was busy carving various things into Breezehome’s doorway, pretty things, but an illegible mess to human eyes. Like she had predicted, Valencia kept any would-be friends away. Lydia tried to spend a lot of time with her, and that was fun, but when she had to return to Dragonsreach for a few hours a day to ‘work,’ well. It meant that Sofie was alone.

Artan and Argis had been gone for at least two weeks, and were due back in maybe one more.

She tried reading the tomes that her pa left behind, and even doing the exercises he taught her with the short dagger he had given her. It was hard to train alone, and the books he had given her were all read and put back on the shelves. And besides, books didn’t replace people. Jon was nice enough, if a bit of a hopeless romantic. Watching him fighting with Mikael over such things had become less entertaining and more tiresome. She had learnt more cuss words, though.

It was-
“Hey. The trolls are coming to steal all the shoes. Will you fight with me to protect our boots, milady?”

Sofie looked up from her seat on a small hill behind the Drunken Huntsman, up at a little blonde girl maybe a year older than her. Probably about thirteen, maybe fourteen, with bright green eyes and a bow across her back, mud streaked across her face in an imitation of warpaint and a shining smile. With a quick hand, the girl threw a wooden sword at Sofie’s feet, and turned, almost expecting her to follow.

Sofie did.

xxx

“Forgive me if I do not look relieved. This place has… worn me down, so to speak,” Erandur murmured, almost inaudible.

“That’s understandable. Are you going to be okay?” Artan looked to the elf, who shrugged in return.

Erandur then laughed, “Dawnstar is safe, and Vaermina has no hold in Skyrim without her twisted artefact. She can feed, but not in the expanse that she used to. Without a cult and without a champion, she is legless and armless. I will be more than okay, after a few tankards of mead and a good bed, of course.”

“So what are you going to do now? Return to Riften with Maramal?”

“That old swot? Goodness no. I had planned to stay in the Temple with Mara’s shrine and live out my days praying for forgiveness, however now… well, instead, I would like to offer my services to you. If you ever need me, I will be there.”

The cat started, stopping a little ways past the Jarl’s longhouse. “Thank you, Erandur.”

The old elf laughed again, “It should be me thanking you, Artan.”
“Hey now, I just helped do the right thing. I think that regardless of whether I showed up or not, you would have stormed that Tower eventually.”

“It had been the plan, but I am glad I waited. If you and your friends hadn’t been there, I doubt I could have made it to the end.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, old man. You might be a little-“

Artan pushed the door open to Windpeak inn, allowing the old dunmer to enter first before he shook the snow from his fur and the sharp edges of his steel paldrons, absently pushing the door closed behind them. He had expected to see Vilkas, Farkas and Argis sat drinking again with Eri wandering around the hall singing songs with Jordis. In any order, really. The reality was Vilkas stood at the bar with his eyes on the door, looking a lot like a gargoyle atop a moulding castle. Eri had given him a wide berth, sat with a cheery Farkas and Argis, Jordis on her other side. Artan coughed into his fist, and quietly suggested the elf sit with the others while he got drinks. Erandur had taken one look at Vilkas and chuckled, before nodding and pottering away.

The Khajiit had expected an explosive battle of wit with a lot of yelling. Vilkas was silent. The awkwardness between the mildly confused cat and broiling werewolf stretched into halfway through the first pint, at least until Vilkas growled loudly beside him. “We have a lot to discuss, cat.”

“Must be my lucky day, dog.”

“Larethius-”

Artan didn’t even feel himself move. He just knew he had from the feel of a soft tummy under his knees, the blunt pain of the ice around his arm shattering against Vilkas’ sword, the blurr of movement as the Nord tried to change, the feeling of a nose breaking under his fist. It wasn’t until he felt the familiar magica of Eri pinning his arms back did he finally register exactly what was happening. Vilkas was pinned to the floor by the same spell, but that was soon obstructed from view by a puff of blonde hair and an angry mismatched pair of eyes.

A sudden surge from the thu’um, and the paralysis bled away. Only to be replaced by two huge fucking fists around his hands, pinning them against his own back in a ridiculous parody of a hug. “Stop…!”

“I’m not going-“ Artan started.
Argis cut him off, “No, you’re not. But randomly attacking-“

Artan snarled, “I’ve killed countless people like him who show up-“

“Yeah and throw others to the Alik’r-“ Argis sniped, but Artan was having none of it.

“I’m not going back.”

“He’s not one of Eldunarto’s men, Garma.” Eirian said gently.

The terse exchange between the Thane and Housecarl was derailed with Eri’s simple statement, rubbing at her magica-burnt hands absently. “I told him about Larethius, and I also told him not to talk about it. But as you know, men jump first and ask later.” She sent him a pointed look, before helping a rather murderous-looking Farkas with dragging his unconscious brother into one of the back rooms. Jordis followed quickly, before the elf returned to lead the two of them to a separate room, Argis still not trusting the cat to just snap and attack again, so he carried him there.

“Fuck it, why would you tell him about all that? And how the fuck was I meant to know? The last time someone who hated my guts knew about all of that I ended up running naked down a street and into the bay!”

“I told him because I had to,” Eri frowned, pushing the door closed behind them. “The same way you had to tell Argis and Lydia. The same way that Jakk had to tell Brynjolf and Scouts. Because when faced with a danger, unity is the best defence.”

“For fucks sake, he told a thief and a dock worker about our fucking slave master? And you told a set of glorified mercenaries about your skull-fucking monster of a…? Are you actually kidding me?” Artan shrieked, shaking in Argis’ grip.

“No.”

“And what is keeping any of them safe?” the cat snarled.
“Artan…” she tried gently.

The Bulwark actually winced when the thu’um washed out of the cat this time, sharp little pinpricks flickering against the skin of his neck and face. Didn’t make him turn away, however. The cat was a little more volatile with his response this time, “Larethius will catch up to us, the same way he catches up to everyone. One of his men will have caught a whiff of Iman getting sent down, and where she was at the time she got caught. It’s only a matter of time before someone squeals about the elf in Jorvaskr or the new cat thane, and when they do we’re fucked. They’ll catch wolf-boy here, and the Silver Hand will look like syphilitic whores by the time they’re done. And most likely Vilkas will go after them, get himself killed and the mighty Companions get dragged into it, For Honor and Brotherhood, right?” The cat sneered, wriggling even harder in Argis’ grip.

“And he’s a seasoned fighter; imagine what will happen to Scouts; a poor dockworker. Tobjorn will probably either hand him over easy cause he’s a giant lizard or he’ll fight and get himself and the rest of his family murdered in the night. You know what they did to Argonians back in the Isle. It’ll be a fucking miracle if the others in the Assemblage don’t get the same treatment, regardless of if they know or not. And we don’t even need to cover how Brynjolf will end up. Thieves get treated worse than even Argonians by the Dominion, especially the fanatical ones.”

“And yet, even though you point all of this out you neglect to point out what will happen to your housecarls when they catch up to you,” Eirian frowned, bright green eyes driving into the cat’s own.

“I’ve already got people on that, Eri. Even if they catch us, they won’t get our mates. For the moment though, I’ve only got precautions for a few of them, but in time none of them will get caught out with a sword in their face.”

The quiet start was enough; stricken faces turned to regard the cat, eyes hard and a cold smile in place. “I have Talia on my side, remember?”

The elf laughed too then, hard and high, an entire litany of musical words pouring out. Argis could barely understand one in thirty, but maybe that was because he was still reeling over everything they were arguing about. He was more than unsettled about the idea of them both knowing that a known-slavers men were sniffing around, and even more so that both had most probably set up precautions to stop said spies. Most definitely with lethal force, too.

“Looks like she’s getting paid more than either of us make in a year,” Eirian sighed lightly, running a hand through her hair.

“You hired her, too?” Artan clucked, legs kicking lightly at Argis’ shins.
“And S’eta,” she grinned back, a sharp little light flicking on in her eyes.

Artan actually cackled, the stone-feeling to his form melting away. “Well, shit. I didn’t know you loved these mercs so much. I wouldn’t have kicked him in the nuts so hard if I had known.”

“I had wondered why he was unconscious,” she replied lowly, smile still in place.

“Hm. I’m surprised he hasn’t thrown up, to be honest,” Artan shrugged.

“Did you think of the Stormcloak rebels, too?”

”Yup. So I’m guessing she has an intense army behind her now, right?” The cat grinned again, all teeth.

“Well, considering she already had a band of loyal misfits, I wouldn’t be surprised if she had used the money to hire more. They probably stay on for free now; she has a very… persuasive nature. I’m guessing the two of us are asking her to persuade a group of ex-Stormcloaks to help her kill Thalmor?” Eirian asked, tone brightening.

“What did Jakk ask her to do?” Artan asked conspiratorially.

“Apparently he asked her to kill any Justicar, spy or informant ‘in a way to deter all their predecessors,’” she smirked at his tone.

“And I’m guessing this whole thing will come along soon, right?”

“If you’ve done what I think you’ve done, then yes.”

“Copied all the Thalmor dossiers and given them to every high-standing Stormcloak sympathiser from here to Windhelm? Then yes.” The cat inclined his head, almost as if he expected praise.

“Good. But you know we will need more than that to keep the Dominion out of Skyrim,” the elf’s
brow raised.

“You two are planning to kick out the Dominion? Like Hammerfell?” Argis frowned over his shoulder, eyeing the elf now sat upon one of the tavern beds, then the cat still pinned to his chest. “The Stormcloaks are just bands of men hiding in the hills, and you want them to what? Evict the elves?”

“That’s why Tulius has a set of the intel I found in the Embassy; to get the Empire on side, or at least not cause another civil war when the rioting starts. At best, we will evict the Dominion from Skyrim but potentially leave the Empire. But at the very best, we create a domino effect and create an uprising that the Dominion has never seen.”

“And how the hell are you going to do that?” Argis practically yelped, looking between elf and cat.

“Put a sympathetic voice in every important ear, of course. Get the right people in the right places, and you can get anything,” the cat trilled down at him, wriggling a little in the Nord’s grip.

“That’s-“

“Impossible? No. It’s actually scarily easy. If we work fast, we might be able to get people into the right positions in time for the moot next year. A bunch of the provinces leaders in one room? Beautiful timing.” Artan nodded to himself and then at Eirian, who returned it with a bob of her head.

“If he actually attacks us before we manage to rally the Stormcloaks, then it might get a bit stickier. If he goes for S’eta first, then we are on our own except for our personal forces and possibly the thieves. If they go for me, it is similar except we have the Companions. But if they go for you, there is a possibility of starting some kind of all out battle between the Empire and The Dominion, as well as whatever group you have allied yourself with over the years.

For example, the Mage’s guild would most probably create a debacle since you are Archmage, with or without Tolfdir being the real leader behind the scenes. But that is small compared to the Dominion actually attacking one of the Legion’s Legates. It would create an international uproar, especially since you have a clean record as Artan. This is without even considering your Thane status in several Holds, many of which you are the only active and battle-worthy Thane.

All of that considered, even then it is only the things we can estimate; I haven’t even counted all the others who would probably jump to your defence; between your housecarls, the other companions you have made and the general citizens who recognise you as a defender of their own wellbeing, well,” Eri shrugged, looking almost hungry before she shook it off, “But this is all far-future talk; Talia is just working on keeping Larethius off our backs for now, and using that to build up the local
love for her. She calls the new group the Chainless, funnily enough.”

“What?”

“Free of the oppressors chains; she wanted something that wasn’t based on just one race,” Eri supplied, sitting on the edge of the room’s dressing table. “Something that was in common tongue that anyone could join. She already has a few strays in tow.”

“Shit. Where did you guys… oh,” Argis cut off, almost fully letting Artan go.

“Yeah. She came with us. She was an orphan picked up on one of Eldunarto’s holiday trips and ended up being kept as a training dummy for the guards. Set her up with basic sword fighting and had the new recruits attack her for their training.” The elf’s voice lost it’s bubbly tone, instead dropping into a dull monotone that didn’t sound right on her.

“Talos Almighty… How… many of you were there when you escaped?”

“Six of us. S’eta, me, Eri, Talia, and Jaden,” Artan answered this time, patting the Nord’s shoulder.

“Fuck… and-“

The door practically flew off of its hinges when Vilkas practically kicked it down, face completely maimed by a scowl so deep it made his eyes barely visible pinpricks in his brows shadow. “You-“

“Vilkas, do you remember when I told you about the run from Talwinamath?”

“Of course I do, and then I hear the cat talk about a Larethius that isn’t you, about your forsaken brother! What was I expected to think? That wretch would do anything; even sell you out if it meant he wouldn’t get caught by that monster!” Vilkas was practically spitting with how angry he was, arms flailing from cat to elf to Nord and back.

“Him and his brother are the ones I escaped with. “Eirian said gently.
“You can’t be serious.” Vilkas snapped.

“When am I not?” The elf sighed, shooting the Nord a tight smile. “Regardless of whether you believe me or not, the only reason he is here at all is because of me. He wouldn’t betray me for the same reason why I helped him and his brother escape back then.”

“Why? If he is one of the cats you escaped with, then he’s also the one who sold out Taneth to the Thalmor, knowing exactly what one of the dedicated ones are like. He gave up an entire city to be slaughtered, enslaved and worse for himself. And you think that he wouldn’t do the same to you? You’re that crazy fuckers sister, Eri. You don’t think that will give this little shit pause? He could hand you over in exchange for being free! And then you’ll be a-”

“What?” Argis broke in, looking from the furious Vilkas to Eirian, rubbing her hands over her face. She almost looked constipated when she eventually slumped forwards, elbows propped against her knees.

“Eldunarto Larethius is my twin. My full name is Eirian Larethius.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me that?” The Bulwark snapped at Artan, who looked even more confused than he had when he had first seen Vilkas at the bar. “I thought I had. Lydia knows, and I thought I told you about it.”

“See? He even tells his housecarls about it. Who’s to say that one of them don’t just kidnap you to sell off to Larethius? They are sworn to protect whatever shithoop they are charged to defend, after all!” Vilkas growled, motioning towards Argis again.

“To think, we used to be friends,” the cat griped, straining uncomfortably in the again tightening grip of the Bulwark. “You talk as if I am the worst thing to ever crawl out of the primitive muck. The reason why I would never betray her is the same reason why she wouldn’t betray me, or you, or the Companions.”

“Don’t even think to compare us, cat. You would sell out anyone to get yourself out of a sticky situation,” the werewolf snarled, spittle flickering from his pronounced canines.

“You can believe what you want. I don’t give a fuck what you believe,” the cat actually laughed, and Argis debated on turning his back on Vilkas to better protect Artan for when the wolf actually snapped. “The people who I care about know to what extent I would go in order to protect them, and
“You mean the housecarls? The men and women who swore an oath to protect a Thane that just so happened to be you? They would protect their thane to the death; it could have been anyone. They protect you because they have to, not because they want to,” Vilkas scoffed, his eyes already half dilated.

“If that was true, then Argis wouldn’t have stopped me from making the killshot earlier. He would have let me kill you, a known werewolf to protect my life. Instead, he restrained me and even now still has his back to you, regardless of his own welfare. Even knowing that this will probably end up as a fight, he is still trying to diffuse the situation. Why? Because he knows I will regret it, and he considers my feelings as something worth the extra work,” Artan replied, before his eyes flickered to a spot just behind Vilkas’ head. “That, and Jordis only thought to draw a blade when you suggested that she only protected me because of an oath, and not during our fight.”

The wolf-man turned slightly to note Jordis, stood behind him with her eyes twitching wildly between the cat and himself, her face uncharacteristically blank. He barely had enough room to look down at the steel dagger resting on the junction between his throat and shoulder.

“You see? You Nords aren’t scary because of what you swear your lives to, or what oaths you take or what lord you serve. Nords are scary because of what friends they take, and how far they would go to protect them. If things were as you think they are and I died they would get re-assigned without much of an uproar. I’m a cat, and a foreigner, so it wouldn’t really be a black mark against them. Some Jarls would have even rewarded them for letting it happen. And when I first became their thane, I even offered each of them a free way out in case they didn’t like being a cat’s housecarl. I introduced each of them to the Grandmaster of the Blades, and let them choose between the glory-soaked return of the Blades and staying with me. Their families would be overjoyed,” he sighed, and shook his head. “But they stayed.”

The cat even smiled fondly at each of the blonde housecarls in turn, before continuing. “And eventually, we all became friends. I melted a dwemer centurion into molten metal for one, almost killed three restoration-school mages when trying to heal another, brutally murdered the dirty little shitstains that attacked one more, and that’s only the times I can remember. But how many times they have saved my ass? Well, there are just too many to count.” Artan shrugged, apparently noticing that the Bulwark had loosened his grip considerably since the conversation began.

“Yeah, I was a monster in the past, and you could say that I deserve to hang for what I did. But at the end of the day, I was an assassin brought up in a world where life was meaningless. The only person who got to live was the ruthless cur who killed first. Survival was more important than honour, or glory. Honour is pretty fucking easy when you’re in a pretty land like Skyrim, where the men fight for love and justice and their family name. Where I came from, all that shit got you dead. I still sometimes wonder now whether or not becoming a Thane and dedicating myself to keeping people safe was a clever option, because when the Dominion takes over and turns this place into all the other slave-states, well. Who’s the first head that gets piked? Mine. The Jarls. The heroes and the do-
gooders. But fuck, then I’d think if I didn’t, then doesn’t that make it worse?’

Vilkas was just staring now, eyes wide, mouth clamped shut, listening. Eri just looked sad.

“Doesn’t it make it worse that I’ve seen what happens when the shit hits the fan, and instead of actually trying to make things here better I just let them get worse, then wasn’t I just the same as the cats who sold my ancestors to the elves years before? Because that’s what happens; people sell you out to keep themselves, their families, and their own things safe. I bet you don’t think of the Silver Hand members who’s families get mauled by rabid wolves, or the Vigilants who come-a-knocking when one of you changes in public and someone blabs to the Order. You just think ‘it’s me and them, and it sure as fuck isn’t going to be me.’ Right?”

“I don’t even know why I’m trying to explain it to you,” Artan huffed, squaring his shoulders from the slump they had slunk into. “I bet you think this entire fucking thing was just a ploy to get sympathy so I can kick your ass into the Hunting Ground later, but fuck. I don’t care. I’m done with this bullshit for tonight.”

“Good to know. Vilkas, I’m going to get drunk,” Eirian puffed, blowing her hair from where it had fallen across her face. The Nord nodded, still looking slightly dazed, before wandering back into the main section of the inn. Eri sent the khajiit a small smile before following suit and letting Jordis into the room, eyes still that half-crazed stare a muddle on her face. “What’s going on?”

“Sit down, honey. It'll be a long one,” Artan sighed, before Argis fully let go to shut the door between the three and the rest of the world.

xxx

“The evil necromancers are going to turn us into their undead thralls if we wait any longer! We need to attack now!” Lucia screamed, flinging her sword at the tree and drawing a new blade, grasping Sofie’s hand with her free one.

“But Firestorm-“ Sofie started, turning to run and tug Lucia away from the fight when Lydia broke their game.

“Hey Sofie, its time for supper. Time to round up your game and come home,” Lydia called, wiping her hands on the already stained pinafore around her waist. The two girls and Atronach looked up from their game, and the housecarl couldn’t help but laugh. The two girls had stolen boys clothes
from somewhere that obviously belonged to older boys from the way they had to wrap their belts around their waists several times. Both were covered in mud, leaves and had warpaint caked across their faces, Sofie’s bloody red wave mimicking Argis and Lucia’s green claw marks mimicking Aela’s. Valencia had even joined in with the dress-up, moving some of her molten chest and horns around to look like old Nordic armor.

“Well if it isn’t the little warriors. What fell beast have you been thwarting today?”

“Necromancers!” Sofie cried, making odd wooping sounds that Lydia supposed was ghost noises.

“Ahh, well didn’t you know that they have suppertime too? You can destroy their nest tomorrow,” She eventually settled on, smiling at both the girls.

“Can Lucia stay for dinner?” Sofie asked, looking from her new friend and back to Lydia.

“Well, only if her mother says okay,” the warrior shrugged, twisting her arms around to untie her pinafore.

She actually felt the stab of panic in her chest when the two girls flinched, Lucia going so far to fall back onto her haunches. “Um… She… She won’t mind.”

The housecarl could only nod, thanking every Divine that she made more than enough for the three of them. And when Sofie asked if the little Nord girl could sleep over, well she couldn’t say yes fast enough.

xxx

Vilkas had become slightly less curt during their trek to the tomb. He still looked like a fermented fruit whenever he had to talk to the cat, but that was expected. Some things took time. But for some reason, everything that Argis wanted to speed up was suddenly in some kind of slow trot compared to everything else happening in his life. Calder still hadn’t replied to any letters, regardless of the sender. He hadn’t been able to find a messenger in Dawnstar to send a few bits back to Yngvar, and he really doubted that the Nord would wait much longer for his special brew wine. And things with Artan had noticeably slowed to an almost stop.

Their relationship or whatever the hell the thing between them was back to the dancing, cat and
They still talked, and they were still friendly enough. And the interest was definitely still there. But whenever they got within five inches of each other, well. The cat would turn into a statue, make up some excuse and disappear. Literally, in one case, disappearing through a window. Sometimes, Argis would even see his nose getting pinker before he ran off, but it was always the same. Lydia had said something about being shy, but Argis wrote it off. The cat pranced around in skin-tight leather, and even wore a divine-damned dress. It was only when they were in close proximity did he freak out and bolt.

When asked, he got the regular deflection or a “Hmm? Can’t say I know what you mean.”

Eri hadn’t given him much to go on, either. She had simply said that back when they had first split up, just previous to Artan arriving in Hammerfell, that he had been a prudish kind of thing. But then, he had been in a place where they had lived in cages on some days and filthy vermin infested cesspools the next. It was understandable that “fornicating,” was the nasty-ass word she used, was low on the priority list. He had argued that Jakk-

She had laughed, and said well Eltbet isn’t Riel Riel.

He sighed, and slung his undershirt next to his discarded armor on the riverbank.

It was fucking freezing, but he stank. He had the idea of asking one of the mages to heat up a pond or something, or create some kind of small bath dug out of the dirt, but they declined. Something about not being able to keep it warm without a steady stream of other magical mumbo jumbo that he tuned out of half way through. So, cold, half frozen river it was.

Vilkas had simply suggested he didn’t bathe.

Argis had replied that he smelled like wet dog, at which the other twin laughed hard enough to almost choke to death on his rabbit stew. Naturally, Argis disappeared in the forthcoming kafuffle.

It wouldn’t be as bad if he didn’t catch Artan staring, or taking not-so-discreet sniffs of his hair. The Nord didn’t understand the cat’s fascination with his bloody hair, but it seemed to get more attention than he did at the moment. Artan had braided it, apparently so he could get better and do Sofie’s in the future.
He sighed again, unwittingly.

The only time they had actually slept in the same bed was the night they both got drunk, and that was just to sleep. He didn’t mind the waiting, but all of the mixed messages were more than a little confusing. He did best when things were kept simple. He had no idea what the hell was going on, and any questions were shot down, or the cat became so awkward that he dropped the issue.

He knew the cat had, well, before. He had about a few partners, one or two human, so it wasn’t that.

Argis’ face turned from rather lost to rather pained when he took a step into the river.

xxx

“I didn’t know that Farky is scared of spiders. New pranks in Jorvaskr, I am predicting now! Maybe I will set up a new betting pool!” The elf replied, ducking under a low hanging cobweb. Ysgramor’s tomb was just as dirty and vermin-infested as you would expect from an ancient Nordic tomb, albeit thankfully without the added irritation of Draugr.

“You do realise he’s standing like, three feet from you, right? He’ll kick your ass when this is over!” the cat yelled from up ahead.

It took nearly an hour to get to the brassier, and nearly another to kill Kodlak’s wolf-spirit.

But when the giant beast finally hit the dust, dissipating into a cloud of glittering smoke and ash to let Kodlak’s ethereal form stand from the remains, anybody who was there could see the shining edges of tears in the four Companion’s eyes.

It took at least another hour before anyone spoke. “Well. I think it’s time for a relocation, yes?” Eri broke the silence, patting Farkas on the arm cordially.

Artan piped up from his and Argis’ respectful distance beside one of the sarcophagi, “Well, I was planning to throw another head in there. Cure my own lycanthropy while in the neighbourhood.”
The elf shrugged, “If you want. Need a hand?”

“Well-“

“The Companions would be glad,” Vilkas grumbled, lifting his head from its downcast position against his chest, “to help a shield brother.”

Artan couldn’t even speak from the shock. All it took was a small, reassuring smile from Farkas and a nod from Vilkas for the cat to say yes.

Xxx

4E, 203 Early Rains Hand

“And then my uncle and aunt threw me out. I’ve been begging since then.”

“I ended up in Windhelm selling flowers and sleeping in the snowbanks behind a barrel after my pa died. It wasn’t until Artan adopted me that I’ve been… here.”

“Is he a good person?” Lucia asked after a moment, eyes still not meeting Sofie’s.

“I don’t know,” Sofie shrugged. “He’s good to me, and good to others. I’ve seen him give money to every beggar we come across, and he helps everyone who asks him. He’s like a saint to some of the adults, and it’s obvious he hates that he can’t be there for me more. But he’s an assassin.”

“For the Brotherhood?” Lucia grinned back at the girl.

“Yeah. He doesn’t worship Sithis though; he’s an Agent of Mara,” Sofie nodded, rubbing her muddy hands on her dress.

“Wow. So he trains you with the blade, then?”
“Sometimes. But he prefers conjuration. Says that it keeps me more out of the line of fire. Valencia is his flame thrall, and stays with me most of the time.”

The girls glanced over at the Atronach trying to push a bucket through Breezehome’s window and Lydia’s valiant attempts to stop it. “But she’s kind of odd, you know? Just like him, when I think about it. She likes to play, and is curious about everything. And when she gets angry she’s terrifying, but she never gets angry at me. And when someone they care about is in trouble, they don’t have limits. They kill whatever the threat is. It’s funny to see him arguing with guards and things sometimes, but other times it’s scary.”

“Sounds nice to have someone care that much about you,” Lucia offered, sounding a little sad.

“Scary, really. I don’t even like thinking about which one would be more dangerous if a boy gave me a flower.”

Lucia giggled, “My brother was the same. He taught me how to fire a bow so I could defend myself when I was older. And whenever the neighbours boys came over he was like a sabre cat!”

“Angry and smelly?”

The two sniggered, and went back to making a fort out of the old furniture Artan wanted to sell in the markets.

Xxx

4E, 203 Early Rains Hand

The Plains around Whiterun were barely a few trees away when Vilkas suddenly sneezed. Aela made some kind of snide remark, at which the man swatted at her with a hand, ignoring Vilkas and Jordis laughter. Argis looked away, shaking his head, and back up at the cat ahead of them, side by side with Eirian Larethius. He didn’t even want to know what made her so different from her brother, or what she used to be like before she changed for the better. He had a sick feeling whenever he thought about it, the way she had looked sick when Artan had talked about Taneth to Vilkas. A part of him wanted to keep the cat as far from any Larethius as physically possible, but the other part was undecided. She was most definitely the only reason Jakk and Artan had gotten away that day, since by the sounds of it she was the boss’ sister and the rest were slaves. She would have had unbelievable power, especially in her own domain.
But she threw it all away to live in Jorrvaskr with a bunch of smelly old dogs.

He had only gone into the Hall once, and even that was enough for him. It was full of fighting, bloodied noses, mead and the undertone of wet animal that made him feel like a lamb shank in a wolf den. And well, now he knew why. Any one of them could most probably kill him in their wolf form if they got close enough, but hand-to-hand while both human would be a toss up in the air.

He-

Artan and Aela both made a sudden sprint towards the treeline, making the rest of the group shudder with surprise. It was only when the cat yelled, “Valencia is fighting!” and Aela screeched, “I can smell smoke coming from Whiterun!” that the others made a move. Vilkas and Farkas started snarling behind him, he could hear that much, and he could visibly see Aela’s armor shaking with the sudden muscle growth. Seeing the woman’s skin start tearing apart at the seams, the jagged black fur pushing up from underneath, and the sudden jerk as the rest of her wolf-form tore free-

He refused to be sick.

He had barely made it to the treeline before a huge snout collided with the back of his knee, throwing him up in the air to land hard on a wolf’s shoulders, a glance to the side making him aware of Jordis’ being in the same predicament. He had to drive both hands into the huge animal’s ruff to keep himself from falling off, and settled in for a long fucking run. It didn’t even feel like a horse, it felt like being in bed naked with a bloody sabre cat. He almost laughed. Aela surged forwards, slamming into Eri like a mountain boulder hit a lake during the spring thaw. The elf was terrifying, albeit in a more back-breaking-bendy-under-pressure kind of way. She flew, only to land gracefully on the wolf’s back as if she was just doing a rolly-polly in a field somewhere.

The Nord looked to Artan, who seemed to have gone through a moment where he didn’t know whether it was a bad idea to cure his lycanthropy or not, but it was soon quelled. Argis filed away the surprise at his ability to read Artan so well for later scrutiny. His shadow seemed to lurch upwards like a torrent of lava, shifting until the vague outline of a horse was seen galloping astride him. A flicker of movement, and he was on Shadowmere’s back, barely able to keep a few feet behind the speeding Aela and Eri.

They had broken the trees by the time they had heard the shouts.

It didn’t take long to realise what was happening in Whiterun.
Valencia was screaming loud enough to break windows by the time Lydia made it outside, apron thrown aside and sword drawn. The first one met her blade easily, thudding to the floor in a pile of ash rather than a body. Another let out a loud screeching roar that made Valencia pause, before the Atronach swooped in to let loose a torrent of flame into the vampire’s face.

The housecarl looked away, eyes scanning through the screaming, running citizens for Sofie.

She couldn’t find Lucia.

She wasn’t at the hill, and she wasn’t near the Bannered Mare. She wasn’t beside the Eldergleam, and she wasn’t at the edge of the fountain outside Dragonsreach. She wasn’t anywhere that Sofie could find, and Valencia was fighting the vampires who had tried to attack her. They came in the middle of the day, and most of the Companions were either with her pa or on their own missions. There was only the dunmer, the angry looking Ria and-

It was huge.

She skidded in an attempt to not run straight into it, but instead her knees gave way and she was on her butt, shaking and staring up at the huge, grey-skinned bat that had just finished tearing-

She couldn’t even throw up; she was just frozen, watching the thing as it slowly noticed her. It seemed to laugh -rocks and ice all crunching together in a bag- and lumbered around to face her fully, flicking a claw across the intestine caught up in one of its protruding fangs. A dark, slimy tongue darted out to catch at the blood streaked across its forearms, before it shook its wings and slowly drifted to the ground, and took a heavy step forwards.

Sofie couldn’t even scream. Her hands were numb, if she even had them anymore. She couldn’t feel her legs, especially when the black, rolling mist started up around the towering creature, fogging up its silhouette and leaving just a pair of glowing yellow eyes to stare down at her. Her throat constricted tighter, her eyes caught the edge of Valencia diving into the marketplace, and she knew that this was-
The vampire howled.

The mist fell to the ground like black sand, covering the old Whiterun cobbles in thick dust. Its bloodied paw flew to its neck where the arrow protruded from what looked to be a thick vein. And to her complete shock, the beast fell to one knee; the one without an arrow stuck in its crease. She had expected Lydia to storm out and drive a sword through it’s heart, but-

Lucia was screaming wildly, eyes sharp little daggers in her face, as she ducked under the thing stick-thin wing and clambered up its bent back to wrap its wiry grey braid around a fist, yanked its head back as if the thick weave was a chain around its neck, and drove a short glass blade straight into the hollow underneath its half-howling jaw.

Sofie couldn’t look away, even when the blonde girl screamed again and again, driving that tiny green blade into the vampire’s throat and chest over and over, before the thing rolled forwards to collapse along the road, and the girl straightened. But even when that wild animal child stepped forwards, screaming at her to get up, and her bloodied hands clenched around Sofie’s wrists, well, Sofie wasn’t scared.

Because Lucia looked just like Artan had when a bear attacked their camp a few days after he had adopted her.

The same, wild green.

Something hit Lucia hard, sending her careering into the half-stood Sofie hard enough to send them both sprawling.

“You goddamn cur! How dare you attack a Volkihar Vampire from behind! I’ll-”

The new, black-haired woman stalked forwards, but barely made it another step. Sofie pushed through the thin membrane between Nirn and Oblivion, and the fiery wolf-construct swept through like a hot knife through butter. The woman screamed, barely bringing up her sword in time, as the wolf leapt into action. Her sword pierced its chest, but the animal just let itself slide down her blade until its sternum met hilt, before it exploded in a huge blast of fire. Sofie had Lucia on her feet and running by the time the flames, and the screams, died.

“Pa has a load of staffs and scrolls in the house. If we can get there we can set up enough wards and maybe a few summoned creatures,” Sofie forced out, almost biting her tongue in her haste.
“What about Lydia? Shouldn’t we find her?” Lucia asked, sounding a lot more solid than Sofie did.

Sofie flashed the other girl a watery grin, “She’s probably busy gutting vampires right now.”

“There are less vampires around than-“

“Oh my Divines.” The two girls stood straight, staring down into the Plains District from atop the stairs. The entire city was fighting the vampire horde, a shifting, ugly battle that seemed to be more fantasy than reality.

“Talos Almighty, is that your Pa?” Lucia asked, breathless.

“Yeah…” Sofie swallowed tightly, staring down into the foray.

The two stopped at the very edge of the Wind District’s steps, surprised to see three huge wolves tearing into behemoth fights with more of the huge grey-bats that ranged from rooftops to the hills and even through the market stalls. Seeing the bulky wolves flicker through the merchant stands without even a hair touching the merchandise was mind blowing. Various guards were aiding with covering fire for the wolves and scattered Companions, hitting a smouldering vampire or two with varying success. Apparently huge fucking werewolves weren’t a concern if they were killing off attacking forces.

A golden elf that Sofie called Eirian was flitting in-between various fights; sending shards of ice and flashes of lightning into vampires that stayed still too long, and in some cases outright killing them with headshots. Even from where they were the tinkling laughter could be heard. A huge blonde Nord was not far behind her, the bloody red wave warpaint across his face, slamming into vampires and throwing them completely off of their feet. A bright golden sword was in one fist, and a heavy-looking shield in the other, both already slick with blood and gore. A few fluttering arrows rained down, and it only took a moment to realise that Jordis was giving backup fire from one of the rooftops, hitting every mark hand and fast.

But the cat was the most noticeable, in a strange way. He was slinky, and none of the vampires looked at him. Not until it was too late. He wandered and flickered through the various battles, a lot like the elf but without the flashing magic and the sharp cackling. He was silent, bright green eyes visible even with the distance, and had already killed seven by the time he doubled back through the bar-fight-esque scene. He was fluid, a blade in each hand, and landed hits that were only visible from the wide arc of blood that followed in their wake, hitting vitals like rain hit Nirn.
“He is bloody terrifying,” Lucia chuckled, but didn’t look away.

“I kno-“

His eyes landed on them, and all of a sudden he was pushing, stabbing and thundering through vampire and guard alike to get to them. “Why are you covered in blood? And who’s this?” the cat looked from girl to girl, before stabbing both blades into the two sheathes lashed to either of his thighs and shooed them back into the Cloud District.

“This is Lucia. She’s my friend.”

“Well Lucia, it’s nice to meet you,” he nodded, pushing them further into the Cloud District.

“You too, sir,” the girl nodded.

“Well by Mara as my witness that’s the first time I’ve been called sir. I’ll introduce you to the housecarls; maybe you can teach them some manners,” he shot them both a grin. “One of them tried to feed me to a bear once.”

Lucia giggled, at which the cat just snorted and flicked a wrist, another Atronach pushing itself into Nírn. “Penelope, I want you to take care of every vampire in the city and then take Valencia to scout the wilds. Any vampire you find I want you to kill. After that you’re free to do what you like.”

The Atronach nodded, before swatting Sofie on the arm and disappearing into the fray.

“Now, why are you both covered in blood?”

Sofie fidgeted with her hands, and Lucia wouldn’t look at him. He ushered them into Kyne’s temple, sending the grave-looking Danica a nod. “One of those big grey bat men attacked me in the street, and Lucia killed him.”

The cat froze, before he whipped back to stare from one girl to the other. “What?”
The blonde shrugged, “I shot him and stabbed him until he died. But if it wasn’t for Sofie conjuring that exploding dog then I don’t know what would have happened. After I killed the bat, a vampire girl hit me from behind, and it was her quick thinking that saved us from that vampire. I guess you could say we kinda saved each other, really.”

The cat slumped onto one of the stone benches, looking completely bewildered. “Well shit.”

“Don’t swear,” Sofie frowned, slapping his wrist. Artan laughed, rubbing at his hand.

“So, I come back thinking the worst and instead I find two little warriors with nary a scratch. I can think of worse homecomings.”

“Oi, give someone a heads up before you wander off during a fight. Jordis is panicking and… oh. Who’s this?”

The three looked up to see the giant blonde Nord from before, blood splattered across his face and hands, armor soaked and dripping, and hair plastered to his neck. The cat shifted in his seat before proclaiming “This is Sofie’s new friend. They killed one of the Vampire Lords and another vampire together.”

The Bulwark looked from the tiny Imperial kicking dust to the brunette girl picking at the hem of her tunic, neither looking at cat or Nord. “I am not surprised. She’s your kid, after all,” the man deadpanned, before stepping forwards to ruffle Sofie’s hair. “Good job. And not even a cut on either of you. Me and the others will be out of jobs if you kids keep it up.”

“Hey now, I can always use a butler,” the cat chuckled.

“I refuse,” the Bulwark replied, deadpan.

“Wha-a-at?”

“You heard me-” Argis frowned, shaking his head.
“Pa, can Lucia stay with us?” Sofie asked, gripping his arm tighter.

Artan looked back to Sofie before rolling up his sleeves, eyes flickering to the commotion in the entranceway of the Temple. “What about her own parents? I don’t fancy being called in front of the Jarl for kidnapping. Although, a shot good enough to take down a Vampire Lord might be worth it.”

“Luu,” Sofie nudged the other girl, who grimaced and looked away. Sofie frowned, before looking back to the cat. “She got thrown out of her farm by her aunt when her ma died. She’s been begging like I was. I thought—“

“Yes, she can live with us. It’s up to you though, whether or not you want to be a part of the family or a ward,” Artan smiled faintly at the blonde, who was still pointedly not looking at any of them. Until that, of course.

“What….? You’d…. you’d be like a pa to me or something? You don’t even know me!”

“Yep, and this little rat-bag would be your sister,” he poked his tongue out at Sofie’s glare, “And I trust her judgement. She likes you; that much is obvious. You’re a good sort, and I like to help good sorts.”

“But… what would I call you?”

“Whatever you want. Pa, Artan, or just old man. You could be a sister to Sofie and a daughter to me, if you wanted. It’s up to you. But either way you have a place at our hearth whenever you need or want it. That part doesn’t change.”

“I want a family.”

“You, Lucia, are more than welcome to join ours. We’re a little weird, dysfunctional and none of us are related; but we love each other,” Artan smiled reassuringly at the kid, who seemed to shake more by the moment.

“That… that’s all I want.”
“Well then-“

Artan almost broke his neck with the force of the two girls throwing themselves at his chest, one babbling and crying, the other shrieking with joy. Argis refused to help him stand up.

xxx

The next three days were busy.

The Companions were helping to rebuild various burnt or otherwise damaged homes and shops, and Artan and Eirian were full-time healing aides at the temple. But when the two got an hour or so off for lunch, the elf spent her time braiding hair and drinking mead. But the cat? He spent his time playing with the girls. It was strange to see the Thane that Argis was used to seeing covered in blood and gore instead covered in mud and warpaint, dressed in a set of mismatched clothes and playing a city-wide game of battle-tag. It was some new game the kids had come up with where they hunted trolls and ghosts and things, with some being the beasts and others being the hunters.

Lydia filled him in on all the goings on since they left for Dawnstar, and to be honest, he had figured that if Artan had refused the girl then Lydia would have probably broken bones until he decided otherwise. It was obvious in the way she was around the two of them that she cared about both girls as if they were her own kids, to the point that he actually found enough courage to point out that she would make a good mother.

She had snarled and thrown a pot at him; didn’t hide her blush, though.

It wasn’t until the third day, when Jordis was training Sofie with her dagger, that Lucia came to find him on her own. She strolled up slowly, eying the Nord sat atop one of the sunnier hills in Whiterun. He set down his book, another instalment on the raunchy Argonian Maid, and regarded her when she sat down next to him with a handful of honey nut sweets that Lydia had baked that day.

“So Argis…?”

“That’s me, little miss. And you’re the Thane’s new nipper,” he nodded at her.

“That’s me, mister,” she snarked back.
“Heh.”

“Sofie said that you bit the head off a bear once,” Lucia continued, flicking her eyes at him.

The Bulwark actually laughed at that, putting his sweetroll on his knee to wipe the crumbs from his stubble. “Talos Almighty, what other stores did she tell you?”

“That you’re in love with Artan.”

He must have made a face, because the girl laughed, loud and bright. “Have you told him yet?”

“You… what?” Argis carried on mumbling, but it was those words that she could make out.

“She said that you guys have kind of made moves on each other, but now are just kind of running circles around each other,” she supplied, but he carried on mumbling confusedly.

The Nord stared over at her while she plonked herself down on the hill beside him, bright green eyes staring straight back. “She said that it’s cute. Kinda like watching puppies or something.”

“I… I am so lost right now,” Argis grumbled, rubbing a hand over his head.

“Yeah, she said as much.” Lucia snorted.

“You… what?”

“Oi, what are you two up to?” Artan yelled.

The two turned to see the cat meandering past Olava’s house and up to their hill, wiping mud from the bridge of his nose. The girl just smiled sweetly, shrugging her shoulders while Argis fumbled for words. The khajiit just looked mildly confused. “Well, it’s lunchtime. And Lydia says that you’re only eating sweets. What about proper food?”
“But they taste so good…”

“And so does steak,” Argis pointed out, but Lucia pouted.

“Not as good as these,” the girl waved the treats at him, “If I could live just on these and mashed potatoes, I would.”

“You haven’t tried my oyster chowder yet, so I will not blame you for your food-ignorance. Look, as long as you eat right for your main meals, you can eat whatever sweets you want,” Artan sniffed, resting his hands on his hips.

“Really?” the girl questioned, looking sceptically back at him.

“Yup. But only after you eat your proper meals, and if you don’t make yourself sick. Otherwise you get cut down to one sweet a day. Fair?”

“Alright. What about Sofie?” Lucia asked.

“Sofie doesn’t-“

“She has a sweetie stash hidden in her junk chest,” the kid pointed at him with one of her treats.

The cat’s ear twitched, almost comically. Argis couldn’t hold back the laugh, barely hidden by a grunt and a fake cough for good measure.
Princess Sithis and Mr. Sweetroll

Chapter Summary

When your kids are better with animals even though you're a giant cat with Kyne's Peace

4E, 203 Early Second Seed

The knife slid in so fucking easy that it felt like heaven. Blood flooded across his hands, across his legs, and the expression on the man's face was so surprised that Artan could almost taste the burgeoning fear, fleeing with the last dregs of life. Isran was a bag of dicks, to be honest. Hard, bearded and no nonsense. Artan got sent on a mission straight off the bat. Said something along the lines of “You look competent. Go prove it.” And after that, well. It was a bloodbath, and not in the regular vampire-related way. There weren’t any desiccated corpses in this ruin; no fresh kills but Artan’s own. It was almost funny how much these things were feared, and how easy they were to hunt. These ones were full of pride, and apparently didn’t expect to have anyone opposing them. None of them expected that they could die.

Artan was past feeling sad for them.

He found Tolan’s body. They didn’t need to do that much damage to a man to simply feed.

Sick fuckers.

He slid his blade free, letting the body slump to the dust. It was still weird to not feel the wolfblood boil at the sight, but that was just the way things were now. He still felt alive when he killed, but it didn’t make him hungry. It was a welcome change from the living hell of lycanthropy. When he had to mentally steel himself against the smell; and the need.

Artan slipped back into a subtle, sneakier formation and began pressing further into Dimhollow Crypt. He guessed it had some kind of ancient power or vampire they wanted to resurrect since the Volkihar’s were adamant about getting here. He had only seen the race for the Jagged Crown get as ugly.

Whatever it was, he guessed he’d have to make a decision about it. He hadn’t enough information
about Isran to guess whether he was a good person or not, and even knowing that it was impossible to guess what someone would do when granted some kind of higher power. He’d seen it enough in the Isle. Father had told the cubs stories of how cats would give their cubs to visiting Thalmor as gifts for returning the moons to the sky. In return, they became nobles and lived in the cities.

Mother had always said that if there was a chance; run.

It sounded mental now, since he knew there was near enough no way off the island for a cat without a master, but there it was. Unless one of them found a piteous merchant to smuggle them, they would get straight back to Larethius. It was only Eirian’s wise words and quiet counsel that stopped them running after… well after they lost their parents. She was probably the only reason they weren’t still in the Isle.

He shook the thoughts away, and listened to the screaming, sobbing man at the base of the stairs. The chamber was huge, easily big enough to house Solitude’s entire marketplace. The ugly gargoyles huddled between the rocks and the jagged rock carvings however, were not anywhere near the same elegance as the capital. They were rather detailed, however. Enough so that he made a mental note to avoid them completely. Another sharp shriek brought his attention back to the other inhabitants rather quickly. Some greasy looking vampire was prodding at another vigilant with…

Artan swallowed the bile and pushed the memories back.

“Lokil, we should probably get the iron spider out. It might help him talk easier.”

“I did not ask the opinion of a thrall. Get back to the brazier and heat the iron again.”

It took only an instant to draw his sword, jump the balcony’s stone wall and Whirlwind Sprint his way between the vampire and his sickly thrall; maybe a fraction less to behead the latter, closest one with a swing from the ebony sword. The vampire managed to look startled, before the head hit the floor and he was all broiling anger.

And then he snapped the Vigilant’s neck.

“And another Dawnguard.”

Artan should have cut his neck at least to the bone with the rapid attack he made, but Lokil had
thrown his entire torso back at an unnatural angle, twisting his hips to try and kick at the cat’s head. His boot met the cat’s raised sword-arm, dagger-hand sliding up his gauntleted forearm to lock the vampire’s ankle in place between his wrists. In that upside-down stare, and seeing the realisation dawn in the moment of stillness they had, well. It was good Artan was better. The dagger slammed up, straight through the vampire’s leathery boot and Achilles tendon, almost immediately causing the man to howl in agony. Artan didn’t give him time to continue. He glid forwards, up and around, just as the vampire slumped to his uninjured leg’s knee, and drove the ebony sword straight through the nape of his neck.

There was an awful, grating tug as his sword clipped the man’s spine, but he finished the vampire in spite of the ugly twisting in his gut. He didn’t even dare look at the Vigilant.

Turning to the huge pillar of rock in the centre of what seemed to be an underground lake system, he weighted his options. There was nobody else in the vicinity, a quick detect dead spell as well as a detect life spell told him that. He could investigate this weird monument, or clear the rest of the crypt of threats before checking it out. The place was creepy enough that he was seriously debating on summoning an Atronach or Lucien to keep him company, but eventually vetoed that idea. None of them were good at stealth, and he wasn’t going to risk having a life-draining all out brawl with a horde of vampires that he could stealth-kill one by one.

Well, he could, but it wasn’t a priority.

He sniffed, and tested a foot against the rather crumbly stone bridge that led out to the very cultish-looking pillar a good house-width away. It looked like some kind of daedric shrine, but he had already cleared out most of them, with the exception of a few, and the place had no obvious Molag-Bal architecture to suggest it was a vampire shrine. It could have possibly been something to do with the Volkihar’s personal history, but that was just supposition at this point.

Regardless, it looked suspect as fuck.

He eventually decided fuck it, and within a few moments found himself in what looked like the Atronach Forge. A huge set of glowing circles with a few scattered braziers full of pink fire, and a big centrepiece that looked a lot like an uglier version of the blood bowl in the Underforge. All with lots of undercuts of spooky, gross and rather threatening. It wasn’t obvious, but the place had a subtle wrong-ness to it that Artan couldn’t place. He didn’t like it. But he spent a good twenty minutes pushing braziers around until that click and shudder of stone from the centre informed him he had solved whatever ancient puzzle the crazy old men of the past had left him.

And that was it.
Nothing else happened. No enlightening arrows pointing him to whatever the fuck he was meant to see, no ghost telling him he had released a great evil. Just silence, except for the odd gurgle of the lake below.

Until he leant against that stupid pillar in the centre and it nearly tore his hand in two. The spike was huge, straight through the centre of his hand, and seemed to actually cry quietly to itself until it receded with a snap, leaving him whimpering and cradling what was left of his mutilated paw.

It was probably only his assassin training that stopped him from getting his head cracked open by the sudden upward-jolting pedestal, the hexagonal tiles shifting until an even bigger pillar of stone rose up from underneath that evil central bowl. Healing hands and a light potion smeared across the gaping hole in his hand distracted him for a moment, until he knitted the bone and flesh back together with one of the higher restoration spells that Danica had insisted he learnt. And now, he saw her point. He would make sure to send her a fruit basket when he got back to Riften.

It wasn’t until he shook his head and looked up to see what shit he had managed to land himself in this time-

There was a fucking girl sitting in the hollow insides of the pillar, looking half-dead and a little fucking confused.

Xxx

4E. 203 Late Rain’s Hand

Two weeks before…

Jealousy wasn’t the word.

Artan knew - well decided - that ‘jealousy’ wasn’t the explanation for the intense want to tear Celann’s face from his skull. It had all started off so well. The Dawnguard lad just cantered into the Bannered Mare, cracking jokes and the like, before pulling up a stool at the bar beside him and starting up a conversation. He was funny, and down to earth, and Talos-

He wasn’t bad on the eyes.
He wasn’t Argis, but still, he had a rough kind of loveliness to him. Artan could see them being friends. Until the Bulwark walked in, spotted them sat down at the bar and screamed, “Celann? Oh my god!” like a child who had just realised Lydia had baked more sweets. He knew, because it was a common mantra since the girls had wrapped Lydia around their little fingers. Especially Lucia, the little shit. The lass had been pranking him all day; mixing his tea with salt, and moving all his books, and eating his food from his plate while he was distracted. She was a genius, and it pissed him off as much as he was proud of her ingenuity.

He thought he had escaped all of his headaches within the Mare, but apparently not. Talos just hated him. Argis was rarely ever that excited to see anybody that wasn’t him or Yngvar. Sometimes after a long time, he did when he saw Lydia or Jordis, but seeing this stranger entice such a reaction? And such a pretty one at that?

It wasn’t jealousy.

“So, you were saying about the Dawnguard recruiting?” Artan put his ale down, pointedly staring at Celann. The lad just smiling brightly back. Argis actually looked surprised. “You left the Vigilants? But you left the Reach to join them!”

Celann looked back to Argis, simply giving him a bashful smile, “We had a disagreement. They didn’t believe that the vampires would band together and start attacking, and well me and Isran, our leader, did. So we left and created our own sect.”

“That is recruiting?” Artan pressed, sipping from his ale. In his peripheral, he could feel Argis looking at him. He didn’t look back, just in case he did that weird mind-reading thing again. Creepy Nords. Lydia did it too, and it pissed him off to no end. He would eat his own underpants the moment Jordis ever did it.

“Yes. We had heard that some of various holds had fighting Thanes in their courts, and they would be invaluable allies to fight the vampires. Other scouts who looked among the Legion for temporary members heard about the recently ascended Legate being a monster on the battlefield. At the time Isran gave us our orders to start recruiting, he made it pretty clear he wanted each of these Thanes and hopefully even the Legate on side to fight. Funnily enough, instead of getting the ten men we planned for, we find you.”

“What a great sales pitch.”

Celann laughed, rubbing a hand through his hair. “I don’t mean to sound rude, I’m just surprised. You’re like a bloody myth in Skyrim at the moment; some people can’t believe half the stories about
you while the other half are adamant that you’re even better than what they say. It’s kinda hard to believe.”

“Nice flattery attempt, but not closing the deal material.”

“You’re a patron of the people; and right now vampires are the biggest threat.”

“What are you gonna do about it?” Artan prodded.

“Destroy them at the root, and tackle any stragglers.”

“Good aim. I’m in.”

“Just like that?” Celann laughed, incredulous.

The cat shrugged, “they are attacking cities now. I’m expected to do something. And from the sounds of it, your group are taking the most initiative. I’ll need a week to settle some things, and then I’ll be able to head to your base and start helping the cause. I don’t know how much I can do since my duties can take my time at almost any moment, but I’ll help where I can.”

“That’s good to know.”

And when they said goodbye and Argis invited the cur to dinner, well. It still wasn’t jealousy when Artan discreetly stomped all the way home.

xxx

“Ladies, we are going to Riften.”

Lydia looked up from her bowl, “What? All of us?”
“Yes. I’m going to set up a base there for the girls while this vampire shit clears up. Riften is nearest to the Dawnguard’s hideout, so it is heavily patrolled by both the regular guard as well as their members. That, and since Jakk is one of the thieves guild they will protect you too. Most likely. The houses are replaceable, but you fuckers aren’t. I’m heading to Windhelm on the way to get Calder, since he still isn’t fucking answering the fucking mail.”

“But Artan, you spent so much-“

“Like I said, the houses can be replaced, but you fuckers can’t,” the khajiit motioned generally, but still kept his gaze fixed to his wine bottle. The girls were already in bed, so he didn’t have to worry about the swearing. “I’m not having some fucking vampire-“ he cut off suddenly, before downing the last half of the bottle and wordlessly asked the politely quiet Celann for another bottle.

“We aren’t Iona,” Lydia growled, stiffening under the sudden glare the cat sent her.

“Your friend got killed by a vampire?” Celann asked, looking grave.

The cat frowned, deeper. “One of the fuckers who killed her was. Apparently he had integrated into Maven Blackbriar’s mercenary unit. The other one was his thrall. The others thought he was just a fucking idiot who liked killing. Turned out he was a vampire, and nobody clocked it until he went rogue. When I found her, she was already cold,” he growled in reply. “It took a week for that shitstain to burn to ash in the sunlight. I have only one vampire friend, and even she freaks me out sometimes…. Ugh. But she’s a good person, doesn’t kill her prey, and only feeds off the willing ones. Kinda funny, when you consider the fact she works in an assassins guild.”

“An assassin vampire? That doesn’t use her powers to kill?” Celann sounded part sceptical, part indignant.

“Sounds mental, but its true. She just uses invisibility and poison, and that’s it.”

“I don’t believe it,” Celann bit out, shaking his head.

“Then don’t. Our targets are Volkihar, so she isn’t an issue,” Artan shrugged.

“The Dawnguard are there to kill all vampires. We don’t differentiate between monsters. They are all just animals underneath.”
“Aren’t we all?” the cat clucked, poking lazily at his chicken with his fork.

“No.” Celann frowned.

Artan sat forwards more, momentarily forgetting his bottle to stare Celann in the eye. The Breton didn’t flinch, but that was probably because he had drank as much wine as Artan. “So when you make a clean kill with your bow, you don’t get a swell of pride? When you take down a vampire, you don’t get a burst of good feelings? You don’t get hungry for more of that?”

Celann swayed a little, before shaking his head no.

“Then I don’t believe you.”

They had barely walked through Riften’s front gates when Brynjolf rolled up to meet them. “Long time no see short stack! Still keeping your pa on his toes?”

Sofie grinned an affirmative, before catching the customary apple that Brynjolf always seemed to have on hand to give her.

“How’d you know we were coming?” Lydia frowned, but the Breton just waved her suspicions away. “You’re not exactly incognito around these parts. A little bird flitted by and told me you were on your way here.”

“Jakk?”

“Nope. He’s been on some errand for your Thane,” Brynjolf shrugged, handing another apple to Lucia.

“What? Artan said that he hadn’t gotten any replies from Jakk for weeks,” Lydia growled, rummaging through one of the packs on Jordis’ back for the house key.
Brynjolf actually looked surprised at that. “Well shit. He’s playing nookie?”

Artan was barely through the front gates of Windhelm when he spotted the fucker. Calder was stood talking to some wench or other, laughing about something either stupid or ridiculous. She actually squeaked in surprise when Artan rolled in and grabbed the Nord by the mutton chop, using said facial hair to drag the man’s face down to his level. “Why the fuck haven’t you been replying to my letters? I’ve been worried out of my fucking mind!”

“You never sent any fucking letters!” Calder growled back, swatting the cat’s hands away to glare jauntily down at him. “You just went silent after I left! I expected you to show up, but you didn’t! I was in the fucking dark for a month, with no idea where you were or what the hell was happening. Since you hadn’t issued any orders, I was duty-bound to protect your house while you was gone, and none of the letters I sent got a reply! Not to the ones I sent to Jordis, or Lydia! Even Argis wouldn’t reply!”

“Jordis and Argis were with me. But Lydia said you hadn’t sent anything.”

“Then I don’t know what the fuck happened. But don’t yell at me because you’re pissed. Especially after you dumped your shithead brother on me! The only message I ever got was the one he brought with him. You didn’t even-“

“What? Jakk’s here?” Artan snapped, sounding less angry and more confused.

“Yes. Said that you asked him to be here to oversee something. All I have ever seen him do is drink and bring that damn Argonian in.”

“What?”

“Scouts something or other. Don’t know, don’t care,” Calder’s nose twisted in derision. “He has the shame to apologise when they keep me awake, but other than that I don’t know-“

“That fucking dick. He’s been here intercepting our messages so he can keep the house as a
The housecarl gave him a pointed, angry look. “You’re brother would do that?”

The cat gave him a deadpan stare back, “Well he flaming well just did.”

Calder shook his head, “this bleeding sucks pigs ass.”

“Couldn’t have said it better.”

xxx

Calder had enough of a mind to actually blush when they entered Hjerim. The sounds were loud, even to his own ears. The Nord shook his head, folded his arms, and gave the cat a pointed look. Could have cut a cow in half, that look. Artan sighed, before storming straight through the room, up the stairs and gone. Calder could definitely hear the surprised screech, as well as the argument that followed. He decided to make a cup of tea. He didn’t even glance at Scouts when the Argonian rolled up beside him; he just passed the other man another mug of tea and settled into one of the chairs in the entrance hall. He pointedly ignored the light pink scratch marks and the torn clothes, more for his own sanity than the quietly grateful Scouts.

He didn’t bother to look up when a growling, pissed cat sat opposite him.

“I only blew off work for a week! And besides, I only intercepted unimportant messages! If there was a mad one about some kind of huge deal then I would have come clean and-“

“You are a fucking idiot. You didn’t even need to intercept messages! You could have just said that you liked a guy and wanted to housesit for a while! Fucking hell, S’eta!” Artan threw an arm up in the air, at which Jakk bristled even more and crossed his arms.

“And get the usual lecture about syphilis? Wonderous.”

“Oh fuck off. You know I only get involved because I care. And I wouldn’t have lectured you. This time would probably be the only exception to that, so yeah I get why you’d be kinda… hesitant to
tell me,” Artan rolled his eyes and mirrored his brother’s folded arms.

“What? Why?”

“Scouts is like a fucking saint,” Artan snapped. “I’m surprised you managed to persuade him to even kiss you outside of wedlock, let alone sleep with you. And that isn’t even considering the anti-disease-genes he has.”

“You… approve?” Jakk asked, surprised and more than a little hopeful.

“Don’t hurt him; and I mean that to both of you,” Artan had stopped shouting, to give both the now-quiet Jakk and the mildly lost-looking Scouts meaningfully. “I don’t know who I should give the shovel-talk to this time, and it’s confusing.”

Jakk snorted, “Divines, when did you get so soft?”

“Don’t ask me. I don’t know. You have a new niece, by the way.”

“Yeah, I met her.”

“I mean a new one.”

“What?”

Brynjolf was scarily efficient in finding information. He sent off one of his initiates in the next few minutes, and within three days he had his intel. “Apparently he has been holed up in Windhelm. He has been intercepting messages between your Thane and the Housecarl stationed in the city’s Hjerim, and that way has kept his being there in the dark. Been paying off the eyes we have there to keep it quiet from us too, by the looks of it. He’s been gallivanting with one of the local dockworkers… buying flowers? Eating picnics in the local woodlands? What the fuck? He’s supposed to be some kind of hit-and-run lover? What the fuck is he playing at?”
“What do you mean?” Argis asked, turning from stirring the pot on the stove to level the thief with an even stare.

“He came to us like some kind of fucking master. I mean that literally. He was smooth as silk when it came to finding someone’s bed for the night. He’s nice, and doesn’t stonewall them after, but its just fun. Apparently he’s been playing… housecat since he arrived in the city! He hasn’t even been flirting with the barmaids!”

“Well,” Argis offered, but was unsure how to continue. He sent an encouraging nod to Lydia, who sent a cold look his way.

She simply snarled, “Well sometimes, people find someone that they would change for.”

Xxx

“You haven’t told him?” Jakk asked as gently as he could.

“Told him what? That I get mind-numbing feelings whenever he’s near me? Don’t you know how bloody ridiculous that sounds!” the other cat griped, fluffing up all over.

Artan was practically yelling in that bitchy-whine he slipped into whenever he was anxious. No matter how many times Jakk had heard it he still found it teeth-grating. “You need to fucking say something. Think about what you’re fucking doing. You’re running away whenever he gets close; how do you think that will make him feel? He might be a man, but fuck it he has feelings too!”

“I know! It’s just…. Shit. I just don’t know what I’m doing. This new territory for me, completely. I’ve been with people in the past, but I didn’t care about any of them, not when I compare it to all this… with Argis.”

“Don’t you think I feel the same?” Jakk asked again, actually gentle this time.

Artan turned around from standing beside the window overlooking the dark courtyard. It was well past sundown, and both Calder and Scouts had retired. The Argonian had tried to leave, but Artan suggested he stay the night. The other man had thankfully agreed, and they ended up drinking into
the night. But now, the cats were alone, and everything was leaking out.

“About Scouts?”

Jakk nodded. “I… I’ve never felt this way before. I care about my lovers, but he’s… he’s something else entirely. It’s like comparing a potato to one of Jaden’s twice-baked berry pies.”

“Mmmm.”

“Yeah. And I don’t know what to do. He’s just so… easygoing. And whatever I do, I wonder if I’m treating him right, the way a partner should. He’s just so… kind. I… I don’t get it. At all. Because it’s like you’ve gotten this amazing thing and—“

“You can’t even begin to fathom why or what they stick around for,” Artan smiled, small and fond.

Jakk grinned in return. “Talk to him. You’d be surprised at how far their understanding goes. And you’ll feel better for it, trust me.”

“Talking from experience?”

“Totally.”

Xxx

It wasn’t until he watched them while they thought he wasn’t paying attention did he see it. His baby brother was in love. It wasn’t glaringly obvious, or tattooed to their heads in its blatancy. It wasn’t even sickening like some couples tended to be. Arguably, they were sweet in some unfathomable way.

He guessed it started with watching them make breakfast together.

They had a play fight with the flour that only ended when Calder barked at them, resulting only in a few quiet giggles and the continuation of making some kind of oatmeal. It even carried onto the
journey to Riften, where most of the walk was filled with inane chatter and random banter that alluded to a happy relationship. Artan was surprised when Jakk had said the Argonian was coming along, but when he pressed for reasons, well. Jakk said that Scouts had managed to get a non-paid holiday, and with the cat giving most of his paycheck to the assemblage to cover his temporary departure, Scouts was free to join them. Artan didn’t bother pointing out that the Argonian wasn’t a fighter; Jakk obviously had some kind of plan to keep him safe enough without his help.

It wasn’t until Artan had ousted Jakk for spreading their history around that the other khajiit finally admitted that it was safer to have Scouts along; for both their safety and his own. It took them a week, and if he was totally honest, he was glad for the distraction. He still hadn’t really sorted things with Calder, who refused to bring up the subject of the New Year. He didn’t like the idea of the two hulking Nords in his life meeting again, especially with everything going on. But alas, life was a bitch.

It’d be fine, Artan mentally reassured himself.

Fine. As long as someone hides the weapons.

Xxx

4E, 203 Early Second Seed

It wasn’t as nearly as explosive as he thought it would be.

They just sat at the dinner table, glaring at each other silently from their respective places, Celann sat between them with an embarrassed expression on his face. Lucia was the first to redirect the awkward conversation the rest of them were having to jab both bears in the eyes at once. “So what happened to make you guys hate each other? Are you jealous because Argis bit the head off a goat and you haven’t? Or is Argis mad he can’t grow mutton chops like yours?”

The stunned silence was only broken by Jakk’s hysterical laughing, his cries heard throughout the house from his seat on the main bed.

“It’s more of a battle of two alphas, really,” Argis offered cordially.

“More like idiot dogs fighting over the same steak, tell it right,” Lydia sniped from her own seat
beside Jakk. “It’s ridiculous, and should be described that way.”

“To be fair, it’s kinda understandable,” Jordis nodded to herself.

“Done! Can we-“ Sofie squeaked out, bringing the rooms attention to her.

“Just don’t burn anything or shoot anyone. We don’t need the guards at the door again,” the khajiit gave the girls a serious stare, going from the blonde to the brunette before they nodded and he shooed them out the door. It wasn’t long before Lydia moved from her seat on the bed in the other room to the empty one at the table, eyeing the cabinet next to her. Celann, who still hadn’t returned to his post, was sat on the Bulwark’s other side, beside Calder. He didn’t even seem a little fazed by being the smallest one there, being Lydia’s height but coming a little short on the muscle mass. He was a light fighter; not like the Housecarls. If Artan had been back doing stealth missions then he would have been perfect for a quiet hit. He would have to try and recruit the lad for the Brotherhood later; initiate turnover rate completely aside.

“What?” Artan deadpanned, his eyes finally flicking to regard Jordis, munching through what he thought to be her own malfunctioned bread. She didn’t look up from her seat on the mat by the fireside, instead looking intently at her food.

She shrugged, eventually, “They have what is considered Hero-Worship. They have probably been brought up on stories of warriors who could bring kingdoms to their knees, and well. You’re the Dragonborn, a legendary hero that destroyed the world-eater. It’s understandable that boys spoon-fed those stories would want to fu-“

The spoon hit Jordis between the eyes, successfully diverting the conversation to Lydia’s pinpoint accuracy.

“You should have seen her back in the old days,” Artan sighed, wistful.

“Old days, my Thane?” Lydia growled.

The blatantly obvious cut in her tone made most of the room giggle nervously, but Artan was used to it by now. He carried on collecting plates and settling them into the big wooden bucket he had hidden away under the bed for washing dishes. He had to first shoo Scouts from trying to help him, saying that the Argonian was a guest, before he continued. “Don’t you remember when we had just met and you used to snipe enemies over my shoulder?”
“Don’t you have a nick in your ear from that?” Lydia snorted.

“And don’t you still have a burn mark on your ass from when I missed once?” Artan laughed.

“As a subordinate I’m not allowed to point out you’re failings, my Thane. I’m only supposed to kiss ass,” Lydia waved her free hand, the other busy pulling another bottle from the alcohol cupboard.

The cat poked his head around the door, “Don’t you humans call that sex?”

The woman’s head snapped around, hand still buried in the cabinet by the front door. “What? Who told you that?”

Just as Artan passed another tankard to Scouts to dry, the front door opened to reveal Marcurio and Brynjolf pushing their way in. “Lookie here lad, you just need to find yourself a good-“

“Nope. Last time I took advice from you I nearly got banned from the temple of Dibella,” Marcurio waved his hands, straightening slightly when the room’s attention settled on them.

“Lads, what brings you here?” Artan called, not bothering to get up.

“Well, first,” the red-haired thief sighed, gruffly rubbing at his beard. “I need to talk to your brother. Mercer-“

The speed in which Jakk was gone and Brynjolf was already chasing after him almost gave Celann whiplash. He mumbled as such, rubbing his neck theatrically, which made both Argis and Calder chuckle lightly into their ales. Artan sniffed, motioning for Marcurio to sit where he liked. The mage nodded, looking troubled at first, before pulling up a spare chair from outside and settling around the table.

“Artan… what’s going on?” Marcurio asked, sounding more nervous than ever.

“Hmm? With what?” Artan replied neutrally.
“You’re aura is all over the show. It’s like being near one of those anomalies left over from the Eye.”

“I have no idea what you could mean, Marc. Maybe its Tolfdir trying to kill you through some kind of magical tracking device that reacts to your presence.”

“Still hasn’t forgiven me?” the mage relented, and allowed the subject change.

The cat stood, wiping the suds from his hands, “You thought he was a woman and groped his ass at the bar. You kind of deserve it.”

“To be fair, he uses some great hair tonics.”

“Yeah that’s true. But seriously, if you liked him it’d be better if you hadn’t called him a girl.”

“You’re not as funny as you think you are, you know?” The imperial sighed, half-glaring back over his recently acquired tankard of wine.

The cat grinned, “that reminds me, how’s the ‘hey I’m a mage’ pickup line going?”

“Hey I’m a mage pickup line?” Celann asked dubiously, Argis shaking his head as if it was a ridiculous idea to start the two up. Artan ignored it.

“He goes around trying to woo women with his magical hands or something,” the cat wiggled his hands as if to demonstrate. “Hey young lass, how about an electric night? Or Hey, how about I show you why mages are magical?”

“You make it sound unscrupulous,” Marcurio frowned, taking another sip from his cup. “And besides, I was drunk that time.”

“Pfft, I’d hope so. She looked like she could crush your skull with-“
“I can’t imagine either of you being able to pull.”

Both mages turned, fully staring at Jordis still sat on her mat but with a tankard in hand instead of her god-awful homemade bread. “I mean, you’re both so….” She made a generic wavering hand motion and grimaced, before downing the last of her drink and making to stand. Lydia had begun laughing, while the others had just begun guffawing where Scouts just looked shyly apologetic.

“What do you mean?” “I’ll have you know I am the best-“

“I mean, you’re both just so….” Jordis frowned slightly, “lame… I mean if I had to pick one of you or go home alone… then I’d have gone alone.”

Lydia actually started half-crying at sight of an appalled and mouth-agape Artan, but nearly broke entirely at Marcurio’s prissy offended gasp.

Almost shocked silence followed, only filled with light wind-down chuckles and the ice queen’s hiccups. The uproar nearly started again when Marcurio sent a half-smirk at the cat, “You must be more offended than I am. You’re the one with a thing for blondes.”

Artan actually managed to look even more flustered, before the cat began stomping back to the bucket in the other room. And promptly shouted, deadpan, “What the fuck is that?”

“It’s a mudcrab!”

After Scouts shuffled around the door and into the kitchen chuckling in his pleasant gravely way, Argis stood, patting Celann on the shoulder as he went by. But it wasn’t until he fully saw the two girls stood at the backdoor that he laughed. Hard.

They were covered in mud from head to toe, leaves, branches and all sorts of plant life stuck in hair and pockets and in Sofie’s case algae splattered across her dress. But both had a mudcrab in both hands, held out towards Artan for appraisal. “My one is called Mr. Sweetroll!” The taller, blonde grinned, rubbing a hand across the top of the crab’s chitin.

Sofie smiled wide and held out her own mudcrab. “And this is Princess Sithis!”
“You expect to keep them?” Artan gave both crabs a nod, before looking from one girl to the other.

The two looked to each other and back to him. “Please?”

The cat was silent for a moment, before he sighed and shrugged, “If you promise to take care of them I don’t see why not. Want me to make a pen outside?”

“That… that would be amazing!”

“For tonight I guess they can sleep downstairs in the basement with you two. Just make sure they stay in your room at night, yeah? I’ll get the pen done in the morning,” Artan smiled, rubbing a hand across Princess Sithis’ claw with his own. “Where the hell did you get these anyway? And why are they so… calm?”

Sofie shrugged, before throwing a one-armed hug around the khajiit’s waist. He was half surprised, but when the other girl followed suit and the euphony of thankyou’s wafted up he seemed to relax. “Night Pa!” “Yeah, night!” the cat watched the girls go, chattering between themselves as they scampered down the stairs and out of sight.

“I might have just made a grave mistake,” the cat muttered to the Nord, Argis stepping further into the room. The Bulwark just chuckled back, resting against the doorway. The loud shouts, laughing and sharp crackles of small magical lightning seemed to fill the air, but it all sounded rather muted compared to the soft smile Argis was giving him. The Nord folded his arms across his chest, brow quirking.

Apparently Artan was giving him a weird look.

The khajiit coughed into a fist, jerking his head towards the back door and making a slow turn to walk out onto the balcony. He wasn’t surprised to find the Bulwark only a step behind, closing the door quietly behind him. The two settled against the wooden railing overlooking the darkened LakeHonrich. It was a beautiful view. The sun was gently setting, everything awash with a red glow; even tinting the usually blue-black waters a dark maroon. The trees were a similar shade, shuddering quietly in the early spring winds. It was a little bit of a shame that Artan was too busy frowning at Argis’ distance from him to give them proper appreciation, however. They were maybe a foot apart, elbows set on the wood.

He could understand it, he supposed.
“We… um we need to talk about… about us.”

“If you’re ready, then sure.”

“What…?”

Argis shrugged, and half turned towards him. “You seem to be worried about something, and well I figured you’d talk about it when you’re ready. Are you?”

The khajiit was silent for a moment, just giving him an unreadable stare. It was a mild surprise for him to actually be unreadable for once; Argis had actually begun to understand what the hell Artan was thinking to a degree. For it to revert back to not knowing… it was a little strange to say the least.

“You get a sweetroll for that, big man.”

The Nord snorted out a laugh, before Artan continued.

“Have I ever explained what it’s like to absorb a dragon soul?”

Well that was a surprise. “Not in a lot of detail, no.”

“Well it’s kind of like jumping off a cliff.”

Argis just stared at him, brows raised. The cat waved his hands, “In a good way. It’s like, you feel kind of weightless and you can feel that rush, but it’s not just the wind against your skin. You feel it in your hands, in your toes, just everywhere. A light kind of… something. It doesn’t tingle or anything like that, but it feels like liquid joy or that breathless kind of anticipation or…! And then it doesn’t just stay, it kind goes deeper and actually makes your lungs kind of stop, and you can feel it kind of swirling around in your chest too! And you feel like you’re filled up and on fire, but it just keeps going and you’re falling and then you breathe in and it just keeps climbing. Its like you’re still falling and everything starts changing into lightning, and you can’t even feel where you really are anymore. And when the body of the dragon’s soul finally hits you, it blanks your brain out to everything else.” Artan was making lots of movement, hands waving, head nodding and then cocking to the side as if in question, before he finally slowed down and just murmured the words. By
the end, he was just short of whispering, a small, strange little smile on his face.

“That sounds terrifying and amazing, all in one,” Argis supplied, unsure.

“And that’s kind of the way you make me feel.”

What?

“When I first became the Dragonborn, I had never felt like that before about anything. I felt kinda numb, unless I was drunk. And when I first got hit by a soul, I thought it was the most amazing thing in the world. Its kind of similar with you,” the cat had shrugged nonchalantly, but the stiffness in his shoulders and back undermined that pretend calm. “I have never felt this way about a person. I have always lived by the idea that I’d never have a normal life with someone. That everyone was basically either one step away from throwing you to the dogs or would walk out the moment they could. After they got what they wanted, be it protection, sex or supplies, they would leave. So growing attached would just be detrimental to me in the long run. The only people I felt anything for were the others I escaped with. We only split up because we were too recognisable together, you see. But hell. I figured that Skyrim would be another Hammerfell. That I’d set up shop with someone, do some contracts and that before moving out again. Instead, I get myself caught up in this dragon bullshit and get a housecarl,” Artan managed to grin, before turning around to sit on the wooden railing, tail draped over the side.

“I expected to just cart her around for a few months while I tried to find out some leads on the local assassins, but instead, I ended up busting a skooma den and got another. So I settled in, and dragged them around while I looked for reliable sources. You know how it went; I only met Astrid a few months after I met you. And by then, well, it wasn’t just getting by anymore. I liked living here, with you guys. At first it was friendly, kind of. Lydia and Iona were all honour and glory, but I was more surviving and debauchery. It wasn’t until three or four months after I moved into Breezehome that the Whiterun citizens began to accept me as a friend. I mean, I understand, I was a stranger and old prejudice dies hard. But eventually I found myself getting cakes and things given to me as thank you gifts, that people would pop round for bottles of milk and the kids would ask if they could stroke the horse outside. I figured they were just soft and silly, that their simple lives had led them into complacency. It wasn’t until I joined the Companions that I realised it was because they had warriors on their doorstep that allowed them to be so… laidback.

At first, when I rolled into Markarth expecting to find assassins in every corner. I expected to have so many contracts that I could move to somewhere sunny and remote to party hard for the rest of my days. Instead I managed to get caught up in a bloody conspiracy of all things. When I went to the throne room, you were there. I figured that you were pretty, and asked around after I left. I had the idea that when I eventually came back after dealing with the forsworn, that I’d appeal to your honour and chat you up or something.

Well, I shipped out again, fully intending to go towards the nearest Forsworn camp and plant some new daisies, but instead I get a messenger. Iona is dead, and Kodlak had been murdered. I went to
“Up until then I’d made a shitload of money killing off the vampires holed up near Morthal, and apparently one of them brought her intel on the town. After everything went down, well, I already had two Thaneships so it wasn’t like I was a nobody. They fed her the bogus stuff about me being a Thalmor assassin and she ran with it. The informant said they would handle the situation, and Iona turns up dead the next week,” a short, tight smile, “She even went so far as to link me to Astrid somehow. I guess it makes sense, since if it was me I’d keep my fingers in the Brotherhood just in case the suspected Thalmor cat showed up. I just didn’t expect Astrid to sell my information to her, and I didn’t expect the same trick twice. But… I’m running away from what I was trying to say.

I tied the vampire up to a tree out near one of the old ruins out in the Rift countryside, and killed off the thrall. It took maybe a week for him to burn up into nothing. By then, Vilkas had caught up. Said that I was some kind of traitor, Kodlak was dead and I hadn’t even bothered to come back. It was messy as fuck.”

“It wasn’t until Iona died… that I started actually paying attention more. And the second time I rolled into Markarth, I had already decided to try harder at the Thane thing. If she hadn’t been my housecarl, then maybe things would have been different. Maybe they would have been the same. But still. I should have done better.”

“By the time you popped up, I’d come to the conclusion that even if I was going to disappear eventually, well I’d be a good Thane up until then. That I’d defend you guys the same way you were defending me. It was only fair. After meeting Astrid, and getting chewed out by Lydia for disappearing, well. At first I figured it was because she would get in trouble for me dying. And after a while,” the khajiit shrugged, “That wasn’t a good enough answer anymore.”

“Something changed after that, in the sense that I confided in Lydia more, and she confided in me. It became like a strange kind of partnership more than a Thane and Housecarl. Even then, though, I still had the plan to leave,” a light laugh, and a hand running over his ears, “the moment I knew that the plan was fucked was in Blackreach. When Lydia got hurt and you nearly got… I knew.”

“And you’re muddled up in all of that,” Artan laughed lowly, eyes rolling in almost-exasperation. “You guys make me feel alive. Like I have choices in what I do. And now, I have the girls, and they’re happy… I don’t know. It’s just like, with the housecarls by my side I feel like anything can happen. But you…” the cat made a nervous little shake, before clapping a hand against the still-stunned shoulder of a staring Nord, “you take the cake. You make me feel like… no matter what, it’ll…”

Artan shook his head, lost for words. “It’s bloody terrifying, though. I’ve kind of gotten a little… protective? Of all of that. It feels like its getting worse. When we’re fighting, and I see something
coming up behind you blade drawn, I want to kill them. It’s the same with the others, but it’s the way I feel when its you… it scares me.”

Argis actually managed to force out the laugh bubbling around his throat, “I know what you mean.”

“Well… enlightening?”

The Bulwark laughed again, before throwing an arm around Artan’s waist, dragging him along the railing until they were side to side. The cat’s arm coiled against the Nord’s chest, claws tinkling lightly against the chain around his neck. “In a word, yes. I have to say, though, you don’t have to feel alone with all your… feelings? Troubles? We both have a sturdy net for when things get tough, and more than a few axes for when things get even worse.”

The khajiit half-laughed, sounding more winded than anything. His claws had extended out, and were kneading nervously into Argis’ shirt. Any other time he might have been worried about getting scratched, but he was more relieved that they had finally cleared the air somewhat. The full truth was finally out, and it wasn’t in snippets anymore. “Just be careful,” he sighed gruffly, rubbing circles into Artan’s lower back. “I get the feeling that its only Maven thinking you work for them that’s keeping Larethius from finding out where you are. If she found out about all of that, it wouldn’t be long before he shows up on a doorstep somewhere. It’ll be a massacre, whatever happens.”

“Hmm?”

“Between our team, the Holds and the Brotherhood, it’ll be messy as hell,” he shrugged, trying for a carefree kind of tone. He was unsure whether or not it worked, but Artan seemed nonplussed.

“He won’t. And even if he does, I have a plan. I told you before; I am not burying anybody else. Not one more person. It won’t come down to something like that.”

“You do know that you aren’t a lone assassin anymore, right?” Argis huffed, pinching at the lobes of the khajiit’s ears. “The same way that you get all pissy when something attacks one of us, do you think we don’t get the same kind of feelings?”

The cat grunted, ears flattening against his head and arms crossing his chest. Argis –naturally – took advantage the opportunity. He slammed a shoulder into Artan’s tummy, just under his arms, and flung him up and over into a fireman’s hold. A thick arm hooked behind the knees, and the cat was secure; flailing and shrieking aside.
“Oi, pipe down. You’ll wake the girls,” the Nord couldn’t keep the shit-eating grin out of his voice apparently, since Artan hissed back and swatted him a few times with his tail. “Just think of it as the floor is a riverbed.”

“You ask a guy for a piggyback over a river one time and he never forgets,” Artan grumbled back, letting out a startled yelp when the blonde dropped him onto Honeside’s master bed. Argis just shrugged, unapologetic, before stepping around the bed and into the kitchen, huffing quietly under his breath. “The blowhards have gone to bed, apparently.”

“Apparently,” Artan grumped, although there was no heat in it.

“Hmm. I’ll go check out the damage downstairs. Make sure the mudcrabs are locked up,” the Bulwark sighed, rubbing a hand through his hair.

“You make them sound like baby dragons,” Artan called, moving to the chest beside the bed. It would be nice to actually have something soft to sleep in for once rather than armor or robes. Argis snorted, waving a hand flippantly as he descended the stairs into the basement. “Knowing your kids, they very well might be.”

“Are you…”

“Yes,” came the muffled chuckle from downstairs.

Artan was already tugging a soft tunic from underneath the other junk in the chest before he noticed the stupid smile tugging at his face. He managed to stomp it down into a more neutral expression by the time Argis returned in his plain house-shirt and soft breeches. “Lucia has hers in bed with her. Did you know they click their claws when you stroke them the right way?”

“I forget sometimes how attune you weirdos are to nature,” the cat grinned back, pushing down the furs covering the bedspread and tucking himself neatly underneath the thick bundle.

“Even that has its limits. The whole spriggan thing died out years ago, otherwise yeah I’d agree,” the Nord shrugged, sliding into the bed on the other side. “To be fair though, someone somewhere probably still knows how. Maybe an offshoot group has kept that tradition alive.”
“Hmm, hopefully,” Artan conceded, wriggling in against Argis’ side until he was comfortable.

Neither commented on how easily they slotted together like that, and how unexplainably calming it was to have the other close. The soft fur of Artan’s muzzle against the hollow of the Nord’s throat, and the hard chest underneath Artan’s chin. Even waking up with a wet neck from Artan dribbling on him in his sleep, or the uncomfortably back-brushed fur where Argis had snuck a hand under the khajiit’s tunic and had been unconsciously stroking his back during the night didn’t stop the stupid grins they wore for the rest of the day.

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“What the fuck is that?” Argis yelled.

“This, my friends, is what Lydia calls my closet of Doom,” Artan boomed out some kind of evil laugh, at which nobody laughed.

“For good reason,” the woman sniped from the back of the small group.

They were stood in Honeyside’s basement in the empty room beside the girls one. It only took a few moments of standing there in the dust for Calder and Jordis to start sending worried, confused looks between themselves. Lydia just looked impatient, whereas Argis looked mildly incredulous.

Until the cat waved some of the mouldering wood away from the wall, kicked a loose brick and a huge slab slid aside, revealing a thick old door. But the rumble of intrigued Nords didn’t sound until the door opened, letting the musty air flood out and the sights within be revealed.

It was a huge, glittery mess of junk, weapons, robes, jars, barrels, shields and statues.

“What in Talos’ name have you done?” Calder frowned, following readily when Artan lead the way inside. It was possibly the size of the entire upper floor, filled to the point of bursting with… well junk.

“Don’t touch anything that looks normal, like a drum or a bowl or something. You can only touch the weapons, armor or shields. And then, make sure to only touch the hilt.”
“Artan?” Jordis prodded, picking a blackened staff from the pile of clothes and shoes beside the door.

“Ah, that… be careful with that. It’ll do something mad and you might end up a sweetroll. Forever.”

“Well…”

“I started stockpiling all the artefacts, unique weapons and keepsakes from different adventures in this room. Some bits and pieces are still in the other houses, but this is where it began,” the cat paused dramatically, before clutching at the collar of his fine clothes. “My life as a pack rat.”

“You… aren’t kidding….” Jordis agreed gently.

“Pick what you want out of it. With the recent vampire attacks the guard should be doubled, and the thieves won’t hesitate to defend the city since it’s their base of operations, but it’s better to have an ace up your sleeve than nothing. Hopefully the ties between the Brotherhood and the Thieves will be enough to keep the edginess with Maven quiet and if not, well they’ll think twice since my new title…. Still. Better safe than sorry, right?”

“It’ll be fine,” Lydia sighed, tugging an ugly shield that looked to have a strange wire contraption bolted to the front. “Spellbreaker? This… well this might help against the vampire’s spellcasting at least.”

“And…” Calder motioned towards the thin katana in his hand, apparently not as spooked by the ethereal lightning coursing its length as first thought.

“Dragonbane. It’s mostly for dragon-hunting, but it’ll work just as well against other things too. Lightning enchantments, you see.”

“And…” Artan turned a little prematurely, catching Argis staring rather confusedly at a monstrous mace he had tugged out of another pile. “This thing?”
“That is the mace of Molag Bal. Don’t… well it’s kind of nasty, really. It’ll help you in a fight though. Drains magika and leeches strength. As long as you don’t throw up from all the squished skulls.” The cat shrugged, before shuffling past a crouching Lydia, and tugging down a huge carpet from the hulking mass in the corner. It turned out to be less of a gargoyle and more of a simple wardrobe. It only took a few moments to open it up and pull the blade out.

“Blades armor? You’re…?”

“Technically not. They’re bound to serve the Dragonborn, and apparently ‘iron armor isn’t good enough,’” the cat sniffed, motioning to the almost perfect set on their very own mannequin, stuffed in the wardrobe. “And besides, I wouldn’t feel right wearing it anymore,” Artan smiled tightly at Jordis, stood just behind him with both hands wrapped around the Wabbajack.

“Still arguing with them then?” Lydia called from behind a stacked and rather neat pile of shields.

“Yep,” he made an extra popping sound on the ‘p,’ before adding to a confused looking Jordis, “They wanted me to murder someone in the name of justice.”

“Aren’t you-“

“Yeah. Ironic, right?” the cat grinned at her.

“Why did you refuse? Was this person innocent?”

“Ehhh. Okay. Story time. Sit down,” Artan half-chuckled, pushing the blonde into a pile of old robes before slumping down beside her. “Girls? I know you’re hovering outside,” he called out, before swatting a hand seemingly randomly in the air, before he clenched a fist and Eirian’s invisibility spell broke.

“Caught me that time, Elbet.”

“Yep. Maybe you can help with this one, actually, just in case I get something wrong,” the cat sighed again for what might have been the hundredth time that day alone, wiggling a little in his seat so the two girls could settle on either side of him, Sofie pressing her back against Jordis’ legs while Lucia
fully laid across Eri’s side, playing idly with one of the tassels on the elf’s belt.

“A long, long time ago when the Nords first sailed here from their homeland of Atmora, they brought with them their old gods. The snake, the wolf, the bear, the hawk, fox, owl, whale, and dragon. These animals were like deities to the ancient Nords, but the Dragons were at the head of it all with Alduin as their leader. Only the renowned Dragon Priests were allowed to call them by their names, or even breathe the word ‘dragon.’ In Atmora, the Dragon Priests were like viziers or maybe conduits for the dragons to speak to the populace. But in Tamriel, they were tyrants who squashed all who spoke against the dragons. They pushed, and crushed until the men were like slaves. When the downtrodden began to rebel, the priests retaliated.”

“But no matter their magic or even the word of their gods, they couldn’t control the people. They couldn’t collect the tribute for the dragons, and so a long and bloody war began. And at first, men died by the thousands, and it looked to be a lost cause. Until some of the dragons swapped sides, and stood alongside men against the tide. They taught the first tongues the way of the voice, and together they killed each of the priests and drove the dwindling dragons back. The remaining dragons scattered, leaving for remote places away from men.”

“What does this all have to do with the blades hating you?” Lucia piped up, moving on to twist her fingers around the hem of Artan’s tunic.

“The Greybeards believe that the Thu’um is for venerating the Gods, and allowing men to walk freely through the world. The Blades believe that the Thu’um should be used for war, to destroy the last of the dragons that inhabit the land. When I was fighting Alduin I needed the Greybeards and the Blades help to get close, and as it turns out the leader of the Greybeards is a dragon. Paarthurnax. He taught the heroes Hakon One-Eye, Feldir the Old and Gormlaith Golden-Hilt the way of the thu’um. And together, those three tried to seal Alduin away with an elder scroll, but instead sent him to our time by accident. Paarthurnax secluded himself atop High Hrothgar, and when Jurgen Windcaller appeared and helped him overcome his instincts to dominate and destroy, well. He eventually figured it out, and became the Leader of the Greybeards. He is the only reason why I even got into Sovengarde to attack Alduin. Without him, I don’t know any way it could have ended as well as it did.”

“The Blades want him dead for the atrocities he committed against humanity during his time as Alduin’s lieutenant. That it would be justice to make him pay for his crimes with death. But he isn’t the same dragon who did those things; he has repented and become… well shit. Alduin was a brother to him, and he turned against him to do what was right. He knew that after the war he would be hunted, but he helped anyway. He strove to be better and right his mistakes. If I kill him, it’d be like… ugh. I don’t know.”

“Well if he’s good now, then what’s the problem?” Lucia asked.
“Hmm?”

Lucia shrugged, “Dragons live for ages, and he’s been alone on a mountain thinking about all the things he’s done for centuries. And when there was a chance to help, he did. The Greybeards up in that monastery probably all learnt from him, right? The same way you pick up knowledge by absorbing souls, well he probably spent ages teaching men the way of the voice and carrying on Jurgen’s peaceful way of the voice. On the one hand, it could be that he wanted to usurp Alduin and has been grooming these monks as new priests. But it wouldn’t make much sense, really to carry on the peaceful ways if you wanted a group of loyal followers to start a new era of domination. If he wanted that, he could have done it. But instead he’s up there in self-exile with a bunch of old men reading books and meditating on peaceful solutions.”

“Doesn’t sound like a villain to me, really,” Sofie nodded. “I mean, what’s he doing about the other dragons? If he turned out to be teaching them and making them nice then that would seal the deal, really.”

“That’s what he said he was doing and well…” Artan trailed off.

“There have been less dragon attacks across the different holds,” Lydia supplied, tugging yet another sword from another pile.

“So…”

“I know what you’re gonna say, and well, the way I see it is some people can’t change. But until you have proof, you’re just as bad for killing them,” the cat rubbed a hand across Sofie’s hair. “Some people realise they did something wrong and either vow to be better in the future or try to fix what they did. Others, well others enjoy making others hurt. And sometimes, it’s better to stop people like that for better of others. You know?”

“Is that how you take contracts… then?” Sofie asked, perking up a little.

“That’s how I justified them, yes,” Artan conceded.

“Are you gonna… tell us?” Lucia continued when Sofie didn’t.
“I guess I could… a few anyway,” Artan flinched, quieting a little. “Do you want to hear about the Skyrim contracts or the Hammerfell ones?”

“You’re from Hammerfell?” Sofie nudge him.

“Ehhh more like I washed up there,” The cat grinned, shooting a glance at Eri.

“Well, the Skyrim ones first I guess. We can hear the rest another time,” Lucia flung a leg over his to kick at Sofie, who just swatted back with her hands.

“Well, my first set of contracts here were pretty weird, to be honest. The first one was some weird old hermit that lived on a hill outside Anga’s. A year or so before, when I first landed here, I spread a few… well a few rumors. I said that a rogue assassin was hunting down any Thalmor spy in Skyrim that they found, in a way to spook some of them into leaving. It was risky since Larethius could have easily figured it was me, but since the war between the Stormcloaks and imperial legion well he would have no way of knowing if it was a Stormcloak assassin or not. I took the chance, and as it turned out there were a lot of disappearances throughout the Holds. Ennodius the hermit was one of them. As it turned out he was selling lumber and intel on the legionnaires who passed the mill to the Thalmor. They needed the wood so they could build small strongholds in secret out in the wilds, since inns were a little public for them.”

“Why… why Thalmor?”

“I was a slave to one of them for most of my life before I fled with uncle Jakk and Eri, as well as a few others. My old master has been hounding me for years, and whatever one of those spies heard, well it would always get back to him. It wouldn’t take long for him to find me here.”

“And the others?” Lucia asked, pointedly not acknowledging the new information.

Artan was glad, “The second was a beggar called Narfi. He was living in a shack near to Ivarstead, and turned into a rambling madman after the disappearance of his sister. At first, he seemed like a regular old nutter until I watched him a little.” The cat actually managed to look a little sick, after that. “I spent a week watching that old coot, and by the end of that week it was obvious what happened. I found his sister to check out the theory, and well I was proven right. Her bones were at the bottom of a river downstream from the village. Her arm and leg bones had teeth marks in them. As it turned out he’d probably either found her dead and then… well before dumping her in the river. Or he killed her. Either way it’s a nasty bloody thing. It probably drove him crazy, if he wasn’t already bloody crazy. I finished the contract and moved onto the next one.”
“The next one was a miner called Betild in Dawnstar. She worked one of the two mines there, competing against her husband for customers. It turned out that this contract would be a big fucking headache,” the cat groaned, hissing a little when Sofie smacked his wrist for the expletive. “Anyway, basically after watching and gathering intel on them both, I found out that their feud started after Betild had a short affair with one of the legionnaires who had passed through. Her husband Leigelf found out, and they split. Apparently she said it was because the man worked twice as hard as him and she loved the commitment. Leigelf said that he would drive her mine out of business, and prove that she was wrong in every way,” the cat frowned, rubbing a hand across his scalp. “Turned out that when his worker Lond found out he was pissed. He loved his job, his boss and everything about it. So, he contacted the Brotherhood.”


“Her cheating on Leigelf nearly broke the man, and Lond values loyalty to friends and partners. To him, it was unforgivable.”

“But…” the girl shook her head sadly.

“Yes, I know. But sometimes things are just shit that way,” the cat yelped lightly when Sofie smacked him again. “Another, or are we done with the stories for today?”

“When are you and Argis going to get married?” Lucia poked him hard in the ribs.

“WELL LET'S GET DINNER STARTED YEAH? A LOT TO DO BEFORE I LEAVE TOMORROW.” The cat shrieked, standing almost instantly with Sofie across one shoulder and the cackling Lucia across the other, running from the room with typical speed. The awkward laughter and jibes he left behind were either not heard, or pointedly ignored.

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“Kids will be the end of me,” the khajiit griped, pressing a hand to his bruised side and the other to his wine bottle. “If I knew that Sofie could conjure a frost Atronach with that much punch I would have worn armor. Shit…”

“That’s what you get for teaching them cool tricks. Lucia almost shot me in the head twice during our game,” Jakk sniped back, motioning towards the door with the metal shaft of the skooma pipe.
“Stendarr grant me mercy from your evil children. The blonde is a rapid shot and the other is a fucking magical prodigy.”

“Just be happy that I’m letting you smoke that shit in here. The girls would go apeshit if they found out that you got their favourite butlers rattfaced,” Artan frowned at his brother before making pointed glances around the table to the slumped, giggling and swaying Nords. Except Calder, who was simply rubbing his face against the table and cooing softly to himself. He didn’t understand what made him let Jakk smoke the stuff in here, and then go ahead and con his housecarls into trying some. Lydia was adamant that she wouldn’t, simply because it had only been seven or so months since the last time she had begged for a pet dog. Artan had pointedly kept out of the conversation, and here they were. The woman was sat at the table, hands stroking her own hair in confusion in between blowing a similarly lost-looking Jordis with air every once in a while. Jordis ignored her, and returned to making small houses out of carrots on the table.

“Your housecarls are weird as shit, you know,” Jakk sighed, handing the pipe to Eirian, who promptly took a long drag before exhaling through her nose.

“Talia sent a report in. She has the warring Stormcloaks under her control and is training them up for an assault on the Embassy. If she manages to take it, she will convert it into a base of operations and have the various Stormcloak camps retreat there. She has all of your information on the place, and the resident Altmer seem to have no idea about the Reeking Cave. When the Thalmor try to retake it, it would be easy enough to escape out the back and destroy the whole place with them inside it. Such a plan would at least give them pause.”

“If they even find out about the Embassy being taken. If she has someone intercept a few of Elenwen’s notes here or there you could probably forge a good few and keep them thinking that she’s still alive in there,” Jakk added.

“I don’t know about pissing them off before we ally the rest of the Holds. Especially since they were killing each other only last year,” Artan huffed. “But if we have Stormcloaks helping to fight the vampires that attack the cities, then it might actually calm them towards each other. Maybe have her hold off on assaulting the Embassy until we have this vampire thing pinned down. And after that’s done, people will be sweeter on them, also a good thing for when the Embassy falls. In that order, it will look more like they are fighting for the people rather than revenge for Ulfric.”

“I’ll get the word out to her. If she talks to the different Jarls, I’m sure she can bargain with them. And as for talking the Stormcloaks into helping, well they have families and such in those cities I’d assume. Killing things attacking their homes is a Nordic wet dream,” the elf grinned back.

The cat nodded back, “I’ll send a few letters to the different Jarls, and suggest a truce. But the longer we keep the Thalmor out of it the better. I haven’t gotten the guild up to scratch yet to keep their
messengers out of the cities, and we can’t have the Companions in the thick of such shit without creating some incident. The thieves aren’t cut out for murdering people, but they might be able to scramble wits and buy us some time.”

“Has Delvin begun the repairs yet?” Eirian jerked her head at Jakk.

“Yeah, I gave him the letter and the money yesterday when Bryn dragged me back,” Jakk frowned.

“You seem to forget,” Celann slumped down in the chair he had vacated at some point in the night, dropping the various pastries and bottles he had bought from the Bee to the table. “That Vigilants sacrifice everything to defeat the vampires. All this extra stuff you’d have to forget if you wanted to join the fight officially,” he frowned, before continuing, “Though I suppose the state everything’s in, Isran will probably take anyone who can kill them. I don’t know if he will agree to Stormcloaks helping but then again, he’s always been a mad old hat.”

“How drunk are you?” Artan grinned.

“Many, many so,” the Breton replied, chuckling into one of his pastries.

“So, how did you meet Argis then, Celann?” Artan asked, voice even.

“Oh by the Et’ada Elbet!” Eri rolled her eyes, before standing and grabbing the oddly shaped vase-like jug they were using to burn the skooma and wandering out into the bedroom area of the house. Jakk gave the confused-looking cat a pointed look before following, apparently oblivious to Lydia catching his tail and following behind him with Jordis skipping along in her footsteps.

“Hmm? Where is that bleeding…?” Celann frowned, before taking another swig from his own bottle.

Artan allowed the Breton a moment of confused looking around before he answered the unasked question. “Ehh he likes wardrobes when he has skooma. Well, he did last time, so I guess he’s hiding trying to find the ocean.”

“Is that some kind of euphemism?” Celann set a pointed stare on the cat.
“No,” Artan laughed, “It’s actually like he goes into a different world.”

“Hmm. Well, back to what you said before. I met Argis when we were kids growing up in the Reach. We both entered the guard at eighteen and when I went off to train with the Vigilants he ended up staying. I came back one in a while, and it was always the same. He’d gained another rank,” the proud little grin was sweet enough that the mild hate for the man waned. Celann was oblivious. “It wasn’t long until he became one of the more eligible bachelors in the Reach. He’d lead groups in to deal with Forsworn attacks and somehow manage to beat them back. Got a lot of attention.”

“Naturally,” Artan smirked.

“Well, it all started off with that Lisbet lass and her brother. Argis and her had a, well... they were sweet on each other. Her brother was a tough little shit, to be honest,” Celann took another bite from his cake, before continuing, “They lost their parents to a Forsworn attack and he had to do whatever it took to keep them afloat. He was very, very protective of her.”

“Since I’ve never met him, I suppose he’s dead, right?”

“Yep. He had been in Argis’ group a month before they hit what was reported to be a routine attack on a nearby farm hold. Turned out to be a trap, and well only Argis and another lad managed to get out alive. Apparently Forsworn thought the two of them were dead and left them there. The other lad retired from the army after that and left for Riften, but Argis stayed.”

“Sounds about right,” the khajiit sighed, taking a deep swig from his own bottle.

Celann didn’t have to elaborate. The Reach was full of old blood, families who clung to the Guards protection so hard that they didn’t care if a few were crooked. The people had bigger problems than underhand dealings. The entire reason that Thonar Silver-Blood managed to keep such a high standing while dealing with the enemy was because he paid most of the Guards salaries. He kept their farms safe, kept their homes and lives intact.

When he had managed to get arrested, and then the Silver-Blood was murdered when the Forsworn broke free from the mine, well. It was hard to mitigate the fact he had indeed broken Madenach out of the jail, however delirious he was at the time. Only when Thonar’s journal and the entire nasty ordeal became public did Artan get welcomed back into the city, and even then it was mostly because the outer Reachfolk praised him to Sovengarde and back. If he was pressed, he couldn’t really place what they thought he’d done, but he remembered all the faces and all the names of the people he’d managed to keep safe in that long ass year after his first visit to the city.
But leading their sons and daughters into battle, and for the fight to be a massacre? No wonder Argis got hit hard. Anything that gave the Forsworn an edge was considered an insurmountable failure. As a ranked officer, he would have been held to a high standard regardless of the circumstances. But when Artan eventually gained his pardon, well. He was a Thane, and people mostly figured that he did what he had to do to keep them safe. Argis would definitely have been treated harsher, especially considering the times.

There were still snappish citizens here and there who got a little antsy about drinking at the bar with a ‘flea-ridden animal,’ but since Yngvar spent a lot of time there it had stopped being an issue pretty fast. He just thanked whatever deity out there that he had managed to invest in a few merchants throughout the province so he didn’t get the hassle he used to. It was funny how helping some sinking businesses endeared you to a town in Skyrim.

But being honest, he didn’t think Argis would stand the kind of abuse he got when he first entered Skyrim.

It must have been hard, though, the cat frowned, inanely fiddling with one of the forks on the table. Living in a place since your birth and dedicating your entire working life to keeping it safe, just for something shitty like that to happen. He understood that each of his housecarls were… broken dolls as it were. Each of them had been shunted aside for some reason or other. Jordis was probably the best example, really, when you compared her to the Housecarls of the other Thanes of Solitude.

She was an ace-shot with a bow, maybe even as good as Aela, and her mix of tactical and batshit insane fighting techniques made her difficult to counter against. But that’s the thing, she was also an airhead who loved dogs, flowers and pretty shoes. She was the last person you would think of as the last line of defence for a Thane, simp-ly because she didn’t seem more threatening than a child with a wooden sword.

Bolgeir was terrifying to the point that Artan wanted nothing to do with him. If the Brotherhood ever got a contract assassinate Elisif, he would refuse. He was dedicated to the extreme, and that kind of love would make a terrible enemy. He was just like Talia; no mercy, no standing down, and no compromises. And between his meaty fist and Falk’s keen eye, well.

Melaran was similar, in a sense. He was dangerous in a sneaky way. The fact he clocked a vampire as covert as Sybille was a testament to that.

Jordis was a lump of sunshine and rainbows. She could cut a man in two with a few twists of a
battleaxe and headshot a fleeing deer with ease, but when it came to presenting that kind of skill to someone… Well. Most of Solitude saw her as a sweet sister figure more than anything. It wasn’t until the vampire attack that people saw her as what she was. A violent hurricane that might contain some cake and fairy dust, but a menacing force of nature none the less.

It was almost irritating to see their surprise at her competence.

Calder was similar, but less so because of his own obliviousness and more because he boinked the wrong nobles daughter. He got housecarl duty as a punishment, regardless of the fact that the two actually loved each other. The nobles moved away from Windhelm, and that was the end of that promising military career.

Lydia, well she was entire different kettle of fish. Hrongar enlisted her for housecarl duty to keep her off the frontlines and safe in Whiterun. Artan being a more pro-active Thane threw a monkeywrench in that plan, however, and well. The ensuing argument was legendary in the Whiterun guard. As well as the angry black eyes both of them had received from Lydia when she found out.

“He lost his eye that day, but it wasn’t that what made it hard on him,” Celann broke Artan’s inner ramblings with an eventual retort, swirling the drink in his tankard and watching the small whorls inside. “It was having people come up to him asking him what happened, why their sons and daughters hadn’t come home but he did. Asking if he left them to die so he could…”

“But-“

“I know. But they lost their loved ones. They were hurt and lost people. People can be nasty to each other in grief.”

The khajiit had nothing to say to that.

“It was public opinion that made the Jarl set him up for Housecarl duty. It was figured that when a Thane came along that he would get killed or the Thane would fire him because of his record, and then that would be the end of that. He was in a pity placement. After the shit hit the fan between me and the Vigilants, I came back for a few months. He was so different. A lot... harder than before.”

“And then you pop up, earn a thaneship and he’s assigned to protect you.”
“He must have thought it an insult,” Artan chuckled, tipping more wine into his tankard. It was for show, really. They’d both been on and off swigging from bottles all day to mark the send off. “They all did in the beginning.”

“To be fair, you are a cat. And in Skyrim, that’s… well. It’s like having the brand across your head. Most won’t wonder what you’re like; they’ll just see what they want. I’m surprised you had the perseverance to help so much. It must have been a bag of dicks when you first got here,” the Breton sighed, wrinkling his nose.

“Eh it was. But it got better.”

“When he said he’d been assigned to a cat I expected a little shitstain to be honest. You can take only so much abuse before you kind say fuck it and fuck them all. You’re nothing like all the stories you hear about khajiit.”

“I could say the same about Nords, or even Bretons. But hell, people are people. You can’t judge them on what they are you gotta look at who they are, you know?”

“Truer words, never spoken,” Celann hiccupped, raising his tankard in a short toast. “I was fully expecting to have to give you some kind of talk about treating him nice, but hell. I didn’t think you’d be treating him that nice,” the Breton winked, making a vulgar motion with his hand, tongue and nose of all things.

Artan managed to turn the traitorous laugh into a cough. “I haven’t the foggiest idea what you mean sir.”

“Uh-huh, sure. It’s just surprising, that’s all. But then again, he’s always gone for people with a good heart, and you seem to have a pretty good one at that. Setting up that rickety old mage and the Jarl’s housecarl? Aren’t they getting married this month? And then ending the civil war, but going so far as to persuade old iron-knickers Tullius into pardoning the surrendering Stormcloaks? Then there was that whole, saving the Lydia lass when she lost half her chest in a dragon fight? The cities you’re a Thane for have halved their crime rate as well! You’re like a bloody hero, and it’s fucking fantastic!” the Breton laughed, eyes bright.

 Pretty, but no sweetroll. Artan smiled back, shrugging his shoulders. “It kind of adds up after a while. At the time, I just figured it’d be nice for people to live in their own homes without fear. It’s no different than you fighting the vampires. And besides, my housecarls are like extended family now. And the Stormcloaks were fighting for what they believed in, and in a way, they weren’t wrong. It’s only a matter of time before the Thalmor roll in and take over like they did with Elsweyr.
“Hmm. I guess so. It’s just a shame that they didn’t band together instead of attacking each other. More funny, though, in retrospect when you consider the ‘heresy’ of the Empire banning Talos worship. Ironically, even though the ‘Cloaks fought for Talos, none of them saw the parallels Ulfric was trying to draw between Hjalti Early-Beard and himself. Might’ve gone different, otherwise.”

The cat set his tankard down, “That was really fucking clever. If I didn’t know you were a Breton I’d call daedric influence.”

“Haha, well hell. It’s true, no? He runs off and learns the Thu’um to take down opponents almost exclusively.”

“Eh. So how did you… well…”

“He’s as obvious as a puppy who wants a cuddle. He’s only less obvious when he’s running into battle headfirst.”

Artan couldn’t really disagree.

“But I’ve never seen him look at even a woman the same way he looks at you. Not even Lisbet, and I thought he loved her,” Celann shrugged. It seemed nonchalant, but the sharp black eyes were a giveaway.

“How long you been playing drunk?” the cat grinned, hard.

“A little while. More of a whim than anything, really. People tend to be more honest when they think the other person is deep in his cups. But I need to know,” Celann put his tankard down, and pushed his bottle as well as Artan’s own aside, even setting his demolished pastry down on one of the discarded plates on the table.

“Will you treat him right?”

“Of course.”
“Even if it doesn’t work out the way you’d hope?”

“Even then,” the cat nodded back, staring with equal intensity into the breton’s dark eyes. “I think I’ve gotten in a little too deep to back out now.”

“Gotta finish what you start, am’right?”

“More like when you finally find something good, you feel duty bound to make sure it sticks around for a good long time.”

“So a lot’ta people can be just as blessed?”

“Why do you think I became Thane so many times over?” the cat grinned, downing the last of his bottle.

“Not just talking about housecarls anymore, are we?”

“Nope. I’m gonna make Skyrim safe no matter what it takes. When I first got here, I didn’t give a shit. But now? I have a lot of reasons why I have to make the province as strong as possible. When I met Lydia I was surprised that there could be nice Nords. After a few more, I realised that I just hadn’t met the others yet. And that kind of escalated into Bretons and Argonians and even Altmer. I realised that I’d been just as shitty about judging someone by what they are rather than who they are, that I’d kind of deserved what I got. But now? Well, we don’t have that luxury anymore. We have vampires, dragons and fanatical supremacists on our hands.”

“And the only way to make it is to band together.”

The cat stood, extending a hand, which the Breton shook. “I think we are going to do fine, Celann.”

“Aye, Artan. I think that too,” the Dawnguard grinned. “Even if you do become less sabre and more housecat when big mans around.”
“I know right? I’m looking forward to going after these vampires so I actually get to kill something. Fuck.” Artan rolled his eyes and huffing loudly into a new tankard.

“Getting itchy?”

“You don’t even know the half of it.”

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4E, 203 Early Second Seed

“Why… why would someone do this to you?”

“What?” Serana asked, taken back. “What do you mean?”

Artan near enough glared at her. They were still sat on that wretched pillar in the middle of a stagnant lake, talking as if she hadn’t just woken up from what was most likely a centuries worth of sleep. Maybe more. He didn’t understand her, at all. She was a vampire. But she was also fucking clueless.

“Why would someone lock you up like this? This is beyond cruel, even to a vampire. Shit, everyone you know… and you’re in a world now that you have no idea how to traverse. It was going to be fucking hard on you to adapt to such huge changes. I mean shit, what if someone came up with vampire radars or some shit? An enchantment to catch you out? You’d be killed straight out.”

“You… you think I was put in there as a punishment?”

“What else would it be? You said you were put in there. I presume you weren’t asked first, right?”

“Well no. My mother put me in there. She said to protect me.”

“What?” Artan deadpanned, but then shook himself. It wasn’t his place. “Well, it’s nothing to do with me. But what are you going to do now? I mean, maybe someone you knew is still alive, could
Serana gave him an odd look, and for the first time since meeting her, he finally saw a little bit of the vampire flare. “I need to get home. My castle is probably still standing, but if not, it’s better to know sooner rather than later, right?” The woman sighed, and stood. It was almost like watching a baby deer, really. She was slightly shaking from the hunger, he guessed. It would be at least a week until she was up to scratch.

“Wait here,” Artan sighed, motioning uselessly with his hands. Serana just looked at him quizzically, but surprisingly acquiesced. A short jog and a looted corpse later, he came back with a jug of blood that somehow didn’t smash when he beat that Lokil joker to a pulp. “Here. It might help with the shakes.”

“Thank you. But… why are you helping me? I can smell the vampire blood on you. You’ve killed at least one today.”

“Heh, that’s because they were torturing a helpless man. There’s a full-scale battle on between Skyrim’s militant groups and a sect of Vampires at the moment. But,” Artan shrugged, trying to sound noncommittal, “The way I see it is that just because there’s a group of crazies out there doesn’t make you all the same. One of my good friends is a vampire, and she doesn’t want to be caught up in all this shit with them. She likes things the way they are.”

“What if I’m like them?”

“You’re not.”

“How can you tell?”

“I’m an assassin, an ex slave and the sworn-sword of most of Skyrim’s holds. Picking up who’s a dangerous monster and who’s not is kind of my forte. And besides, you just don’t have the eyes for it.”

Serana laughed, short and bitter. Artan ignored the blood on her mouth. “Don’t have the eyes?”

“You were starving, and you had a full-blown conversation with me, in spite of that. But you didn’t attack me to satiate your hunger. You held back. That other guy,” the cat motioned generally towards
the other side of the bridge, “he rips the wings off bugs for fun.”

“Heh. I see your point.”

“Now down to the nitty gritty. Do you need my help in getting home?”

The vampire gave him a flabbergasted look; after she almost choked on her long-overdue meal, of course. “What? You’d do that? You don’t even know me!”

The cat rubbed a line across his face. “In all honesty, the Dawnguard would want me to kill you. But shit, that’s the same way the Nords wanted all the elves dead after the treaty,” he didn’t notice the way her gaze tapered from suspicious to lost, and continued. “But you aren’t some wild hedge vampire murdering kids in the night. You’re a lost girl looking to get home, and shit if it was one of my daughters I’d like to think someone would help them,” Artan grunted roughly, tugging at the belts holding his Dawnguard regulation armor in place.

“Hmm. Well, I guess it would be helpful to have a guide. And an extra pair of hands if things get hairy,” she pointed out cordially. “You have daughters?”

“Two. And by the Divines are they going to kill me one day…”

xxx

It was difficult travelling with Serana, to say the least.

First, there was the centuries worth of dirt issue. And the whole, lets find a lake problem. She was also very… shaky at first. Snappy, almost. He took it in stride, since hell. A steak wakes you up after a really long nap -or after you get really drunk and end up in a snowdrift three Holds away from home- and you’re starving for something to eat; but you can’t eat that steak. Oh no, you need that steak to help you get home because you still have that ass-kicking hangover. So he understood her bite, in a sense. And besides, she was only a little nipper compared to Lydia after the New Life festival. Jakk had literally said the name ‘Hrongar’ and she tackled him through a door. Literally through a door; he had to get the local carpenter in to re-do the wooden setting as well as re-hinge a new door after that fiasco. Jakk never teased her again, however.

After two more feeds, she was as sharp as a well-honed blade. She could easily handle herself, even
as disadvantaged as she was. She had no idea about the Empire, about the Thalmor or most other things in the current world. She had been surprised as hell when she had tried a sweetroll for the first time, since apparently her father thought mortal foods were ‘dirty’ and forbade her from eating them.

It wasn’t her character that he had difficulty with; it was her secrecy.

The Elder Scroll for Sun was strapped to her back, but he couldn’t very well ask her why she had an ancient prophetic scroll without outing the fact he knew what the fuck it was. It was one thing to know of the Elder Scrolls, it was another to know what they looked like. Especially since he had been keeping the Thu’um under wraps, it wouldn’t make sense for a random person in the world to know an Elder Scroll. He mentally noted to ask Eirian about it. She would know obscure prophecies.

Asking about her family, her life, and what made her decide to make a deal with Molag-Bal were all off limits. She seemed surprised that he knew she had a deal with the daedra, but he waved her off. “I’ve seen enough people who’ve made deals with one or more daedra that I can practically pick one out in a crowd with my eyes closed.”

But more often than not, he was telling her about his daughters, the housecarls, and at one point, he actually broke the ice about Argis.

“You… you like a human? But… I didn’t think that different races would be attracted to each other like that? I mean, you’re so different. He must look almost naked to you,” she twisted her head, confused but soft.

“Eh I can’t explain it. I mean hell, sometimes you naked freaks are pretty. Haven’t you ever looked at an Argonian and thought, well that one has a nice set of legs, or a cat and thought they have nice shoulders? It started that way, and then it turned out that he had a heart of gold. So yeah. Hard and fast. Almost broke my nose,” the cat pouted, theatrically rubbing at his little pink nose. It earned him one of her scarce, quiet giggles.

“As long as you’re happy. It’s… it’s hard to find happiness in a world like this,” she tapered off again, seemingly lost in her own little world again.

And by Talos, was it awkward sometimes.

That is, until Artan bought Serana her very first ale.
Three hours later, and the two of them were booted from the tavern and wandering down a worn old pathway into the wilds, kicking up snow and taking swigs from the bottles of Bloodwine they pinched. And just like that, everything came out.

“He wants me as a blood-bag, you know,” the vampire hiccupped, eyes hooded against the snowfall.

“What? Can’t he just get bottles like all the normal vampires?” Artan yawned back, almost stumbling into a nearby tree. He didn’t ask who this ‘he’ was, but he had drunk a lot of wine, so he let himself off.

“I mean, they want my blood for some ancient prophecy. They want to blot out the sun with shadowy vampire magic,” Serana sighed, sounding more bored than concerned.

“Can’t they just get a gazebo? Solitude sells them in every colour you can imagine. I’ll get you a catalogue the next time I’m there.”

“I’m not even a daughter to him. Just a means to an end,” the girl continued, the bored tone turning a little more sour. “Why can’t… guh… nevermind…”

“You aren’t going back to him, are you? This is your mothers castle we are heading towards, right?” Artan asked, sobering.

“No. It’s Harkon’s, my father. Although, I don’t for the life of me know why,” Serana scoffed, almost slamming the bottle into Artan’s shoulder. He didn’t take it for a long moment, instead patting her hand lightly first.

“Your mother sealed you in that place to protect you, remember? Just because he doesn’t seem to know what he has doesn’t mean she doesn’t. And besides, it’s not a bad thing to care about your dad, you know? Sometimes parents get it wrong, but that doesn’t mean they don’t still love their kids,” The khajiit murmured softly, before throwing the now empty bottle into the tree line. “If anything, it sounds like he’s done a lot of shitty stuff to you. That you still get upset at the way things have turned out is more of a testament to how you are as a person rather than him,” Artan continued.

“Why am I going back to that, though? I could take the scroll and run, couldn’t i? Just like you did from your old master,” Serana looked up, finally, from underneath the edge of her hood. The red of her eyes was clearly visible in the dark, as well as the slight pink tinge around them.
“You’re going back because you still have hope that the old dad you loved is still in there. You never know, he might surprise you. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, right? Regardless of how family treats us, they are still family,” Artan nodded, almost as if he was drunkenly agreeing with himself.

“Come on, lets get you home,” the cat smiled, soft. “And besides, if he’s still only interested in what you can do for him, you can always leave, right? And well, all you have to do is go to one of the Holds, and ask a guard for Artan. Tell them you want to see one of my Housecarls, usually they are in one of the taverns or at home. At the moment, though, they are all holed up in Riften. If you need a place to weather out the storm, I’d be happy to put you up for a while.”

“But I’m a stranger to you,” she shook her head.

“Even so, you’re a good lass. And helping good people is what I do,” Artan grinned, slapping a hand to the vampire’s shoulder.”

Xxx

The castle was eerie, to say the least.

It was like an ugly, jagged piece of coal that jutted out of the sea, snow flickering around it in surges as if to protect the nearby shoreline from the thing’s gaze. Artan was probably over dramatising it, but still. The place gave him the irritating, itchy feeling of dread. He didn’t feel scared, but he did feel the want to call an Atronach or two and draw his blades. He was very aware he was about to enter the vampire home base wearing Dawnguard armor with another vampire. But even so, he was still worried. The small, protective side of him didn’t want to leave Serana here. They had become shy friends. And even if she did know what she was doing, it still didn’t stop him asking, “Are you sure about this?”

“No,” Serana gulped, but still strode towards the gates of her castle, cape twisting at her back.

xxx

“You fucking what?”

The hall was silent. It was a mild surprise at how silent it actually was, but then again they were bloodless animals; he expected nothing less. Artan stepped forwards, ignoring the hungry, molten
stares that were attempting to pin him down. He’d walked into Windhelm’s palace during the Stormcloak occupation; vampires were a fucking cakewalk.

What did somewhat startle him was how angry he felt. It was almost like having the beastblood again. But even so, he mentally noted how he didn’t have lycanthropy anymore, but he could still feel his blood burning inside. Even under the dilated eyes of the vampire horde inside the castle, he felt the irrational want to start a riot. There was a fifty-fifty chance of him actually managing it, but he had no information on their techniques or fighting abilities. Going in blind and alone was insane, even by his standards. He could feel the ugly, slithering cold of the stonework, and even could smell, hear and almost feel the thralls sprawled across the banquet tables. This place was almost on par with the dungeons beneath Larethius’ mansions. Almost, but no brazen bull.

Harkon actually looked surprised, mildly so but still surprised.

“You’re daughter just came back from what, two thousand years of being gone and the first thing you do is compliment a fucking piece of paper? No hugs? No celebrations? No ‘I missed you dear it’s so good you’re home,’ or anything? What the hell is wrong with you?” The cat snapped, near enough spitting in his gnashing rage. “You’re vampires and you’re supposed to be distant and lone wolf things or whatever, but she’s your daughter! Don’t you give even the tiniest of fucks about her?”

The Lord of the castle chuckled, “Of course I do. I had the utmost faith in her.”

“That she would bring your precious scroll back, or that she’d be safe? Or do those things have to coincide for you to be happy to see her? We both know that there a reason why she was locked up in that shit hole, but to safeguard an Elder Scroll wasn’t the only one,” Artan snarled.

“Clever blood-bag,” the vampire laughed, low and sweet. Almost like an old man over dinner with the folks. “But I am tired of listening to your drivel. Do you want your reward or not?”

“Pfft. Let me guess, you want to offer me your ‘gift.’” Artan managed to make it sound as vehement as possible, and it paid off when one of the thickset vampires standing on the sidelines hissed like a cat who’s tail had been trodden on.

“In a sense. You brought back my daughter, and my scroll. You are fully welcome to join us here, and become-“
“I’ll pass, thanks,” the cat cut him off with a swipe of a hand. “If that kind of power will turn me into a heartless pile of shit like you, I’d rather stay a blood-bag. How you managed to father a girl like her I will never know.” He turned on his heel, rolling his eyes snidely as the cackles of laughter rang out behind him. Artan clapped a hand to Serana’s shoulder, “Take care of yourself kid. And hell, if you need it, you know where to go for a helping hand.”

She actually managed to look even more startled than she already was.

“And you are sure you want to return to your mortal life, cat? You could be more powerful than you could ever imagine,” Harkon trilled behind him, amused no doubt. It was probably refreshing to have someone talk so harshly to him.

“I don’t need power, I need a fucking nap and a warm fire without human remains in the vicinity,” Artan pinched the wide bridge of his nose before turning slightly to give the Lord a sharp smile, “But thanks for the offer.”

“You will become prey, if you carry on this path of yours,” Harkon sighed, shaking his head as if talking to a child. “The same way my traitorous wife became prey when she-“

“So you think you have a sob story. Woop-de-doo. I’m not changing my mind,” Artan snarled back, eyes hard.

“Your insolence does you no favours, cat,” Harkon frowned. “I am being very generous to let you keep your life. Only your saving of my daughter has stayed my hand so far. Do not presume I will always be so kind to you.”

“Kind? You think you are being kind?”

“Of course. When we rule the world, you will be at our sides rather than torn,” Harkon seemed to smile, the edges of his mouth twitching lightly. “Limb, from limb. And that is only if you are lucky. If you are not, well. You’ll be cattle, like them,” the vampire motioned towards the prone, blank-faced humans laid out across the tables. “Prey.”

“I’d like to see you try that shit with me.”

Harkon grinned, fangs already extended, “You think I can’t?”
Artan smiled back; all teeth. “I know you can’t.”

He was barely able to push Serana aside before a grey fist lashed out. She landed hard against a table, the strange elf from the entrance hall catching her shoulders in an attempt to soften her fall. But the others were entranced.

Harkon was huge, and his transformation was almost instantaneous. Artan was sort of impressed. Even with all the bulk, the vampire was fast. His wings made rather formidable folds of air, and all of them seemed to buffet the cat, but it wasn’t enough to push him over. He was already swooped in and lashing out with his claws when Artan’s eyes opened back up from blinking. The huge grey paws kept swiping out, but always seemed to miss Artan. The cat didn’t bother with the theatrics; he needed an escape fast.

The Thu’um rolled out, and Harkon went flying backwards, landing with an ugly crunch and a tirade of claw-clicks on the wall behind his throne, head already whipped up to stare; eyes like sharp little fires in his face. He was unharmed, but that didn’t stop the room from breaking into chaos. But as the cat turned tail and ran, dodging the horde of other vampire’s various spells, arrows and in one case a thrown chair, what he had to remember of that day was how calm the vampire Lord looked.

That glint of bloodlust in his eye.
Chapter Summary

When the dead rise up and snark at you, that's when you know it's time for a career change.

4E, 203 Early Midyear

Coming up the old dirt road beside LakeHonrich, through the gentle slopes of the trees and into the sharp daylight pouring out from above Riften’s rooftops was a rather sweet, domestic view of the house. But it wasn’t until you got closer to the warm, homely image of Honeyside –where a boat sat quietly outside, fishing poles ready and kids’ boots by the backdoor- that you really noticed how pretty the whole thing was. Stood just on the edge of the wilds; a tiny nook to quietly eat sweets and play ridiculous games within, but also teeming with bright life outside.

Maybe Artan was being a romantic.

Maybe it was seeing Argis with his hair up in a bun and an apron around his waist.

The cat would adamantly deny both, but that was just for show.

The Nord was stood at the edge of the balcony where they had set up a wooden ‘horse,’ folding clothes and other such things over the various slats in the frame to dry. Things always seemed to dry quickly in the time between spring and summer, especially in the Rift. Just in one of his regular soft tunics, weathered old pants and bare feet, humming an old tune in-between shuffling around and moving the girls’ toys. But it was when the Nord sighed, ran his hand through a part of his fringe that fell free of his bun and tugged the apron’s bow tighter, leaving the tapering ends to rest over the swell of his arse-

Argis almost jumped when the arms wrapped around his chest, but settled when a furred hand fist ed in the collar of his apron. He had to laugh though, when a cold nose pressed into the dip where his skull met the nape of his neck, nuzzling at the hair there. The low growl, the gentle press as he settled flush against the Nord’s back, the huff of a laugh tickling his ears. It almost made them both forget
that they had a house full of evil children.

The ice-water landed square on the both of them, the deafening howls waking most of the neighbours, irate yelling filling the early morning air.

Although, even then, Artan had to be proud of Sofie managing a frost spell gentle enough to not cause frostbite. Argis wasn’t so sure.

Xxx

“Wow, the crabs got big,” The cat whistled, earning a confused stare from Lucia.

“Yeah. We take them outside every couple of hours or so. They like the pen you made them a lot, since the other critters can’t get inside, but they usually just wander around outside until we bring them in for the night,” Sofie trilled, rubbing at the huge claw of a now knee-high Mr. Sweetroll. The girl ducked as Argis stepped over her, sprawled in the doorway, carrying the dried clothes down into the basement to start putting them away. “It’s weird, though. After all most mudcrabs go through puberty and attack each other, but they don’t seem to want to fight. They tag-team the hell out of all the others, though.”

“You’ve been training them to use tactical warfare using fish as a kind of positive reinforcement, haven’t you?” Artan shot an accusatory glance at Lucia, who pointedly didn’t look back at him.

Sofie glanced between them, looking lost. “You can’t teach crabs that can you?”

“You can train anything to do anything; that’s how we have armoured trolls,” the blonde scoffed, pouting slightly in irritation at getting caught.

“Clever. It takes a lot of patience to teach like that,” Artan nodded sagely, ruffling the girls’ hair. The kid swatted his hands away pretty sheepish, but the tiny smile wasn’t missed as easily.

“Speaking of teaching, Tolfdir sent the books you asked for,” Argis called up from the basement, most probably cleaning up after last nights card game. Jakk had since set up a large circular table after jilting the seldom-used alchemy table from its place, and had started up a nightly cards tournament. Between Brynjolf, Jakk and the dark horse that was Jordis the other resident housecarls were clean broke by nights end. If it wasn’t for Eirian demolishing the three of them when she
returned for the evenings and depositing her winnings in the house fund, well. They would probably have run out of food before Artan returned. Lydia and Calder however were mostly never there; always hunting with Scouts unless Jakk went with him. And when Jakk went with the Argonian, you knew it. Nearly all of Riften had learnt the hard way to avoid the forests after the first few fools wandered in after the duo and returned; but only to squander their entire pay checks in the Bee. Or the Bunkhouse, but you didn’t hear that from Jordis.

Similarly, even with the swindlers in residence it didn’t stop most of the town considering Honeyside a new hangout. They were kicked out at tenth bell or left willingly with empty pockets and full bellies, depending on which Housecarl was home to cook. Ten copper a meal, and three for a pint of the home-brew ale. It only took three days for that setup to fall through, since it was considered an illegal setup.

The Nord had barely come back up the stairs with the empty basket in hand before the cat had begun his flaming ridiculous dancing, already finding the books on the shelf, but could appreciate how the girls joined in with him. They were still too young to be embarrassed by their pa.

“Telekinesis, as well as a few restoration spells. After I had Danica explain how she practically brought herself back to life after getting hit with a part of Heimskr’s house, well I had to get in on that!” Was all Argis caught of Artan’s insane babble; Sofie nodding at him as if the next few intelligible phrases weren’t in Dovah or something as equally obscure.


“Basically, it’s a restoration spell where you put a little magika into a small bubble in your conduit every day. Eventually, you have a huge amount of stored magika that you can use as a safeguard in-case something bad happens, like a broken leg or a hard hit of the flu. She managed to get her bubble up to the point where she practically re-grew her entire arm as well as most of her shoulder!” the cat gushed, clasping the sack of books to his chest. It was almost inspiring to see how oblivious he was to Lucia clinging to his back, spindly arms over his shoulders and feet tucked into the bag.

“That sounds amazing! But how would that work?” Sofie squeaked.

And so began the long discussion between the two, Lucia and Argis just watching on in amusement.
It wasn’t until Artan left to report to Isran later that day did Lucia piped up. Sofie had already given her hugs bye, and Lydia had checked in about Honeyside’s finances. Apparently battle Thanes didn’t get taxed, in some kind of odd way of payment for actively protecting the hold. Argis could barely keep up with the Halls insane paperwork let alone go anywhere near another house’s finance schemes. Lydia was a natural for it, however. Between Calder, Jordis and him, well she was a diamond for the small print. Since Artan had literally appeared out of thin air in the middle of the day, nobody else who had started bunking in Honeyside was around. Jakk and Jordis were hunting for more meat to refill the stores, Calder was in the Bee with Marcurio and Eirian, and Sofie had wandered out into the city with Lydia to find more dressmakers books.

So, in the end it was just Argis and Lucia watching the cat wander off into the distance, Atronachs on either side.

“It’s hard to watch him walk away,” the kid sighed, rubbing a fist into her scalp.

The big Nord looked down at her, eyebrows quirked. “Better grow up quick then. It might take some persuading, but there’s a good chance that you can walk beside him one day.”

“He will never let me, even when I do grow up. That’s why I don’t understand why he’s letting us learn how to fight,” Lucia snorted, rolling her eyes. “He made me that bow, and he gets all of those magic books from his college for Sofie. But that’s the thing, I feel like even if we became masters at what we like, even then—“

“You’ll always be his little nippers,” Argis sighed, fondly. “He’s the same with the Housecarls, don’t worry. Always with the ‘don’t touch that’ and ‘don’t eat this’ and ‘don’t step there.’ I think it’s because he wants to protect us, not because he thinks we are incompetent. He’s seen more than his fair share of dead friends and colleagues, you know? He just doesn’t want to see it happen to us, too.”

“It’s funny, but you talk to us like we’re adults more than pop does,” the girl hummed, twisting a few of her braids together into a knot. “It’s nice. That when he comes back he’ll play games and build forts out of the furniture and that because we’re kids, and when he goes, you guys train us up because we’re gonna be old one day.”

“Old?” Argis sneered. “I’m not old. And besides, you probably think everyone’s old. Do you want to here my wisdom or not?”

Lucia nodded, eyes narrowed.
“I think that he wouldn’t have pushed archery training on you if you decided to like flower arranging or smithing. He would have ended up getting a forge built under the house or invested in a local smithy to get you an apprenticeship. He would have gotten a greenhouse set up somewhere, especially for you to make your… arrangements?” The Nord frowned, before shaking his head in dismissal and continuing. “He gets Sofie her books, and he gets you new daggers and bows because you like those things. Sofie likes the Atronachs, and you like the bows. He doesn’t do it because he thinks you should fight, he does it because he wants you to be happy.”

“But we are happy,” the kid frowned back, leaning up against the wooden railings and propping her head up on her fist. “What I don’t understand is why he babies us so much. He found Sofie in a snow drift and well I killed a vampire the first time he met me, so we aren’t the softest petals on the dragons tongue.”

Argis was quiet for a moment, lips pursed, before he eventually answered, voice soft. “Sometimes, I wonder whether he sees everybody he meets as if they are cubs alone in the snow, and he’s put himself into a position where he can give those cubs claws.

Teach them how to hunt, how to survive, you know? But other times, it seems like he’s collecting things he likes, but forgets that they aren’t like the swords and shields he finds in the ruins he likes dredging through. He forgets that they are people, and that they are able to defend themselves as he can. Either that or he’s scared. Like you said before; you didn’t think about saving Sof from that vampire, you just did it. Maybe he doesn’t even know he’s doing it. It’s like an instinct to protect people.”

“I see what you mean,” Lucia nodded, pensive. “And he’s so protective because it’s like a mother sabre protecting her cubs, right?”

“Right.”

“But what has he got to protect us against? He has an entire Assassin cell at his back, and then there’s Eirian and the Companions and Jakk with the Guild. Any one of them can draw innumerable amounts of resources from their guilds as well as their own personal sects, since I really doubt that they only have one group each, you know? I mean, pa has Marcurio and his friends at the college, and Jakk has the priesthood behind him as well as the different fences in the hold, and I can’t even think about what Eirian has in her pockets. That’s not even counting the fact he’s a Legate, as well as a Thane. He has such a protective net around us I don’t see anything getting through. So why…” Lucia shook her head, eyes flickering back out to the lake.

Argis started where he could. “He has a lot of enemies. Becoming what he is, well you have to step on a lot of toes to get this far. And besides, he cares about-“
“It’s that old master of his, isn’t it?” Lucia cut him off. For the first time since their conversation started, she looked straight at him and stared hard until he looked back at her. To be honest, Lucia was always a bit of a wild child. Always covered in mud, hated dresses and mixed bugs in with people’s food when they were mean to her or one of her friends. The other kids were mostly scared of her since only one of the orphanage lads was able to even come close to besting her in a play fight, so when someone was getting bullied, they went to her. It meant that anyone from bratty child to cruel adult was in the firing line, and that meant she was banned from the Bee already. He had never really seen her eyes, since she was always moving, never really stopping, always something to do and someone to bring to justice. Never looked anyone in the eye, not really. Nobody except Sofie.

But right then, she was looking. And it was rather inspiring to see that much spirit in a kid. She was wild, but it was strangely tempered with a kind of discipline that most adults lacked. All of that wild funnelled into a fine point when she wanted something; be it either to land a bull’s-eye on a target or set a local magistrates hair on fire. They weren’t even related, but holy shit she was a lot like Artan.

“He’s not taking pa. Not from me, not from her, and not from you,” the words weren’t even a question, a cold hard statement.

“And there is that voice of the Emperor I keep hearing about,” Argis snorted, breaking her fiery stance and getting a sharp little laugh for his effort.

Xxx

“Maven’s allowed a huge group of Nords into the city. Apparently they’re holed up in the barracks with the regular guard,” Lydia shot from the kitchen sink, sounding too calm to be anything but furious. It was insanely odd how easy it was to pick up on her mood from just her speech alone, but there it was. Sofie was sat at her heels, back pressed to the woman’s calves while she ran a brush through the thick mane of Eirian’s hair, a few tiny braids clutched in her other hand. It was hard enough braiding the elf’s locks into something even reminiscent of civility, but Sofie liked the challenge. She just hoped she would be as good as Argis one day. She snapped out of her momentary trance to hum in ascent, before asking the first thing that popped into her head; “What would she do that for?”

“Apparently, they used to be Storm Cloaks, but now work under a new banner,” Lydia continued. The girl’s head snapped up, but it was Eirian who replied. “They wouldn’t be here unless something happened.”

“I knew it was something to do with you or those cats. What is it? Who are they?” Lydia snapped around to glare down at the elf; eyes hard as she slammed the dish into the washing bucket and
ground both fists into her hips. Eirian simply sighed, “Might as well give you a heads up; when me, Elibet and Riel Riel left the isle, we left with three others. Arnien, another khajiit slave, Jaden, a bosmeri guardsman who worked under the Outer Guard, and Talia, the training arena’s living punching bag.”

“What?” Sofie asked, barely able to keep the shake from her voice.

Eri sighed, rubbing at her nose. “Which part is tripping you up, sweet pea?”

“They used her as a… punching bag? And you ran with a guard? Didn’t he have an obligation to his master?” Lydia growled, over-cutting the still-shocked Sofie’s would-be-questions. The Nord stomped towards the table and slumped down in the free chair, motioning for Eirian to take the other. The elf complied, and Sofie stood behind her in an attempt to keep her braids in until she could tie them off.

“Jaden is a special case. Larethius had two sets of guards who secured his lands and his person. The Outer Guard dealt with the houses protection, and a group were stationed at every mansion he owned. The Inner Guard were personal bodyguards that always travelled with him and protected him inside his mansions. Tavan was the Outer Guard Captain of his house on the Isle, and so dealt with training new meat. I mean slaves, other guards, and Talia. Jaden was his second, and was more… emotional than the others,” She frowned, eyes glaring holes into the table.

“Larethius sent Tavan to the mainland to pick up new slaves, but he ended up thwarting a break-out set up by a rogue bandit team. As it turned out, Talia was one of their shield maidens, one of the ones that they didn’t… kill. Well, she fought so hard that Tavan was impressed. He figured the training arena needed a new spice to it, to help the recruits better learn how to deal with fighting ‘rabid barbarians.’ Jaden spoke out against it; said that we were better than using a child in pit fights. She was only fifteen years old at the time, you see. Tavan burnt out his eyes, so he didn’t have to watch,” Eirian sighed out through her nose, hands twisting until her wrists cracked and she rubbed out the ache. “It wasn’t until then that I really looked at what we were doing.”

“What?”

“We were monsters masquerading as civilised society. We called the other races barbaric, underdeveloped monsters that preyed on young elves in the night. I don’t even know how many we killed, how many I put to the sword myself. I always used to think it was fun; that when the knife went in it felt so easy, and that all the good things came easy, right?” The elf smiled savagely, before it burnt away into a cold sneer. “When you’re at the top of the food chain, you can have anything, take everything, and I saw nothing wrong with teaching a bunch of savages their place. Until I had to listen to Jaden have his eyes burnt out, and the sound of Talia beating the guard who did the deed to death,” Eirian sniffed, eyes blinking back into focus by the end. She shook her head to clear it more,
before grabbing a bottle of wine from the night before and uncorking the top to drink deep.

“He defended her, and in thanks she attacked when the guards were either looking away in disgust or too busy jeering to interfere. She broke Tavan’s jaw with a roundhouse from behind and flat out busted Seira’s nose with just a few shots. Jaden was bloody shell-shocked, to be honest. He only lost one eye, in the end, so he saw her take Seira to the ground and pummel her head until it burst. Talia spat on her before glaring the living shit out of Jaden. Took almost five men to pin her down after that. But it wasn’t until I started actually looking that I saw how far we had fallen. I told Larethius we needed to stop. He had none of it. So, I began talking to the slaves, to the guards, to Talia.”

“I persuaded Larethius that he needed assassins, and that khajiit would be best. Loyal and won’t go against their master, I said. Seems funny how he believed that, in hindsight. I got my old friend, Za’nir, in to teach them after I explained my plan to him. He was usually my link to outside resources; he got me my books, my imported wines and everything. He was also my contact to the Dark Brotherhood, since sometimes Larethius’ enemies were a little too far for my reach. I explained a few things, and he agreed. We could turn a few of the slaves into warriors to break the rest of them out, rather than risk trying to gain allies within the guard. He picked Arnsien, S’eta and Garma to be on the programme,” she shook her head, smile still in place. “Garma was the easiest to get on side, surprisingly. He said something in my eyes had changed,” Eirian laughed, incredulity thick in her throat. She drained the rest of the wine bottle, and hooked another out of the wine cupboard. “So, the three of them traded the rest of their lives for the Brotherhood’s aide in getting their fellow slaves out of the Isle.”

“I got Jaden in on the plan to break out as many as we could. He agreed wholeheartedly. The five of us could easily get the twenty or so slaves out, I figured. Especially if Za’nir was there with us. It backfired, spectacularly. Za’nir got a letter about the riots and about the Night Mother being in danger, and about how he needed to return quickly. As it turned out, he couldn’t leave until Larethius was dead, since apparently he stoked something within his honour, or thereabouts. My brother caught wind of it all, and Za’nir went on the run. I was late in realising what was happening, but a few days later Larethius held a party and had Arnsien, S’eta and Garma fight for the right to be his lone blade in the dark. He figured that it would be a way to coax Za’nir out to try and salvage all his hard work into training three new initiates, or he would lose all of them. By the time I got there, most of the elves gathered were dead, and Garma had Larethius around the throat, fully ready to kill him. But the guards were pouring in, and we had no time. So I stopped him.”

“If it wasn’t for Jaden knowing, for him setting off the plan early, we wouldn’t have gotten out in time. Between us, we managed to get all three of them out of there, and Talia too. The six of us ran for the hills, killing any guard we found, any trace of his spies that could report back to him, literally everyone. We never managed to get the other slaves out. It wasn’t until a month later in Bravil did we hear about him purging his stock and getting a whole new group of slaves, as well as sending what was left of his Outer Guard away,” Eirian snorted, cold. “Bosmer are like the rest, he used to say. Good for a few things, but they aren’t like us. Little better than the pond scum we use as target practice.”
“He didn’t… kill the guards?” Jordis ground out, eyes to the ground. It was a little startling that she had snuck in so quietly, but Eri retorted all the same. “Not the High Elves, no. He forgave them, and kept the loyal ones. The ones who followed every order to the letter. Anyone else either got the cut or got fired.”

“But what has this got to do with what might as well be a Nord Army holed up in Riften?” Lydia sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose with her fingers. “You told us a long story, but you’ve only answered half of-“

“Talia is the head of that army. She’s been gathering all those men and women to get ready for Larethius. On the outside, it looks like they are fighting the recently rising vampire threat, as well as just generally defending small towns and homesteads against bandits. But really, it is just another step in trying to keep him and his men out. Especially after the whole slaver thing that’s gone live. It’s being kept quiet in most of the cities to try and stop rioting, but some of the smaller villages have already been hit hard.”

“E-excuse me?” Lydia stuttered, fully facing the elf now.

Eirian gave her an incredulous, almost disbelieving stare in return. “The slave ring? There’s been a group of elves working in Skyrim the last few months that are targeting Nord and Imperials, but outright killing Bretons. It’s why you’re all gathered here, right? Safety in numbers? What, didn’t Artan tell you any of-“

“No. He didn’t.”

xxx

Artan trotted down the last little stretch of path, but had already broken into a run and drawn his swords by the time he heard the shouting and crashing of battle, let alone see the fray. A few vampires, by the looks of their armor, caught in what looked to be a futile foray against what seemed to be the scouting regiment of the Dawnguard as well as-

Serana drove the huge chunk of sharpened ice that her arm was encased in straight through the chest of a male vampire, screaming loud enough to make Artan’s ears twitch in irritation. It only took a deft flick, but the enemy vampire was on the ground to fizzle away into ashes in an instant.

“What are you doing here, I wonder,” the cat called, grin splitting his face.
“Daddy issues, I believe it’s called,” Serana called back, eyes glittering. “As it turns out, he doesn’t take kindly to me stealing his magical paraphernalia. Who else would I expect to help a poor girl out?”

“You little shit,” Artan half-laughed, punching her lightly in the shoulder when he finally got within range.

“How sweet. Now, if you would turn your attention to the matter at hand, we have more problems than this leech and its problems,” Isran grumbled, drawing the small groups undivided attention. “We need more recruits. And since you appear to be the most adept at bringing home strays, you’re our new recruiter. And here are the two people you need to recruit first.”

“Heh, good luck with that. If I remember correctly, it will take three pints and a gaggle’a’geese to hire Artan,” a voice called from the edges of the barricade. From what he remembered, the gap between the wooden walls surrounding Castle Dawnguard led to a natural cave system underneath the entire thing, but he couldn’t be certain. He mentally noted to investigate later, and instead turned around to retort with a scathing remark.

He threw up instead.

Xxx

“So, you’re telling me that he knew there was a slaving ring working for Larethius in Skyrim? But he never told any of us?” Argis asked quietly. He and Calder were sat at the table, arms folded in an eerily similar fashion across from one and other, making almost a perfect mirroring image. Both looked ready to murder something with their bare hands, for once agreeing completely on something. It should have been commendable that they finally could be civil enough to each other.

It really wasn’t.

The housecarls were all gathered in the kitchen after pulling various spare chairs up to the table and scattering themselves throughout the room. Jakk had long since claimed one of the few cushioned ones for himself, and apparently had half-begged Scouts to join in the discussion. Probably to defend him in some way in case things got violent. The Argonian always agreed with Jakk, it seemed, and had settled into one of the closest chairs to the door, a hand on the cat’s knee with ale in the other, looking to be the most relaxed one there.
Marcurio sat on his right with his back to the booze cupboard, sweating heavily. Apparently He had always known why the housecarls were really in the city, but was kept on an oath of silence in exchange for an unlimited tab at the Bee. Lydia was still giving him a stony glare for that one, propping herself up against the stone outcropping around the fireplace. Jordis was at her hip, perched on one of the chairs from the balcony. Eirian seemed to be the chirpiest of them all, her lilted speech taking a few octaves higher than usual. Probably out of panic, being the one to pop the lid on this jar of worms.

“That’s the long and short of it,” Jakk replied, taking a quick swig from his tankard. “He said he had it under control and to leave it to him. But there wasn’t a point in worrying you all about it, since it would be nipped in the bud and the victims already returned home before-“

“We got relieved of our regular duties to be molly-coddled by the man we are meant to protect,” Calder sniped, the venom dripping from his voice practically tangible. “How incompetent does he think we are? Each and every one of us swore an oath to defend him to our deaths, and instead of treating us as the warriors we are he treats us the same way he treats his kids. Like we are poor little mites that need protecting. That we haven’t proven ourselves time and time again. It’s insulting.”

Jakk sighed, putting his tankard down, “He isn’t doing it to-“

“Argis and I are both older than him. Lydia is the same age, and Jordis is but two years younger,” the redhead motioned towards each of them in turn; bore settling his molten glare on the cat. “And yet none of us are-“

“What you think that he’s only irrationally protective over you? That his overbearing bullshit is your burden and yours alone?” Jakk laughed; furred brows high and teeth flickering in the sparse sunlight filtering in through the windows. The khajiit rubbed the bridge of his nose with the backs of a few fingers, before catching a hand around his tankard and taking another deep gulp. “Can you not think of any other time he’s acted batshit insane when something he cared about was in trouble?” the khajiit asked, clucking his tongue.

The silence that followed was rather heavy, in retrospect. “Go on. Count them aloud, since you seem to be taking on a child’s persona. Might as well complete the fantasy,” Jakk chided. He ignored the forceful, angry glares sent his way, as well as Scouts quiet sigh.

“Too many to count,” Jordis shrugged, pursing her lips thoughtfully. “He’s always doing crazy things for people.”

“A-a-a-and?” Jakk rolled his hand in a few circles, trying to prompt even more from the group.
“What else?”

It took maybe five minutes of silence before the cat let out an almighty sigh, before slamming his free hand upon Scouts and gripping the Argonians fingers tightly. “Give me strength. Think about it this way, your Holds all wanted you people dead.”

Heads snapped towards the cat, most definitely in shock, but he continued regardless, ignoring the quiet attempt to stop him from Scouts. “Each and every one of you housecarls was either a burden or a liability to your holds. That is why you were sworn to a cat in a province where anything that isn’t human is usually skinned and sold as some kind of carpet or armor. Between little miss crazy who got fired by three previous thanes because she wouldn’t suck their dicks,” Jakk motioned towards Lydia, who pointedly refused to look back at him. “To the half-blind shield-bearer who was basically too goodie goodie, even for Madanach’s men to assassinate under Thonar’s own orders,” the cat then made a general sweeping gesture towards Argis, who looked as if he was about to be sick. “And then there’s the ex-stormcloak that got an acquittal from Tulius, but still enough of a threat that he had to be placed under an Imperial legate’s boot to keep him in line,” Jakk rolled his eyes, and Calder sneered in return before taking a hefty swig of wine. “And then there’s captain crazy herself who murdered her last Thane,” the cat barely even glanced at Jordis.

And to be honest, none of them could even begin to fathom the own personal attacks, let alone touch upon the revelation about Jordis. Jakk didn’t give them time to even start. “Before him, most of you people were only kept alive by your previous accomplishments, because of pure dumb luck, or because he asked for it. Like when Brunwulf said, yeah but it’s a Stormcloak warrior that will most probably try to kill you, he said fuck yeah it’ll be a blast. Or when Firebeard said, well we have one candidate suitable, but she murdered her last charge, he said fuck yeah It’ll be a blast. But now?”

The cat seemed to half-snarl the rest of his words, but not before refilling his tankard with a free hand. “Now? It’s only because he gave you idiots a chance to prove them all wrong that you can even complain about being coddled! It’s only because he’s an idiot that he even gave you idiots’ second chances. From a purely business standpoint, you are all liabilities. It was only after him giving you that chance to prove yourselves to both your Holds and yourselves that you became noteworthy warriors again. Yeah, at first it was probably because he thought that it was temporary and he’d leave eventually. But it’s been what? How many years since he landed here? And it took only a year for him to like you enough,” another flippant wave towards Lydia, still thin-lipped and not looking back, “for him to near enough kill himself as well as a group of highly trained healers to put you back together. He melted a dwarven centurion with just his magic for Argis, and well shit he stopped them straight up executing Calder. You idiots are pariahs by your own fucking people. My stupid brother seems to be the only one who actually gives a shit about your welfare, and you’re just complaining? Taking it as some kind of slight?”

“He doesn’t do it because you suck ass at killing shit, or because he thinks you are kids, or because of some ridiculous fucking protective instinct, because I know you idiots think cats have some kind of need to protect soppy little shits,” Jakk hissed that last part out and took a deep breath, before slamming his tankard to the table and in a half-yell, finished his rant. “He does it all because he loves
you.”

The shocked, rather heavy silence that followed seemed to hang in the air like a low-hanging cloud, suffocating the people gathered in the kitchen. Nobody really realised when Marcurio had run off, but probably when things had begun to get a little too personal. Eirian was nodding, off to the side, agreeing completely. “Riel Riel is right, once again. Even if he did say so in a harsh way,” she pointed out, giving the cat a rather barbed stare. Jak was unfazed. “If you knew how ridiculously better he is now rather than how he was, you would laugh.”

“He was worse?” Lydia laughed, cropped and tight. She ran a hand through her hair and took the seat Marcurio vacated, not even acknowledging Jordis dragging her own chair closer so that the blonde could rest her head on the other’s shoulder. “I can’t imagine him worse.”

“In the first few days on the run from the Isle, he was almost unrecognisable. And I’m his brother,” Jakk chuckled, scratching the back of his head with a claw. “Without Za’ir’s training I doubt he would have had the patience for the stealthy parts. He just wanted to murder everything around us so we could be safe.”

“That’s the way that you live in the Isle. If there is a problem that you can’t fix, or a threat that you cannot avoid or… you neutralise it,” Eirian shrugged, taking a seat on the edge of the counter. “It can’t hurt you when it’s dead.”

“Yes but-“Argis began, but was cut off by an incredibly loud scream from the basement. Surprisingly, it was him and Eirian who were quickest, yet not quick enough. Sofie crashed into him before he even fully reached the stairs, sobbing and throwing both arms around his chest. Eirian thundered down into the basement, followed eagerly by Lydia and Calder, who upon closer inspection found nothing, except Eirian’s bags.

“What is it?” The Bulwark asked, half expecting something ridiculous.

“Well, she found the pickled heads of the Glenmoril coven that I’m taking back to the Companions. So yeah. Maybe some hot peppermint tea and a story before bed tonight,” Eirian sucked in an awkward breath through her teeth.

xxx

It was morning by the time Sofie calmed down and fell asleep, coiled against Argis’ side like the cat
was wont to do. It was unnerving how much they emulated Artan, but there it was. The others were all asleep in their various beds, only Scouts vouching to stay awake with Argis and the little one. The Argonian was sat opposite the Nord, back to the bedroom wall, his feet barely brushing the cabinet’s stumpy legs. Argis supposed he was sat on the floor to give a sense of unity, since Argis was more or less pinned to the rug by the foot of the bed. Even if she was in a new home and safe, Sofie was a very light sleeper unless Artan was home.

It really would have been quite sweet, if Lucia wasn’t the complete opposite. If Artan was home, she tended to be more restless, almost as if expecting something. It wasn’t in a hostile way, but it was still there none the less. She spent near enough every waking moment with the cat when he was home, as did Sofie.

In the first few weeks of Sofie’s addition to the family things were still relatively normal. But with the addition of Lucia? Things became almost like a playground. Between the three of them Breezehome and now Honeyside were like death-traps to the unwary. Especially after Artan taught the oldest how to set up traps and the youngest how to cast destruction runes. It only got worse when Lucia learnt more about bows and Sofie learnt ice-spike, somehow.

“ARTAN!” The Nord nearly jumped out of his skin when the front door slammed open, two short people running in. Scouts was on his feet in an instant, hands up and ready.

“Don’t worry, we’re just looking for Artan,” the shorter of the two shook a flippant hand at the Argonian, before throwing a thick braid over her shoulder. As it seemed, the two were from the orphanage over the river. “He made us a promise, after all.”

Argis looked to Sofie, who was surprisingly still asleep. “Stay where you are,” he called, voice low. It only took a moment—and a very careful couple of hands- to pluck the girl from his lap and settle her on the bed. He hastily threw a few furs over her and returned to the front door, eyeing the two kids. The short one was a girl, with light brown hair tied up in a thick braid down her back. She wore regular boys clothes dyed a patchy light blue, and without her girly voice and face could have almost been mistaken as a boy. If it wasn’t for Lucia’s preference for pants and boys tunics, well he might have made that mistake himself. She looked to be around thirteen, the same age as Sofie.

The other was a lanky, beanpole of a boy that looked at least fourteen or the cusp of fifteen. He was growing up quicker than most, it seemed, since he was squarer in the face than some of the younger ones running around Riften. His hair, well, his mane was some kind of thicket of dirt, twigs and what looked to be some kind of twine tied up in a bun at the top of his head. He seemed a little too big for his clothes, but Argis doubted that Constance could afford to clothe them all properly, and throughout their growth spurts. He knew how hard it was to keep a young lad in clothes that fit.

“Who are you two? And what did he promise you?”
“Sorry for barging in. I guess he hasn’t told you about us yet. I’m Runa,” The girl rubbed absently at her braid, obviously embarrassed. She seemed to get past it, however, and motioned towards the walking birds-nest of a boy next to her. “This is Hroar-““Like the lion-““-yes like the lion,” she shoved at the boy as he tried to interrupt her, frowning frightfully at him.

Argis looked from one to the other, brow raised.

Hroar answered first, chipper as fuck, “He’s gonna train us to be assassins!”

Xxx

4E, 203 Late Midyear

When Artan got home, well, he almost called the Vigilants to clear his house out of Daedric influence. The two vampires were behind him, and they should have been the threat. But in front of him in the master bedroom of Honeyside was a group of no less than ten children, sat in a circle with what looked to be half a deer sitting amongst vegetables and other plates of food in the centre of their little group. What was more, they even turned to him in a synchronised swivel, before the screeching started. And well, if seeing Argis standing over him with a sunshine grin wasn’t worth being mobbed to the ground by a swarm of children, then well. It was worth it, so there.

And then it came out.

Runa managed to push a few of the others off his chest, and wiggled up until she was staring down at him from sitting on his gut –he told himself that he was a goddamned man and she wasn’t as heavy as she clearly was- and shrieked loud enough to make his ears pop. “Assassin initiates here and ready for duty!”

He managed to laugh, even though he could feel one of the other kids had already taken his mace as well as some coin. Another had taken his lunch, but Lucia was the smartest. She was hefting one of the Dawnguard’s crossbows, eyeing down the length.

“Well, we don’t accept just anyone, kid,” the cat replied, pushing her back so he could sit up. Hroar was knelt at his other side, eyeing him intently. “Whatever we have to do,” the lad nodded, trying to puff out his chest a little more. His shaking hands, clenched around his own knees were a giveaway, though.
“Okay. A few tests then, just to make sure,” Artan sighed, making a general wave of his hand to Eirian and Lydia at the door.

“You’re really thinking of inducting kids? You must be desperate,” Serana clucked from a rather safe distance. She had perched on the table that Artan had set up on the balcony, companion at her side.

“Shush you,” Artan called back, before fighting his way to his feet with a rather determined Samuel hanging off his back like a cape. “Get inside. It’d be a shame for such a delicate petal to get burnt out in the sunshine, no?”

Serana laughed back, before taking the other vampire by the hand and heading inside, tugging her cloak tighter around herself as she went. She was oblivious to the sharp look Artan sent the Bulwark, but the Nord nodded in understanding and called the rest of the kids inside too under the understanding that Jordis had made cake.

“Right, follow me. Lucia, you too. You’re gonna give us a hand.”

The four of them, including Argis who sat on the steps, descended into the basement and pushed aside most of the clutter in the main room to make some space. It wasn’t until Artan threw two wooden swords to both Hroar and Runa did Argis speak up. “Wait, you’re seriously training kids to be assassins?”

“They asked. And its better that they have some kind of formal training, even if they don’t have the aptitude for the job. They can learn to defend themselves. Now, Lucia, what are they good at?” Artan asked, burying his head into one of the chests underneath the stairs for more weapons.

“You’ve been using your kids to scope out the joint for initiates?” Lydia snarled from a higher step, head poking out through the banisters. “What the hell-“

“Of course not. Lucia offered,” Artan sniped back, flicking a flippant hand over his shoulder.

The two housecarls glanced at the girl, who shrugged noncommittally. “They wanted to learn how to fight, and I taught them a little. I figured that they were pretty good, and it would be better that they know enough to you know, not die when they go out in the world. Was I wrong?” The blonde asked, turning a little from her seat on the lowest step to look from Argis to Lydia in turn. “I mean, haven’t you been doing that for us?”
The two looked to each other before Lydia huffed and walked back upstairs, face like thunder.

Argis instead, just puffed out a laugh, shaking his head. “And here I thought you were being a bad influence on him,” a hand ruffled the kids hair, before he pushed himself to his feet. “And don’t forget, the housecarls have to report progress tonight.”

Artan just called back, “Yeah I wont. But that reminds me, I have a newbie to-“

The scream was loud enough to shake dust from the rafters. But it was the following crashes, the incredibly loud smashing of crockery and the resulting yelling that made both Bulwark and cat charge up the stairs, just to go from the quiet play-fighting downstairs to the unrecognisable kitchen. Lydia was stood on the bed, the battleaxe from the wall-plaque above in her hands. Her skin was half burnt away, hair still lightly smoking. Jordis was buried in the remains of the bookshelf, out cold. Calder wasn’t home, so it just left Scouts, who was stood beside Lydia on the floor -between the backdoor where the children were filtering out, some, crying and others sending glares over their shoulders- and Serana.

The vampire was stood in the entryway between the kitchen and the bedroom, both hands covered in what looked to be some kind of flame spell, with the vampire she brought with them at her back, a fist clutched in the black-haired woman’s cloak and growling out half-commands, half-pleas.

“Lydia please-“The vampire called, trying to push past Serana, who full-out snarled at her in return. Lydia’s grip on the axe tightened even more.

Artis took another step back down the stairs, blocking Lucia’s access to the rest of the house. Artan wasn’t dissuaded as well as her, however. He was up and over in an instant, standing easily between Serana and Lydia, both like dogs and glaring through him as if he wasn’t even there. “Lydia put the axe down, and Serana please put the fire out-“

“So first you lie to us about why we are here and then you bring back her? What the hell are you thinking?” Lydia half-sobbed, half screamed.

Artan raised both hands in an attempt to appease the Nord, but she didn’t even lower the battleaxe. “Lydia, she isn’t a revenant. She’s a vampire,” he started, but the woman had already pushed past Serana and had stood beside him, tugging her cowl back until long red hair spilled out.
“I have a lot to explain, I know. But please, Lydia, put the axe down so we can talk,” the woman tried, but Lydia cut her off with an almost animal screech.

“You think I’m angry that she might be a revenant?” Lydia growled, and shook her head. In a show of pure strength—or maybe rage—she held out the battleaxe in one hand, pointing it at the woman’s chest. “You were alive. All this time. And you never even told us you were okay!”

“I’ve been in castle Volkihar for the last few years. I couldn’t just—”

“I’m home-e-e-e-e!” Sofie called, kicking the front door open and sweeping in, a ratty lump shuffling along behind her. One of the girl’s hands was burdened with a basket, while the other was clutching one of the dirty hands sticking out of the huge swathe of hair and fur making up her new acquaintance. The thing looked as if it could have been human, once.

It was short, maybe up to where Artan’s shoulders would be, and was an ugly, mottled green-grey colour like the draugr, but thankfully without the awful smell. If it had a face, Argis had no idea; a thick, tangled black mane was covering its entire head and face, the lumpy, mangled mess finishing near enough at the creature’s knees and full of foliage, dropping small rocks and other things as it moved around. It wasn’t until it let out a god-awful snarl and shook a loose branch from one of its bare feet that broke Sofie from her shock at the half-fight in the living room.

She took one look around, before asking the million dollar question, “What’s happened now?”

xxx

It was close to midnight by the time the yelling, awful glares and spiteful little snipes were out of the way. Lydia, Calder, Artan, Jakk and the vampires were downstairs, sitting around the same table that people had gotten drunk and betted away their pants the previous night. It was an awkward little twist, considering how quickly things turned from happy, jumbled little family to drawing out the lines of no-man’s-land in the dirt. From what he could gather, Iona was meant to be dead. Eirian had explained it the best she could, considering Serana was a special case and Iona had little to no idea about the turning process of a vampire. She was still an initiate, by the Volkihar’s standards.

The elf was at his side, stood at the edge of the fireplace in the kitchen, peppermint tea held aloft. At one point in time, she had explained how strange it was that she still found things about Nord’s surprising. Like his similar preference for peppermint tea. In the Isle, everything that wasn’t an elf was a savage creature, too lowbrow to do much more than grunt, hunt and procreate. Even if downstairs the conversation was still heavy, he would rather hear her talk about something else, even for just a brief respite. He had heard enough about ‘atrophied corpses’ and ‘how dead is too dead to turn,’ for one night.
“Why… you grew up in a Thalmor Dominated part of the world. Why aren’t you…?”

“Like them?” Eri asked gently.

Argis nodded.

“Well, I guess it started when I started reading into the Ehlnofey. The library at the estate didn’t have many books that weren’t totally biased towards the predecessors of Mer, so I ended up asking a few of the merchants I knew who could get me more warts-and-all material on the matter. In the end, I had almost every book on the subject as well as the current Nine Divines, the Daedra and Aedra, as well as the original creators of our most worshiped deities. In the end, I came to a startling conclusion,” Eirian sighed, rubbing a hand through her braids. “That the Dominion was wrong, not far wrong, but wrong enough. They believe that we are entitled to divinity, whereas men believe we must strive for it. When Talos became elevated to Divine status, the Dominion was up in arms. Not because they didn’t believe that he was undeserving, but because a man achieved what they had been told they were destined for.”

“They… they were jealous…?”

“I believe that, yes. After all my reading, I eventually started searching other interpretations of the Gods like Khajiit beliefs, Nord beliefs, and even so far as checking into Ayleid beliefs into divinity. The Dunmer is where I found my answer. They do not see Lorkhan as an evil thief, stealing away their immortality in the night. They see him as a challenge. That they will become immortal on their own merits rather than be gifted immortality.”

“It is strange, hearing you talk about it like that. I was brought up to think that you elves saw the world in one way, and that was that,” Argis sighed, rubbing at the ridges of his mouth scar with a thumb. “Rigid, one answer is the answer kind of world. I mean shit, Artan tried to explain your eating habits the other week. It sounds…”

“Excessive? Insane? I know,” Eirian chuckled, running a few fingers through what little hair that Sofie hadn’t braided into a thick braid around her skull. “Larethius, because of Aldmeri customs, would usually eat before a banquet so that he only had to eat a roll during the party. It meant that the other guests would usually be starving by the end of the night, since etiquette dictated that nobody could eat more than the most important of those seated at the table. He got a kick out of seeing the guests uncomfortable, especially since he was renowned for brutally enforcing the customs and culture of the Isle. A few times, he even had the house slaves lay out the wrong cutlery just to see the other elven guests uncomfortable.”
“Well…”

“Insane right? But that is the world some of us have grown up in. It wasn’t the idea of someone being forced into servitude that upset us; it was the idea of looking like a savage unable to extend the right courtesies to a host.” The elf shook her head. “It was only when I started actually looking objectively at what was going on, thinking about what it would look like to our ancestors, to outsiders, to something more than mortal, that I saw what it really was. Tavan had one of the kitchen slaves’ hair and nails torn out, and heel-skin cut for dropping the sweetmeats meant for a visiting Thalmor diplomat. He knew that one of the guards walked into the girl, making her drop it.”

“And that was normal?”

“That was mild. It wasn’t until Talia showed up that things changed within the Outer Guard. Most of them were made up of mercenaries that worked for private patrons, and had moved on to become sanctioned warriors for the state. So, they had fought against real Nords, real Redguards, and real bog warriors from the Marshes. When the new ones came in to train, seeing Talia as a living practice dummy was a little much for them. She became an invaluable asset to the training of new recruits. A valuable slave, one that was kept like a favoured dog rather than an actual slave. The other humans that Larethius kept mostly worked in the house as cleaners and kitchen staff, and had quarters in one of the outer buildings near to the stables. The khajiit and Argonian workers were more field workers and builders than anything, but had some of the worst living spaces. Purges were common, in a way to keep the numbers down and to remind the slaves who they belonged to. In some ways, they envied her. It kept her isolated from people she could have found some form of comfort from. It’s why later in the year, Artan was singled out to work as a personal assassin. He tended to be kinder to her than the others. Larethius saw it as a wild animal helping another,” Eirian shrugged, eyes tight.

“He saw it as taming a beast to do his bidding. As you know, it backfired completely. You can’t own a person. But even so, I still don’t have the slightest idea why Artan didn’t kill me when he had the chance,” she took another sip of tea.

“Because you was guard captain?” The Bulwark prodded, setting his own cup down.

“Yes, as well as being a Larethius. If anything, up until she showed up and made it abundantly clear to myself and Jaden that what we were condoning was wrong, I was just like Tavan,” Eirian shoved away from the masonry and rounded on Argis, eyes downcast. “If anything, I was worse. I have done many, many terrible things in my life. It is why I am spending my time now helping where before I would have… I still don’t know why he didn’t kill me when he became free. Jakk at least, I understand. He would rather forget everything and start anew. Artan has always been steeped in the past, always worried, always worrying about it catching up. Always seeing the danger around him. It’s why I suppose he spends his own time taking down usurping kings and world-ending terrors.
Why he’s now committed himself into helping the people as thane. He knows what its like to be hungry, to be scared, and to have an unfeeling monster as a master,” she sat down, eventually, plucking at the edges of the braid with an idle hand. Argis didn’t know what to say to her. In Markarth, you were free. Having someone decide what you wear, what you eat, where you sleep, if you sleep, if you eat…

When he thought about it, it made him hate lots of things. The dominion, the empire, and even at some times, the common man. Because when he looked hard enough, he could see how some of the things that happened could be condoned. Khajiit and Argonians were considered little more than beasts, even in free lands like Skyrim. Artan probably thought he didn’t notice the sneers, the looks, the way that some merchants talked over Artan to discuss trade with him. The amount of times he had seen Lydia or Calder or Jordis pull them up for it, in varying degrees. But it didn’t change the fact that most weren’t allowed in cities, even ones like Riften.

Considering the fact that it was because of old prejudice, old ideas like most being thieves or assassins, well. Most cities were full of both.

Using such excuses, ones that he himself had used, brought a sense of shame down on him. But then, knowing your mistakes is half the battle. A thumb rubbed idly against the skin around his blind eye. Things were better, for sure, since Artan had become thane. Many holds were allowing the nomadic khajiit into cities to barter or to visiting inns, but it was a new thing. Too new to guess upon now, anyway.

The matted ball of hair that had walked in with Sofie earlier had turned out to be the notorious Talia. Cleaned, mostly by Eirian and Artan with lots of scrubbing and the cat’s awful homemade ‘healing soap,’ the girl was quick and quiet in her appearance in the doorway. When the shouting had quieted enough for Artan to welcome the girl inside and shuffle the vampires and hissing Lydia downstairs, it was quickly established that nobody was to touch her. In a quiet aside, when the khajiit was making some kind of sea-food chowder for dinner and Argis was chopping up some of the slimy, creepy things Artan said tasted great, well. The Khajiit had simply been surprised that Talia was even letting the girls get so close to her.

To see Sofie dragging the girl in by the hand, and not covered in scratch marks or crying from a punch was telling.

It was strange though, just looking at her. She was covered in scars, some old, some barely pink, and some were just weeping little cuts. But it was her hands that were the most telling, if he was honest. They were calloused, probably as much as his own were, by wielding some kind of weapon. By the looks of them, she was at least proficient in a few different weapons, and definitely either a battleaxe or a war hammer. It wasn’t that which made him more than a little unsettled around her, even knowing she was probably just as able to kill him as Jakk, Eirian or even Artan could. Her knuckles were covered in a thick, almost leathery skin, as were her elbows, knees, shins and feet.
It spoke well enough of hand to hand combat, but the idea that she hit something hard enough and often enough for her to grow a natural barrier to it like that was more than a little… creepy he would have to say. Eirian was a magic-only fighter, and he had never seen her even touch a blade unless it was to spread berry jam. Jakk preferred daggers or swords, and Artan was more or less good with war hammers and swords. The Khajiit had show a good proficiency with a bow, but preferred ranged magic attacks.

Out of all of them, however, he had never really sensed how dangerous they were unless they were in a fight. Day to day, they seemed more or less like regular citizens with slightly better clothes (even if Artan dressed like a blind horse in a wine cellar.)

She was the only one he was slightly on edge about sleeping under the same roof with; and she had barely said a word.

The idea that a girl younger than his –lover? Thane? - Well, than Artan was able to put him on edge so much made his teeth itch.

“Artan has always been sentimental in that way,” Talia quipped, nose wrinkling at the unfamiliar name. “I still do not understand why he changed his name. You would think he would be shouting from the rooftops for the pisskin to hear and come running, not hiding away as a new man.”

Eirian sighed, running a hand over her eyes and tugging the braid from its pins. She flattened it out, and undid the leather ties to let her hair out fully, before replying wearily. “Not everyone is as nuts as you, remember? Sometimes, it’s better to wait for your enemy to make a mistake than jump in with your swords out.”

“He has a good base here, as well as loyal warriors under his banner. As do you, and S’eta. And I have gathered enough of the wandering fighters to aid us. We could rid the world of him-“

“And possibly start another Great War. Skyrim is nowhere near ready for another fight with the dominion. Larethius isn’t just a random slave-owner or little man in the Dominion. He’s a higher ranked politician, with many allies and many men under him. We can’t just roll in and take it apart. If we could, we would have planned for it. The best we can hope for is if he comes to us, and even then it would be suicide,” the elf snarled, shaking her head. “We can’t bring the Companions or the Holds into this. And I doubt the thieves’ guild would agree to help unless we want to give them most of his estate. Even that much money might not be enough for them; Mercer would most probably see Larethius as a possible patron, the same with Maven. The only factions we could depend on would be your men and the assassins, who are only bound to Sithis and the Night Mother. Artan might be the Listener, and now Guild master, but he is not their Master. They might agree to help as a kind of friendly gesture, since Artan is like family to them, but he can’t ask them to fight an enemy like Larethius. Not so soon after the entire guild got purged by Commander Maro. It would literally be
just us and whoever else we have allied with over the years. Artan wouldn’t include the housecarls in-“

“Why not?” Argis asked, eye flickering to Eirian. “We’ve been sworn to him, so if he goes into a fight, we are going too.”

Eirian stumbled for a moment, looking uncomfortable, before she shrugged away her hesitation and simply replied, “Yes, but that is under the laws of a Hold. Fighting Larethius wouldn’t be lawful, technically. Since slavery in the Isle is legal, he is technically property that Jaden and I stole from him. And especially after the concordat, the Holds would be bound to return that property to the Dominion. Their hands would be tied. If the housecarls stood up against the law that way, it could be considered an act of war by the Dominion, especially since Skyrim is still without a High King. The Emperor is also dead, and without a successor. It would result in a landslide, and Skyrim would most likely end up like the other slave states. Especially since it is still a part of the Empire, and Hammerfell would surely not attempt to aid us in keeping the Holds. You see?”

“Close but no sausage, butcher. You lot aren’t going into a fight without us, stupid law or no,” Argis grumbled back, rubbing at his nose with a fist. “And besides, they can only kick up a stink about it if word gets out, right? So all we need to do is keep it out of earshot of our holds and kill off every enemy we find.”

“Mara’s Grace I came up here to get away from all the deep feelings, and here you guys are discussing the world falling apart,” Artan clucked, stepping up into the main floor.

“I’m guessing since you still have your ear-fluff Lydia has calmed down?” Argis huffed, folding his arms. The khajiit let out a low groan, rubbing at his eyes with the heels of his palms.

“She is placated, or at least less murderous. I kept the slave-ring quiet because I need to fix this ridiculous vampire thing first. With that out of the way, I can crush whoever is still out there hunting. I already have the assassins working double shifts to try and keep the ringleaders under pressure, but by the looks of it another springs up to lead more hunters around the wilderness. At the moment, they are just attacking random bandit camps, trying to establish a hold in the wilds. Naturally, they are finding the Reach the hardest to get a base in,” the khajiit chuckled, continuing, “Hopefully after I help get these specialized weirdos for the Dawnguard, they’ll try and overrun the Volkihar’s stronghold and we’ll have that under wraps. From what my Intel says, the slaver rings have had too much pressure put on them to send anyone back to the Isle or to their dens to be sold. Apparently the Companions have been weeding out the ones near to the Hold, and between the vampires and the Dawnguard, nobody wants to come anywhere close to the Rift. The Legion is keeping most of the towns in-between safe enough, it’s just the small farms and roads that are dangerous right now. But still, it doesn’t bode well if Larethius is sending in groups like this.”
“We don’t know it is him, even if… even if it does have his hallmarks,” Eirian spoke, quiet yet still audible. The silence that followed was awkward, in the sense that Argis could feel all three of them inwardly cringing. It took a moment, but he had to ask.

“Hallmarks? What? Like his signature?”

Talia was the one to answer, in her hard, wild accent. “Trophies, mostly. He works in slaves as well as uncommon ingredients and decoration. Human skin for necromancy and Atronach building, Argonian tails for headaches, Dunmer blood for fire resistance…” she broke off, before her nose twisted again, brow crushing down above her eyes. “Khajiit fur, to keep the floorboards warm in the winter.”

“They… but aren’t they supposed to capture people?” Argis asked. He had to. He didn’t know why, but it was something he had to know.

“They’ve been hitting family groups out on pilgrimages to the different shrines. The bodies have been found along roads, in lakes and such by nearby militia. Always missing the things that sell on the market for a lot of coin. They catch the children. Easier to break, make into a good slave. The adults are worth more as parts rather than another mouth to feed. Better food rationing that way,” Eirian replied, pouring a hefty amount of wine into a new tankard.

“Have your people found the children yet?”

“Yes,” Artan was the one to reply to the Bulwark this time. “It’s why the orphanage is fuller lately. It’s also why some of the older ones are looking for jobs, or trying to learn warfare. They hear the stories from the new ones, and promise to keep them safe from the ‘bad men.’ Hroar and Runa want to be assassins so they can do what I did to Grelod for the new ones, you know?” The khajiit sighed, rubbing at the short fur between his ears. “It’s why I took them on, mostly. I can teach them that sometimes you kill, and other times it’s better to try and find another path. Either way, I’ve been paying them for Intel that my scouts can’t get. Like numbers, what the slavers look like, stuff like that.”

“You mean…” Argis couldn’t continue.

“Some of the kids escaped the attacks, and ran to the nearest shelter. The Legion has been sending them along with patrols to here, so they can find families,” Artan finished. “It’s how we found out so early. The main cities have only been hearing rumours so far, but enough is going on that precautions are being taken. It’s the main reason why the nomads are allowed into the cities now.”
“Shit.”

xxx

The perfect image to show what parenthood was like appeared at the noonday bell in the marketplace. The mighty Dragonborn stood, hung-over and bleary-eyed beside a chipper Marise, holding the leashes of two huge mudcrabs while his daughters browsed the stalls. Modesi straight out laughed at him when he started leaning against the Argonian’s stall, begging for mercy. Thankfully, Modesi had a few pastries to spare the khajiit, who nearly cried at the sight.

Lucia was checking out the armor stall when he got enough of a mind back to think about why he was in such a predicament. There were eleven people living in his house. A tiny house meant for five people, at most. Jakk and Scouts had set up a tab at the Bee so they were just daytime visitors, thankfully. Artan had banned them from the house since they could not be trusted.

He had Lucia and Sofie now.

And to be honest, there was enough of a problem with his brother and the Jarl that he didn’t need to start more at home, too. After the Legionnaires had found the other brother and his lover in the woods rutting, again, and reported it as an ‘awkward encounter, but many laughs to be had,’ he got three letters from different people in the Jarl’s court. Three. As well as one from Tulius, encouraging him to rein in his brother, since it was unbecoming of a legate to have such a raunchy sibling, apparently. Considering the fact that it broke three laws, in a way he agreed. On the other hand, whatever the two of them did with each other was nobodies business but theirs.

It was a headache that he didn’t even want to go near.

Eirian had similarly taken up a home in the Bee, far away from the couple. No matter how apologetic and embarrassed Scouts got, it never was quite enough. There was only so much someone could apologise for-

No. He didn’t even want to think about what they got up to. There were many, many awful reasons why he went through so many chairs, rugs and other, unassuming items. He even had to get a new fishing boat after he had found Jakk’s smallclothes under one of the seats, since he didn’t know if his brother had cleaned anything and he didn’t want to ask.
He shook his head, clearing the thoughts.

He had two vampires to consider, as well as everything else. He was in a vampire-hunting guild now, with two ‘pure-race’ vampires in his goddamn basement. They slept in the spare room where the hidden closet of doom was, during the day. And at night, they helped Jakk run the betting shop he had somehow set up in the basement. How the fuck the little shit got that past Maven was beyond him, but then again, it was his ties to Maven that kept him out of jail for public indecency. It was funny how that Maven had taken an angry grandmotherly role to one brother, and mortal enemy to the other.

Still. The girls were fine enough in their room. Jordis went to bed with them most nights, sleeping on their floor. Other nights, she would join in the betting with Lydia and Calder, and eventually both women would retire to sleep on the floor together. Calder, well Artan still wasn’t sure where he slept. He was always awake, whenever Artan saw him. Nobody else seemed to want to answer him when he asked, so he guessed the Nord was lodging at the Bee.

This meant that considering everything, Talia ended up sleeping by the fireplace that night.

With himself and Argis a few feet away in the main bed. Now, usually he wasn’t such a sourpuss. There was a point where Talia was one of his best friends, and they had spent enough time together that they were like siblings. It was the same with Eirian, except the Nord was a younger sister and the Altmer was an elder sister. Jaden would probably be the grumpy uncle, and well S’eta was family.

Considering that, as well as the fact that he was one of three people permitted to even pat her on the back without losing fingers or hands or even genitalia was amazing. It also didn’t answer to the flashing, huge, lit-up question of why he wanted to throttle her.

If he was honest with himself, he knew that it was because with her arrival and subsequent sleeping arrangements, Argis had gone back to sleeping with a shirt on. Now it sounded petty and awful, and he felt both things in spades. But it was still there. It was almost the same irritation he felt towards the girls or the housecarls when they woke him up in the morning, and laughed at what back-brushed fur looked like on him.

There were few secrets he kept from Argis, but his best kept ones were how nice he looked in an apron, how he liked the way the Nord would press a thumb into the side of his throat when he scratched at his scalp, and the wrecked laugh he had when they beat the shit out of something. If he looked at these things in a list format, he would agree that these things were weird enough. But saying these things compared to just thinking about them, well that was another animal entirely.
Because if he said those things, well he’d have to admit all the other things that he hadn’t let himself look at too closely. Like what would Argis think about how even though a Khajiit’s jaw worked differently, Artan was pretty damn good at kissing a human? Or how that sometimes, when that wrecked little laugh after a battle filtered out, that well sometimes the adrenaline kicked high enough that he wanted better, louder wrecked sounds to come out?

And when he really thought about it, he understood why he was being such a whiney little pimple about Jakk getting laid here there and everywhere.

Even just a wank was in short supply nowadays, especially since there was no privacy at all in their lives.

And now, of all things, the shirt goes back on.

It’s bad enough just being around Modesi, since he can smell the remnants of Helga’s perfume on the Argonian’s fine clothes. And if that wasn’t bad enough, sometimes he can even smell someone else on Calder. It’s always faint when he does notice it, covered up neatly by sword polish or by some other musk, but its there. And since none of the others know about it, he can’t really out the poor bastard. Especially since they have taken the whole, ‘we are not talking about the festival’ stance. Things were still awkward, even if they both knew that things were mostly settled. The Khajiit knew he could depend on Calder for loyalty, and the Nord knew he could depend on Artan for help when he needed it.

The baseline was, that he was a pent up, angry responsible-personage now. And even if sneaking off somewhere sounded lovely, well. He had responsibilities. And those responsibilities meant that he was a shattered, shadow of a man at night. Definitely not able to- Mr. Sweetroll tugged at his leash with a claw, almost in sympathy. Artan was probably just still drunk.

xxx

Pa left the next day, angry and twitchy. The new vampire left with him, citing that she needed to help. Since Iona had returned, though, things were a little odd in the house. Lydia had more or less settled into the same stance as a prickly pear, and Calder was no better. Out of all of them Argis and Jordis were the most welcoming to her. The vampire took over her old duties as housecarl, as well as reporting to Maven that she was still alive. The official story was that she had been captured by enemies of her thane, and he had recently found and rescued her. Maven was unconvinced, but the woman reinstated Iona as a possible candidate for housecarl duty. Until then, she could live at Honeyside, since Artan wasn’t technically Thane of the Rift anymore but still owned the house.
It wasn’t what she was really all that interested in. Sofie was more interested in something else, being honest.

“You hit him in the liver, and he’ll lose his breath, get dizzy and it’ll fuck him up hard. Hit him in the breastbone and he’ll be winded hard, but it’s hard to hit so only go for it if you know you’ll land a hit. Don’t aim for the face unless you know you’ll get him in the temple. If you hit him in the face wrong, you’ll break your hand on something, you understand?” Argis nodded, trying to instil the lesson in Hroar. The lad nodded back, hair bobbing with the motion.

“Good. And remember, if you want the fucker out; never let other people see you hit first, right? You make sure he goes for you, and you dodge. You get the second, third, and fourth hit in. And then when the guards come over, make the first excuse,” the Bulwark carried on, nodding as if to himself this time.

And that’s how things went, for a time.

Sofie learnt better spells from Eirian, as well as self-defence from the housecarls. Lucia was mostly out hunting, learning from Scouts and Jordis how to shoot a bow like a master, and the crabs grew up to be even bigger. It wasn’t until three months later that pa came back, looking like he had been dragged through a bush backwards and into a ravine.

At first, it looked like the housecarls were going to chew him out for not checking in for so long and with so many enemies in the field, but the khajiit had just simply thrown both arms around the nearest person – Scouts, to his surprise- and drew them into a hug. Twenty minutes later, and then with three angry vampires in the house, things settled down. “There is a guy I learnt most of my conjuration spells from in Morthal. He’s been known to study vampires, and is one of the most respected in the field all things considered. He can cure it, but I’ll have to collect some shit before I go. It’s just another fucking bump in the road,” the khajiit growled, thumping his head to the table.

“Can’t you just drop the scrolls off and return after you’ve been cured? It would give this moth priest time to study the scrolls,” Jordis supplied, but Eirian was quick to shake her head.

“The Elder scrolls rot the eyes of anyone who looks at them. It will be a quick glance at best, and since we don’t know how much damage the scrolls will do to him, it is unwise to leave the priest alone with them for too long. Just the one alone is dangerous, let alone three. And besides, if you rock up to the Dawnguard fortress as a vampire they’ll kill you. And even if they don’t, well they won’t want a vampire among their ranks. It’s best to get the cure first and then finish the mission,”
the elf sighed, quiet.

“It’s just so much work, and if I’m honest I’d rather just attack the Volkihar now and be done with it. Isran says that this magic bow will help us do that, but I just see it as another round-about way of scratching his ass when it’s his knee that’s itchy,” Artan griped back, running one hand down a wine bottle and the other across Sofie’s hair, the girl sat against his knees. His head thumped back against the table when Eri just grunted at him.

“It was awful though. I couldn’t even hold Dawnbreaker, or cast any fire spells. I couldn’t even summon Penelope or Valencia because they hurt to be around,” Artan grimaced, running an extended claw against an elongated fang. “The only thing that I like is that I can summon gargoyles now. And my telekinesis spell is super powered. Other than that, I had three Vigilants attack me on the way back, and I had to wear a hood the entire time. There was a lot of snow and awful rivers, too…”

Lydia scoffed from the fireplace, turning away from the cooking pot to flick hot water from her spoon at him. “What? Did you have to go slogging through rivers all alone?”

Argis popped his head in from the bedroom, half-folded laundry in his hands. “What do you mean? He can’t swim, remember?”

The awful, pained groan from the cat was drowned out by the bellows of laughter that rolled through the house. Argis looked from the tearful giggles of Jordis to the choking of Lydia, muffling her laughter in her sleeves. Even Calder had to cover his face with his hands, incredulous laughter ringing out.

“He managed to get you to carry him then? Holy shit,” Jordis managed, wiping her eyes. “I can’t believe you fell for that!”

And for the rest of the evening, the cat didn’t meet his eyes.

xxx

Cool powers aside, being a vampire was worse than being a werewolf. When it came down to it, it was so much worse. Sleeping beside Argis, or at least trying to considering the whole night owl thing, was awful. Being able to feel his pulse without even touching the Nord was awful, because it just made him feel hungry. Not even in a good way; just a bone-weary hunger. Being around the
girls was just as awful. It was why in the end, he left without saying goodbye. Serana or Iona would explain.

Either that or they would guess.

Even so, out of the two ways to get into the Soul Cairn and get the Elder Scroll, he picked the better choice. After the debacle with Azura’s star he knew he wanted nothing to do with someone trapping a piece of him away, and well. He knew how to cure Vampirism, so it made sense. It was easier to get a cure for that than deal with broken soul pieces.

He told himself all of this, but really, he was hiding again.

He really didn’t want to deal with Iona and Lydia.
When your past returns from its holiday with its bags and says it's back to fuck you some more

The only time anyone had realised Artan had left the house was when he came crashing back in during the middle of the night. And when two vampires and a mob of half-asleep housecarls intercepted the three assassins loitering in the kitchen, somehow things didn’t escalate past idle threats and inane mumbling. How in the world Argis had gone from “murder all the murderers” to “oh its just assassins” in a few years was something he didn’t want to inspect too closely.

It was almost comical how that Eirian was the only one of Artan’s old group to actually roll out of bed and join the congregation in the kitchen. The creepy way that she explained how herself and the others had tabs on the house, and probably didn’t feel the need to get up…. Well it was too early for delving too deeply into things anyway.

Apparently fate was a cruel bitch, because when Artan motioned for them all to sit down somewhere and ushered the taller of the two cloaked assassins at his heel into a seat at the table, well. It was a general groan that filled the room as everyone settled in for a long damn briefing. It went without saying that Lydia stood rather icily beside the fireplace, stoking it back into a hearty roar. Another time it would have been a background action, something not worthy of taking note of. But the flinch of the three vampires in the room and the shuffle in the opposite direction the three of them took was telling enough.

Artan sighed, before tugging his cloak aside and throwing it over one of the hooks beside the door. “Report, Bard.”

“There are agents sniffing around Proudspire as well as Vlindrell hall. As it turns out they can’t get anywhere near Hjerim, but that’s more because of the fact most of Talia’s men are stationed around the city, as well as it being the seat of power for the Stormcloaks for many years. There’s quite a few cats asking about you and your brother, but nobody’s figured it out yet, thankfully. Most Jarls don’t
even know you have a brother, as it turns out. It looks like that Larethius bloke has gotten his hands on quite a few more Khajiit slaves and is using them to infiltrate the various Holds, since you know how the nomads have a huge thing against the elves yeah? So the locals figure that they’re pretty safe, especially with you as a Thane. They come and go as they please, and some of the dopier citizens tend to praise your ass to every Divine in existence,” Bard shrugged and huffed into his beard. It was unsure whether or not he found it actually funny or more irritating, but the sentiment was there.

“Some of the enemy agents are getting too close though, and its getting harder to pin them down, especially since Igrod and a few of the others have passed laws citing khajiit as full citizens now. Not mean to sound nasty, Listener, but its making it hard to sift through the spies and the regular folk. Whoever trained them isn’t some hack. If it wasn’t for you and your elf, our lot wouldn’t even have caught half as many. They’re using a mash of your techniques as well as some other, weird-ass ones I haven’t ever seen in Skyrim,” Bard sighed, rubbing at his face. He had taken his hood down, but he didn’t even seem half done.

He looked like a regular man that might have been seen in a tavern. Muddy brown hair, thick beard, a few scars. He had nothing that would make him stand out in a crowd. In a way, it was even more unsettling than the old Brotherhood members. They always stood out enough to be unsettling. He was just an ordinary guy.

“As for the slaving rings, they’re hitting the towns hard. Especially the snowy places. We figure they have a few mages in their ranks since realistically it would be a clusterfuck to take people as slaves in a fucking tundra, since you know most of them will fucking die. We also figure they’re keeping to the rivers and fishing their food, or maybe even stealing from the various food-caravans moving between the villages and the cities. Funnily enough they couldn’t seem to catch the cats, and even if they did there’s a huge khajiit that curb stomps the shit out of whatever comes at them. Funny as hell, on Talos’ knickers mate. If we hadn’t been keeping tabs on each of the cat groups we probably wouldn’t have caught up with any group of slavers to be honest,” he continued, before pouring a hearty cup of ale for himself and taking a swig. He wiped at his beard for a moment before he carried on, handing the tankard to the Initiate at his side.

“Either way, they’re fucking thorough, and it’s not just one group like we figured at the beginning. Nobody left alive to tell the tale, most of the time, or they’re shipped off sharpish. It’s literally only the caravans we’ve been getting solid information from. On the one hand, the cats are pretty fucking clever keeping their distance from this lot; they’ve already reported this lot ran into some Forsworn and ran them through the ringer hard. But yeah; one of the teams we have around Dawnstar has cited they’ve seen a few Aldmeri ships, straight from the Isle. All private, ya know? All we could get on the ones who attacked the cats was they were mostly Bosmer with a few Altmer thrown in. A few humans, not enough to guess what they are though. Could be Breton, but definitely not Nord. Covered in animal skins, most of them, but typically well made armour, suggesting they have a wealthy asshole shitting in their purses. Makes us think that the groups working in Skyrim at the moment are all under the same banner, considering how organised it all is.”
“But last Morndas, we caught that big guy you had one of the ankle biters watching, Hrongar, making a move into the wilds,” the assassin frowned, rubbing at his beard again. He didn’t even flinch at Lydia, who had turned on him like a wild dog. Apparently he had enough of a trust in Artan’s hand on her arm to not feel too worried. His voice did sound a little tighter, however.

“We had him pegged for coming here with big-kitty-Kharjo and the nomads, but the thick shit got caught up in a raid one of the other teams had been tracking and it was a fucking mess. He thought our lot were a part of their lot and attacked them, didn’t even listen to Kharjo telling him to fuck off. We lost a few, but we nailed them. Dunno whether they’ll end up like the rest though. Our nippers aren’t used to seeing so many skinned cats and lizards, I’ll tell you. makes ‘em green whenever we hit a tavern and one of the locals makes a skinning comment. Bazzy almost punched a guy out. Ah, right, the few that escaped while we did damage control managed to take him and a few of the cats with them. We managed to save Zaynabi, but they managed to collar the Nord, Kharjo and his Shield-Brother. The Caravan leader got nabbed as well. They were just too fucking good in that kind of mad fuckery, but we managed to get a trail on them since that Kharjo left little bits of his fur behind. Ripped straight out of his arm according to S’haira. They’ve holed up in some shitty cave near the Falkreath-Whiterun Border like they’re waiting for something, but we have maybe three days before they either make a move or something else lands on our watching-boys out there.”

Argis had to give the assassin props, he had valiantly ignored the way Lydia kept on trying to interrupt his report. By the end, she had shifted into a quietly broiling rage, barely even able to listen to Artan’s quiet question, “What are the Legion doing? And the Hold’s warriors? Solitude has two other thanes to defend her people.”

“The Legion has no fucking idea what’s going on, that’s what,” Bard growled. “The slavers have been taking out the men stationed in the villages, so many that words going around that Tulius is beginning to consolidate the men around the major Holds and pulling out of the wilds. As for the other thanes, well, for many of the Holds you are their only Thane. Solitude has that asshat and that imperial girl for Thanes, but neither of them are battle worthy, even if the lass has been hiring more men to protect her mining town and their families. It’s more to secure her investment, but still more than the other one’s doing.”

“Anything else?”

“They seem to be targeting people who know you, have known you or are working for you. In the last month, the underground network you set up in the different holds have seen a big rise in foreigners asking about you, specifically. They’ve been passing more and more info onto our assassins since you had them begin informing, and to be honest, none of its good. Eirian is still under the radar, and Jakk doesn’t exist to the general public outside of the Rift, and even then they don’t know much more than he’s the dockworkers lover. Talia is taking the brunt of it though, since its mostly common knowledge among her men that she was a slave. Difference is that her men are like fucking monsters when anyone comes sniffing around asking questions about her, and the slavers don’t have the numbers to go up against a small army. Even when our lot put yours and her name in they were hard pressed to get any information about the people snooping around. And that Jaden guy
you had us keeping an eye on went to ground. Hard. We can’t even find a fucking hair off his ass, and neither can the Nightingale we have contact with; not even a fucking Nightingale. But during that raid -yeah the one that took Hrongar- Lefty managed to swipe this off of one of the slavers, as well as this shrapnel,” Bard rubbed at his beard, motioning to the Brotherhood Initiate at his elbow.

The girl stepped forwards and put her pack onto the dinner table, yanking a thick fur from its depths, as well of what looked to be some kind of glass armour piece. “We don’t need to tell you where that fur came from,” Bard continued, mouth pressing into a thin line.

The room was silent after that, the huge group barely making a sound. Talia looked grimmer than usual, thin mouth pressed into an ugly little line. She had sat at the dining table with her arms crossed a little ways into the briefing with Jakk and Scouts at her heel. Calder was on her other side, stood between the woman and Scouts’ chairs. The Argonian was relatively calm, looking more resolute than the half-growling Jakk at his shoulder, leathery hand clasped around a furred one. Lydia was beyond all reason by this point, eyes boring into Artan’s skull from his stance beside the fireplace with her in front of the door, ready to go at a moments notice. Only his hand around her wrist had kept her there. Jordis was at her shoulder, but instead of being a blockade she seemed more inclined to join in with the bloodshed on the brunettes mind. The vampires were the only ones who were really being still, stood in the archway between the master bedroom and the kitchen, eyes glowing faintly in the darkened house.

Argis was sat between Talia and Bard, the assassin initiate retreating behind her superior officer. Argis didn’t know if he was that to her, probably more of a captain than anything. He didn’t really want to get to know the Black Hand’s hierarchy. But being between two of the heaviest drinkers in the room had its benefits, like all the full bottles of wine and ale in front of him. And shit did he need to drink.

Bard and his… follower? Companion? Went on to give a list of the people taken after briefing them all on what the fuck was going down and who was being taken where. There were a lot of patchy parts, mostly because the eye witness part was pretty sketchy because of the slaving rings efficiency, as well as most of the witnesses being escaped children. Jakk barely waited a moment before he pressed forwards, “We need to cut off the fucking head, and you know it.”

Artan barely turned to look at him; eyes pinned to that fur on the table. “The Brotherhood is stretched thin, the thieves don’t do murder and the Vampires are breathing down our necks. We have a fucking leech prophecy to stop, as well as that mad asshole that keeps sending his fanatics to try and kill me for being a fake Dragonborn, and then there’s the fact that there are multiple groups in different Holds. If we go to take this lot out it will put a target on our backs like none other. You know this is fucking bait-“

“They have our people. Would you really-“ Jakk snarled, but Artan cut him off.
“No. Bard, keep our boys on damage control. Make sure they keep under the radar of the authorities but still shit up these spies. Tell our people that it’ll have a lovely pay check behind it, and whoever gets the locations of the other slaving cells gets a bonus. They have orders, and I want them. Any means necessary. Jakk, if you can get the thieves in on locking out these enemy informers then I’ll back them as a patron. We both know Maven’s pockets are running a bit dry trying to keep them going, especially now since I’ve had the Hand cut ties with her completely as well as crippling her business associate. Eirian if you can get the Companions onto locking down the Whiterun Hold it would make things easier. The Dawnguard seem to have most of the Rift under control, and since the vampires seem to be mostly be hanging around the Northwest it’ll discourage any of the slaving groups from properly working around there. Just have someone set up surveillance since the slavers might try and sell to the Volkihar for a high price. I’ll see if I can get Tulius to increase the amount of soldiers in the smaller villages.”

“What’s the game plan for us then? Hiding?” Lydia snapped, tearing her arm back from Artan.

The cat seemed less than phased. “We’re gonna suit up and head out. Bard, get word out to Babette to bring out the good poisons for assassins above novice level. Also have Nazir keep an eye out for those ships, and if they dock, I want everything they have in our treasury by the end of the month. If he gets people, then I want him to give them to the Dawnstar Jarl and have her protect them if they agree to be protected. I’ll send a letter to her just in case she gets a little shifty around assassins bringing freed slaves to her doorstep. Tell Cicero that I want him to meet me in Riverwood in five days. We’ll go there to restock and to pick up any messages, so have the boys send them there. Each time we crush a set of slavers, we’ll go to the nearest settlement. Spread the word out. Every slavers head that gets brought to me gets a hundred gold in return.”

“Aye, Listener,” Bard nodded before standing, rubbing away at a spot of mud on his leathers.
“Anything else?”

“Send them to the Void, brother,” Artan nodded, clapping an arm to Bard’s own, the two grasping at each others elbows for a moment before letting go.

“And what if the people in their group aren’t all slavers? You know those assholes will need guides and that,” Bard asked, tugging his hood back up over his head.

“What is life’s greatest illusion?” The khajiit smiled, tail flicking.

Bard nodded, a sharp little twitch of his hood, before he motioned towards his initiate and they were gone. “Why are a sabre-pelt and a piece of armour able to tell you who these people are? We find stuff like this all the time on the road,” Calder asked, looking confused and tired. He didn’t even look
up properly from being half-slumped with his head resting on his fist, other arm tucked under his elbow.

“That’s because it’s a khajiit pelt, and that armour is Larethius’ hunting team’s armour. It has his smith’s hallmarks underneath the buckle, here,” Artan sighed, rubbing a hand across his nose and clicking a claw to where he had said the hallmark was. The Nord started, looking like a rabbit in a wolf den before turning an awful pale green. Artan just patted his shoulder, “Sorry to break it to you, Cal.”

Calder shook his head, looking even more ill.

“We should probably all get some sleep, and be ready to move as soon as possible,” Talia shrugged and rolled her shoulders back until something clicked. “We can’t move now, at any rate.”

“And what about Hrongar? Or the others?” Jordis asked, somehow managing to keep the edge out of her voice. “A few of us could leave now, and-“

“And then what? You run in tired and unprepared to get sold off too?” Talia snapped back, but the heat in her voice didn’t match the blank stare she had settled on the two women housecarls.

“We need to-“

“You need to be clever. If you get caught too, then who will protect the people you love?” The girl snarled a half-animal sound that made Lydia rankle even more.

“I can’t protect them if I’m not there,” the brunette retorted, but Artan stepped to be between them, throwing up his hands in an attempt to appease the two of them. He got a pair of glaring, enraged women stepping into his face and nearly a fist in the gut for his troubles, but he persevered.

“We will wait until tomorrow night, and then we will leave with everything we need. We will murder every slaver in this province so that nobody has their loved ones stolen from their homes again, and for fucks sake we will not fight each other over this. Save it for the slavers,” he growled, eyes sliding into tiny knives. It sounded more like a plea than an actual order, but the women stepped away from him, with Talia storming from the room and out into the night and Lydia wrenching her arm from his grasp again. This time a gauntlet caught his palm, and by the twitch the vampires made it was obvious blood was drawn. Artan didn’t flinch, even when Lydia nearly pressed her nose into his with the surge she made towards him.
“You-“

“No. You don’t think I know what they’re going through? I do. And I want to go save them right now. But I also know how slavers work and how prepared they are. If we go now then we lose them all, do you understand? Do you trust me with this?” the cat said, quieter this time. It seemed to work, since Lydia deflated and stomped through the house and down the basement stairs, Jordis grabbing a bottle from the cupboard and following her after patting Artan on the shoulder in good faith.

“Alright, who’s staying and who’s coming?” he sighed, before turning to face the room again. A few shuffled in their seats, or shifted between their feet, but nobody outright said a word. Scouts broke the ice with a cough, drawing attention to him.

“I can look after the girls if you want. I know that most of you will want to go, so I don’t mind holding down the fort while you rescue the villagers,” the Argonian rumbled, rubbing at his knee with his free hand. Jakk squeezed his other hand, and added, “I can get a few of the thieves who aren’t out scouting to protect the house before we leave.”

Artan’s brows rose, “You’re coming?”

Jakk’s jaw tightened, “Yes.”

“Okay. Anyone else?” Artan turned to the rest of them, who were still to leave their grim thoughts.

“I’ll stay, be extra muscle. You know this entire thing might be a trap to make you leave, and having a big axe at home base will be helpful if they try and take this place,” Calder groused, pointedly not looking at Arnsien’s pelt on the table. Artan didn’t begrudge him that; it was a nasty day when you realised how ugly the world really was.

“Lydia and Jordis are a yes, and so am I. I would think that Argis isn’t putting his hand up because it’s obvious he’s going. And Jakk too. So that just leaves Talia, since she can either take a small group of her men and we can double team the opposition or she will come with us and leave a second in charge of the army. Vampires?” Eirian turned to Serana and Iona, who seemed to be staring at each other in silent communication. Iona looked angry, but Serana just looked irritated.

“I’m coming,” Iona bit out eventually, snapping their strange gaze and instead settling a pointed stare
on Eirian. The elf smiled back, and simply shrugged. Serana spoke next, eyes still on Iona, “I'll stay behind and protect your daughters. It'll make more sense than having Iona with you since you know her fighting style better than you know mine.”

“Fuck, yeah,” Artan grimaced. “Well, raiding party start getting your stuff together. We’re leaving when the sun sets. Make sure you tell Scouts, Serana and Calder what you’re taking from the vault so they know what weapons they have on hand.”

xxx

It had started off as just another tiny detail in their everyday lives.

Noticing something small, and how it grew into some thunderous jungle overnight. He figured that Lucia had more of an idea about the world than she let on, as well as how much she actually did in the background. She was very good at doing things unseen, and then getting away with it. He first thought that she had begun to help train some of the little weeds from the orphanage to help solidify her own knowledge as well as aid her pa -especially since they were heading out again in a few hours and training recruits took time- but then it moved onto thinking that maybe Sofie had a crush on the lad and she was trying to help her sister.

He was wiry and muddy-faced, but had huge eyes that looked terrified most of the time. But when the little shit had a sword pressed into his hand and a shield strapped to the other, well shit. It was a complete transformation. Still early days, but still. Where Iona had taken to teaching some of the smaller –around Sofie’s age instead of Lucia’s and above- about daggers and Jordis had begun switching out with Lydia on teaching bows, well. He was stuck with fighting Calder for the heavier fighters. Apparently it was because Lydia hated the little shits that had taken to the sword and shield and the bow had more discipline, and that was before Hroar had found a love for the two-handed weapons. It was easy to see it was all bluster, though.

Still, he didn’t think much of Lucia helping out around the practice field that somehow was more like a playground when lunchtime came around.

Until she asked him to braid her hair.

“I mean, you do it for Sofie all the time, right? I just want to keep my hair out of my face when I’m practicing,” the girl frowned, and already, he knew something was very, very wrong. It was deeper than usual, and the careful eye contact she had built up with all of them over the last few months was gone completely. If anything, she just looked angry, and maybe a little sad.
“Yeah I guess so,” the Nord replied slowly.

She sent a glare at him, and he knew not to press the issue. She knew that he knew there was something wrong, but she also knew that he wasn’t one to pry. The same way that she didn’t ask how he lost his sight in his eye. But still, she was still a short-stack, and Artan’s little nipper. Why the hell would she be angry about hair though? She never had even a slight interest in things like that before, saying it was girly-

“Oh Talos almighty it’s a boy,” Argis smacked a hand to his head, and the girl jumped and made a loud squawking sound like an upturned pigeon. He waved his hands in an attempt to appease, but she carried on glaring, and he really wondered whether or not she had been watching Lydia glare people into submission the last few months.

“Look, it’s none of my business, but hell. You know I’m here to listen or something. I’m really shit at talking or giving advice but fuck- I mean shit- oh fucks sake. What I’m trying to say is that-

“Don’t blow a vein,” Lucia frowned again, steeper this time, and crossed her arms. Because it had become the norm to never ask how Artan managed to get the things he did, nobody asked where he had gotten custom made leather armour for Lucia. It was stylised like a regular dress that finished at her knees, where thick leather boots carried on. It wasn’t that it fit her perfectly, or that it had been specially made for an archer –since its extra pocket in the back was set in a way to not even jostle a quiver- it was the fact it had sharp, detailed engravings across the matching arm and leg guards that derived from Nord and Imperial architecture. He knew that because Eirian had told him, twittering about how goofy Artan had gotten.

“It’s Francois. That flowery kid from the Orphanage. He’s a year older than me, and well… I heard he likes girly girls, so… you know,” she shrugged, trying to look nonchalant, like she was talking about how to make tea. “I figured it couldn’t hurt to do my hair nice. Guys like that, right?”

“How the hell should I know?” Argis deadpanned, but she just snorted at him. He clocked on pretty quick, “Well, I guess. But everyone’s different, you know? I mean, some people like skill! There was a baker back in Markarth when I was younger, and all the girls had crushes on him because he was really good at what he did. Show how amazing you are with a bow, and he’ll confess sharpish,” the Nord continued, nodding to himself.

Lucia didn’t seem too confident, so he ended up braiding her hair up anyway. Which led to Sofie wanting hers done, and a bunch of clucking women ogling them from the doorway to the house. Because apparently seeing a warrior sat on the floor wearing an apron and braiding children’s hair is a miraculous occurrence. His father did it for his sisters, so in that respect it wouldn’t have made
sense if he hadn’t lived through the army. Seeing traumatised men going home to their families, unable to continue their lives as normal was-

He stopped, half finished with Sofie’s own braids, the girl chirping on about how the crabs do little dances for each other when he spotted the little shit. “Damnit, stuff that cute should be banned,” the cat slunk out of the shadow underneath the windowsill, chuckling to himself. That was easily drowned out by the loud “Pa!” that Sofie nearly deafened him with. “Why are you upstairs? Aren’t you meant to be resting?”

Artan sighed, rubbing at his head with a hand, “Well, I was trying to. But I had a weird feeling that I needed to be up here. Still not sure why, but there we go. Is everything okay?” the cat hissed slightly when he leant too far out of the shadow and into the sunlight, causing a little tendril of smoke to rise out of his fur. The khajiit grumbled about it, but Sofie wasn’t fussed. “Well not really. Talia seemed upset about something this morning, but I don’t know what. And Lucia finally let Argis braid her hair! Amazing right?” She nattered on for a bit, telling him about her day, what plants she had found, that one of the crabs had stolen Calder’s boot and he thought it was some weird game Jakk was playing. Until, that is, Argis tied off the last of the fish plait with a leather tie and she thanked him, before running off into the daylight.

“Looking a bit pink there. You alright?” he had to ask, since Artan had since curled into a tiny ball against the back wall, ears and tail tucked in.

“Yeah. Just pissed that I had to do this vampire thing to get into the Soul Cairn. It means getting a cure will be a fucking hassle since Falion is all the way out in fucking nowhere. I was planning to just take the next week off, but that was a total shit in the bed. I didn’t think this slaver thing would come to a head so soon. I knew that we would move out as soon as we had details on where they were based, but shit. I just really fucking hate being a vampire. We could have left this morning, otherwise,” Artan griped, fangs flickering around in his mouth. It was strange, to see the extra inch of tooth and the glowy eyes, but still. Lydia had seen Artan when he had fully transformed Lycanthropy, so in a way, this was a little less… insane.

He just sighed, rubbed a hand across his face, and went to stand, almost reaching out to help Artan up before he remembered. Then he nearly smacked himself in the face for forgetting so quickly. Artan just sniggered, almost as if he was telepathic now. The Nord dragged one of the patchwork duvets off of the bed and with an easy twirl had it over and around the khajiit, who simply mumbled something about it being too warm for a duvet. Argis ignored him; they were all told that vampires ran colder than most, even when they were beast-race. It meant that they couldn’t stand high temperatures, but the fire was off and it was better to be a little stuffy rather than crispy, since the whole sun-is-death-now was a thing.

Still, he flung open the window, just to be sure, and then picked the bundle up and walked easily to the bed, ignoring the squeak and the half-hearted grumbling from the duvet. He settled then on the
bed, lump of Artan beside him, with a book in hand and a beer on the nightstand. “Just try to sleep. You’ll need your energy for going when we head out, yeah?” The Bulwark sighed, stuffing a hand into the huge nest that the duvet had become and stroking a hand through Artan’s hair, pinching an ear as an extra little ‘Listen!’

There was a grumble, but when Argis threw both legs up and settled with his back against the bed’s headboard Artan slumped back against his leg and threw the duvet until it settled over the most of the bed as well as Argis’ legs. And then the crazy bastard managed to surprise him; again. Artan somehow managed to snuggle into Argis’ side, pressing his back up and into the Nord’s hip so his tail could rest comfortably across Argis’ thighs, which wasn’t really the surprising part. The khajiit managed to then hook both feet around Argis’ ankle and arch backwards so he could fling an arm over the Nord’s chest and bury his face in Argis’ shirt and promptly fall asleep, coiled back on himself like a snake or something.

And the surprising part was that this ridiculous position wasn’t even surprising anymore.

This was fucking normal.

Argis huffed to himself and carried on rubbing out the weird little knots in Artan’s ruff. It happened when he didn’t brush his fur out properly after a bath and just put clothes on, and if he was honest it was rather irritating. Because he was always the one that had to brush them out again. Well, “It’s irritating,” is just a hollow complaint really. It was actually a rather apt summary of most of their interactions, really.

Artan was pretty private about some things, one of those being bath time. And being the one allowed to brush out all the stupid knots that the khajiit was too “lazy” to do? Yeah, he could do that. It was a cover for the both of them, really. Argis says that its irritating, because then nobody else would want to do it. And Artan didn’t do it just so Argis could do it. And since the cat was notoriously strict about bathing and how private it was, it meant they could have a few moments in a day to just do some menial tasks together. They rarely talked when the two of them hunkered down in the basement side-room, an extra little space that Artan had had built into each of his homes especially for bathing. In Honeyside, it was just a large tin bathtub that could fit Shadowmere with a little hole in the bottom that drained out into the river to go out to sea.

But the first time they had decided to help each other bathe was strangely domestic, and he guessed it was hindsight that made it so. At the time, he figured it was just guys doing guy shit. Yeah, he had just begun having all sorts of weird feelings for the little shit, but back then it was just some crazy pipe dream. One that led to the first hot bath he had in years. It was in Markarth in that ridiculous bathing room that Artan had that nut bag in the Dwemer museum set up, and at first, it was just some crazy stupid experiment that was bound to fuck up. It did fuck up, but then the khajiit had only laughed and said that it was bound to, but no worries I promised you a hot bath.
And the first time that the cat had made a hot bath for him using conjured ice and a few well-placed flame runes, he knew that mages weren’t all that bad.

He remembers he went first, as the cat had to brush out his fur first. Argis had simply been in heaven, since the cat had just ignored his whining and threw whatever potions he wanted into the bathtub. Argis found out pretty quickly that when it came to anything hedonistic, Artan knew what he was talking about. Wine, food, or bathing and the khajiit was a bloody sage.

And then the talking. It started off safe, about different kinds of weaponry, stuff like that. Argis had already sunk into the bath, listening and half-watching the cat sat on one of the wooden counters, surrounded in smelly shit that Argis had previously thought only girls kept in their homes, brushing away at his arms and chest with a soft-bristled brush that could have easily been a horse-brush.

He remembers well enough how he wasn’t surprised that the cat more than just a pretty face. He was pretty everywhere, it seemed. His fur was grey, like steel or like rain, and was darkest mostly around his spine where a thick black line of colour was drawn from between his ears and all the way down to his tail-base, almost as if someone had just painted him. Similarly, black stripes clawed outwards from that line; partially around his throat, his chest, and even his hips. Only his chest, throat, and the inside of his arms and legs were this bright, fluffy white. And that was just his fur.

He was well built, muscled like the messengers were, except more solid. Where most of them where wiry and wispy, Artan was slightly thicker, strong arms, legs and was obviously one little muscle all on his own. Argis had wondered how a cat shorter than him could hold a battle-axe nearly as easily as him, and that day gave him an answer. A very interesting answer.

He can’t remember much of what they talked about, but he remembers a lot about how Artan had changed while they were in that room together. He was softer, somehow. The khajiit was like electricity most of the time, in those early days. When they were going around and uprooting witch havens and hag-raven nests it was insane how he could be so destructive. But then, when they got into towns and cities it was as if the cat had simply bottled all that energy, and only flickers of the danger lurked in its wake. But then, when they had settled into scrubbing and brushing, respectively, Artan had changed.

It was almost as if he finally put his feet flat on the floor rather than always being on the balls of his feet.

Even as he thought it the thought sounded insane, but Argis knew what he meant. It was like the khajiit had stopped, let that energy dissipate, and Argis had been lucky enough to see it. He was trusted enough that Artan let his guard down. And when he really thought about it, he knew that was the moment that it became more than “that is one pretty cat.” Because where Artan had the electricity, Argis had just been a golem. Stone edges all around. When he had turned into a squishy
pound of clay was anybody’s guess, but in that room with Artan he was allowed to be squishy. He didn’t have to be a bulwark against the forsworn or any other insane force. He was just Argis.

Artan himself brought him back to the present, rumbling slightly in his sleep and rolling over to throw both arms and legs around Argis’ knees and hips, cold nose pressing into the slight pudge around his belly. The khajiit ignored the quiet grumbles, but seemed happy enough when Argis carried on idly stroking his back. The quicker that Artan got that cure, the better, really. Argis didn’t like the change in smell, or how cold Artan was now. It felt wrong, almost as if he had to keep wrapping the little shit in blankets to try and warm him up. They said it was a part of vampirism, but it was a part that Argis fucking hated. Artan always ran warm, and to be honest, Argis had stuffed his hands up the khajjit’s shirt to warm them more than once on a cold night. He felt… wrong somehow, in a way that the Bulwark couldn’t really pin down.

He sighed, pressing a thumb into the little dip under Artan’s jaw. A few claws pricked his breeches, but other than that the khajiit didn’t stir. So much for catching up on his reading.

Eirian had given him the book, said something about it being riveting. It was halfway through the first chapter that he realised it was some smutty book about a couple that tied each other up. He was surprised that Eirian even had a book like that, since he couldn’t even imagine her flirting. She was always turning down someone who tried to “crack that golden egg” as some of the locals had been saying. He was surprised, however, when he learned more about the multiple uses of sword handles than he was comfortable with.

What also came to a bit of a shock was that Eirian’s weird, broken speech pattern was mostly gone. Artan said it was because she had finally settled into the common tongue, and it was much easier to not get spotted if you spoke like everyone else. A weird elf who talks in tongues? It would be a cakewalk for someone unsavoury to find her. Artan didn’t have to say it, but there was an unspoken threat in the air that there were Thalmor spies about, especially with Skyrim’s newest threat to civilians. If it was the regular kind, then that would be more or less fine; The Brotherhood had a little deal going on with Tulius to keep the nastier ones at bay and to keep information in the right circles. Apparently it had been hard to set up a deal with the Emperor barely in the ground, but Artan managed it. But the fact was that Larethius still had people out and looking for the six of them…

Jakk had been slightly unsettled recently since Arnien had stopped reporting back, and well now they knew why it put nobody at ease. It didn’t bode well for the rest of them, since that khajiit was probably the best out of the lot of them at going to ground. “He could be in a sea of elves during a feast and never be seen,” Talia had said. A slave couldn’t walk a few feet without getting ordered to do something for a guest. The three khajiit had been forbidden to learn magic while under Za’nir, so an invisibility spell would have been out of the question. Just pure skill then, really.

Argis couldn’t place the horrible, ugly feeling in his gut.
It was like the day he lost his men and his eye, all over again.

xxx

Seeing a group of armoured warriors and mages outside Honeside was a sight to see. Artan had loaned out a few of his scarier armours, and luckily some of them were already tailored to the housecarls. Apparently he had a good network of blacksmiths across Skyrim, one of them being Riften’s own Balimund. How the cat had gotten that old goat in his little black book was unknown, and to be honest nobody wanted to ask. Balimund was a hard man, and only had an eye for his work. Artan’s chatter-box nature would have been like oil on water or chalk and cheese when it came to that man. As it turned out Artan had gotten his forge up and running again with the aid of a shit-tonne of fire salts, and that had made the bonds of friendship appear.

Jordis had decked herself out in ancient nord armour that Artan had found in an old crypt. Apparently he had the set remade by Eorlund Gray-Mane with Skyforge-steel since the iron had been eroded and the leather was fucked. It looked good, even with the strange helmet. Lydia had gone in a completely different direction, instead donning some kind of daedric armour. Eirian had needled her about it, but the Nord was having none of it. “I’d rather be alive in evil armour than dead in regular kind.” Eirian had nothing to say to that. The elf was in some kind of deep-pink mage robes, ignoring all the quips about how what was effectively a silk coat with a few leather plates attached couldn’t be protective, and why she had managed to tint the glass such a gaudy colour. “It’s pretty and it’s safe,” she twittered. She refused to wear a helmet, though. Argis didn’t say that her head would be a target now.

Jakk was in some kind of leathers, but instead of the skirt had leather-plated breeches instead. “Flashed too many people with the skirt. Sometimes it helps, but I’d rather not lose my giblets thanks.” Eirian had said later that it was actually better to have leather pants instead, since the thigh had many major vessels that could be stabbed. Argis had then begun wondering how much of the Summerset Six’s wardrobe was actually based on aesthetic or real battle experience. Since when he thought about it, when Eirian had her head uncovered it would create a prime target. One that an enemy wouldn’t pass up, and when the arrows bounce off her wards, well. It’ll take some time to draw another arrow or swing the blade back, and she would have killed them by then. Scary people.

Iona had donned what looked to be orcish armour covered in what looked to be some kinds of protective rune work. Argis only knew that much because when Eirian swooped over to finger at the engravings she made loud noises in Aldmeris and then in common about how it had been years since she had seen old Nordic practices like this. To Iona’s credit she didn’t flinch when a 6’2 elf appeared almost magically in her face and started groping her pauldrons.

Argis had stuck to the good old ebony armour that Artan had given him a year or so ago. The cat had
said that when he crouched it would emit some kind of shadow to conceal him when sneaking, which was good in a way. But when Argis had asked where the cat got it Artan had clammed up and said he stole it off a traitorous dickhole. Argis didn’t press much after that.

When Talia appeared a few minutes after sunrise she was almost unrecognisable. Her thick hair had been let loose from the braids the girls had tied it into, and instead just plumed out behind her in a huge gold cloud. And that’s were all the sweetness of her was, since the rest of her was in a scrap of animal leathers and furs held together by chains and various pieces of mail. She had wiped an intense amount of war paint across her face, which made her frightfully-blue eyes stand out even more and made her look a horror, and to be completely honest Argis was beyond relieved that she was on their side. It wasn’t even a slight surprise that she had corralled the rogue Stormcloaks into a working army where the clean-cut Tulius could not.

Artan had forgone armour this time for master level mage robes, and pointedly ignored how literally everyone in the group had needled him for being so “squishy” and “unprotected.”

“It doesn’t matter, I’ll be fine. These robes have kept me alive through some insane shit. I only wear armour for dungeons and Legion business,” the khajiit waved away their concerns, and pushed the group out and into the wilds after procuring seven horses for them to ride. Apparently he had already gotten the stable master to have four on back up just in case, and the stable master had done as asked. Although, this was after the cat pressed a ring into every hand and ordered the entire group to put them on. “Just remember, if you need a quick escape, then a river is bloody awesome for it.”

“Remember the day we escaped the isle? We had to jump off a waterfall to lose Larethius’ men and then swim around to the next settlement before we even got anywhere near the harbour,” Eirian twittered, before making some kind of spider-climb onto her horse.

In the end, seven horses warily followed Shadowmere down an old dirt road into the wilds. Not even the notoriously bold sabre cats that tended to hunt along the roads got near that horse when it trotted by, instead waiting it out in the brush. It wasn’t until Artan had them stop for a quick break to water the horses that Argis really noticed that a few of the others hadn’t brought weapons.

He was about to ask, pushing the last of the dried meat he had packed for a snack back into the pack on his horse’s flank. Eirian seemed to anticipate his question and waved him down. “I made a promise to never wield a weapon. And Talia prefers to beat her enemies to death with her fists.”

Argis didn’t even hide his incredulity in the stare he levelled on the elf. She shrugged and sat down on her bedroll a few feet from the makeshift fire. Talia munching at some kind of tree root beside her. Artan slumped on the elf’s other side, hunk of bread in hand. “She really isn’t joking,” the cat sighed, deadpan. Talia herself just gave the Nord a rather flat look and returned to her tree root.
“Where is our heading? We probably wouldn’t make it to Falkreath until tomorrow at the latest, even if we pushed the horses. Shadowmere probably could, but ours aren’t made for speed like that. They would probably injure themselves while trying to keep pace,” Iona sighed, rubbing her short hair into a lump and pressing it against her skull before letting it go. She stepped easily over a fallen tree and sat heavily on top, rubbing idly at a nearby horse’s side. Luckily the tree still had a few thick branches to tie a few of the horses to.

Artan swallowed before answering her, gesticulating wildly with the bread in his hand; “We hit Ivarstead and their Vilemyr inn to restock and get a reading on how hard they got hit. We’ll do the same for the other villages and towns we go through so we get a good idea of where to send who, and what our enemies’ movements are. Then we move on the Falkreath— Iona smirked at that, “before we sift through the pine forest and find them. There aren’t many places where they could have holed up, but we have to check them all. Even… even Falkreath. And Helgen.”

The cat’s face stooped into a glare before he threw the last of his bread at her. “And you can wipe that grin off your face. You know how much I fucking hate Falkreath!”

“I’m surprised you still hate that place. It’s been years since we last saw—”

“Do not say her name,” the cat actually hissed, ears flicking back and hands making swiping motions towards her as if waving his hands around would quiet her.

“She’s not a witch, my Thane. She won’t be summoned by saying her name,” Iona smiled, small and indulgent.

“Do I even want to know?” Jakk appeared behind her, sitting down lightly beside her. It was almost strange how the cat could still move like water in leathers, since the others were slightly encumbered by their own armours. He was almost as fluid as Artan, but a little short since their thane was in what might as well be a cloth sack armour.

“He tried to get alchemy training from one of the shamans there. But he thought he could do better and tried to make his own potion,” Iona shook her head in disbelief. Artan huffed and wandered away, not even sticking for the punchline.

“What happened, then?” Jordis asked, already smirking.
“He got a three day erection and a lifetime ban from the alchemy table,” Iona shrugged, smiling. The roars of laughter seemed to wake Lydia from whatever gloom she was skulking in, since she stood from her vigil at the edge of the camp.

“It’s good you can still remember stories about us, considering how long you abandoned us for,” Lydia snapped, pushing her way into the small riverside clearing.

And just like that the tension was back, but not for the upcoming battle with the slavers. No, it was just two old friends. In a way, it was worse.

“You know that isn’t-“

“Of course it is,” Lydia talked over her, loudly enough that Iona’s mouth clacked shut.

“It had already been a half a year by the time I had recovered enough to wake up. When I did, I had to dig my way out of the ground,” Iona snarled, standing with enough force that Jakk nearly fell backwards off the log. “And when the sun came up, I was fucking burning. I spent the next few months in the dark, half mad with hunger. I don’t even know how many innocent people I murdered in their beds, but I know it was a-fucking-lot,” she carried on, stomping until she was nose to nose with Lydia, and even then she didn’t stop yelling. “By the time I was myself again I had run into Orthjolf, one of Harkon’s trusted vampires, who dragged me out of the muck and set me down on my feet. And he was a fucking monster. I knew that, and I also knew that if it came down to it, I couldn’t kill him. He had been a vampire longer, knew what he could do. I was still new, and had no fucking idea about anything. Whenever I got news about you, it was because you and Artan had ripped the guts out of another vampire coven. Do you really think I’d have come back, knowing that you hated vampires that much?”

“You think we would have killed you?” Lydia asked quietly.

“I didn’t want to risk it. I knew that if you attacked me, I wouldn’t have stopped you,” Iona sighed, voice tight.

Lydia seemed to be weighting her options, looking at Iona’s face for a while, before raising her gaze to the sky. “I get it,” she bit out after a few more moments of stretched, ugly silence. She clapped a hand to Iona’s arm before dragging the other woman into a rough hug. “I fucking get it. It makes sense now.”
“So you forgive me?” Iona asked, voice strangely wet.

“Yeah. Forgive me too? For getting kinda shitty with you when you did get home?”

Iona snorted out a small laugh. “Yeah.”

xxx

4E, 203 Mid Frostfall

“So you’re in love with uncle Jakk?” Lucia asked innocently, plopping her spoon into her bowl to catch up the last of her soup.

Scouts looked up from his own meal, oblivious to Calder’s bright blush and Serana’s bark of laughter. Oblivious or simply ignoring them, the Argonian hummed and danced a little on his chair while he swallowed the last of the bread in his mouth.

“Yes, I guess you could say so,” Scouts conceded eventually, patting at his mouth with a napkin.

Sofie and Lucia looked to each other, before the two screamed loud enough to wake the dead and began pelting the Argonian with millions upon millions of questions that ranged from when they would get married to when they met and how they met and-

“Oh my Talos let the man breathe would’ya?” Calder held a hand up to try and quieten the girls, who settled down into giggling at each other and making little comments between bites of their food.

They seemed to have some kind of silent conversation, and then more shyly this time turned to the Argonian. “What does it feel like?” Sofie asked, sounding rather quiet.

Scouts thought about it for a moment. It felt strange, but good. He had spent a lot of his life running, fighting and hiding from things, but love was the only thing he was ever sure of. Shavee loved him like a sister, and Neetrenaza loved him like a best friend. Stands-In-Shallows was usually too high to feel much else but love for him, and scorn for anything else.
But with Jakk? Well, he knew he loved the khajiit. At first, it was simply mutual attraction. The cat was attractive, to the point that most anyone would stop and stare before shaking themselves and wandering off, a little bit of awkward in their step this time. It wasn’t just his looks, because he looked great. It was the way he moved, the way he laughed and thought everything was amazing. He was a lot thinner than Artan, and a little more frivolous and much, much more fickle. The only thing Jakk seemed sure about was him and their relationship.

At first, it was just meeting a friend’s brother, and then it snowballed and Scouts found himself cooking meals with Jakk, shopping with Jakk, sleeping with Jakk. It was strange and wonderful, and Scouts had never felt surer about anything. It was reassuring and terrifying in equal measure.

He knew Jakk felt the same, since the cat seemed to actually let down his guard around Scouts more than anyone. When it was night time and they were alone, the cat told him about the Isle and how awful it was, how Artan, then Garma, had literally torn men apart who stood between them and their escape. Artan had mellowed out now, Scouts could see that, and it was testament to how safe Skyrim made him feel.

With Jakk he knew he didn’t have to hide anything of himself, and Jakk knew he didn’t have to either.

“It feels wonderful,” Scouts settled on, pushing a few fingers into his hunk of bread and tugging until the soft inside came out. He rolled the soft result into a small ball, dipped it into his soup and popped the mess into his mouth, oblivious to the awed stares the girls were giving him.

xxx

Ivarstead was fucking quiet, given the time of year.

Winter was lurking close by, with the last dregs of Autumn picking up her skirts and readying to leave them behind. Thankfully, the rest of the night travelling was easier with Lydia and Iona on equal terms again. It only took a few hours of banter for the newer members of the group to realise how fucking easy it would be to get found by the enemy, what with the loudness level being through the roof and grazing the fucking stars.

Between Lydia, Artan, Jakk and Iona it was a full balls out sarcastic battle of wits and snark, and to be honest Argis wondered if he should be surprised by that. Iona poked fun at Lydia, asking whether or not Hrongar was still lurking in the shadows. Lydia pointed out that after Iona’s night with the
weedly little puppy that followed Mjoll around like a lost soul she couldn’t say fuck all. Jakk had simply pointed out that both girls seemed to be pretty good at picking up the flowery ones, at which both turned on him about how demure Scouts was. Artan kept quiet during that one, until Lydia spotted him trying to push Shadowmere past them and that caught fire quickly.

The two girls and Jakk turned to him, eyes flicking up and down before Jakk made a passing comment about buns and teeth and they all burst out laughing. Artan’s ears went down and that was enough for Argis to catch the jist of what they were on about.

Eirian then broke in, reminding everyone that she was there in the wake of how quiet she was, and pointed out that out of anyone that Farkas had the best buns. Jordis had almost fell off her horse laughing, and then the loud argument started. In the end, they forged ahead, leaving Artan, Argis, Jakk and Talia to watch them frolic away with very different expressions on their faces. It ranged from Artan’s still-sour glare to Talia’s bored slate, and then to both Jakk and Argis’ bemused grins.

“So when are we gonna get there…?” Jakk asked conversationally, at which Argis shrugged and Artan grunted.

A few moments of silence later, and the girls up ahead shouted back down that they were there. And Argis was promptly reminded why he didn’t bother going to Ivarstead more than once before. It was practically a ghost town with only a few farmers and some guy who led them all. It only took a minute to get from the road to the inn, at which everyone outside it called and waved at the Dovahkiin—something which the girls jeered at—and they dismounted. They were literally inside before five minutes being off the road.

The moment that they entered the inn, there was a catcall, at which Jakk patted Argis’ arm and muttered, “don’t worry that was for me,” and another moment before a woman had thrown herself at Artan.

It might have been that sole thing that had put Argis in a tight little wind. He ignored the pointed glances from Lydia across the table, and even the few nudges from Jordis. Iona seemed more awkward than the others, and Talia seemed quietly amused.

Leelee Star-Sung—or whatever her name was—was still draped over Artan’s shoulder a table over, talking about life and love and all sorts of other things. It wasn’t until she made a loud shrieking noise and shoved the back of her hand in Artan’s face that Argis actually started to hear proper sound again, and the loud, “Oh You’re engaged? Congratulations who’s the lucky sop?”
The Bulwark sniffed, and levelled his gaze back to his own table. They didn’t fucking miss how his mood had brightened, and got a few snide comments and more than a few giggles in ribbings.

“Yaay!” Artan brought a few peoples attention back by clapping his hands loudly and bouncing in his chair. “I really love Gwilin! Oh Lynly you’re gonna be so happy together!” At that the girl shook with joy and the two began nattering between themselves, talking about Riften and the Temple and getting married and everything.

“Sometimes I forget he does that,” Iona sighed, rubbing at her face with a hand.

She almost fell out of her seat when a shriek sounded behind her and a rushing body flew at Artan’s back. Two hands flashed out, catching the Khajiit’s hands and almost crushing them against a pretty bosom. Argis didn’t even flinch this time, since the newest girl screamed, “You’re the Agent of Mara aren’t you? You heard my prayer?”

Lynly spoke instead of the cat, “Yes! He’s the best voice of Mara I have ever met! He encouraged me to woo my Gwilin, you know?”

And just like that, the twittering and screeching began again.

It wasn’t until a few moments later when the girls dragged Artan off to talk shop about another wedding and a new weight settled on their table did any of them look up. “And I had thought myself deaf to much else but that ringing,” Klimmek sighed, clinking his mug to Iona and Lydia’s in turn. “What brings you lot back here then? And with a few new faces, too?”

“Hunting slavers this time. Apparently dragons aren’t the only thing in your neck of the woods,” Lydia winked and raised her tankard a little higher.

“Ah, yeah,” the man nodded in understanding. “We’re lucky we have the Greybeards so close. Apparently their Master can sense bad things lurking, and send them down whenever he feels an attack coming. Haven’t even lost a soul to the slavers yet. Borri stays down here with us at the moment to help. Sad he can’t talk none. Apparently the thu’um can blast you apart when it’s in your face,” Klimmek chuckled.

And weirdly enough, when the others had all wandered off to bed, Argis found himself still talking to Klimmek. The guy was only fifteen years older, at which Argis mentally balked, but seemed fairly
sturdy. Ivarstead was a sweet little town, but it was hard this far from a city.

It wasn’t until Artan sat a very shy woman down in the seat opposite Klimmek that Argis noticed that everyone but the innkeep was gone. Klimmek seemed to choke on whatever he was going to say, and Artan had already skipped around the table, slapped a hand to the guy’s shoulder and tugged insistently at one of Argis’ pauldrons. The Nord got up, said his goodbyes, and followed Artan.

The cat made an evil little laugh as he looked back, and it was enough that Argis didn’t want to look back.

It wasn’t until Artan had disappeared into their room and flicked a hand at a few of the candles to light them that he finally turned, bouncing on his toes, to look Argis in the eye. “She likes him, but she likes that little shit Bassianus too! She thinks that Klimmek liked his fishing more than her and so she figured she would move on, but the old sop just got a little nervous!”

“So you sat them down and are making them talk?” Argis sighed, smiling. He should have guessed Artan would get involved with such things again. He had barely ran a hand through his hair before Artan had slid both arms around his waist and tugged them together, face pressing into the little hollow under his jaw. The Bulwark hugged back easily, no longer surprised that the khajiit fit so well against him.

“Yeah. I figured they needed a little nudge in the right direction,” the cat mumbled against his throat.

“Yes. Well, what about this other man? Doesn’t he deserve to be happy?” Argis asked gently, but really he didn’t care. Klimmek was a good sort, and any girl would be lucky to have him.

“Bassianus? He’s heading to Helga’s. And we both know she’ll eat him alive there. It would have been a matter of time before he moved on to her and left Fastred out in the cold,” Artan shrugged. “Some people are steady, and others aren’t. Sometimes it’s a matter of who meets who when, and other times it’s just the wrong people expecting different things from each other.”

“I guess so,” The Bulwark conceded. Claws flicked the buckles on his flanks undone, loosening his chest and backplate, but Artan didn’t really make much of a song and dance about it, barely moving until he had to step back and start undoing the intricate shoulder and arm pieces. All the fucking secret catches and clasps, but Artan was done in record time and flung each newly freed piece onto the spare single bed, ignoring the Nord’s quiet humming.
“So what, you set up strangers on dates often then?” Argis asked eventually, trying to ignore the light clacking of claws on the last of his armour, or the warmth rolling off of Artan. It seemed to only get stronger with the more armour the cat peeled off of him, until he was sat on the bed in his breeches and undershirt, bare feet barely feeling the cold from the old wood underneath them.

“Eh, not as often as the praise says,” the cat shrugged, running a few claws along the stitching down Argis’ shirt. “It’s mostly that I set up one couple and they tell their friends, and eventually I get complete strangers hunting me down for me to find their true love. It’s fucking weird,” he huffed, stepping forwards to stand between Argis’ thighs. He had soon given up on picking at the Nord’s shirt, instead running the pads of his hands along Argis’ shoulders, up his throat and into his hair. A few seconds of some kind of spooky khajiit magic of gently pressing his fingers and claws into Argis’ scalp had the human groaning, tugging the assassin even closer.

Being honest, Artan didn’t even realise Argis had his hands around his hips until then, chuckling lowly when the Nord just groaned again when his thumbs massaged the little dip at the base of his skull. Argis wrapped both arms around Artan’s hips and hugged him even closer, until he could just bury his face in the Khajiit’s stomach while he worked. It only took a minute or so to unwind the braid from the man’s hair, which earned a grumble when one of Artan’s hands had to stop massaging.

Artan almost stopped entirely when he realised Argis’ hands had moved down to his calves, thumbs rubbing slow, distracting circles into the sensitive backs of his knees. Even through the thin pants he had changed into earlier during his talk with Fastred and Lynly, he could feel the warmth rolling off the man. He could feel how damn large Argis’ hands were, and how goddamn strong they were too. It was easy enough to look further down from the top of Argis’ head to the rest of him, all muscle and latent power. And yet he was still as gentle with Artan as a florist was with his plants.

Artan was a battle hardened assassin; capable of infiltrating both the wedding of the Emperors cousin and murdering her in front of an entire parade of dignitaries, as well as the Emperor himself on his private liner. He had ended Alduin the World Eater’s reign of terror over the Nord afterlife, Sovengarde. He had stopped Queen Potema’s resurrection. He had almost single-handedly brought down the Skyrim branch of the Penitus Oculatus, and effectively demolished a good portion of Ulfric’s forces, as well as the usurper himself. He had even driven most of the Forsworn from the hills of the Reach, some of the bastions he wiped out had been considered ‘impossible to take,’ or ‘impenetrable.’ He took in a group of three or four and beat them into submission. He was the Archmage of a college, as well as the Master of an entire assassin cell.

Even so, when Argis ever touched him, it was always gentle.

When the Nord had first initiated a touch between them, it was a pat on the back for making an amazing stew. When he had first kissed him at the festival, his hands were firm but so damn gentle, framing Artan’s face easily, fingers a mix of pressure and not-enough caresses. And since then it had
been a myriad of pats here, a press of a hand to his shoulder, his neck, his chest just over his heart. But never as if he was restraining himself, as if he was expecting to hurt the khajiit; it was always a very natural, easy thing, this sweetness.

And at first, Artan didn’t understand. Why, Artan had wondered, why is he being so gentle?

Argis was rough all over, scared twice over, and could cleave the head off a troll with one swing. He had lost more than most, especially after the failed raid on a Forsworn camp. And yet, he was still as soft as a Sweetroll on the inside when it came to the people who were important to him.

They weren’t overly touchy people. And if he was really honest, there were few people that he could actually tolerate touching him. Friends were different. He had never really met someone in a sex sense that he wanted for more than one night. He could handle a few seconds in a hug or a handshake, but much more than that and he had to really persuade himself. Really give himself a pep talk, as in ‘yeah it’s gonna be hard not to just snap and kill them, but hell it beats beating the meat.’ Or, his favourite, ‘don’t worry you can leave straight after.’

Romance was a completely new dimension entirely. So he enjoyed the hand on his hip, or his shoulder, or running down his back. It was alien to have someone touch him so freely, and without any real ulterior motivations behind it. Argis never really expected anything from him except for him to be a good man. And when he started actually looking, a lot of Nords seemed to be the same with their partners. Cracking skulls the one minute, giving flowers to their loved ones the next.

Skyrim was insane.

Eirian said that if he had come from Elseweyr like other Khajiit then the whole monogamy thing would be even more alien to him. Khajiit spent their lives with their loved ones, but they didn’t marry like other races did. It was why when people found out that Artan was also an Agent of Mara they were so surprised.

Argis’ hands slid up ever so slowly, firm against Artan’s thighs, fingers tracing the seams of the khajiit’s breeches, thumbs pressing their own little lines into his flesh. So slow, slow enough that Artan was almost half dazed by the time the Nord reached the hem of his short tunic and passed under it completely, hiking it up on his wrists. But it wasn’t until fingers searched even higher and threaded through his fur, warm skin against his sides without clothes in the way, blunt nails dragging ever so nicely over his sides and along the lowest of his ribs did he stop scratching at Argis’ scalp and start gently pulling at hair. It might have been a mistake, since Argis just took it as encouragement and pressed a chaste kiss against the hollow just under Artan’s sternum. Such sweetness shouldn’t have even been legal.
Artan snapped, if he was honest with himself. He fell to his knees, hands tight in Argis’ hair, tight enough that he could easily drag the Nord close and go on the full attack of his mouth; all tongues, gasping and teeth that made everything past the press of each other disappear entirely. The hands were goddamn everywhere, and holy shit was it so fucking different. Argis still tasted like the awful ale they sold here, and smelt like the ridiculous farce they called a lamb leg shank but-

Hands were running up his back, almost tearing the stitching on his tunic, but rubbing fantastically against his fur and the muscle underneath, all the way up until a large hand had him by the back of the neck, stupid tunic all bunched up around Argis’ elbows. It was a good thing then, since when Argis’ grip settled he crushed Artan against his chest using his arm as some kind of brace to hold him up for when he pulled back from whatever fight their mouths had going on. And Artan was about to protest at him stopping somehow, some way, but Argis leant back in and kissed him everywhere, up his throat, lifting him enough on that strong arm to kiss at his chest where the fabric had just given up and ripped straight down the centre. Sweet, short little touches of his lips against the skin where the fur parted became a new favourite thing, until Argis sank his teeth into the junction between Artan’s throat and shoulder, and it was so unexpected in that haze of fucking fire to feel a jolt like that that Artan actually yelped.

Argis’ other hand left Artan’s hip while he carried on the strange nuzzling-kissing mix that already had the khajiit breathless, instead running wildly to press, rub, and simply tease the living hell out of whatever it could. A gentle thumb running the line of Artan’s rib, a sinfully slow claw up the khajiit’s stomach, dancing along the waistline of his already-tight breeches. Artan pressed his face into Argis’ shoulder and growled something into the Nord’s throat, something that was probably horrible but it made Argis chuckle, and that teasing hand surged down until it breached Artan’s pants and squeezed one of his asscheeks, making the khajiit grunt in surprise. He keened though when Argis slammed their hips together and ground their already straining erections against each other.

The friction, the pressure, the heat of another body; Artan could have handled that. But the evil, sadistic Nord slid his hand up a little, and his thumb dragged beautifully against Artan’s tailbase at the same time his hot tongue slid against the sensitive inside of his ear and that was it. Artan made a loud, awfully embarrassing sound and shivered from head to toe, and he could practically feel Argis’ dick twitch against his at that, and then everything went really fuzzy. There was a growl that neither of them knew the origins of, and Argis’ shirt became some kind of confetti in the air, and Artan’s pants were gone and hands were under his thighs pulling him up easily until they could kneel and sit with their chests sticking together from Argis’ sweat and fucking pant into each others mouths. And neither of them knew who stopped the game first and grabbed the others dick but after that it was a goddamn race to the finish line, full of dirty tricks and cheating.

He didn’t know just having a hand on him could feel so amazing, but there it was. Argis’ calluses were just fucking right, and when his thumb drew some kind of pattern against the head of his dick and twisted his wrist just right, damn. How Artan kept up any kind of pace with the Nord was unexplainable. Argis was playing so damn dirty; mouthing at his throat, pressing all sorts of delicious touches against the base of his tail, any sort of thing that took his fancy and made Artan make noise.
The cat fought back of course; running his claws up Argis’ back to make the Nord’s back bow, licking at the sweet little spot behind his ear that worked like a button to make him shake like a leaf, and rolling his hips down in a way that made Argis’ breeches tighten around his thighs and groin.

But it wasn’t until Argis randomly nipped at Artan’s chin and made the khajiit open his eyes did everything fall apart. It was only a single damn look they shared that made the hazy dance they were doing shatter into whatever the hell it was that shook the entire goddamn world. Someone moaned brokenly, or maybe they both did, and he felt something crushing him as he arched up and all of the heat, all of the electricity exploded out and down and up and everywhere until he could barely even see; only feel.

It took them near enough a half hour to come back, and even then it was a slow journey. Argis had fallen flat on his back, somehow lengthways on the bed with Artan still straddling his hips. The khajiit had managed to stretch out from falling onto Argis’ chest on his face, finishing with his head tucked under the man’s jaw but no less fully on top of him.

“What the flying fuck was that?” the cat managed, somehow sounding tired, elated and a few parts awed.

“Don’t know. Took a long time coming, though,” Argis nodded, almost to himself. A hand stopped stroking up Artan’s back to prod him in the shoulder, but then carried on. Artan took a moment to lean appreciating into it, but then melted back down against the Nord’s chest. It wasn’t until he was fully settled did he reply.

“That was the shittiest pun I have ever heard,” Artan snorted, running a lazy hand up Argis’ flank. “But true.”

The Nord just hummed in reply, apparently too busy running hands up and down the khajiit’s sides to reply. It was maybe a few minutes after that, when the man’s steady breathing and warm chest had almost lulled Artan to sleep when Argis huffed quietly. Artan waited a few moments, and was not disappointed. “We’re stuck together,” he said finally.

“You only realise that now?” Artan griped, biting at the belly of Argis’ jaw.

“I mean literally. We both came and now we’re stuck together with spunk,” Argis looked down at them, prompting Artan to look down too. And between the coils of light blonde hair, the dried remains of a fantastic mutual handjob and the thickness of Artan’s fur was a slightly painful realisation. Their room had no basin.
“Ah fuck.”

Chapter End Notes

AN: Well holy fuckballs what the hell did I just drop on your desk? A kink in Artan’s plans and then a happy ending? The worst part is that I hadn’t meant that as a joke and then just made myself laugh out loud. But yeah. Hohohohohohohoh.

You can probably tell what made this chapter so damn late.

Also, just for future reference if you see a *** as a scene break instead of a xxx, its gonna be sex. I’d be a little more pussy-footed and shy about saying it, but I’m drunk right now and I don’t feel shame. So yeah, for the future if you see a *** between scenes, then it’ll be smut, and it’ll end when you see the next *** and be safe after that.

As per the regular I’m open for criticism, so if you see anything I can improve on then give us a holler and I’ll give it a tweak.

So yeah. That’s it.

Hope you enjoyed the chapter guys, and thank you for reading

~Frog
Waking up was slow.

At first, Argis wasn’t even sure if he wanted to wake up. Most of the night he was aware that Artan was next to him, slowly getting colder as he got hungrier. At one point, he had actually woken up thinking the other was gone, since all he could feel in the bed was his own body heat. The pessimist in him darted between ‘he regrets it all’ to ‘they got in!’ but each time it just turned out that Artan had just cooled down even more.

In the end, Argis had to wake up.

He didn’t mind it so much this time. Artan was pressed against the length of him, pads of his feet tucked against the back of Argis’ knees with his arms tangled in a mess. One was tucked around and underneath him, and the other was wrapped easily around Argis’ own arms. When he had simply forgone the panicked awakenings in the night and simply pinned the khajiit to his chest was a bit fuzzy, but it didn’t stop the little pinch of shame that he had acted like a small child with a doll.

It did mean, however, that he got to watch one of the weirdest parts about Artan since they had started… whatever this was.

Artan had been the first to be awake when a leaf touched ground when they met, and it was almost funny how that Artan would be on his feet faster than Argis opened his eyes. The khajiit always noticed the danger first, even if it was just a leaf in the wind. But now it was like he was catching up on twenty five years worth of sleep. He stretched from head to toe, pressing back against the full length of Argis. Then writhing a little to click his bones, and settled again, tucking himself more snugly into the crook of Argis’ shoulder. It may or may not have been on purpose that his ass pressed harder into Argis’ centre than usual, but when the sleepy groan came Argis figured it was just another evil kitty tactic.

“We have to get up, you know,” Argis pointed out, blowing at one of Artan’s ears.
Artan made a loud, hissing whine and burrowed deeper under the inn’s scratchy blankets. Argis huffed and pulled up a corner of the blanket, which resulted in another loud hiss and the khajiit swivelling around to bury his face in Argis’ throat, both arms and legs flicking out to circle Argis’ chest. Argis pushed down the rampant thought about flexibility and simply returned the hug. “You know Lydia will barge in if we don’t get up soon. It’s almost dawn,” he murmured, hopefully keeping the smile out of his voice.

Artan actually sounded like a petulant child when he whined this time, before lifting his face and biting the line of the nord’s jaw. “Just gotta catch my watching-boy. Then we’ll have the latest intel and can plan from there,” the cat sighed, slipping both hands up to gently rub at the cartilage of Argis’ ears.

The nord was quiet for a moment, confused, but soon was humming and pressing into the touch. “Wasn’t planning day yesterday?” Argis asked eventually, pressing his thumbs into the base of Artan’s skull. The way his

The cat didn’t reply for a few even longer moments, busy purring and basking in the attention, but eventually he replied. “Yes, but that was based on the intel we had then. It’s been eight hours, so Lefty probably has something new for us.”

Reluctantly, they had gotten out of bed. Argis stepped out after sitting at the edge for a moment, whereas Artan slid unceremoniously to the floor and crawled to his clothes.

Lydia barged in when they were sat side by side on the edge of the bed, tying their boots.

xxx

Artan’s ‘watching-boy’ was a tall, almost waiflike Argonian that didn’t speak, only a string of hand signals and grunts. It took maybe three minutes to get a full report, after which Jordis expressed confusion at how a full report could be attained so fast. Artan made a few signals back, at which his assassin nodded and loped back into the shadow of one of Ivarstead’s houses. Where he disappeared to after that -since open plains were all that was behind the house- remained a mystery.

“Faster than speech. On top of that, Lefty is one of the most observant and reliable informants I’ve got. I don’t need to waste time asking him a lot or repeating himself. Really fucking useful,” Artan shrugged, moving to stand from the bench outside Vilemyr. He tugged at his hood absently, irritated by the cloth against his ears. His brotherhood scarf that wrapped around his head had a thinner part for around his ears, so that he could still hear fantastically. This hood was from some mouldy old cloak the innkeep had behind the bar. Artan didn’t need to voice his disgust very loudly; Jordis’
aghast face when the mildew smell hit her was enough.

But it was that or burn, so.

“Where is Hrongar?” Lydia pressed, hand moving to Artan’s elbow. She almost looked ready to shake him, but apparently held it in.

“Knifepoint Ridge,” the cat replied, lightly patting the fingers she had around his elbow with his hand.

“But Bard said-“ she started, but Artan shook his head.

“Our Watching-Boys saw them come out of their little hidey hole with the prisoners and head northwest of Falkreath proper, straight into the arms of a bunch of ‘bandits.’ We haven’t been able to find slavers the last few months because we were looking for slavers; but they’ve been playing bandit to try and throw people off the scent,” he explained, smiling grimly at her while he did.

“Is that what Lefty told you?” Jordis asked, shifting on her feet. She had managed that out through bites of what looked to be a baked potato, which was in itself a miracle. She rarely ever wasted time speaking when she could be eating.

“Yup, so grab everyone you can. We’re heading to Knifepoint now. Meeting place is where we left the horses,” Artan jerked his head in the general direction of Shadowmere, loitering like a rain cloud on the nearby hills. The three female housecarls nodded, each meandering off to gather their rather widespread companions, Jordis going back into the inn to gather the drunkards. It effectively left the cat alone with Talia, the grumpy nord slumped against the inns rails.

“They’re using BrittleshinPass to get past Whiterun and the werewolves, as well as dodge Falkreath. I’m guessing that they’re keeping a distance from the thicker parts of the Pine forest, but I couldn’t tell you why.”

“The PineForest is haunted, duh,” Talia snarked, falling in beside the cat as he turned from the town and began the walk up to Shadowmere.

“How’d you figure?”
“The men told me. Apparently there is an old legend about a woodcutters wife who roams the woods. I’m guessing they had a run-in with her and decided to keep a wide berth,” Talia shrugged, stepping around the rampant chickens in their path.

“As if they would get caught up in superstitions like that,” Artan snorted, but Talia didn’t mirror the sentiment.

“What? Haven’t you seen some weird shit while you’ve been here? I know I have. Random floating lights, ghosts and shit. The headless horseman thing that shows up in the night, a group of werewolves that live in a town, that spider guy who enchants spiders with elements,” Talia pressed her hooked index finger against the digits of her other hand, a rather theatrical embellishment but Artan understood it.

Unnecessary bullshit, she thinks. Weird, batshit insane fairy tales that nobody in the Imperial City would believe. Similarly, the Thalmor nor their agents would be dissuaded by such things. Which just meant that the men in that camp were most likely paid muscle by the slaving ring, or their guides were native. First most, it would be easier if it was just guides aiding their travels through Skyrim. If they were paying entire bandit clans to cover their asses, then it would get hairier. Especially if it meant that they were getting paid enough that looting the remains wasn’t an issue.

“Fuck,” Artan shook his head, stomping a little harder.

“Finally catch up to the horse, eh?” Talia clucked, motioning to her scouts stationed in the distance. Three of them were sat in the shifting grasses, just a little ways from the horses. Shadowmere was intimidating enough to keep most thieves away, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Artan shrugged his grim thoughts away and pressed forward even harder, until he was beside the few big boulders and decrepit log they had tied the reigns of their horses to. Shadowmere trotted around the nickering beasts to press his face into the cat’s side, but didn’t do much else after that. He was more interested in Talia and the apple she had for him. Artan circled the rocks, and proceeded to dig a few out to get at the assassin cache he had underneath. You could never have enough secret hidey holes for your stuff, Za’nir had said. It felt like a lifetime ago, now.

By the time he had slid his assassins leathers on and tugged his looser mage robes over the top the rest of their group had lumbered up the hill, still as loud as ever. He didn’t feel any warmer with or without it, so he tucked the cloak into the cache and wrapped his scarf around his head, ignoring the burn of job adrenaline that the action brought. “Change of plans, kids. We’re going to Knifepoint Ridge, and from there the Brittleshin Pass. We’ll hit Riverwood after that before we loop back and hit Falkreath. Eirian, we will drop you at the pass so you can head straight through to Whiterun to rally the Companions. Jakk, we are leaving you at the Pass too so you can go with her and pick up the thieves in Whiterun. You’re the one who set up the meeting so you know what you’ve gotta do.
After we rescue the civilians you’ll have more than a few able bodies in your group to get there.”

“I want to go with them,” Lydia stepped forwards, voice stern.

Artan gave her a look, but it didn’t let anything slip. Eventually, he nodded, “Alright. But you stay with Jakk and Eirian. When they leave, you leave. I’ll keep you updated on everything, but be ready to move on a hat drop.”

Lydia nodded, jerkily but still an affirmative.

“Talia, we’ll run into your boys at Falkreath, for sure, but most likely we’ll run into a scout or two while we’re out and about. Can you have your captains get the various Legion outposts on attacking the bandit camps in tandem? Tell them to throw my name in, and say it’s legate business. I’ll have a bird head to Solitude to give Rikke a heads up, and it should be good to go.”

“The Legion pulled out of the wild lands, and if I’m going to have men heading towards possible slaver dens, then I need them in decent sized groups, legionnaires or no. They might have a grudging respect for each other, but I aint got a clue if it’ll keep my boys from attacking the wrong tin-head, you catch my drift?” The girl replied, waving a hand at the sky.

“You’d be surprised. They were brothers before they were fighting each other. And since they’re allied against a common enemy, I’d say it’s the best time to get them together. You don’t give a fuck whos at your back when they’re pulling your ass out of the fire,” the cat grinned, a sharp little thing.

The girl grinned back, all teeth. “I hear you.”

“Fantastic, lets move.”

xxx

It didn’t take as long as it should have to get to Knifepoint Ridge. If anything, it was more of a leisurely stroll through the woods with two arch level mages, four heavy warriors and the shadow that was Jakk. Talia was barely even registering on Argis’ perception, instead practically just a whisper on the wind. Iona said that it was a type of old Nordic warfare, and it had nearly died out in most parts of Tamriel. When pressed, she had simply said that a few of the vampires in the Volkihar keep had used such methods.
They didn’t press much, after that.

It was a steep climb up an old path towards the camp, at which Artan made them turn to the side and into the trees. The small fire, the cooking meat, the stench of sweaty bodies, it all wafted from the camp they were practically on top of. They waited, however, a little ways off in the pines. For a good half an hour before Iona’s muffled laugh broke the uneasy silence. Artan had said they were waiting for something, at which the housecarls all had varyingly loud objections. We aren’t running in, he said. And they were all silent in the waiting game after that. It seemed like whatever he was planning had come to a head. Lydia gave her a tap, and which the vampire shook her head and whispered, “Talia.”

She pointed, and with that, most of the group had looked up at where she had been pointing. It was dark, but Argis could make out the sharp silhouette of a guard tower, shoddily built out of logs and things instead of stone, but sturdy enough to hold two grown men atop the platform at its peak. And near the top was a smudge.

And in that moment, Argis once again counted his blessings that Talia was on their side. He did, however, shuffle a little further from Eirian. Talia wore her bestial side on her sleeve, but Eirian was more contained. Didn’t mean she didn’t have one, however.

The smudge hooked its feet into the underside of the log platform and crouched until its hands had curled around the edge and it could slither up, behind the completely oblivious sentry. It almost didn’t look human, the way the smudge coiled forward like a snake to catch the man’s head and snap it clean to the side. There was no sound. Talia lowered the body, onto something, probably a chair, and propped it against the railing like it was just resting. And then she was gone, and Artan was signalling them to move.

The cat went first, with Jakk on his left. The housecarls trailed behind them by five feet, each keeping their eyes pinned to a khajiit’s tail. It had been a part of their early sneaking lessons, as ordained by Artan, that whenever they needed to be stealthy they would let him lead, and they would watch his tail. It saved any unnecessary movements that might alert the enemy. Watch the tail.

They were over the small hillock and into what looked like a clearing, man made, with a few targets set up in the space. Beyond that was a log wall, but between them and that wall was Talia, knelt beside two more bodies that were both twisted in ugly ways. She was silent, not even jerking her head to tell them to follow; apparently whatever Artan saw in her face was enough.

She led the way straight up to the wall, at which she stopped, pressed her back to the wood and Artan loped up into a leap and she threw him up and over. He barely made a thump as he landed on
the roof of the small shack that could be seen from the outside. She jerked her head this time, towards
the staircase that led into the compound on the far right. Its bottom step was at the top of the path
they had left before, and practically next to the guard post where she had snapped the sentry’s neck.

Jakk was beside her, and she made a few hand signs to him at which he nodded, touched Lydia and
Iona’s arms and nodded towards the stairs. Talia herself looked to Argis and Eirian, before slinking
off in the other direction. They followed, close behind, and eventually came across something that
would haunt him forever.

He had seen a Forsworn Briarheart sacrifice a child once, back in the early days when his captain
had put the scouting mission above the safety of a ‘single person.’ It was why he had asked to be
transferred from the scouting regime and into the fighting one. He had never looked back; knowing
that if he had simply been in different group things might have been different. Their hesitation had
cost a life in an already harsh world. It didn’t need to be said that he ignored his captains orders, ran
in and nearly got them all killed. He reported to the commanding officer, an old guy who only had
three years left for this world, and the old codger gave Argis a transfer to the frontline. The scout
captain got dishonourably discharged from the armed forces entirely for his inaction.

There were seven of them, three at the campfire, one at the nearby forge, and three more milling
around the cooking spit. Four of them were bandits, looking to be just the regular riff raff. They were
the ones at the camp fire, trying to look as if they were just being dumb lackeys when in reality they
just didn’t want the same fate. The other three, they were obviously the guys they were here for.
They were in some kind of custom plate armor that was an ugly grey blotched with black and green
war paint. On retrospect it was probably some kind of camouflage attire for the heavy greenery of
Skyrim. Didn’t do squat in base camp, though.

Behind them were three men. One was an altmer, strangely. It was a fleeting thought, drowned in the
next few world-shattering thoughts that followed it. He was dying. His arms, like the other two
prisoners, were tied high above his head to some kind of metallic pike set into the ground. The flesh
in his chest was mostly gone, peeled away by something. Most likely tools from the work table a few
feet from the prisoners, but that was just an assumption at this point. Sharp, bright red was flowing
down his legs from where all of his muscles were just leaking out from his sagging skin, straining to
keep whatever left of his body it could together. The others were even worse. The middle one looked
half-mad with fear, but he wasn’t screaming. Not even making sound, as if it would bring down a
fate worse than death upon his head. Nord, barely even seventeen by the look of his peach fuzz. The
last, well the last was enough to make any man puke if he hadn’t already.

The last was a Breton, by the looks of him. He was definitely already dead. His eyes were gone, and
by the lack of cuts around the edges it looked to be a skilled torturer rather than a scavenging animal.
Whatever was left of his nose and ears didn’t even catch in the wind, the skin all gone as well as the
cartilage. It just got worse the further down he looked, and thankfully he didn’t have to look long.
The first time he came across something like this, his companions failed their duty to protect the innocent.

This time, there was no hesitation.

He was right in line with Talia and Eirian as they fucked stealth to high hell and brought sunsfire down on whatever monsters they had happened upon. There wasn’t any yelling from them, and it was probably that which made the surprise attack even more of a surprise. Talia had leapt into the middle of the three bandits and kicked up a good part of the fire into a face, effectively blinding one and making the other two jump back and fall down, respectively.

Argis didn’t look to see her stomp once on the head of the fallen bandit and turn to the other, already drawing his weapon. The blinded one was barely off the ground, but Argis drove his sword between the man’s ribs and turned to whatever dark pit the slaver-grunt had crawled from.

Absently, he reminded himself that this man probably was just paying for his food. That he was just doing his job. But there was a choice, and he made his. He made the choice to torture, or to at least stand by and let it occur. That absentmindedness dissipated, and Argis didn’t even feel the twinge at his pride for not letting the man draw his sword.

Eirian had already dispatched the other two, a spike of ice in each face, and was stood a ways back from the pikes holding the men. Artan and Jakk were soon through the narrow gap beside them, most likely leading to the other shack they had seen before, and practically stopped dead upon seeing the hanging trophies.

“Don’t go near him, yet,” Artan whispered, and just like that, assassin was gone and healer was here.

He quietly motioned for the others to secure the area, but motioned for Argis to stay to keep watch. After the group split into three teams, Argis and Artan, Lydia and Jakk, and then Iona and Eirian and Jordis, they went separate ways and did what they could. It was a flickering of magika and that regular sky-smell that accompanied the calming charm Artan placed on the boy. Argis would have asked why, but the cat pointed out “He doesn’t even know were here. He just knows that whenever someone comes near, someone nearby gets mutilated.”

It was enough of an explanation, and Argis simply helped the cat cut the altmer down and then cut the boy down. The Bulwark sat with him while the cat worked on closing the Altmer’s chest, something that would have previously made Argis sick. He hadn’t been too near magic until he became Artan’s housecarl, but by now it was commonplace. The fact that to do most healing, you had to know how a wound was inflicted and the depth it would go, well that wasn’t as welcome as
the sight of the gold mist. It was light, barely even catching the edge of Argis’ hands with its strange, wet feel, but it was enough. A thin film of skin knitted over the top of the alnter’s chest, enough to keep infection out and blood in, but that was it.

“I can’t do more. I need to conserve energy for fighting whatever is in the mine. I-“

“You’ve done more than most of us could,” Argis replied gently, patting the cat’s shoulder. Artan didn’t reply, just gripped at Argis’ fingers as if they were a lifeline.

They were quiet until Jakk came to get them. “We can’t just leave these guys here,” Artan sighed, but apparently Talia had already beaten him to a solution. She had lugged two of what was to be eight bodies out from the small circle of log walls around the mines entrance to where they were, and then helped carry the two civilians to where a few benches were set up just next to the doors down.

“Who’s staying behind? They’ll need to be ready to crush whoever manages to sneak past the rest of us as well as keep whatever civilian we send up ahead. That and these guys shouldn’t be alone out here,” Artan asked, looking to each of them in turn.

“I’ll stay. I can get a message out to my boys, have them lock down this entrance so nothing gets in or out that we don’t like,” Talia offered, rubbing her hooked hands together. Iona nodded an affirmative, “I’ll keep her company.”

“Me too. Meridia knows that they need something that can actually run up here,” Jakk gave the girls a sly wink, at which Iona shook her head and Talia gave a quiet snort.

“Right. Well, move out,” Artan nodded towards the door, and just like that, it was on.

Argis expected a few winding tunnels and a little time to get some kind of brace on the situation, but they were afforded none. In reality, Knifepoint mine was a short few steps of a tunnel and then a big room full of about ten or so slave-grunts, a small cage with a few civilians inside, and that was it. The door had barely even opened before Artan was inside, drawing blood.

It was almost insane, after that, how quickly those few steps down became an all out brawl. Eirian was at the rear, like some kind of insane banshee, and whenever someone –like one of the guides that had been in the small gathering inside the mine- ran up to the exit, she practically incinerated with magic.
Jordis was as bad as her, a few feet down at the mouth of the tunnel just where it met the bubble of space where all the mining equipment would have been kept, driving a her battleaxe through anything that came her way. Lydia was in the thick of it, however, already at the gate where Hrongar was yelling something just beyond, keeping the few slavers with enough brains from just stabbing wildly into the cage to cut off anyone who might have escaped with a story to tell.

The others, well the others fell quick. In the room was about five or so slave grunts with the rest being bandits and their chief, as well as what looked to be the main captain of this slaving ring. Artan had already downed three bandits, and the others were looking a little tight around the throat. Argis had barely enough time to think before his own sword was bloodied, as well as his shield. It was an instinct, to bring the shield up to shatter a mans arm against the rocks.

It was done, moments later. Lydia was breathing heavily, looking more like a wolf than a woman, teeth bared and hackles up. Artan had thrown the slack arm of the slaver captain to the ground, blood seeping from the mans clenched teeth. Didn’t take a genius to realise the man had poisoned himself rather than give anything up. Argis had figured the only place where he would see blood on gold would be Markarth, when the Forsworn escaped from Cidna mine and left ugly stains on the metal embellishments around the city. Not to be, apparently.

Artan turned from the Altmer to stride towards the cage where a good fifteen people had been crammed in. It took a moment, somehow not longer with Lydia breathing down his neck, but the door was open and people began pouring out. And just like that, it became a whirlwind once again. People crying, laughing, some he knew and some he didn’t. Hrongar and Lydia were practically crushing the life from each other with their embrace; the khajiit caravanners had shook Artan and his hands, patted Jordis and led the way out. They kept a certain distance from Eirian, but were kinder to her considering they watched her aid in their escape. He guessed this group of people would be a little fearful of elves for a while, but there it was.

“Long time no see, friend,” Kharjo hummed out, slapping a de-clawed hand against Argis’ gauntlet.

“Looking better than last time, I see,” Argis grinned back, and the cat appreciated the joke.

“As if you see much at all,” the khajiit snorted, closing an eye and scratching an imaginary scar into his face. Argis knew it to be a light-hearted joke, especially since Kharjo used his clawless, bloodied hand. Still, it made the Nord nauseous to see such things on a man like Kharjo. “Make sure you let Artan see that, and soon,” Argis nodded towards his hand, at which Kharjo shrugged and allowed Dro’Marash to press against his side. The big cat pressed a hand against the other’s back, and nodded lightly. Dro’Marash just shrugged, eyes still pinned to the slavers bodies across the floor.

“Little brother wanted to crush them himself. I can see the appeal,” Kharjo sighed, but it wasn’t an old, weary one. It actually sounded wistful, as if watching others kill their captors had been another
strain he hadn’t needed. “Thank you, for this,” the big cat sighed, before slapping a hand to Argis’ shoulder and following the others out.

Argis looked back, and saw that Hrongar and Lydia had barely moved, the big bear’s face still buried in her hair, and her face still buried in what looked to be week old filth. Eirian was already gone, probably to help address the new additions to their party.

“Looks like we most likely have a heading,” Artan sniffed, pressing a hand into Argis’ side. Argis had barely noticed the cat sneak up on him, just like always.

“Most likely. Are we still dropping Eirian and Jakk at the pass?”

“I don’t know. That Altmer who was on the pike won’t survive the pass, and besides we wouldn’t be able to take time out to get him all the way to Whiterun. Best bet is to take him straight to Falkreath and have the alchemist there take care of him. But then again, if he did make it to Whiterun, then Danica would definitely save his life. But Eirian isn’t a healer; I’d have to go to Whiterun with him to make sure he makes the journey. I can’t make up any poultices for them to take with them, and if I gave them our supplies then we would be lacking. I dunno,” Artan shrugged, looking even more confused.

“Well, I’m guessing that the supplies are set up for a whole group right? Well we wouldn’t be the whole of us anymore. Lydia is going with Jakk and Eirian, as are the villagers. That means we just need enough for like what? Five people? Me, you, Iona, Talia and Jordis. You kept a team of five alive in that shithole underground, so you know we’ll be fine,” Argis pointed out. Artan seemed less convinced.

“Yeah but what if they manage to take me out? Then what?”

“Kick their asses and slap you till you wake up, I guess,” Argis sighed, throwing an arm around Artan’s neck and tugging him against his chest. The cat chuckled, but his grim mood didn’t lighten much until they exited the mine and saw the fruits of their labour. A group of free men and women, all ready to go home.

Xxx

Watching Eirian pour magika into Artan was strange, albeit very pretty. Her hands were settled on his shoulders with her stood diretctly behind him, something that spoke the trust between them
without words. Between them, they managed to restart the altmer’s heart twice on the way to the
pass, once Artan and once Eirian. Seeing the mages pump an insane amount of lightning into the
man’s chest almost made the group of freemen run for the hills, but upon seeing the result it made a
kind of awe build up.

Between them, and Talia’s insane backwater remedies, his fever was headed off and he was just a
sleeping, injured man. The freed civilians were a lot more helpful than anticipated, with Kharjo,
Dro’Marash and Hrongar helping with hunting and cooking, since the group was a lot bigger than
before.

From what he could gather, Talia had set up her men like a kind of faint mist, one that followed
silently behind them to catch out any slavers or guides that were missed. A thin line of scouts went
ahead them, along with the seemingly random scattershot of assassins and informers Artan had in the
field. It wasn’t until they were maybe a league from the pass that Lefty appeared again, this time with
what looked to be some kind of child. Except they were both in assassin leathers.

“Lefty,” Artan greeted, and received a nod in return. “S’haira? We must be in the shitter,” the cat
laughed, although it was muted.

The child turned, and as it turned out she wasn’t a child at all. It was a tiny khajiit, maybe a little
taller than Sofie, standing in the shade with Lefty. Argis couldn’t have said why, but they were an
unsettling team. Lefty was at least Argis’ height, but waiflike. It seemed to be some kind of strategy
then, to wear skin-tight leathers. He looked as if he would snap at a slight breeze, but Argis could see
well enough that the Argonian was lithe, and could probably put up more of a fight than most
Legionnaires. He was a bright, bright pink colour, from the scales Argis could see, anyway, with a
splash of bright white flecks across his muzzle. Argis didn’t look at his eyes too much. He made sure
of it.

The girl, S’haira, was at his hip in height. She looked to be a child, but Argis had heard enough
about khajiit to know that she might be a full adult. There were types of khajiit that grew huge, and
others that stayed small, ones that walked on all fours and ones that walked upright, and he knew
better than to ask. She walked digitigrade, although it did barely anything to her height. She hadn’t
bothered with a hood like Lefty, and wore the baggy cotton robes that Artan sometimes wore on a
job. She was a bright, startling white with equally bright yellow eyes, with the long hair on her head
twisted into thick ropes that reached her tail easily. A few bits and pieces were twisted into her
dreads, like animal bones, and a few bright feathers alongside some gold and jade beads.

“You have a bad turn ahead, old man,” she chirped, jerking her head towards the bend in the road,
one that would take them to BrittleShinPass. “They’re bundling them into that natural tunnel. Thirty
or forty, with ten or so bandits on lookout. The slavers are pretty cheerful, so id say they don’t
know about their mates yet. They have the same armour as what we got off the last group, and Lefty
says they’re the same as the ones you ripped a new one.”
“Opinion?”

“I’d say we go for a quiet swim. The day is beautiful for it, the lake is a bit murky though from all the big fish swimming around the banks. Apparently it’s the season, especially since all that algae at the centre has been making breathing a little hard for them,” S’haira trilled, making a low purr in her throat at the end.

“A swim sounds lovely,” Artan smiled, ignoring the confused glares shot between the housecarls. Talia was seemingly non-plussed when Jordis nuded her. “Jakk, you’re on point. Keep them low and keep them out of sight. Stay at a smart distance and keep under the radar until the signal, then jump in. Lydia, Argis, Jordis, Iona, you’re under Jakk’s lead for the moment. Eirian, Talia, keep the civilians safe,” the cat continued, but Kharjo broke in.

“Kharjo is more interested in new scratching post, to be honest,” he folded his arms across his chest, nodding when Dro’Marash nuded his shoulder with an elbow. “And little brother is feeling hungry. We think we will join your cubs, old friend.”

“Can you handle it?” Artan asked, but tugged a thin, long blade from the hem of his trouser leg all the same. Argis could see the confused then amused grin that broke across Jordis’ face, but said nothing on it. Kharjo took the blade, tested its weight, and nodded. Jakk had already thrown another spare sword to Dro’Marash, the other khajiit happy enough to wield the borrowed blade.

“You’ll need to lend me something heavier, lad,” Hrongar huffed, pointedly ignoring Lydia’s cold glare.

Artan sighed, and shot an indecipherable glare to each of them, before he made a low clicking hiss sound in his throat, and Lefty stepped forwards and pull a huge, thick canvas roll from S’haira’s back. Where that had been, Argis couldn’t have said. He put it on the ground before ripping the leather bindings open and flipping the roll open to show a hoard of swords, a battle axe and two shields. Not a few wary glances were sent towards the tiny S’haira, who didn’t even acknowledge them. Her eyes were glued to the bend in the road, tail flickering anxiously.

The weapons were handed out, and it was decided that group of huddled, dour-faced civilians were going to be defended by Lydia and Hrongar, since the two refused to be parted and neither wanted the other to engage the slavers. Artan put his foot down and told them to stay behind, at which they both grumbled but acquiesced. The smaller group of Jordis, Eirian, Jakk, Talia, Argis, Iona and the three assassins carried on, mostly not voicing varying levels of surprise that Lefty and S’haira were joining them.
And just like that, they were heading into hell.

Chapter End Notes

AN: I'm so sorry this took so long. I ended up getting a new job, and actually taking care of myself, so I've had less time to write and get shit done. That and the next few chapters are gonna be sad as fuck, and that kind of shit is gonna be hard to write. If I actually manage to buckle down and do what I want to do with the next few chapters, it's not going to be pretty. But still, you'll know what I mean by that if I actually go through with the plot the way I have it planned.

Thank you for all the lovely reviews! Even if I don't reply I read them all :) mostly because I panic and don't know what I should say, but rest assured I am not ignoring you.

Thank you for sticking with my story and me through this, and hopefully I'll be able to get out the next chapter early. I already have it half-written, so that should be fine.

Thank you for reading!

~ Frog
4E 203, Mid Frostfall
Turdas

The signal was flashier than expected.

The seven of them, including Dro'Marash and Kharjo, were settled in the thick brush at the lakeside, all with their eyes pinned on the slavers bustling around Britleshin Pass. The green-faced bandits where looking to be less of a threat than ever, one or two even going so far as to turn away from a few of the screaming civilians. And then it started. The lake nearest the slavers was bubbling, at first a slight few and then a broiling mass of water frothing and churning. It was enough to make a good few slavers turn from their places, as well as giving the bandits something to focus on rather than bloodied and beaten bodies. A few even ventured close to the waters edge.

There was a flicker of red light, and a few of the civilians broke free of the tight little line they had been herded into. One even went so far as to near enough brain a nearby slaver with her shackles, downing the man with the sheer force of the blow.

In the sudden chaos as more civilians started fighting back and a few slavers turned back to the line of chained men and women, the bandits seemed a little more confused at what to look at. The slavers attempted to quell the crowd with blunted shields and swords, the bandits watching on dazedly as the rallying slavers pushed past them. And that was when the signal hit. The two flame Atronachs rolled out of the lake with a huge bellow of flame, flanked by an assassin on both sides and one in the centre, near enough crushing whatever resistance there might have been at the lakes edge.

It was kind of terrifying, watching the assassins and conjured Atronachs serge out of the lake to smash, and burn and gut their way through the enemy ranks. The two furthest allies pinned the dragging tail of the slaver line to the rock face, cutting off any hope of an exit.

And just like that they were loping out of the brush, Jordis and Jakk and the head of their group, driving the screaming enemy back from the pass’ open maw and into the open. It became chaos pretty quickly after that. Argis quickly lost sight of Artan and the Atronachs, but the sudden titanic twin roars behind him brought them back to his fragmented attention. Penelope and Valencia were surging into the Pass, Artan at their heels, and the echoes of screams much louder than the ones from out in the open. Argis didn’t have the time to really pay attention to the niggling fear he had in his heart, busy driving his blade through what he guessed to be a bandit archer. She screamed, and he absently noticed breadcrumbs and smears of sauce across her face. He didn’t let it get to him. The civilians had taken the bait, and as the thin line of warriors and Eirian managed to pin the rapidly dying slavers to the mountainside the civilians were herded to the water side, trying to help each other out of their shackles. A few of them even picked up fallen swords to help cut down the straggling enemy since the assassins had followed Artan into the tunnel.
In retrospect, it made sense since Artan’s identity as the Master Assassin of the Brotherhood was very fucking confidential.

One of the slavers, by the looks of the crested helmet a captain, managed to slip past one of the tired villagers. He lashed out with his sword, and Argis knew he couldn’t make it in time.

Jakk’s blades were fast enough to just be a mottled blur in the air, one in the captain’s elbow and the other in his kidney. The speed of the attack was lost on the villager, who only noticed the danger when the man screamed in agony a mere foot from her face. She staggered back and Iona took her place, hand on the man’s throat.

He didn’t see more, since his face was splattered with blood from a careering bandit, staggering from Talia’s punch. She hit him again, and his face crumpled.

A few more ugly minutes, and it was over.

Only the sudden blast of light that Eirian sent up as a way of signalling Lydia made the celebrating civilians falter from their happy yelling, their dancing and the rowdy song that a few of them had started up. The lull didn’t last, instead the merrymaking returned with fervour. It took a lot of manoeuvring to guide the citizens through the Pass, mostly because they were so relieved to have been rescued. Of course, there were no assassins spotted in the pass, and everything inside that could have harmed an innocent was dead before they needed to cross paths with it.

Things might actually work out, Argis thought.

xxx

4E 203, Mid Frostfall
Middas

Serana was unbelievably hungry.

It had been a good few days since she had fed, and even though the kids and Scouts-Many-Marshes had offered supplementing her, well. She had refused, simply because feeding off of friends was something that she had promised herself she would never stoop to, willing donor or not. If she was honest with herself, it was because she didn’t trust herself to stop. Artan had voiced similar worries, but the cat hadn’t said much about his insecurities to anyone but her and Iona. She had given him a few of her spare bottles of blood, and the ones she had kept for herself were long gone.

And so, she found herself outside Riften and its murky walls, more or less stalking a few of the mercenaries wandering the Goldenglow Estate. She had found it incredibly easy to infiltrate, just as Artan had said. Apparently the place was owned by some rich fart who liked to hole up in his ivory tower like a terrified princess, scared of Maven’s wrath. What he did to warrant such a thing, Serana didn’t know. But if it meant an easy meal of some unsuspecting fools, well then that was just her shining luck.

They should have been more on guard, she thought absently, watching a thin waif of a man pick at his gauntlet with a bored hand. He was alone, because of course he was. Apparently doing watches in pairs was considered to be a waste of time here, since all of the patrols on the estate worked alone. Not a bright spark among them, then. It would have been easy for an assassin to wander in and murder the owner. It might have been the mans own luck that Artan did no deals with Maven.

Serana stepped out into the watery moonlight and more or less strode towards the mans open back, and then moving to stand straight in front of him. He jumped a little at her sudden appearance, but before he could much more than grunt he had him in the compulsion, fingers faster than his voice. A
few flicks, and he was completely under her spell, eyes glassy and face slack. It took only a moment to brush a long coil of dark hair away from his throat and drag him towards her, hand firmly planted at the base of his skull.

It was easy enough to drink her fill, just enough to tide her over and not kill him. He might have a few bouts of random dizziness, but he would be alive and well in a few days. She laved over the pinpricks in his throat with her tongue, effectively healing the wounds. It was a clever little adaptation that vampires had. It was a shame that most didn’t know about it, or didn’t care to know.

She sat him down by a tree stump at the lakeside, patting his hat in appreciation before turning on her heel to face Riften.

It was just in time to see the huge explosion rock the land-facing battlement of the city.

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4E 203, Mid Frostfall
Turdas

Argis tugged on his cloak, tightening the fabric around his neck considerably. It kept the draft out, and made him slightly more comfortable. Well, as comfortable one could be around three assassins. Artan was more than fine, but Lefty and S’haira were unsettling enough for the male khajiits presence to be almost ineffectual. They had left Eirian, Jakk and Lydia to escort the civilian army that they had rescued safely back to Whiterun. Eirian had let out what was more akin to an unearthly howl into the sky when they reached the other side of Brittleshin pass, and had enigmatically said that they would be fine from there on out. So he, Iona, Jordis and Talia had promptly returned through the pass to come face to face with three very smug assassins. It was easy enough to strip the slavers and bandits of gear, burn the bodies and more or less gain no new information.

None of them were particularly proud of that development, but Artan didn’t let them dwell on it long, since he pushed them to make the few hours journey to Riverwood that night. It was more or less midnight by the time they reached the Inn, at which the innkeep was ecstatic about having so many customers. Talia broke off from there, citing that she needed to speak to her scouts. Iona similarly excused herself, oblivious or ignoring the dimming light in the innkeep’s eyes.

Lefty and S’haira had refused to even step foot in the place, apparently both having unpleasant memories of inns. Argis didn’t want to know. Where they disappeared to, nobody could quite figure out, but Argis was more than relieved when the two of them turned on their heels and left. But now, he and Artan were sat on one of the benches outside, waiting for Cicero. S’haira had dropped down from the rooftop above them to perch on the balcony’s railing, and almost gave Argis a heart attack. Lefty fucking melted out of the shadows next to his face, which almost gave him a second heart attack.

And all Artan did was laugh, because he was an asshole.

He stopped laughing when a tiny light in the distance appeared, and in silence, the four of them watched it approach. Nobody expected to see Scouts-Many-Marshes lope out of the dark, bloodied and dead-eyed with Dawnbreaker at one side, Serana at his other.

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4E 203, Mid Frostfall
Middas
She ran faster than she had ever needed to before. But even so, she was late.

The fires had already begun eating their way across the various upper boardwalks, sending ashy timbers crashing down onto the lower catwalks. People were screaming, running, and between the flashes of magic and the thunderous cracks of Dawnguard crossbows, the orphanage kids were making mad dashes towards the river. The vampires had each of the other gates covered like ants on a cake, and the various battle-worthy citizens were already hard pressed keeping the bloodsuckers pinned against the rapidly burning doors into the city. Well, most of them.

Serana hadn’t been able to get into Honeyside, the backdoor was being bombarded with different spells and at one point the vampires had their thralls lift one of their fellows and try to use his screaming body as a battering ram, but Scouts had done well in barricading the door. With what little notice he had, she was impressed.

She had eventually decided to scale the wall and leap over, which almost got her a bolt to the throat. The Dawnguard who shot at her had been mauled by an enemy vampire just as he fired the shot, and she didn’t know whether to be grateful or not about that. She may have been running for Honeyside, but she was still torn. It was pure spur of the moment that she grabbed at a nearby child, dragging them to their feet and pushing them towards Honeyside.

It was Runa.

“Get the other kids to Honeyside, as well as anyone who can’t fight,” Serana bit out, before she simply threw down whatever reservations she had and let an unholy amount of lightning loose into the fray. She caught three thralls in her attack, allowing Mjoll an opening into getting at a Nightmaster Vampire that was trying to use them as cover for breaking into the Bunkhouse. Serana rose two of their corpses, and just like that it was on.

It didn’t take long to realise that the Dawnguard were firing at her, but it also didn’t take long for her to notice the local guards and a few various children screaming bloody murder at them for doing so.

Eventually, all coherent thought bled into movement after movement, attack after attack, a seamless dance of lightning and the ugly sucking drain-spell she was wielding with a vengeance. There was a moment of clarity when a Dawnguard appeared at her side, his face in that battle haze that she had seen so much of since she woke up. She had been ready to blow his brains out with lightning before Hroar, little Hroar of all people, to step between them and shove the man away from her. She laughed, high and shrill, before clapping a hand to the boys back and yelling above the din, “Keep your eyes on the leeches, boy!”

The thieves had begun to trickle into the battle, more pronounced than before to lend aid beside the guards they might have swindled or paid off the night before. It was hilarious, in retrospect.

They were bunkering down, settling in around Honeyside like it was a beacon in the night, the last few kids that hadn’t-

The last of the kids were ducking through the tiny gaps between the fighters to run straight into the house when she noticed. It was when Mjoll and a few of the theives’ heavies settled into two rough groups, one in the alleyway beside the house and one spanning the sparse few steps between Helgas and the boardwalk, that Serana finally glanced back. Between the flickering archers and the livid Wylandriah, and beside a roaring Marcurio was Sofie. She had a scroll in her hands, one that Serana didn’t recognise at all, and she was glad for it.

The pain was unimaginable.
But even as she was dragged inside by -Talen? Talen-Jei?- she noted absently that at least she wasn’t like those other vampires outside, ashes already from just being near the Circle of Protection. Why not, she couldn’t say.

Sofie was babbling at her, so she guessed she should pay attention.

“...So pa said it would be useful but it might be a little too adept for me. And he’ll probably be angry for me reading his books but I got bored and I guess it worked out for the best, right?” She tittered, pressing a hand against Serana’s brow. And immediately the pain began the fade even further, and as her mind cleared she nearly nodded to herself and dislodged Sofie’s hand. The girl had learnt a spell that could heal the dead. Artan had a fucking amazing kid.

“You did well, kid. You definitely just saved my life right there,” Serana smiled, tight but still genuine. She stood, waving away Igrun’s hands of help. “Where is Scouts?”

“He’s um, over there. Lucia is trying to… talk to him.”

“What? Why? What’s-“

The answer was right there, in front of her when Scouts himself made a horrible wail, and crouched closer in on himself. His hands were bloodied from clawing at something, and on closer inspection it was from clawing at the skin that covered his ears. Lucia looked absolutely terrified, eyes darting between the Argonian and Serana. But the vampire didn’t know what to do, either. She had never seen anything like it, the rocking, the wailing, or the blank stare.

She almost had enough time to ask, but Hroar’s dead body came crashing through the doorway, a bleeding Mjoll trailing after him. The woman fell to a knee at his side, face wild and rapidly snapping towards the outside world, before she simply leapt straight at the fireplace, a surge of lightning scorching where she once was. A stray bolt caught Hroar, and the body just twitched before lying still. It made Sofie’s already panicked crying pitch into outright hysteria and Lucia’s terror bubble into outright screaming fear. The citizens were fucking howling, and Serana wasn’t fast enough.

The last thought she had before the enemy Volkihar vampire stepped onto Honeyside’s welcome mat was, “They fucking left us to die didn’t they.”

Her head snapped reflexively when the vampire’s head made an loud ugly crack.

Brynjolf sailed past the vampire, landing lightly beside the table with ash-covered blades, and the vampire went after him with a pained snarl. He and Mjoll were trying to back the civilians into going deeper into the house with their turned backs, as well as fighting off the whirlwind of attacks that the Volkihar vampire was throwing at them. It was like watching a snake fight a pair of chickens, is what it was. And Serana couldn’t help, because another vampire had popped its head in the door. She slammed it with a frost spell that would have rivalled Windhelm’s Winter Solstice and it recoiled, but more and more kept appearing. She could feel her magika reserves dwindling, and fuck the bodies were piling up around that door, but fuck.

They were fucked, weren’t they?

Mjoll screamed, and Serana spared a glance at her to see an ugly red gash across her side. She was still standing, though, as was the heavily bruised Brynjolf. But the vampire was winning.

She couldn’t leave the door.

The warriors outside were either dead or had already run for their lives. They were lucky that there were only five or so vampires firing shots from outside, as the others had probably begun hunting in
other parts of the city. It was disgusting to think it, but she was glad. Better someone else than us. Keep them off us, I don’t care who dies just don’t let it be us.

But Mjoll was faltering, and Brynjolf’s speed wasn’t a match for the vampire.

Sofie was screaming even louder, and Lucia was shaking her, trying to drag her away, anything that was getting the brunette further from the now cackling vampire.

And just like that, something in that house snapped.

Scouts was behind Mjoll and Brynjolf at a speed that made the thief’s already heightened survival instincts twitch, the red-head’s face twitching into fear like a flash.

The Argonian slid between the two of them to stab at a vampire who was dancing around their blades. Serana didn’t want to tell Jakk that Scouts was dead. The vampire looked as stunned as Brynjolf and Mjoll when the silver blade pierced her straight through her chest. The expression was immortalised when the Argonian did a dainty step and twirl around the thief and warrior to behead her neatly, sending a whirlwind of ashes into the sky when Dawnbreaker met undead skin.

It was more or less a massacre after that.

Scouts was like a river, pushing and thundering around the vampires surging through the door the moment Serana’s magika ran out. They were literally turning to dust the moment they crossed the threshold, only the thralls piling up around the doorway now. Even when the surge had reduced to a trickle, Scouts didn’t stoop from his steel-like stance, not even seeming to breathe. All of Serana’s instincts told her to run.

Usually they were “Kill, sleep, feed.” She had never felt a fear in her like this before, even when she watched Artan eat a fucking dragon’s soul before her very eyes. She felt awe, but not this bone-deep fear of an Argonian that she had watched make cakes in a pink apron only hours before.

When it had metaphorically quietened down, a sobbing Sofie threw out another Circle of protection, one that would encompass the door entirely, before Brynjolf started quietly urging people to un-barricade the back door. He didn’t take his eyes off Scouts once, his face set into that wild-animal fear that she had seen on farmyard animals beset by wolves. Mjoll was similar, but more subtle with her stare. She had Grimsever at her side, shield strapped to her back, and was chugging a health potion that Aerin had pushed in her slack fingers moments before.

Scouts had fallen completely silent, only moving enough to stand stock still in the centre of the meagre entranceway. His hands were held rod-straight at his sides, his head the only thing allowed slack it seemed, since his chin was resting gently on his chest. It was almost as if he was in a kind of trance.

Sofie was crying silently now, hand around Lucia’s with the other clutching at her dress. She let go of both to take a sure stride forwards, to do something that made near enough everyone else in the house have a heart-attack on the spot.

She wrapped a hand around Scout’s wrist from where it had fallen limply to his side, and tugged gently on his arm. “Scouts, we need to go find pa and uncle Jakk.”

Scouts’ sword arm twitched, and for a second Serana thought he’d plunge it straight through Sofie’s head. She felt her insides twist when the Argonian slid the silver sword into it’s sheathe and transferred Dawnbreaker to his free hand, the one that wasn’t held by Sofie. He nodded once, twice, before shaking his head and seeming to return to himself. “Yes. We need to leave. They will know
what to do,” he seemed to be telling himself more than her, before twitching his wrist a little so her hand slid down and they could hold hands. He led her two the door nodding to Lucia before he nodded to Serana, the suspicious Brynjolf and twitchy Mjoll.

But even as Sofie led him out into the wilds, things weren’t quite right.

“What about dad’s stuff?” Lucia asked quietly, looking back into the house before following her sister and the Argonian down the wooden steps and into the trees. There were vampires nearby, hollering and throwing things up to the stable’s roof to cave it in. Scouts led the two of them further away, unable to stop them from realizing they were caving the thatch roof with bodies.

The other citizens that had hunkered down in Honeyside with them had mostly already broken into runs towards the wilds, or in some cases checked their luck and jumped into the lake. In retrospect, Serana wondered why they were making a slow jog at best.

Sofie answered, “From the looks of it that room had more defences than a secret door, so hopefully most of the things inside are salvageable when we retake the city.”

Serana scoffed, but tried to gentle her words a little more when she did manage them. “You saw them all. They practically ravaged everything. Who could stand against a group of vampires like that? Not without an army at least? And that Talia’s army moved out towards the other holds days ago.”

“Dad could,” Lucia noted thoughtfully.

“Aye, that he could lass,” Brynjolf nodded, making sure to miss the bow she had across her back when he ruffled her hair. She seemed to remember then, and drew the weapon to hold it at her side. He nodded again, in approval.

“Where are we going? We cant just wander the wilds-“ Aerin started, sounding a little out of breath from everything. The six others looked to him; well, except Scouts, who was having trouble looking at anything. His eyes still had that awful glassy blur.

There was a quiet moment where they all looked rather listless and lost, but eventually Sofie snapped that in half. “We are going to the nearest house. Which would be Ivarstead. They have the Greybeards, right? So they would probably have at least one in the town protecting the townsfolk, especially since the citizens have been supplying the Greybeards with food and other such necessities for generations. We will be safe with them, as well as get a message out to papa. Now we had better get going, hadn’t we?”

She turned on her heel and began near enough dragging Scouts again, but keeping a very tight distance between her and the lake. Serana looked to Lucia, who shrugged and broke out into a jog to walk beside her sister.

They almost made it.

They hit the tiny farm that skirted Riften, but by looks of it the vampires had already gone through, destroying most of the house as well as setting the fields alight. It was a mistake going past it. Something whistled through the air, and Serana was too slow to react. The shard of ice caught Mjoll’s side, wounding her but thankfully missing her with the sharp point. It sailed mostly past, ripping a few of the belts across her shoulder free. She hit the dirt hard, whether from instinct or pain was unclear, but Aerin was forced face-first into the dirt by her arm, and her sword- was already drawn in her free hand. Serana had to guess a little of both. Serana looked into the dark swells between the fires and started firing back, sending a bolt of lightning into the dark. It lit everything
pretty well, but also encouraged a few of the stragglng vampires into the woodland around them, and that was that. Aerin took off towards the lake, dragging Sofie and Lucia beside him, while Scouts drew his silver sword and started hacking at anything that tried to follow.

It might have worked, having Mjoll, Serana and Scouts holding the line. But as it was, something hard and heavy hit Scouts in the chest, shattering the silver sword he held up in defence, and he went flying. Mjoll was too slow to see the arm whip back and it caught her across the head. She crumpled, and Serana was alone, only barely able to hear the sound of Scouts hitting the lakewater. It sounded like he hit a deep part, so she was not worried.

She was worried when Orthjolf appeared in her vision.

It was easy enough for her to banish the Gargoyle that had been summoned, and she backed away from the line of ten or so vampires that had accumulated. She even recognised a few of them, sickeningly enough.

“Hello, Mistress Serana,” Orthjolf smiled, and she knew, deep inside, that this one of them were going to die tonight. “It is a pleasure to see you again.”

“What are you doing? Riften is miles away from the castle, and the Dawnguard are practically its neighbours! This is insane!” she hissed at him. They both knew she was stalling, trying to give Aerin enough time to-

“I have them, Orthjolf,” a male voice rang out in the near silence. And just like that, everything fell apart. Stalf had Sofie and Lucia by the hair, one head in each fist, and was urging them towards the enemy line.

“And that human?” The leader asked.

“Put him in a compulsion and made him drown himself, of course,” Stalf replied.

“Good wo~”

She almost tore his entire cheek and jaw from his face with her attack, and the girls were screaming, and there was some kind of howling from all around her, but that was it, wasn’t it? She couldn’t feel much of anything, just the whirl of wind around her and the rapid smack, smack, smack of things hitting her legs and arms. Her fingers were wet, she felt, more because of the cold dripping and the way the wind made the liquid on her hands feel even colder. It felt like forever before she stopped, or at least forever until she came back to herself, eyes taking in the dark that had settled in the tiny copse of trees. The farm wasn’t burning anymore, and the girls, well the girls were gone. Hopefully they ran. But as she looked around at the bodies piled around the path away from Riften, she knew. Orthjolf wasn’t there, and neither was Stalf.

Her father’s men had Artan’s children.

Xxx

4E 203, Late Frostfall
Fridas

He had wondered what the journey was like for Artan when he went between Dawnstar to deal with Cicero and then all the way into Riften to deal with Maven. It was a long time ago, and he barely remembers the things that happened there. He had been through worse. But he did remember the sound of Artan’s voice when he got into that basement dungeon that Maven had in her house.
It still kind of haunted him.

Artan wasn’t talking this time.

They had left the same night that Serana and Scouts showed up. Cicero had appeared on the road towards Whiterun, looking even madder than before. But his jokes died in his throat, and for once Argis saw an actual monster rather than a man. He fell in alongside Artan, S'haira and Lefty, and between them it was almost enough for Argis to say fuck this I’m out. If it was anything else, then he would have. But as it was, he was never going to stop until they got to those kids. He supposed there must be something wrong with him, too, because Jordis was giving him a wide berth, and Lydia was avoiding everyone.

Scouts, well Scouts was inconsolable. Jakk was at his side, but even the khajiit couldn’t fix whatever had snapped inside the Argonian. Artan hadn’t said a word, and just set Scouts up with a set of armor when they hit Breezehome. Dawnbreaker was still at his side, and Artan had given him another sword to dual wield with.

Artan didn’t even seem surprised that Scouts could fight, and Jakk was livid. The two kept it out of the Argonian’s sight, but it was obvious to the rest of them that Artan had been the only one to know about Scout’s incredible battle prowess. They had all figured him to be a regular guy. But from Serana’s tale about how Riften was attacked, and then about how she had taken the quickest route to Riverwood after realizing she had been too late to rescue the girls, well. She was a vampire, a pure-blooded one at that. It had been night time, and she was on full alert. And Scouts had not only found her, but snuck up on her.

It was good news for them; since they needed all the firepower they could get in order to attack the Volkihar Castle, but as things looked… Scouts was in bad shape. Whatever he stopped fighting for, well, it was enough that it had brought back some terrible memories. Argis didn’t know how he felt about making Scouts fight.

As it was, they managed to gather Jordis, Lydia, himself, Scouts, Jakk and the assassins. Eirian, well, Eirian had surprised them all.

They had stopped off at Jorvaskr after Jakk had insisted, and the elf was sat inside at the big table celebrating with the others. Apparently Farkas, Aela and Ria had managed to tackle one of the slaving groups who had tried to attack the small farms near Whiterun, but easily repelled them. As well as finding out one of their bases. Aela had even taken a key from their leader before he managed to dispose of it.

And when Artan stormed in, Jakk at his side and Argis at his other, well, it was a surprise that Vilkas welcomed them. And when Artan explained the situation, well, if “The Volkihar took the girls. Apparently Harkon’s retaliation at Serana leaving with the elder scroll, I need you, Eirian,” counted as an explanation. Vilkas had recoiled, looking grim, but the elf had stood, eyes like a fucking hurricane. Njada and Athid had actually moved away from her, much more aware of the tiny wisps of lightning that seemed to filter through the air around her head.

“Companions, your Harbinger goes to war. We have been a family for more than a year now, and I do not ask you to follow me. But I am going to the Volkihar Castle, and I will raise that backwater vampire den to the ground. Who, if any of you, will accompany me? Who will be my sword and shield?”

The screaming started soon after that, and as it was, near enough half of the guild had followed Eirian and Artan out of Jorvaskr that evening.
It seemed that Eirian had become their leader, or Father figure, or whatever kind of head the companions had. Or at least they respected her enough to follow her to the other side of the province. Cicero had thankfully kept a distance from the werewolves, as well as most of the more normal warriors accompanying them. But even so, nobody had heard from Calder since he had gone to the market in Riften before the attack. Scouts said he hadn’t returned, and that he only knew about the attack when some vampires had tried getting in through the back door. By the time he had barricaded it with near enough anything not nailed down, the girls had run in, Sofie crying and Lucia wild-eyed.

Calder as it was could be either dead, or worse.

But then again, if he was alive, they would rescue him, too.

The only time they stopped for more than two hours was when Celan and his group of scouts intercepted them. “Hello again, Artan. Argis, what’s going on?”

Argis had tried to reply, or at least tell him to run, but Artan was already in his face. “Vampire hunters indeed? Those freaks have my girls, and the Dawnguard near enough crumbled! What the fuck kind of warriors are you?!”

Celan looked shocked, and then entirely devastated after hearing about Riften when Eirian had manage to get between them and explain. The other few Dawnguard fighters with him seemed rather grim, but none the less, they seemed determined. It made their group bigger, if more passive aggressive, than before.

Some of them even looked a little green around the edges when they went through Morthal and Artan cured his vampirism. A few of the old Vigilants in the group looked disgusted when the black soul gem changed hands, but something in Argis was a little cold when it came down to the tiny rock. Rather someone else than Artan, he guessed. When he had started feeling less charitable with his pity, he didn’t know. When they were maybe a day from the icy jetty that would mark the short stretch of water between the castle and the mainland, Artan took his hand. It wasn’t anything more than a silent askance for strength, support. Argis gladly gave, and the two of them stepped up from the seats they had taken on a log for their watch, and woke the rest of the dozing group.

And when they strode out into the patchy snow between the water and the woods, well. The thirty odd vampires meandering around the wooden jetty were less of a threat and more of a starter before a main course, Argis thought.

XXX

Sofie woke slowly, and instead of the anger she thought she should have felt, she only had a deep-set fear in her heart. Lucia was different. She was near enough vibrating with rage at her side, almost enough that Sofie wondered how the manacles around her wrists stayed on. She hid her tiny smile at the thought of them binding their hands before them. They weren’t bindings right now, they had more or less given Lucia a hammer.

“They took us to lure dad here,” Lucia bit out, eyes not leaving some far off point in the room. Sofie took that moment to look around, and notice the forty or so vampires in the huge mead hall, all staring or at least glancing furtively in their direction. As it was, they were huddled in the centre of three huge tables, and well…

She tried not to look, but one of the humans laid on the left-most table groaned quietly, and the resounding thunk of a vampire cracking a fist across the man’s skull drew her eye. The thought of it, being under a compulsion that strong, strong enough that a bunch of vampires feeding on you wouldn’t break it, Pa said that compulsions usually snapped when the subject was introduced to pain,
so if someone under a compulsion was hit with something hard enough the compulsion would break. But vampires always muddy up the rules, he had said. The man had to have been strong to even make that noise.

A huge vampire strode into her space, grabbing her by the back of the dress and lifting her up to sit, ignoring the gurgle she made when the neckline cut off her airway. Something slammed into his arm, making him release her. When she looked back up, the vampire smashed the back of his hand into Calder’s jaw, but the Nord didn’t even flinch. The vampire retreated, grinning. He looked nothing like Serana, since she had stayed looking mostly human. But these vampires were all so… inhuman. She couldn’t explain it much more than looking at something ethereal. But then, Penelope and Valencia were very human-like, in the way they presented themselves. Childlike more than anything, but they had some kind of humanity in them.

“Don’t forget, blood bag, that you are only alive because you’re that animal’s lover,” the vampire snarled, too-big fangs twisting the skin around his mouth tight. “If you were anything else, you’d be on that table with the others.”

Sofie’s head snapped to the side, eyes pinned to Calder. He looked a little grey, but didn’t give anything away. By the Nine they were in trouble. Thank the Gods that Lucia intervened, who brought the attention to herself by growling, “You’ll regret it, leech.”

The vampire turned to her, and spat. She laughed a laugh that Sofie had never heard before. It was deep, and reminded her vaguely of Talia. “Keep on going. He’ll strap you up to a tree ready for the sunshine.”

The vampire growled, and stormed away. It was almost funny to see a windswept and screaming vampire ran in, an altmer by the look of him, pushing through the vampires congregated at the balcony entranceway to howl down at the congregation. “He’s here! Here’s here and he brought a dragon!”

Lucia’s laugh rang out through the hall, even so much as drowning out most of the hubbub that erupted at the announcement, some vampires looking more distraught than others. It was an awkward look on their faces. Too human for the inhuman twists. It was another big, dark-haired vampire who slammed down his fist on the table behind them that brought silence to the hall. Lucia sneered, but was quiet as well when the lord of the castle spoke.

“We are Volkihar; we are the top of the food chain. A mere animal and its pet lizard are nothing to my might. I will destroy any vampire fool enough to run from this fight. That creature has most likely gathered a strong group to attack this castle, and once they lay dead and dying, this province and its blood bags are ours,” Harkon laughed, loud and bright.

He looked about to say more, but an explosion rocked the castle. Well, to say it was an explosion was a little bit of an understatement. Wood from what she guessed was the front door thundered through the air, huge splinters catching the vampires crowding the balcony in front of them. Some of it even landed around the bound threesome in the centre of the hall, forcing Lucia and Sofie to huddle even closer to Calder, who tried his best to shield them from most of it. Something caught him in the shoulder, making him snarl out something in Nordic, but otherwise he didn’t make a sound.

“Oh Talos Almighty, Calder!” Sofie shrieked when she looked around. It was at least three inches wide and seven long, going straight through Calder’s shoulder muscle and out of his back. A few inches lower, and it would have caught her straight in the head.

“Keep focused!” Lucia grabbed her hands, which she hadn’t realised were shaking, to still them.
And just like that, the world fell away. Lucia was staring at her, straight in the eye, calm and collected. It reassured her, that trust. And when Lucia tugged the last of the ropes from Sofie’s hands, and Sofie went to return it, Lucia shook her head. “Heal Calder. It won’t be the first time I’ve gotten out of a tight bind,” she smirked, rewarded with a tight little chuckle from Calder. So Sofie took up a nearby candlestick that had fallen from the tables, ignoring the fucking mania going on around her, and hit the splinter in Calder’s shoulder with the butt. He screamed so loudly that she thought that the vampires around them might have just jumped on them out of instinct, but there were a few Dawnguard warriors in the thick of it, as well as a few of the Companions.

She ripped the splinter from his back, garnering a tight little hiss and maybe a whimper, but by then Lucia had freed herself and was working on the mans bound hands, tied behind his back. Sofie made a quick perusal of the wound, before deciding that they could cut out whatever she had missed later, and they needed to move, now. With shaking hands, she managed to press against the wound on both sides, one on his back and one on his front, and she pushed as much as she could into the spell. She must have blacked out at some point, because when she came back to herself Calder was carrying her up the stairs, and Lucia had stolen a crossbow and bolts from a fallen Dawnguard and was firing at whatever tried to stop them from ascending the stairs. Valencia swooped past them, fire rippling wildly from her shoulders like a cape.

It wasn’t until a vampire stopped them on the stairs that Sofie realized how close they were to dying. Most of the warriors raiding the castle had pushed deeper into the main hall, leaving the front door wide open. There may have been more allies outside, but here and now, a Night Master vampire was stood between them and the relative safety of outside. Calder dropped her on her feet and lashed out with a fist, which surprised the creature enough for it to falter. Lucia was already dragging her up the last of the steps, however with Valencia and Penelope at their sides. A Companion, Njada, had gone to aid Calder, throwing him some kind of axe, but they were already out into the hallway and then into the watery sunlight outside. To meet a Gargoyle, the monster turning from its fight against what looked to be a werewolf, and that was it. The things eyes locked onto them, and Lucia seemed to freeze. It must have been taking orders, since it threw the werewolf off with a resounding crack of a fist against the dogs nose, before barrelling at them with a speed that made it blur. Sofie felt the thing hit her, and felt Lucia’s hand torn from hers, and then she was looking up at the sky, the wolf snuffling at her face.

She sat up, and the wolf seemed to nod before taking off after the Gargoyle.

That thing had taken Lucia.

Sofie did what she thought was right. She ran.

xxx

Lucia hit the tiles hard, barely able to take in the chaos of the throne room. She rolled out of the way of a huge Nord that was fighting some kind of dunmeri vampire, the two of them too battle-haze to even notice her. The gargoyle was screeching, seemingly unable to see her with all the noise and movement. Whatever had hit it hard enough for the thing to drop her, she was thankful for it. She could see Argis driving his way through what looked to be a night master vampire’s guard, the things blades unable to stop the mans brute strength. But his eyes were glazed with rage, as if something had fully taken him over. Jordis was at his back, a whirlwind of lightning hair and the bright venomous glint of her glass battleaxe. Whatever safety she would find with them, she knew it wouldn’t last long. She made a move to huddle underneath one of the nearby tables, eyes peeled for her father.

Artan wasn’t hard to miss. He was enveloped in a ball of pure sunlight, a thin black akaviri blade at
his side with an ugly, twisting dark magic at his other. Something in that mass cracked, and a pale white slip of a creature slunk out to take the shape of a man in the Dark Brotherhood robes. Something in that man was broken, but it didn’t seem to matter much since he was already slashing away at the vampires who tried to crowd Pa’s back. She barely recognised Eirian, cloaked in lightning and practically howling.

There wasn’t many brave enough to approach her, but by the looks of it she was in a fight with a few of the higher ranked vampires. It seemed scarily balanced. Jakk was the one who found her, huddled under that table and unsure at what to do.

He dragged her out, and took her hand, and made her run.

This was strange. It hadn’t really hit her before, how strange this was. It had been a bluff when she said Dad would come. She didn’t expect him to actually show up. He had the slavers to deal with. And so many people had come with him. Uncle Jakk was practically dragging her now, before he just turned on his heel and plucked her from the floor. A vampire appeared over his shoulder, and she screamed.

But the vampire burnt up like a potato lost in the fireplace, and Sofie appeared at his hip, screaming wildly.

Lucia didn’t expect that, either.

Jakk took off at a run, and that was it. She couldn’t tell him about the ice shard. It was too fast, and it had already hit him in the back, downing them both. Lucia was quick to push him up, and he was screaming, and Sofie was there at his side crying, still too tired from healing Calder, and Scouts was-

There was a very big space around them now Scouts had practically barrelled to Jakk’s side. A few opportunistic vampires had begun closing in when Jakk went down, and Scouts, well, he was practically a blur of rage. Whenever he stood still, still enough to think, to think about roaring at the ones that got too close. Dawnbreaker was a sliver of cold fire at his side, and between them it was enough to give the predators pause.

But it was when Dad appeared that she felt calm.

It was weird how things went from unadulterated fear to a tranquil quiet just by his appearance in the fray. He was at Scouts side, sunlight in his hands, and even though they were outnumbered, even though most of the other fighters were working their way through the castle and far enough away that they would get no help, well. She felt safe.

She should have felt sick watching the body parts go flying, but she didn’t.

And when the khajiit turned, his thu’um practically warping the air around his mouth and throat, when he walked straight up to them to kneel beside Jakk’s head, start pumping that healing energy into the fallen Khajiit’s wound, his eyes were the most unsure part of him. He seemed confused, relieved, and a huge maelstrom of emotions all at once. Lucia waited, where Sofie didn’t. Sofie practically plastered herself to his side, sobbing and crying wildly. Jakk managed to sit up at one point, and Scouts had knelt by his side. The two cats shared a look, before Jakk turned to Scouts and simply passed out against the Argonian’s chest.

And Lucia was still frozen, knelt on the bloodied and scorched tiles of Volkihar castle. That is, until a clawed hand coiled around her head and tugged her into a hug. And just like that, everything broke, and she was crying right next to Sofie, the cat’s arms around them both, both their heads wet from his tears. Pa’s arms.
“He’s been pushed back into the throne room, Artan. We can’t get through the doors without some kind of key it seems,” Lydia snarled, still angry from being thwarted at the last hurdle. Looking down at the cat huddled with his kids, however, did soften that anger. Argis wasn’t here to see it; he was with Vilkas and Farkas, heading a small group that were clearing out the vampires deeper inside the castle. As it was, only herself, Jordis and Lefty had stayed where the others had all disappeared. The companions as well as S’haïra had begun hunting the vampires who had fled, since apparently a group led by Orthjolf had escaped just as Odaving landed. Apparently they figured Harkon dead in the water. Serana had become an invaluable source of information, as was Iona. Iona had led Cicero and a few of the Companions whelps into what was supposedly the sleeping area, and was currently cleaning house, as she put it.

That sweet kid, Hroar, was dead. Mjoll too, most likely, as well as Aerin. Lydia didn’t know how to feel about any of this. Most of Riften was most likely either a thrall or a bloodied lump being fed from right now.

What she did know, was that this wasn’t about Harkon’s supposed care for his daughter. It was most likely about the Elder scroll.

Fuck.

They didn’t have time for this. What if those slavers really were being led by Larethius? At the moment, they knew that one of the teams was his, but none of the others had been. The Companions had routed another group who had experienced slavers in their ranks, but they had been wearing a different set of armor. Still customized, but with a mark that Jakk hadn’t recognised, and neither had Eirian. Could it have been a fluke before? Could someone had left Larethius’ employ but just kept the armor, the armor that Bard had retrieved alongside Arnsien’s pelt? They had a key, and a heading, but what if it led them further away from Larethius? What if he wasn’t even remotely involved?

It didn’t matter, she decided. They still had a job to do, a job that involved ridding Skyrim of the monsters trying to enslave its people.

Artan stood, but not without nuzzling Lucia and Sofie’s hair in turn. “I’ll get that door open.”

“We’ll keep the girls company,” Jordis nodded at him when he turned, but Artan shook his head.

“Kill whatever comes near them. Keep them safe,” he went to stride past the two of them, but stopped between them instead. He clapped a hand to each of the women’s shoulders, before nodding tightly at Lefty, and then carried on.

Artan didn’t know how to feel about anything, anymore.

His girls were safe, but these fuckers had gotten them so easily. He had practically left Riften defenceless because he figured the Dawnguard were right next door, and well who would attack Riften? It was next door to a guild of vampire hunters, and well it was a shithole so most people didn’t even think to try and take the city. Maven had enough deals going with the Thalmor and Elenwen that the elves didn’t really give it a second glance.

It didn’t make sense.

Was he going senile? He literally took everyone from Riften after he said he would make it into a
safe place for his girls, at the drop of a hat. The second that they got a lead on the slavers, he literally dropped everything and took everyone with him on a wild goose chase. He could have taken down that slaver group in the pine forest with half of the people they had. He could have left more people behind, and maybe Riften would still be standing. Maybe Lucia and Sofie wouldn’t have gone through what they had.

And that was it, wasn’t it?

He needed these slavers dead, and that was that.

But he had one more thing to take care of with these vampires, too.

He kicked the door leading into the throne room, but it stayed firmly shut. A few of the Dawnguard who had been loitering around the door, waiting to see if Harkon would try to run, seemed to snicker at that a little. Serana looked ready to puke, or kill them, or just walk away. Artan looked to her, and actually regarded her for a few moments. “You should leave. I… don’t think you want to see what happens next.”

Serana didn’t say anything, but sat at the steps leading to the throne room.

Artan nodded back, and turned to the door again.

The Dawnguard lackeys stopped laughing when the full Unrelenting Force shout rolled from Artan’s tongue, his throat expanding and deflating as he pushed the words out. The door practically disintegrated under the pressure, and the cat drew a newly-retrieved Dawnbreaker from his hip and stepped into the room, Valencia and Penelope flanking him.

He didn’t let Harkon talk, didn’t grace the evil villains monologue with an audience. It was fierce, the fight, but it was obvious when the fear started beading up around the vampire’s eyes that he knew he was going to die. It was easier than expected, tearing the ugly leather wings from the creatures back, breaking one knee, and the other ankle, and then simply working his way up. He was glad in the end that nobody was there to see him.

Nobody was there to see, and the Atronachs wouldn’t tell.

Dawnbreaker scorched away all of the sins Artan made that day, and when he exited the throne room, and walked down those blackened steps with Serana at his side and the Dawnguard at his back, the Companions in their human-skin filtering in to follow, the girls on either side and Argis at the door, well.

It was a victory, and more so a reminder to the Province.

Don’t fuck with the Dragonborn.

xxx

It was an even harder battle to tell the congregated mass that he was postponing the slaver hunt for the moment. Well, less of a battle and more of a flat declaration. “I am taking my kids to Markarth, and from there I’ll get some plans together about the slaver situation.”

Eirian returned to Whiterun with her Companions, but not without giving both girls a kiss to their crowns and a few hugs. Jakk, well, Jakk had given a pained smile, hugged his brother and his nieces, and said that he needed some time to get his shit in check. Him and Scouts left with S’haira, Lefty
and Cicero the day after Eirian, people slowly peeling away from the group until it was just the girls, their dad and the housecarls.

And Serana.

She was less broken up about her father than Artan expected. He supposed that she had already mourned the loss of her father, and now, well now his ghost had just followed him into death.

It was a rather quiet return to Markarth.

He still hadn’t fully explained what really happened with Iona’s attackers yet, and he knew that was coming. Lydia had asked her how one of the men who had attacked Honeside had been a vampire when two bodies had been strung up outside the Bee and Barb, at which Iona had no answer. Jordis looked to be more or less decided about how that had occurred, but hadn’t voiced her concern. In the end he cut off all the crazy ideas about it and straight up told them he strung up two bandits bodies instead. When asked why, he pointed out that it was bad enough that Riften’s Jarl blatantly flaunted her patronage of the Thieves Guild, let alone the idea that she had vampires in her pocket also. Even the rumour alone might have opened doors for her, and Artan didn’t put it past Maven to sell “stolen goods” from the quiet settlements in the Rift to Vampire covens.

Argis pointed out that she wouldn’t possibly sell her own people to vampires as cattle. Artan just laughed and patted the Nord on the back.

Xxx

It had been maybe a day until Calder sat down at the big table and asked the million septim question. “What the hell are we doing? And what the hell is going to happen to Riften?”

Lydia moved from stuffing the sword polish back into the drawer beside one of the mannequins in the kitchen, back to her seat at the end of the table, easily settling in to listen. Jordis poured her a cup of wine and put down her canis root for a moment while she re-crossed her legs and too, got ready for the answers. Argis just sighed and plopped back into his seat a moment after getting up, crossing his arms. Even Lucia and Sofie looked up from their plates, silent and listening. They still hadn’t talked to anyone but each other about Hroar, or Runa, or any of the other kids. Not even Mr. Sweetroll and Princess Sithis came up in conversation anymore. Artan didn’t want to push them, but still, he was worried. Iona and Serana were loitering in the doorway between the alchemy room and the kitchen, red-head with a tankard of ale and other with what Artan hoped to be a new kind of spirit that would work better than Stros M’kai. Scouts and Jakk had even bothered to bunker down for a while, the Argonian seemingly more normal than whatever world he had been in on the journey here.

Still.

“We have a week until the people I sent for get here. A week. In that time, I am going to Solitude to get Tulius to give me a few Legionnaires to retake Riften with. With the recent attack on the city, it means that they’ll want someone to go in, and naturally that someone’s going to be me. I’ll also be updating him on the current status of the slaving rings, as well as… everything else. Hopefully I can broker a full peace treaty between the Empire and the last of the Stormcloaks. If everything goes to plan, I’ll have Talia’s men as well as the Legionnaires retake Riften, cement a full alliance and use the resulting mega-alliance to crush the slavers. As you lot know, we don’t know if these slavers are being led by Larethius. One man out of the hundred or so that ourselves or our allies have killed has had one of the man’s hallmarks on it, so we can’t really make a conclusion. But I wont lie to you, it is very, very fucking bad right now,” Artan sighed, pressing his hands into the crook of each elbow. “If shit goes down the way I think it will... then I won’t be able to protect any of you from what will happen.”
The silence was sickening.

“But as things are, you lot are the last defence against the shitstorm that’s gonna be heading our way. And you need to be ready for what that means. Right here, right now, is where I have to draw the line. Over the last few months you’ve seen the edges of the things after me and Jakk, and Eirian, and Talia, well all of us Summerset six are like. This shit ain’t nice, and being honest, it’s the mildest part of the things that could have happened. This is just the lukewarm bit of the bath before the hot water really gets going, you understand? So I need you all to make a choice today. I’m going tomorrow with Jakk to Solitude, and I need people here to look after my girls. I need to know that whatever happens, they will be taken care of. That you idiots will be alright. So, here’s my plan. Whoever stays, stays. And if the shit hits the fan, I need whoever’s left to take the girls away from this shithole. I have money set up everywhere in the province, each in a little room like Riften’s basement. You take that and you get away. I’ll write up a list for each of you to memorize about getting new identities and moving into a new country, I’ll set you up with contacts and things to keep you out of trouble. You’ll survive this, whatever happens. Or the second option is that you head out tomorrow morning. I’ll give you the rest of this years pay, and then that’s it. I cannot make you face the shit that’s coming for us, and if you can’t handle that, then it’s safest for you to go now. I can’t… I can’t guarantee how safe anyone will be if you stay.” Artan finished, looking at each of the crowded and greenish housecarls, to the stone-dead vampires, to the determined Jakk, and finally to his girls. Sofie was staring at him, indecipherable expression on her face, while Lucia looked-

“You’re seriously planning to give up, then?” Lucia more or less spat at him, bringing a shocked silence in to cover the sick silence from before. She looked more or less like a thrashing snake at this point, head shaking from side to side.

“I’m not giving up, Lucia. I’m making a safety net in case-“ Artan tried, but Lucia cut over him.

“It sounds like it. You’ve probably already got a funeral service in mind,” she snarled, pushing up from the table to glare at him better.

Artan threw his hands up a little, “I haven’t given up, I just-“

“Then why-“

“Because I can’t protect you anymore,” Artan roared, throwing both arms out and away from him and catching a nearby vase, sending the thing flying. A few of the closer housecarls twitched at the sudden outburst, but soon quieted, for once ignoring the shattered pottery littered across the room. The cat glanced distractedly at the pieces, before hissing and drawing his arms back in so he could rub his face with his hands. “You fucking Nords don’t make it easy, do you?”

“You’re making plans for when you fucking die, what do you expect?” Lucia snarled, taught fists tightening even further.

“The men I paid the keep a lookout for Larethius’ men are mostly dead. Dead,” Artan repeated, ignoring the shocked little gasps around the room. “The entire of the Rift has gone dark, and the Thieves have gone underground to protect themselves as per Mercer Frey’s orders. The Brotherhood is already out in the field, but even they can’t keep enough pressure on these slaving units, especially since they have more money as well as more manpower than I can pour into the Brotherhood. If these slavers really are Larethius hiding behind a bunch of smoke and mirrors, then we can’t let anything fall into his hands. All he needs is one little thing and he can pin me down, you understand? All they have to do is link Artan to the Brotherhood and he will say, ‘hey I sunk a bunch of money into a bunch of assassin cats, and here we have an assassin cat that plays cute with nobles. Oh goodness gracious, they do so say that old habits die hard,’ is what he’ll fucking say. And it won’t take much to dig up information after that. He’ll have anyone under
my employ on a rack before you could blink. And when he catches wind of any of you, then he’ll-

“He’ll what? Attack?” Lucia snorted, hair thrashing around her. “He’s already attacking, and regardless of what you think we’re already in this. The moment you became their Thane it was a done deal. The moment you dragged her out of the snow,” the kid hissed, motioning towards the scattered housecarls, and then towards Sofie before continuing, “and the moment you let me in was the moment this became a done deal. I’m not going to stand around listening to you try and justify going away. You say it’s to protect us, but what you don’t seem to get is that we aren’t letting you run away from us.”

“You don’t seem to-

“No! You don’t understand!” She shrieked, making the cat jolt in surprise. She didn’t even take a breath in before she carried on in that harsh, desperate tone. “When my ma died I had nobody! Nobody! I looked after the farm alone until my aunt Narrina and her husband came along! I thought they would take care of me, but they just threw me out! That I was the half-cast kid of her sister and that Nord trash! Not even my blood family wanted me!” A foot slammed down, and she was shaking, but Lucia didn’t stop. “And it wasn’t until I got to Whiterun, finally, after all the wolves and bears and I was terrified but I kept going, and even then, nobody but Brenuin helped me. They looked at me like Narrina did. Like I wasn’t worth squat,” the girl spat, and at some point she had begun crying, but she didn’t reach out, and Artan was too shocked to move.

“And then I met Sofie, and I thought fuck, you know what, I’ll be fine. Because someone who’s genuinely nice is still around. The world isn’t as big of a fucking waste as I’d figured,” she laughed, hard, almost disbelieving. “And when she said, Luu there is nice things. Just like you, I laughed at her. I thought she was a stupid kid. But when that vamp went for her, I just moved. I couldn’t… I couldn’t even imagine letting it hurt her. And I kind of figured, yeah, there are nice things, and I’ gonna get strong enough to defend them. Doesn’t matter what happens, I’ll defend them,” she choked out, the tears stopping, and her voice growing slightly quieter. It didn’t waver, though. “To be honest though, when you first invited me to live with you, I couldn’t believe it. Even if I knew you’d grow tired, you’d figure out eventually that you made a mistake. I was ready for that. But you never did.”

A choked sob rattled out, but she just clenched her fists tighter, stormed closer to the cat until both arms were tight around his chest. He forgot how tall she had gotten in the last few months, since she rarely ever hugged him anymore. Too cool for that. “You never threw me out. Even when I set Hrongar’s beard alight, or when I put itching powder into Yngvar’s smalls, or when I let wild geese loose in Maven’s mansion, or when I trained those chickens to attack Nazeem on sight, or when I started putting animal hearts into peoples pockets in the market, or when I shot Brynjolf by accident. You never even considered getting shot of me, when it would have been easier if you had. I was so surprised that you kept me around, and even defended me from all these things over the years. But I get it, you love us. And we love you.” She had stopped shaking, and Artan had barely settled against her, chin resting on her head and arms draped across her shoulders before both fists near enough tearing holes in his shirt startled him enough to tighten his grip. “So you aren’t leaving us, and he’s not taking you. And don’t you dare start making shitty ass plans as if you’re gonna die. We’re gonna do what we’ve always done.”

“Grind them into the dust?” Sofie called out, strangely chirpy.

“And then some,” a muffled growl replied, the fists tightening even more.

Sofie let out a high squeal, before jumping straight into the hug, both arms easily catching both cat and imperial. Argis had an even easier time of it; huge arms easily covering all three of the skinny
whelps. Calder had to be dragged over by Jordis, who wrapped easily around at least three people. Lydia made a grumble but still joined in, as did Serana and Iona in varying levels of enthusiasm. Jakk and Scouts also joined in on what turned into the biggest group hug under Vlindrel Hall’s roof, and then what deteriorated into what Scouts called a ‘puppy puddle’ when some asshole knocked a few knees and sent everyone into a heap on the floor. Calder said just call it a fucking mess and be done with it.

Chapter End Notes

AN: I’m really sorry about how late this came out, but life hit me in the head like a fucking train the last few months. Long story short, I’ve had a eath in the family as well as a slight relapse with my depression, so between those it was always gonna be a late update. But yeah.

What I did want to say is that this story will always update at some point until its finished. I won’t turn around and just stop updating forever. It might take me a little while, but I will update until the story is done. I won’t leave it hanging.

but yeah. dunno what else to say, really. except im kind of scared about the next few chapters content. haha. it’ll be good, dont worry.

Hope you enjoyed the chapter

And as always, Thank You for reading my work :)

~Frog
4E 203, Very Late Frostfall

The funniest fucking thing Argis had ever seen was right in front of him.

It was what he supposed to be a normal Fredas afternoon -current events aside- sat on the walls outside Markarth with Yngvar having a few ales and getting ready for the sun to set over the distant hills. It was something he did before Artan, back when he needed the space and the fresh air to keep the cloying, itchy feelings away. If he rubbed at his blind eye a few times, Yngvar wouldn’t mind. A few of the guardsmen milled around them this time, swiping ales and swapping stories about various attacks, mentioning that the Forsworn hadn’t bothered to pop by in near enough a year and a bit, now. As well as prod for information about Artan. Nothing unsavoury, just the regular teasing that came with a friend’s new lover. “I bet he can put his toes in his ears,” and “fifty septims says Argis’ knee will give out before years end.” Argis ended up having to throw more than a few of the cabbages the stable boy had left out at the guards before a better conversation topic picked up.

“Who knew that Argis would be the one to catch himself a rich lover,” Harik sighed, rubbing at his nose with a free hand. He had long since set his helmet down to nurse his ale, sat on one of the bales of hay at the stables side.

“I know right? Next thing you know we’ll have to start callin’ him milord,” Bjis huffed back, although in good humour. The older guard even took the last cabbage Argis threw at him in good humour, too.

“Fuck off the lot of you,” Argis grumbled, downing the last of his ale. He took a moment to stand, a little wobbly, before moving to take another ale from the pile they stashed behind a hay bale. Keep it cool away from the sun, Harik said, at which Yngvar pointed out that having hideyholes for booze on shift was the signs of a drunk. Harik had simply shrugged and said, sign me up for the shitty clothes and weird backstory then.

But the hilarious part was when three brotherhood assassins popped up from practically nowhere, children hanging off of them like loud jewellery. Harik fell backwards off his hay bale and Bjis actually managed to partially draw his sword, just in time for Argis to slam it back into its sheath and hold it there to Bjis’ quiet incredulity. It was just in time for at least twenty more children to filter up from the path up to Markarth, chattering away at a volume that made Argis wonder how much they had actually drank. The kids were more or less a whirlwind of noise and colour, but apparently Harik, Bjis, Yngvar and himself had all missed them.

Bard, the closest assassin, actually laughed. “Well, it’s good to see you’re doing well with the cat away, Argis,” he sang, wiggling his eyebrows at the young boy holding his hand, who giggled lightly along with the other children around Bard. The other two assassins, both unknown to Argis, snickered themselves.

“Let me guess, Artan hired you as child minders in his attempt to adopt half of the province?” Argis snarked back, at which Bard let out a heartier laugh than before.

“Ah nah, this lot are from the Rift, actually. As well as a few other places across the province. Artan had us round them up and bring them here where you housecarls can look after them. Apparently
they needed a safe haven, what with the orphanage out for the count, and Artan proposed Vlindrel Hall,” the assassin cackled, only growing in mirth as Argis face took on a ‘fucking of course’ expression. Bard handed Argis a stuffy looking letter, complete with Artan’s seal.

“Well, I had better get them in, then. You lot staying for dinner, then?”

“Nah, mate. We have slavers to catch in this neck of the woods. We have a lead that says a big group are wandering the hills. We’d leave them to the hags, but Artan says there are only two tribes of Forsworn left in the hills, so here we are. Here’s hoping your madmen keep out of our faces, eh?” Bard smirked, before taking his hand back, patting the little lad at his side on the head a few times, and said his goodbyes to the children. Harik, Bjis and Yngvar all gave him the fucking weirdest looks, so while Bard and the assassins said goodbyes, in one case a flying bear hug from what looked to be a small girl, Argis explained.

“Artan has been hiring the brotherhood to escort kids safely across the Holds. Let’s just leave it at that,” he nodded, at which the three others looked vaguely awed. Naturally, everyone would know Artan had the Brotherhood in his pocket by days end, but apparently for a good reason. It would also keep the various assassins on ‘maybe not kill on sight’ list for future reference when the guards were concerned in the future. Hopefully, it would mean that the brotherhood would get a little leeway until this slaver business was done.

They were still taking contracts, but favours for Artan seemed to be the order of the last few months as far as individual assassins were concerned. It would be back to business as usual when this was all finally over.

Until then, well. He had a group of ducks to lead back to the pond.

Xxx

Turning Vlindrel Hall into a temporary nursery was easier than expected. Especially since Artan bought Nepos’ old house while still in the city. Jarl Ugmund had agreed to sell it to him, only on the understanding that the Thane would sell it back, although the Jarl probably expected it to house militant cells rather than children. So dividing the kids between Nepos’ house, well, Vmmiark Hall and Vlindrel hall was pretty easy. The orphanage kids tended to want to stay together, so they mostly banded in the other house while the other kids from across Skyrim bunkered down in the Hall with him, the girls and Scouts.

When Argis thought about it, he figured it to be a good thing. Lucia and Sofie still hadn’t talked about Hroar, or the possibility of Runa, and so having other kids around would do them good he supposed.

Vmmiark Hall was led by Lydia and Serana, acting what Argis guessed to be ‘Super Nice ma’ and ‘Strict but Nice Ma.’ It wasn’t until Lucia explained that Lydia was actually called ‘Snow Queen’ and Serana was ‘Twilight Queen’ that he knew the right of it. Apparently the kids had nicknamed them all, but Lucia wouldn’t tell him what his was. Jordis was ‘Sunshine Maiden,’ Calder was called ‘Red Mountain,’ to everyone but Calder’s infinite mirth, and Iona was ‘Tulip,’ weirdly enough. Scouts was ‘Ma,’ or ‘Mama,’ at which Lucia explained again that ‘Marsh’ got cut into ‘Ma-ma’ and then it just stuck.

Whatever the reason for all the cute nicknames, it didn’t change the fact that they had at least thirty kids to look after. Shell-shocked and battle worn children that probably had seen all sorts of horrors on just the walk here. He wouldn’t soon forget two of the littler ones who burst into panic when Lydia had begun to cut veg for dinner on the first night. It had been well into the night before they had calmed down enough for a light soup and bed. Iona, Calder, and Jordis skipped between the
houses, leaving Lydia and Serana as captains of one house and Argis and Scouts in charge of the other.

At one point, the kids had made some sort of game up that played the two houses against each other. With how well they had set it up, Argis almost wondered why they didn’t set the kids up for planning a war effort; they were seriously organized and the ones who knew how had carved up quite a few swords and shields out of wooden bricker-brack pretty sharpish. Serana and Lydia’s house became the Stormcloaks, because of course, and Argis and Scouts house became the Imperials. It was pretty funny to see old warriors try and scold the kids, and then the Ice Queen herself reprimanding the old fools for daring to sour her ducklings games. “That is your war, and it is over. It isn’t theirs,” she growled, before starting another battle by pretending to be Alduin.

The look of begrudging sadness on the faces of the citizenry when the Stormcloaks and Imperials banded together to defeat Alduin the Snow Queen was actually quite saddening in of itself.

Xxx

Artan, for the first time in a long time, was having fun.

Him and Jakk had gotten into Solitude with ease, only a few half-hearted bandits bothering to stop them on the way. It was funny, they didn’t even have to kill the poor bastards; Jakk just laughed them off and the brothers passed them on by. The stunned expressions buoyed them until they got to the gates, and they passed the group of caravan khajiit camped inside the walls. Ma’dran and the others seemed to find Jakk a novelty, and praised the lattice that Artan had family about him. Jakk had made a cheeky comment that made his big brother cart him away to the sounds of loud rumbling laughter.

But it wasn’t until they passed a bunch of revelling legionnaires that had set up outside the Winking Skeever that things got a little… odd. Ma’jahad was standing with one of the legionnaires, and Ra’zhinda was sat at one of the tables set outside, both chugging ale with the legion foot soldiers and looking like they were happy as chickens in a quiet field.

“Looks like my initiative has helped relations quite a bit, eh Hadvar?” Artan called, making the Nord jump at first, since he was trying to make the doe eyes at Ildii, but when he turned to see Artan stood with arms held wide and the shit-eating grin in place, well. He bowled over a man in his way in his haste, sending a table flying and nearly sent Ildii running. Jakk actually stepped back for when the huge man practically swept Artan off his feet and into a hug that made bones crack. A few jeers - well a lot of jeers- later and the man put Artan down and tried to cough into his fist to dissipate the embarrassment that had rushed in.

“Good to see you again, prisoner,” Hadvar huffed, at which Artan just crowed back “how much have you drunk to turn your back on a sweetheart like that?”

It only brought down more jeering from the group of tipsy soldiers, at which Jakk made a quiet comment about showmanship, and then, well. Then Artan realized that his brother was probably above even himself at manipulation. The little bastard just whispered “we have time to spare and hell to raise,” and the deal was struck.

Xxx

It hit eight bells in the Skeever when shit hit the fan. The legionnaires had spread out through the bar, fucking randy on legate-paid wines that made Sorex near enough glow from the business. It got to a point where the bards from across the way started filing in, but that had mixed results. They seemed a little intimidated by Lisette, all except the Aia girl who had some kind of song fight that made
Artan’s fur itch with how cloak and dagger it was. Well, more like spittle and middle fingers, but the intent was there.

Artan was sat at the bar, swapping war stories with Gulum Ei about shitty deals gone wrong as well as low-key pinching his gills about the slave trade, at which the Argonian made an angry hissing noise and spat on the floor. “It’s a dirty trade, dealing in perishables. Easier in gemstones. But from what I hear, there’s a few covens buying from an independent seller based in the Isle. Usually that doesn’t fly, since the dominion doesn’t like that shit on its doorstep, but this one is high up. Their middleman is some wired dirt elf that talks like he can kill anything, even that ebony tank wandering the mountains. Whether he can, I don’t know. But if you’re shooting at this wallet, then you’ll want this dirt elf under your boot before you line the shot up.”

Artan was about to ask details, but Aia sat in his lap.

Literally just pushed Artan’s arm from the bar, sat down and looked him in the eye. “Couldn’t keep away, could you?”

Artan could hear the Argonian at his side groan in exasperation, and leave the bar. Artan resisted the impulse to snap her neck—he was more or less a master at stopping himself from snap-murder now—and instead just twisted the hand she had tried to sneak into his shirt until she squeaked. “Get off,” he said seriously, and begrudgingly, she did.

“You’ve changed your tune,” Aia snapped, wrenching her hand back.

“No, you’re just finally listening to the words,” Artan hissed back, taking a deep swig from his cup before ordering another. Sorex glanced at Aia and giving Artan a sympathetic nod before reaching for the bloodwine. Aia still hadn’t left.

“You’ll give in one day, kitten,” she smiled tartly, leaning on the bar and almost getting close enough that Artan could see the weird little muscles in her iris move, before the music suddenly picked up again and startled her away.

They both turned to look at Lisette, stood on a bench on the room’s far side, winking at them when they caught her eye. Artan grinned back, raised his new drink, ordered a tavern-wide round of drinks for the bloodwine. Aia still hadn’t left.

“You’ll give in one day, kitten,” she smiled tartly, leaning on the bar and almost getting close enough that Artan could see the weird little muscles in her iris move, before the music suddenly picked up again and startled her away.

And as the market workers started filing in, as well as a tired-looking Falk, the party really got started. The old bastard actually had the cheek to raise his legendary snark eyebrow at Artan, who raised his cup as cheekily as his drunk ass could. “Ah, Thane Artan. I see you have dedicated your time to attend our city’s morale in these trying times.”

“Of course, dear steward. And don’t give me the eyebrow mate we both know it got worse in Jorvaskr! Let me see that Companion stamina!”

Falk just laughed, one of those hearty sweet ones that made you smile, before he simply sat down on a preferred chair at Artan’s side. Then his face slid into a blank, almost horrifyingly serious expression and he said “Want to make a bet?”

It went downhill from there, watching the steward clear out the various patrons of the tavern. Artan
flat out refused to play cards with him, but when Jakk managed to stumble-dance over to land heavily on Artan, wiggling until he was sat comfortably and Artan was decidedly uncomfortable with bones digging into his leg, the tables turned.

“Care to explain why you’ve been sat here watching a card game for the last hour instead of dancing with me, brother?” Jakk snipped. Artan knew it was hot air, simply from the way Jakk started aimlessly flicking at a nearby soldier’s paldron. The man was smashed, so didn’t notice in the slightest.

“I’m watching our steward clean house, as it were,” Artan laughed, ignoring the grumbled complaints around him. The men still thought he could beat Falk and was just holding back, but fuck that Falk was a titan at cards. The Companions probably threw him out for that alone rather than the man’s honourable departure.

“So you’ll dance with me when you see him lose, right?” Jakk asked, all sugar.

And there it was, the little fuckbag who glued a napping merchant’s feet to his boots so he couldn’t take them off for the pre-eating scrub that the Altmer were very insistent about. Before every meal, the Altmer in the isle liked to have a quick scrub of hands, arms, feet and face. It was a lot to do with the fact that they didn’t want to ingest anything when they had touched the same things as their slaves, rather than anything to do with Auri-el like they claimed. And hearing the mans wails of rage at being fucking glued in was fantastic. Za’nir had scolded their recklessness, but applauded them for not getting caught.

“Definitely,” Artan nodded, and Jakk knew that tone. It was the ‘fucking do it that will be hilarious’ tone that came out when they were roaming Cyrodiil and hadn’t left since.

Watching Falk’s face fall apart when a drunken, effete khajiit wearing more jewellery than Elisif ruin his dominant run of cards was delicious. The legionnaires and the swaying Havar almost brought the roof down with their cheering, and god knows how loud the sailors from the harbour had gotten, but it easily drowned out the music. And in a show of pure Jakk, his little brother stood and held a dainty hand out for Falk to kiss, as if he were sovereign of the realm. The steward did so good naturally, at great amusement of the peanut gallery, before Jakk turned to Artan an more or less yelled, “your move!”

Artan held his hands up, defeated, and let Jakk drag him up.

xxx

It had been years since they had first hit the beach in Cyrodiil and Eirian bartered for their stay at an inn. It was a hard deal, since Garma had been a dead-eyed ghost at her shoulder and Jaden was a stoic giant with a huge fucking hammer. Less said about Talia the better. S’eta had given him a few honeyed words, and the man had conceded. Which had led to the ‘repair effort,’ as Eirian had later explained. Jakk got them all smashed. And it became routine, going from inn to inn, getting trashed on other men’s coin, taunting the thin line that the locals walked with the Thalmor, assassinating a few justicars here and there. It was where Garma became more… well more than just a bitter, angry blade that cut first and… well there were no questions asked at all let alone later.

It was then, in a random bar called Fair Tart’s Folly, that Garma danced on a bar for the first time and earned more money than a solicitor. And the fun part was, that it wasn’t even to trick anyone into a dark corner to kill them. It wasn’t for anyone else but him. And it was fun.
S’eta was ecstatic.

And they became like fucking legends in that part of Cyrodil, the dancing cats that would earn your heart and all your coin. It was like one huge game, where the locals would try and seduce them, and it never worked out.

Za’nir had begrudgingly taught them how seduction worked in theory, as well as a few tips, but pointedly told them never to go further than a few sweet lies. “Your body is yours, regardless of what Larethius says.” Ironically, a lesson that Larethius forced upon them became his downfall, in the end, since a dance was exactly how Jakk distracted the gathered dignitaries.

Even now, when they were trashed and barely putting any effort in, the game was there. The fun was there. The idea that all the money spent training them was getting shat on in the name of their joy always tickled him.

Even funnier was watching –well glimpsing, since the whole dancing thing was taking up a lot of coordination- the dumbstruck faces of the few straggling legionnaires who were probably going to be calling him legate in the morning. They probably had never seen a superior cut loose, and by Talos was it fucking hilarious. He was probably fostering a kind of commander kink in the men but fuck if he cared. They knew he was off the table.

It had been a hot topic since the festival that one of the thanes had taken a lover, and it was more or less common knowledge that the Dragonborn was taken. Regardless of how the information got about, it was written in stone; don’t touch or you’ll lose the hand.

They were doing some kind of strange, twisting dance on one of the smaller tables in the centre, amusing the patrons in how well they could dance, balance and move around each other without fucking it up. To prove a point, in one of the recent aria’s lulls, Artan pulled two bottles from the bar with his telekinesis, catching one in either hand to the awed ohs in the crowd, handed one to Jakk and they downed their drinks together before the bard picked up again. Just in time to watch one of the sailors chuck his biscuits right onto Pantea’s lap and get his nose relocated by her fist.

Xxx

Walking home was decidedly less walking and more falling, laughing, and falling headfirst into a market stall in Jakk’s case. Artan couldn’t even save him from the pile of fish he had landed in, he just broke down laughing to the point he was a crying, breathless puddle in main street. Even when Jakk picked one of the big ones from the pile and fucking slammed the dead meat against his back, well, he couldn’t even crawl away well enough. It was like that, the guards found them, crying with laughter while one brother hit the other with a dead fish.

Xxx

They were sat just outside Proudspire when Jakk broached the subject. Somehow the cheeky shit managed to swipe another bottle of bloodwine from somewhere, and although Artan was curious he was nowhere near the level of sober he had to be to figure it out.

“How in the world are you getting away with it?” Jakk clucked at him, before settling a little harder against his shoulder.

“Away with what?” Artan asked, ignoring the way Jakk was flicking at his ear with a claw.

“Brotherhood assassins as babysitters? Sthis is gonna have your skin for that, you know?”

Artan was quiet, for a damned long time. Long enough that Jakk actually stopped flicking his ear and
looked at him seriously. Artan shrugged, trying to think of the best way to put it.

“We have had a lot of contracts out for slavers. Specific ones. Not just general ones. Names, faces, everything down to how they buckle their armor, the Night Mother gets them. Every once in a while, I pop into the Sanctuary to see her, see if anything new has come up. Its how I’ve been able to set up a decent defence against slavers on the roads; I’ve been having assassins pick the kids up.”

“But…?” Jakk’s eyes flickered a few times while he worked it out, before he sighed hard enough to disrupt a gale. “The kids are making the contracts?”

“Yes. And the assassins are using them as… to get the slavers to appear…” Artan sighed, rubbing at his face with his hands. There was no way blood wine could blot that kind of admission out. “The kids sending contracts in is how we’ve been getting any reliable information at all about the slavers so far. Everyone else turns up dead or too… too mad to give us anything concrete. Kids…. The way I’ve been setting it up has some of them getting ready to become assassins themselves. With any luck they’ll end up… end up like Za’nim. Or us. We’ve been doing pretty well for ourselves. And they’ll have a Family. A bloody, weird, cult family but still.”

“But where are they getting the corpse from? For the contract to work?” Jakk asked quietly.

Artan looked at him, and for a moment he was back in Somnian Hall, the screams were echoing out and the crowd was gathered. There was the stench of blood in the air and the sound of teeth ripping into fur-

“Medicalparents.”

Artan didn’t answer, and that was enough.

xxx

It was delicious.

The moment they walked in, almost on par with the pristine Jarl herself in how well groomed they were, eyes turned to them. Half the guards on duty were hungover trash from the night before, and Falk looked more ruffled than usual, but that might have been Bryling’s recent return to the city rather than the booze. In the throne room was the gruesome threesome. Jarl Maven, of Riften, with Asgeir Snowshod her trusted wiper. And on their left was Erikur, looking as if Talos had shat in his coffee as he glared across at Bryling, who looked like she had no more bothered in her big bag of bothered.

Whatever was going on, it was beautiful, seeing it.

The lemon-faced threesome and the Bored Alliance of Falk, Bryling and Sybille that had included the usual sunshine queen Elisif, and the exasperated guards who had to listen to the cistern of bullshit that had accumulate over the morning in court. All of them looked ready to wish for Alduin’s return just to escape each other.

“My Jarl, have this… man, arrested!” Asgeir shouted, no really, he shouted at the newly ascended High Queen.

She didn’t even glance at him, instead proffering her hand, which Artan dutifully kissed. “Always good to see you, Jarl Elisif. Or should I call you your majesty now?”

“Just Elisif for you, Artan,” she shook her head fondly, at which Asgeir was almost audibly fuming at. Fantastic.
“I came here to request men and women to retake the Rift’s capital. As you know, I might be a Dragonborn but retaking a city as extensive as Riften would be a little far stretched, even for me,” Artan shrugged, still refusing to look at the now glaring lemon trio.

“Unfortunately, we will have to discuss that later. Maybe during tea? Until then, the Jarl of Riften, her business associate as well as our own Thane Erikur have all levied some very grave accusations against you. Naturally, we need some answers,” she sighed, and gave him a slightly apologetic tilt of her head. It said much that even she was tired of the posturing, but as High Queen, well it came with the job.

“Oh? And what exactly would these three criminals have to say against me?” He turned, and although he wanted to put as much vitriol into it as possible, he kept it light and airy. It made the three seethe, but only Maven kept her cool.

“He is an assassin, my Queen. He is behind my fiance’s murder, as well as the assassination of the Emperor himself,” Asgeir snarled, at which Maven’s cool evaporated into quiet scorn.

Artan could see Jakk practically vibrate with the contained giggles.

“You mean the woman who sold intelligence about Imperial encampments, weapons, supplies and the odd national secret to the Aldmeri Dominion? That fiancé?” Artan asked, barely able to keep his tone civil. The gasp was so worth it. Asgeir paled. “Don’t give me that look; it’s why you two were even engaged. It was a political marriage in order to cement an alliance between you and her. You gave her whatever information you learned in court that she was not privy to, and she gave you contact with the Dominion in which to sell your stock. She was your damn fence. And the fun part is,” Artan tugged a wad of paper from his satchel, which Argis had said was a cute man-bag and Artan had laughed back in his face because hey practicality. “You were stupid enough to leave a paper trail. And the best part is, that isn’t all there is. She had her hands in pirates, bandits, you name it. She was even behind the plan to put the lighthouse out of commission to make ships crash and have their goods stolen. So tell me, what makes your word mean anything at all?"

It was with quiet victory that he handed the papers to Falk, who looked ready to rip the head off a bear.

“Yes, I killed her. I murdered one of the brotherhood assassins and donned his armor as a disguise while I did it. But I didn’t do it as an assassin. I did it as Thané of this hold, as Dragonborn, and as a fucking Legate. I didn’t go to anyone about it because I knew that it went deeper than just her, and until I rooted the rest of you scumbags out it was just risking the province’s security. So I pretended to be a brotherhood assassin and had them take the blame for her murder. They loved the attention, and gave me an I.O.U as it were for a future rainy day. And as for the blood money she had in her estate, the huge ass coffers that you tried to get to after she died? Wanna know what happened to that money? It got spent paying for the reconstruction efforts across Skyrim. It went into homeless shelters, into the orphanages and into local farmers and merchants pockets so they could get their trades running again after the war. What should have been done with her time from the very beginning, if you ask me. All of that, and it recently paid for real assassins to start cracking down on the slaver cells currently moving through our province. That contact in the brotherhood got me in the right position to start actually fighting the monsters roaming Skyrim’s countryside looking to make slaves of her people. They are hunting the lookouts right now, they are hunting the sellers right now, they’re out there hunting ringleaders and what are you doing? You’re trying to get me arrested over the execution of a traitor.”

“Your intervention killed people,” Asgeir pressed, but Artan held up a hand.

“Nobody but her died. A few men were injured, but none of them actually died. And as you
probably remember, I spent most of the week after that healing them myself,” the khajiit shrugged, staring seriously back into Asgeir’s eyes.

“Why all the secrecy? You have all of the paperwork here, and the emperor?” Sybille sniped, adjusting her chair until she was more comfortable.

“That part is a fun story,” Artan nodded, and he half expected the room to erupt at his levity. But it didn’t. He carried on in the wake of their shock, happy that he was at least getting listened to. “Since I actually got ordered by Tulius to find the people who contracted his assassination. And the fun part is that it wasn’t just one man, like I had originally thought. It was a group of people. These little shits being some of them,” he waved his hands at the three of them. “I even killed one of them prior to his contracting me, which was, you guessed it, his own cousin Vittoria. The others, well, the others are right here. Asgeir, who sees the dominion as a dumb money making machine to fill the place where the empire crumbled. Maven, who probably sees just as much opportunity there, and last but definitely least, Erikur. They’re more or less selling the empire out for money, status, and a promise of not getting turned inside out by telekinesis when the invasion happens. All fun things, I assure you,” Artan smiled, turning back to the court.

“You would really listen to these outrageous accusations? He is a common thug dressed up like a noble hero to appeal to your sensibilities!” Maven found her voice first, and Artan let her carry on, fully ready for the next dance. She was angry, he could tell.

“He broke into my home and viciously attacked Maul, my defender,” she motioned to Maul, who was sat with his prosthetic leg hooked over his knee, and drinking from his tankard with his one good hand.

“You sent hired thugs and your housecarl to Proudspire to attack my housecarls. That alone would have merited retaliation, but you took it too far. I broke into your home because you kidnapped with intent to torture two of my housecarls. One of them was in intensive care for a week. We had a few spats in the past and you retaliated by attempting to harm my sworn swords. If I was anyone else, you would have succeeded in brutalizing at least three innocent people outside of your lawful reach as a Jarl. It wasn’t until I threatened to out your other crimes that you left me alone, even though by law I could have straight up killed you for that,” Artan snarled.

He could feel the Nord presence in the room at that, especially when Maven paled. She didn’t blanch at what she had done; it was the threat of voicing her fling with Hemming. But the Nords saw her pallor as admission to a sneaky bullshit way to fight, and by fuck did Artan love it. Nords were reliable, honourable, and they would see nothing wrong in Artan beating the shit out of whomever he had to in order to right a wrong. And even better, the Imperial presence would have paled at the torture if not the underhand methods. The group mentality deal humans had with each other would weed out the rest, and lo-and-behold a court room completely under his thumb.

“Other crimes…?” Falk looked up from his reading, looking angrier somehow.

“Incest. Attempted murder. Money laundering. You name it,” Artan shrugged, waving another sheaf of papers around. “You could literally pick any sort of crime from your head and Maven has done it. She’s the patron of the thieves’ guild, after all. So larceny, robbery, all the good stuff.”

Maven sent a deathly glare at Jakk, who simply shrugged.

“And what about me, I wonder,” Erikur sneered, rolling his eyes. Artan wasn’t a violent man, but watching that façade fall away into burning destruction would be delicious.

“You, well you’re the extra spicy version of criminal that I prefer to just kill outright rather than listen
You’re one of the men linking bandits to join the slaving rings. You’re helping these fuckers steal people from their homes to sell them off as slaves or as living bloodbags to the vampire coven that had settled in the north. It’s you paying their wages and you coordinating them with whomever is shitting in your pocket. All the intel you have about the hold you’ve been using to tattle on Imperial outposts, getting the soldiers out of the way so you can sell off the civilians. So I’m gonna ask you nice before I ask nasty,” Artan smiled, and it was a sick joy that came when Erikur’s eyes shuttered into full blown fear. “Who the fuck is your boss?”

It was a bluff. Artan knew it was someone in the court, but not who. And he might either send whoever it was into hiding after this stunt, and he’d give chase, or he’d be right and he would have his rich bitch flinging coppers at the bandits. Either way, he would have his mouse.

A lot happened in those moments.

Erikur tried to run. Artan’s vision tunneled and he came back to himself sat on top of Erikur’s back, the Nord’s hands tied behind his back and completely out cold. Well, Artan had smashed his head onto the uppermost stair, so it was understandable. Jakk hadn’t had to move, since Sybille had set up a mass paralysis spell that had caught most of the room in its thrall while she shackled both Asgeir and Maven’s hands. Falk had been frozen in front of a fluttering Elisif, who was fanning herself with a hand rather confusedly.

When Artan broke the spell, well, he more or less just waved it away, Sybille gave him a snotty glare and well that was that. The college Librarian’s paralysis spells were tougher than hers, of course he could break them.

“Why? Why did you take this all on alone? We would have backed you wholeheartedly if you had just told us, Artan,” Elisif sighed, pushing up to stand before him. Falk was at her side, and was mostly silent while he checked and re-checked the papers, all the evidence Artan had found on the ridiculous conspiracy. Well, it wasn’t a conspiracy, really. It was a clever ploy from the last emperor, all of it. With Titus Mede III dead, the Empire was in a strong position again, the trade was strong, the Legion was back in power with the Stormcloaks under the radar, and the capital was back in the green. But he wasn’t the one who could lead a war, not after the Concordat. So, he had himself removed. He knew there was someone gunning for him, for his sons and daughter. So he ordered the hit on himself through Amaund Mottiere. And in the last few moments before his death, he asked Artan a favour. To assassinate the people who would uproot the royal family, who would destroy any hope of fighting the dominion in the upcoming war. To kill off any leads that would out the assassination as a sacrificial suicide. His heir would take the throne without the burden of their father’s choices. It would be a clean slate. And the Empire’s people would actually have a chance at surviving the Dominion.

This group were planning the overthrowing of the empire, but not in the way Artan had put it forward. If anything, all they did was set the Empire up for an invasion. But this? This was the perfect way to cover up his involvement, fulfil his promise and protect the innocent people of Skyrim.

Falk’s growl brought him back, and Artan knew he was in the clear. But one thing was left to address.

“Before I was Artan, I was someone else,” he started.

“Are you sure about this?” Jakk interrupted, but Artan just smiled reassuringly back. He was sure it was no better than a grimace, but it got the point across. They had nothing else. No more tricks. This was it.
“We both were, me and my little brother. We grew up in a little shack on the Summerset Isle. It was more or less a cat farm, a way to produce slaves that didn’t know what freedom tasted like. Less rebellions that way, you see. Our master was the esteemed Advisor Eldunarto Larethius, right hand man of Elenwen herself. And he was a fucking monster.”

“His sister saw him for what he was, and conned him into having a dark brotherhood assassin train us to be his pet assassins. She told him that cats were perfect; they were the in thing right now for Aldmeri nobles to have. Dumb animals to order around as you will. He fell for it, and we became trained as assassins. And when our trainer fucked up and fell out of favour, our master ordered me and my brother to fight to the death for the right to be his pet assassin. If it wasn’t for our trainer, we wouldn’t have even known… we wouldn’t even have an ounce of heart left in us. Anyone else, and we would have been just blades. But we weren’t. We are people. And we wanted to be free. So, we murdered our way out of the isle, and after a lot of bullshit and betrayals, I set up here. And being honest, it was a shithole when I got here,” Artan grinned, ignoring the pale green that Falk had turned.

He was obviously thinking about all of the times Artan could have murdered any of them. Thinking about the possibilities of what could have happened with the infamous Larethius as a master.

Elisif looked lost, almost as if she couldn’t even fathom what was going on. But from the odd tear at the edge of her eye, he knew Falk had been keeping her up to date on what actually goes on in the real world. The possibilities.

“And yeah, at first I thought that people were fucking assholes. I came here because I had nowhere else to go. Hammerfell was a bitch to outsiders as I found out, and Cyrodil is… well. Cyrodil is like a hotbed for Thalmor. I was a bowl of shitty acid reeling from my friend trying to sell me back to the Thalmor back in Hammerfell. So I came here, and you all know how I hate cold so you can imagine how thrilled I was. And at first, I saw a bunch of shitheads too busy punching each other to notice the wolves at the door. And then, well, then I joined the companions, because while in idiot country, best act as the locals do. And there I met Kodlak. He was like, the only redeemable thing you lot had at the time. He… took me in when I had nothing else. Somehow, my Thu’um woke up, I got a housecarl, and she was a bitch,” Artan laughed, ignoring the quiet ‘I’ll tell her that’ from Jakk.

“She made me laugh, and even though the plan was always to leave, well. We became friends. And as the years went on, I made quite a few friends by just… well. By just being me. Apparently you Nords get super excited when someone is nice to you, and well, the whole story thing spread, and well yeah. The Alduin thing happened, and well since that’s your afterlife I felt kind of obligated to help, you know? Some people only have peace in death, and something destroying that peace? Sickenng to me, as weird as that sounds.”

“But long story short, I was trained to be an assassin as a cub. But that is what I was, not who I am. I’m a father, a loving… er, lover? A brother. A Thane. A Legate. A Dragonborn, I suppose. The Archmage of a college, even though all I do is tell them to not set shit on fire, and yeah. I also am very good at wood carving. So yeah. My training got me some good contacts in the shadier circles, and in that way I managed to become a temporary patron for the Assassins so that I could have them start pinning down the slavers in the province. And in a week or so when I retake Riften I’ll be able to do even more,” Artan shrugged.

“You can have me punished for what I was, but you can’t fault me for what I am. And what I am is a free man using whatever he has at his disposal to try and protect this shithole from going under. I have a duty to the people to keep them safe at any and all cost to myself, and that’s my overall game plan. I am going to use whatever I have I order to protect the people of Skyrim from the Dominion at any cost, whether I get approval or not.”
Elisif was silent for a long time after, as was most of the room.

“Is there a limit of what you would do for Skyrim, Artan?” Elisif sighed; shaking her head in what he hoped was fond exasperation.

“Since I know very well what the alterative is, my Queen? No. There isn’t.”

xxx

At first he thought it was one of Artan’s pranks.

It had been a few months since the khajiit had begun the stalking game, and if he was honest, Argis had to say it had been an interesting experience. It started small, maybe in the late morning or early evening when he was out shopping for food in whatever city they had holed up in for a few days. Argis felt a prickle across his neck, and went to swat at the air behind his head. A few more times and he clocked it for what it really was; eyes were on him.

And even as the basic tips on assassin spotting Artan had supplemented with flashed through his mind, he hadn’t been able to spot who it was that had begun watching him. What he did do, however, was remain calm. Lucia had been hunting with Jakk, and Sofie was with Lydia and Jordis in some kind of museum the Bards had set up in their school. Artan was sleeping off another failed attempt at alchemy in the basement of Proudspire. Whatever the fuck it was that made his eyes dilate that much couldn’t be good. It almost blinded him, how fast the potion worked and with how strong the sunlight was.

Still, Argis put his mind to searching for the weirdo watching him. It wouldn’t do to let them anywhere near the house, but then again, Artan would probably eat them in a blind rage if someone dared to break in while he was home, let alone when his kids were there. If anything, he could probably lead them into the walled garden part and ambush them. If they were good, then he probably wouldn’t catch them, but Artan would, and it was a short trip downstairs.

If he did catch them, then he would have a mug of ale while he waved them goodbye. Goodbye, as they rushed to meet the ocean waves just beyond and way below that balcony when he threw them over it. It was a damn long drop to the rocks below.

It was easy, keeping his cool. Acting as if he was just walking home with the big hemp bag. Nocturnal might know what the kitty brothers wanted all the fish for, since they couldn’t cook salmon for the life of themselves let alone-

He slipped around the stone banisters and begun the short few steps up, round the corner so he could plaster himself to the back wall, the patio doors on his close right. After a moment of listening, he put the bag down on the furthest side of the door from himself, knowing well enough that it would probably go flying any other way.

It was quiet for a long while. The sea air was fresh and cutting against his throat, unused to such-

When the prickle happened again, he near enough whitened out with all the adrenaline. Both hands flew up above his head on instinct, and when his hands clamped down on soft fabric and flailing wrists, he tugged. It was easy to pull them off the roof, especially since they were balanced on the uneven tile. It was even easier to catch some of their bodyweight with his shoulder, their head smacking hard into his bent back.

Winded, it was easy for Argis to twist their arms around them like makeshift manacles and press them into Proudspire’s backdoor. Arms crossed behind their backs, wrists locked in place by Argis’
fists, and since they were facing one and other Argis could easily head-butt them into submission if they caused shit. Everyone always said he had a hard head.

And then Argis looked Artan right in the eye. When the dazed cat looked up at him.

“You bloody idiot I could have broken your neck!” The Nord snorted, unbelieving.

Artan had laughed in his face and pressed his muzzle into Argis’ neck.

Artan had also left Markarth three days ago. As had Talia, bent on rallying her troops for the attack on Riften. Jakk was with his brother, Eirian was in Whiterun readying the Companions for a raid on the house that they figured to be a lead on the slaver operation. Lucia was good at sneaking, her father and uncle saw to that, but she was up to her eyebrows in orphanage children all looking for something to cling to in the storm that wasn’t a bunch of scary adults. He didn’t take it to heart- he knew that most of the vampires had been adults, as well as the slavers. To them, any adult was a suspect; any adult could take them back to that hell.

More kids had been lead into Markarth by assassins, and hilariously the local guard had hit the point where they just allowed the herds though the city. The myriad of different letters going through the hold and up to the Jarl was intense. Argis only knew about it since the old fart himself had called him to the keep especially to complain about it. It seemed that Artan had somehow managed to rope the High Queen and Tulius into backing the raids on slaver camps that the recon unit had discovered, as well as pushing all of the resulting paperwork onto Rikke somehow. As well as getting another thane of Solitude, Maven and her business partner arrested. Each of their assets was seized by the Empire, and naturally went straight into the counterattacks.

Artan had managed to bring nine holds as well as the wrath of two guilds onto the heads of whoever was funding the trafficking ring, and damn was it impressive.

But right now, well, he was most likely leading a small force towards Riften.

And whatever it was that was watching him was not any of Argis’ rascals.

So when he heard the quiet hiss of blade getting pulled from its scabbard, he was already on point.

The poor fucker never had a chance. Argis pivoted on his heel and slammed the side of his basket into the other man’s head, hard enough that it smashed the eidar cheese wheel like a ram smashed a door in, and the man went down. It was damn easy to hop over his prone form to stomp his head into a grotty paste. But no matter how fast he was, he wasn’t quick enough to shout an alarm, but obviously he didn’t need to.

A good few of what looked to be travellers threw off their heavy cloaks to reveal the shining armor underneath, and drew their swords. The actual travellers and merchants the scatter-shot group of slavers were hidden between fled like spooked birds, one or two meeting an enemy blade on their way, just to fall and get crushed in the rush of people.

The guards were on them quicker than flies on shit.

The world damn well exploded into action as far as Argis could see, the marketplace easily turning into what might have been a realm of Oblivion for all he knew. What he did know, as he slammed and pushed and bloody well clawed his way up the city steps was that the guards on the front gates were dead. A slew of men, all in the same hunting armor that Bard brought them seemingly years ago now, burst through the gates like salmon from a broken fishing net.

Magic was flaring through the air, enough that Argis could feel the sharp prickles of lightning. He
would have felt a swell of pride at how damn hard the Markarth city guard were dealing with them but he was busy pushing up towards Vlindrel Hall. The last he saw the girls-

The door was open.

Argis couldn’t fathom what was happening.

Everything was happening in blinks and pictures, not anything more.

There were two Thalmor he could see in the house. A justicar was dead, shot through the eye with an arrow. Serana was pinned to the wall with the edges of a protection circle, half mad and fangs gnashing in pain. The only kid he saw was Lucia, limp across the shoulder of one of the men. Talos knew what happened next, because everything started bleeding red. He felt cold creep up, blistering, searing cold across his arm, the back of his neck. There was blood on his hands, and one of his back teeth was gone.

Everything was gone.

xxx

It took them three hours to crack Erikur. Three hours and four rotations of Legionnaire soldiers who couldn’t stomach the screams. Erikur was convinced that his contact in the Dominion would ruin him more than Artan could. And he may very well have been right, except Jakk had come along for the Solitude road trip. They were both assassins, and every single person trained in the profession had a way of getting information. Jakk’s was… well. Artan watched rather placidly as another sheet-white man had to be carried from his post beside the jail cell door, but Artan couldn’t pinpoint what it had been that had sent him over the edge.

After the first three he had come up with a game of “which part made them crack,” and if he was honest it had become scarily easy.

Jakk was about to start cutting away at what remained of the Achilles tendon of Erikur’s left leg—less said about the right leg, the better in Artan’s opinion—when he finally cracked.

It was only two words, but those two words rocked everything into Oblivion.

“Wintersand Manor.”

xxx

Why they wanted Winterhold was beyond his understanding. Well, it wasn’t, but it didn’t stop him mentally complaining anyway. He was an Aldmeri Justicar, not a snowman. Tusaril was markedly not a snowman, and yet here he was leading a force towards Winterhold; as well as its college.

Ancano managed nothing in his time at the school, mostly since he was too busy trying to grab at glory rather than actually do his duty to the Dominion. Tusaril, for one, was not about to make the same mistake.

The wreckage of what he guessed passed for a village in this vulgar province lay at his feet, and even so he felt unrest.

His informants put most of the magi holed up in the college’s spires to be far from their bleak home, which also meant that Winterhold was largely unprotected. His information put the resident Archmage, in name only, on some kind of path towards the recently overrun Riften. He supposed that the mages were following her lead, or at least following up on their own mediocre research. Probably snow-mad fools, at this point, which would explain a female Archmage. It seemed to be the
fate of the townsfolk, since there was nobody but them in several miles in any direction.

He may have been led to a dreary, depressing ring of hovels in what had to be the foulest plane of Oblivion, but Ondolemar had at least given him good intel. Whatever Elenwen had seen in such a watery creature had apparently not been senility in the old witch.

A few of the scouts -dirt-humping humans of all things- returned. The men, Eldurnato’s finest, looked to him for further orders. As it was, the treasures hidden in that college was immeasurable. And as things stood, they were set to topple another Hold in Skyrim with nobody the wiser. He was sure to get a promotion for this work of art. After sending an assassin after that fool Ondolemar, first of course. Tusaril was not a sharer by nature.

He nodded, and led his men forwards into victory.

He was steps from the small incline that led to the college’s rather ridiculous bridge system when he heard it. It was a tiny pop, and a better mer would have already snapped the magic, but as it was Eldurnato’s finest were worthless trash. He pivoted, fully ready to hurl his wards up and dispel whatever traps the mages had left in their wake.

Seven frost Atronachs. Some were still lumbering from the gaps between ruined houses, shaking off snow as they went. By the time he realized that the things had been hiding as snow drifts the entire time, that they had been caught in a honeytrap-

Ten of his men were already smears on the snow.

The others-

He had never seen a man tore apart, but apparently Auri-El had special plans for him today. His men scattered, some trying in vain to somehow free their comrades. One of the closer ones, slick with blood and crushing a young mer in its arms like a child crushed a doll to its chest. Her back snapped like a twig when her armor gave out, and the sickening flump she made when it did nearly made him void his stomach there and then. A man was crawling towards him, but Tusaril couldn’t move, let alone help. A smatter of arrows hit his wards, somehow still active, and peppered the other Justicar like the dusting of snowflakes across them all. The man on the floor didn’t die, just screamed louder, until one of the Atronachs seemed disturbed and promptly popped his head under its jagged foot like a grape.

Tusaril didn’t even manage to put up a fight.

The Atronachs, apparently pleased with their work, turned on him next. He guessed it was because he was close to the college wards, but they stopped in a vague circle around him. He would have been thankful that they obscured the smell and sight of his dead men, but guts, brains, blood and flesh were frozen and caught on the Atronachs like awful decorations, their frost-cloaks bringing the thick stench of the Sea of Ghosts to block out everything else.

A hand grabbed at his robe, shoving him forwards into the snow as he had once shoved penniless beggars from his person before. He landed in the centre of that circle, barely with any sense he looked up at his attacker. It was a mer, dressed in what looked to be expert level mage robes to show her status as a professor. Her hair was twisted up into two bunches, almost made ridiculous with how insanely strong her lightning bolt was when it hit him. He couldn’t even feel his hands after the current left, let alone cast a spell.

The Archmage?
She stormed into his swimming vision, stomped hard onto his chest and with one hand wreathed in more forsaken lightning, she growled like he had been her worst enemy. “Lesson one my student; humility.”

He doesn’t remember anything, after that.

xxx

Sofie wasn’t struggling, even though the frankly horrified stares of various guards did suggest she should be struggling very damn hard. She was tucked under Argis’ arm, well, the un-frostbitten one. Whatever the hell the justicar in the house had hit him with, it had been strong enough to give a Nord frostbite. She swallowed thickly, ignoring the blood dripping from Argis’ cheek onto her dress. He was still silent, unmoving and overall unresponsive.

She couldn’t figure a way to fix it, either.

Lucia’s head was pillowed across his chest, and just this once Sofie allowed her sister to drape her legs across Sofie’s, just this once though. Lucia was still under whatever spell the Thalmor agents had spun on her, but Sofie couldn’t break it and whenever someone got closer than the thick ring of bodies around them Argis’ head creaked up to acknowledge them, forcing whoever was advancing to retreat.

The bodies didn’t get there by accident.

Sofie rubbed her handkerchief across Argis’ head, the Nord himself ignoring the girl’s fussing. Ignoring or simply numbed to, she didn’t know. Still. She tried to piece together everything that happened in the last half an hour as best she could, especially since Papa would probably want to know when he got back. There would be gossip, but he would want the truth.

She knew they had been taking kids, since Lydia had literally torn a huge hole in one of the enemy mages that had a kid over his shoulder. She had then begun ordering guards to herd children into the Hall of the Dead, and to go through that and into the Jarl’s quarters. It had been working, especially since the higher ground gave the archers a better vantage point against the attackers.

She remembers clearly, coming round the bend and running under the waterfall –more so that enemy bowmen couldn’t get a good shot than anything- to hear Argis screaming like what she remembers the werewolves would do on a hunt. They did near enough the same thing when they hit Volkihar Castle. That lurch of her stomach from his scream, and the near crushing weight of fear when the justicar left her house with Lucia in his arms.

Another followed, and then all hell broke loose.

They made it maybe ten steps before the world shattered open.

She was well aware that they were taking whatever kids they could, mostly the slavers were doing that, but a few Thalmor were dotted between them. They were even wearing their robes, which made the fear ratchet up even more. They weren’t even hiding it anymore. The guards could crush the slavers alone, but with mages on their side things got spotty. Argis was a blur, thundering through the Hall’s door like a man possessed, straight up barrelling through whatever stood in his way. The guards seemed better adapted to the sudden roaring, gnashing beast that Argis had become, maybe even expected it. Since when the slave hunters and Thalmor started panicking, the guard started picking them off with well placed arrows.

It even got to the point where the slavers congregated near the recently closed gates with some of the
captured citizens and children being used as human shields. Talos knew what kind of adrenaline was coursing through them to face Argis like that, especially since even a damn lightning bolt just got eaten by whatever enchanted ring he was wearing.

Whatever it was that had snapped in him, it rallied the Markarth guard as well as a few sell-swords behind him. Most of them kept to the edges, away from where Argis was beating his way through the throng of slavers to get at the Justicar that still held her sister. Straight up beating, with his bare fists where the enemy had swords and shields. Watching him tear the shields from their arms to smash their heads, their throats, their arms, anything within his reach. It wasn’t even as if he just punched them, every step although fuelled by blind rage was sure and purposeful, every step had thought and a deliberate meaning. He dodged and weaved, strong and unrelenting against their defences. Not even one drop of energy was wasted in his insane push towards Lucia. Even when he stood alone against the last Justicar, the sell-swords and guards pulling back, her hands aglow and her eyes on fire.

It was insane, how strong her magic was.

Sofie could smell the ozone from where she was, and she was just about beside the bridge over the river.

At one point, Sofie thought she would kill him. The guards were slow to draw their swords, simply because they were slow to realize she was warding herself from their arrows. Even then it was madness to be anywhere near Argis as he was. She had them in a choke hold –either they had to get close to Argis to kill her with their swords or they had to leave her for Argis to kill.

That is, until something dark and light broke her ward and smashed a dagger into her temple.

Ondolemar caught the side of her head with his free hand, just so he could lever his dagger free. It almost made her sick the way he threw the other mage aside.

There was a moment of complete silence, almost as if the world had just stopped turning. Where the elf and the nord just stared each other down, before Argis stormed forwards and Ondolemar stepped back, and Argis pulled Lucia out of the wreckage of people surrounding the front gate.

The only reason Sofie could see that Argis wouldn’t kill Ondolemar then and there was the fact that the elf wasn’t wearing his Thalmor robes. He was in some regular mage robes, ugly burnt orange against the dull greens and grey.

Sofie just about remembers running to them, just about remembers more guards pour in from outside of the city. Apparently they stopped the attackers running straight out of Markarth with the people they had collared.

Sofie barely remembers slamming into Argis’ side where he’s sat, barely even budging him. There is a shout of protest from the guards, almost as if they expect the worst, but he doesn’t attack her. He has Lucia’s head cradled against his bad shoulder, where most of his tunic is shredded from a frost spell and the frostbite is most pronounced. But he has enough room on his good side for her to tuck her head under his arm, and even though he’s missing a huge chunk of hair and his hands are shaking from the adrenaline, and even though he doesn’t hear her or see her and can probably barely feel her, she feels safe. They might have been in a circle of broken bodies; she was safer here than anywhere else in the world when Papa was away.

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“Alright,” Artan sighed, rolling his shoulders until he felt something crack and slide back into place.
It settled him enough that the heavy stares on his back didn’t much faze him anymore. The Legionnaires at his heel were restless, especially since the cure disease potions were doled out. “Hopefully they’re sleeping, since it is daytime. Right now, the only things on the streets will be thralls. These people are little more than puppets as they are. We could entertain the possibility of saving them, but that will take killing the vampire that charmed them. Where you can, just immobilise them. If they haven’t been pushed too far, then we can restore them to who they were before. Otherwise, we’re going in for the kill.”

It was satisfying to hear the grunts of agreement behind him, as well as the rising feeling in his gut. He couldn’t place exactly what it was, but he would guess it to be confidence. This lot were mostly newer recruits with maybe twenty or so veterans, a good few of them Artan recognised from the race for the Jagged Crown or the battle at Windhelm. It was a blessing and a curse. They kept the newbies in line and led them by example; by being at his heel.

He told them to move, they moved. He told them to rub beeswax into their underarmor, and then they rubbed beeswax into their underarmor. He told them to wrap their swords in hemp, that’s what they did. He told them to smear the shiny studs of their armor in the leather-stain he gave them, he told them to smear the dark brown face paint across their skins, told the blondes and redheads to wear hats, and told them to cover their noses and mouths with scarves.

They listened to every order as if they knew it was for their benefit.

The rumours were right about the Dragonborn; he had the best survival rate amongst leaders in the realm. Where others lead a lone frontal assault and got their men and women slaughtered, well. Artan wasn’t an idiot, and he wasn’t a glory hog. He wasn’t here to make more bodies; he was here to regain a city. Regain homes, and stalls, and businesses.

So when he led them through the sewers, they didn’t complain. They didn’t comment on how his black leathers looked the spitting image of the Dark Brotherhood’s armor, either.

When they hit a fork in the pipes, he nodded his head to the left and led his group of twenty behind him. Jakk, well Jakk led his own group of twenty “sell-swords” to the right. If the plan went right, then the vampires would be pinned between four swords; Artan and Jakk from the back, Talia from the throat, and the sun when they went to run.

As things went along, Artan felt sicker and sicker. He couldn’t tell if it was pre-battle nerves or not. The last time he did this, sack a city, he had a housecarl with him. Argis was with him. The pattern seemed to be that whenever they were apart the shit hit the windows. Still. He pulled himself up the sewer ladder and up to the hole-cover. This one opened up in Honeyside’s basement, thankfully enough.

By now, Jakk should have met up with whatever had been chilling out in the thieves den the last few weeks or so. Hopefully, the vampires wouldn’t have found the secret back panel into what Jakk called the Cistern. Artan had pointed out that their luck had been hit and miss so far, but Jakk was confident enough that Artan let him go with a few assassins.

Hopefully, someone was still there to rescue.

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Jakk, if he was honest, was a mite surprised. In his head, he had never managed to align Garma with Legate. But then again, Artan, what his brother had grown into, wasn’t Garma. Garma had been a mad, jittery thing that seemed a lot like what happened when a puppy grew up in a cage; twisted and
suffering malnutrition. It was as they all were, back then. It wasn’t until Eirian snapped and started sneaking them food that they filled out from sacks of bones to sacks of bones with a little meat thrown in. But in honesty, his brother didn’t start getting a glint in his eye until after Za’nír came and they began getting proper rations.

It was ridiculous really, when he looked back on it.

It had taken years for them to trust Za’nír, years of staring at him as if he would destroy everything. Every little scrap that they had ferreted away after Mama and Papa… but he didn’t. He ended up helping them more than even Eirian had. He had built up a little, tiny shrine around them and their precious things, taught them how to give and take and how to survive. He taught them how to live for when they were in the real world. “This place is just a tiny little box, and when you step into the sunshine, you both will need to know how to live. Nothing lasts forever, cubs.”

At the time, they had figured it to be when they mastered their craft and Larethius allowed them to carry out missions for him. But as the years wore on, Eirian and Za’nír gave S’eta and Garma new ideas.

They wouldn’t just get out and become freed slaves. They would be free men.

And they would live, and love, and laugh.

It took years, evidently, to break whatever hold Larethius had.

But even so, even after all these years, S’eta could still recall the feel of a collar.

He knew that was what was driving most of the Summerset Six this far.

They all knew the stakes here.

He was broken from his reverie when Lefty breached another hidden trapdoor, one leading straight into the Warrens. Thankfully, everything in this shitheap of a city was connected, so the Ragged Flagon wasn’t too far. Whatever was left of it, anyway. Hefid was still alive, spooking the shit out of a few of the greener assassin recruits. She seemed more agitated than usual, probably because she was far from her room. Lefty pulled something from his robes and threw it, the tiny thing making a loud crack against the farthest wall. Hefid shrieked and ran, but nothing followed her. Where she ran, Jakk couldn’t say.

The place was littered with bodies though. There were mostly vampire corpses; with a few Riften Guard uniformed men thrown in. Jakk figured them deserters, although S’haira seemed to find it all rather suspect. Jakk, well, he was inclined to agree. There were maybe thirty bodies in what could be called an underground cul-de-sac. That’s what they called a dead end in a rural street in the Dominion, so he guessed it would do here. In one of the doorways, one of the only to have light and creepily enough a barred door stood a chuckling man. His front was completely in shadow, and only a bloodied butcher’s cleaver glinted in the weak firelight. In any case, it made a rather disturbing image, especially with what looked to be a blood trail leading into his cell from the pile of bodies.

Whatever he wanted or whatever he was muttering to himself, Jakk didn’t want to know.

Leading the way, since the assassins had been more or less banned from Riften after the raid on the Blackbriar Mansion, Jakk didn’t know whether to simply call it quits and rejoin Artan. As things stood, his gut felt like the one time he and Scouts tried sex upside down, and that at least had the benefit of feeling fucking fantastic. Now, he just felt wrung out, with an ugly, twisted wrenching in his chest as if something awful was about to pop out from every shadow.
It was easy enough to set up a look out beside the main tunnel webbing out from the Warren’s main door. Having at least two assassins per stretch made the entire thing look almost creepy, before each of them settled into a hiding place. And then only the telltale prickle of heat he always felt when being watched remained. S’haira had set up shop in the ‘execution room,’ apparently liking the way the sunlight blinded people on their entrance and effectively gave her apt time to murder the shit out of them.

It ended up being him, Lefty and a newbie called Lorena on point. The sun was still strong overhead, just hitting noon. As it was, he would have preferred to be the only one entering the Cistern, since Lefty and Lorena both bogged up the tunnels behind him and would definitely make it harder to run. It also meant that the ambush they set up behind them was probably for naught, but then they hoped to split whatever group was in the Cistern into at least two groups so they could neutralize them easier.

He guessed his gripes were for naught, since when they finally got the all clear for them to move into the Cistern, well. Lefty made a sign with his hands and slipped into the waters around the Flagon’s floating bar, leaving Jakk and Lorena beside the cleaning cupboard. The girl was at least a year younger than him, maybe more. Breton, tiny, liked daggers. She fell into step at his heel, daggers at the ready.

And Jakk, well, Jakk put all those years as an apprentice to Za’nír to the test.

He carefully opened the cabinet to peer into the back, looking for the latch, and whether or not it had been tampered with. It hadn’t, but there was a shadowmark for safe house dug into the wood beside it. If it hadn’t been done with a glass dagger rather than the regular iron, Jakk might have bought it. The grooves were different between iron and glass; glass always cut narrow and clean. Whereas iron always looked like shit and a little hacked up.

He then resorted to the forbidden. He used one of the spells Artan had been bitching and snapping at him to learn ‘just in case you need it.’ He cast detect dead, and he found none ahead of him. Then, ignoring the muttered “that’s a bet I can collect on,” from Lorena, he cast detect life. It was exhausting, but the momentary flickers of light were enough. Twenty living people were in the Cistern.

There was a sudden rush of air around the secret panel, one he knew to be a lot of people moving around the stuffy hallway between the Cistern proper and the secret door. He almost laughed when the people beyond pulled back the panel from the other side and the flickering lamplight beyond broke across his face.

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Talia was ready to kill her way through the thrice damned streets alone at this rate.

It was noon, and they had nothing. No signal flare, no nothing. The Legionnaires that Artan had escorted to her were restless, as were her people. What had remained of the Stormcloak army was easily tucked under her wing. What had been her life before Garma was their rallying cry, apparently. It was abstract to them, but with enough sick reality in its depths that made the straggling men and women convene under her banner. Well, under her lead. After the Thalmor dossiers went public across Tamriel, things had gotten difficult for the Empire and the Dominion. As things stood, it was an uneasy alliance where the Dominion claimed forgery and the Empire prodded for answers.

Whatever.

As things stood, she had a bunch of men and women out in the woods waiting for a signal that might
never come. She knew Artan well enough that it would, but vampires, Volkihar at that, well. They were Molag Bal’s pet monster, they were.

Whether or not the sunshine would even the field, she did not know.

But at least the damned cats had somewhere to run to if the heat got too much.

So when a signal came, she almost pushed over Bjorn in her haste to get to the messenger; who turned out to be that infernal red-headed pickpocket. There were a good ten or so men and women with him, maybe a few children thrown into the mess. All of them looked awful, clothes muddied and torn, faces gaunt and eyes blank. “What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be-“

“Yes lass I should be in a sewer like the other rats, I know. But as it turns out, we got evicted by some old friends of yours,” Brynjolf spat on the ground as he finished, but not before pressing a hand to the satchel across his shoulder.

He threw the piece of armor from him as if it were a snake.

She couldn’t disagree.

Xxx

The legionnaires seemed… disgusted and then entertained by the elementally enchanted spiders Artan had set them up with as makeshift bombs. It was equally as interesting to note that the vampires hadn’t been able to breach the vault under Honeyside, since the enchantments on the door were untouched. Artan led them up into his house, pushing down the molten rage inside. There was blood covering most of the floor, as well as a good few bodies piled outside the girls’ room. Mostly kids, but a few civilians were thrown in too. Something inside his heart was screaming, but he couldn’t pinpoint exactly what it was that made his instincts twitch. He had seen dead children before, and he had brought some kind of justice on the perpetrators before. But as he motioned for the silent, dead-eyed legionnaires to stay still beside the vault doors and stepped up to examine the bodies, he almost wished he hadn’t.

There were few bite marks, but it was the long thin gashes across the neck that killed these people. Vampires he knew didn’t do that. Volkihar castle was full of paper-skinned husks, drained of everything they had.

Vampires didn’t kill these people.

He led a single file up the stairs, silent and light. The legionnaires, for being a mostly scouting unit, were excellent at following his exact step. Maybe they could pad out the growing Brotherhood a little more.

They came across even more bodies and one or two decomposing vampire corpses; where they hadn’t been moved since the city was plundered he guessed. Whatever the reasoning, the light dust on the floor suggested at least a weeks worth of abandoning of the house, except for the clear trail of at least twenty sets of footprints down into the basement. His intel put at least fifty to thirty live vampires in the city, so why they would leave his house untouched was a mystery. And why they would herd their captives up just to kill them all in an abandoned house…

He shook his head free of the extra distractions, and had a few of the men begin to unblock the backdoor. The vampires had barricaded the thing with whatever they could find as soon as they secured the city, keeping most out and unlucky civilians trapped inside. It was easy enough, and when it finally sprung open and the fresh air billowed in, he wasn’t the only one to enjoy the gust of
One of the scouts drew an arrow fletched with bright blue feathers from his back, and readied his bow. Artan gave the nod, and the signal went out.

And then he pushed forwards, through his front door and into the bazzar. He was still sneaking, but he straightened fast enough to make the man behind him jump in surprise. It took ten seconds for two runners to leave Honeyside’s back door, and five seconds more for the rest of the men to pour into the bazzar as a thin line of blades with one archer in the doorway.

Artan couldn’t even bring himself to draw his blades.

“It’s been a long time, Garma.”

Argis came back slowly. He couldn’t hear much, only bumbled words that slurred together. It matched his sight perfectly, since he could only see smears of colour and the occasional dark spot. But he could feel pretty well in his hands, at least. He didn’t have much else than his fingertips right now, but he knew he was alive. He could feel the pressure more than anything of two lumps pressed against his chest. He would have guessed them to be the girls, but he didn’t know.

But everything came back with a crash when some yellow blob waved a putrid smelling thing in front of his face.

Sofie was patting his face with one of her small hands, and it took him a good few seconds to realize she was trying to press the snarl from his features. He sniffed hard, hard enough to clear his sinuses and spat on the ground behind them, making sure not to jostle Lucia too much. Well, he tried to hit the ground. What he actually spat on was the brains of some poor elf who had his skull caved in. Sofie was still patting him, almost as if she were trying to calm a dog, although he wasn’t sure why.

He looked to Sofie, who gave him a small nod, to Lucia who was blearily staring up at him from where she was still too limp to sit up alone.

Then he settled his eye on Ondolemar, crouched maybe a few feet away in what looked like some kind of mage robes rather than the usual Thalmor ensemble with the awful bag of smelling salts in hand. And behind him were the pale faced guards, swords drawn and eyes full of fear. “He has returned to our plane it seems. So I would suggest sheathing your swords gentlemen,” Ondolemar called over his shoulder, although he never took his eyes from Argis.

Pain tore through his throat when he tried to speak, but a small wisp of healing magic from the elf dulled it enough for him to hiss out. “What the hell.”

Ondolemar inclined his head before answering, “Jaden Aedeus sends his regards. As things have seemed to progress faster than expected, I regret to inform you that instead of a formal introduction this mess will have to do. I am one of his agents, the same way that most of the other ‘sommerset six’ have agents. A pleasure to finally make your acquaintance, Argis. Pleasantries aside, we need to start fortifying the city. But as you can probably guess, the locals still believe me to be a Thalmor. You can understand my predicament. So your assistance in this matter would be invaluable.”

“Don’t sweat it, blondie,” Argis nearly jumped when a hand hit his shoulder and Bard’s voice floated out above his head. “The fucker is on our side.”

Ondolemar snorted, “He is more of a redhead at this point, no?”
“Well, what’s left of it anyway,” Bard conceded. “Lets get you lot somewhere warmer, yeah?”

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As per the usual ‘disaster meeting’ protocol, they congregated in the main hall for the clusterfuck of a situation to get debated over. Thankfully, Calder was silent throughout. Angry, but silent. Serana was perched on one of the comfier armchairs, with Iona at her elbow and Jordis on the rug at her feet. Argis was sat at the dining table, ignoring whoever told him it was best to sit on one of the cushioned chairs. The blunt wood biting in reminded him where he was and who he was, and he needed it more right then than he needed a soft pillow for his ass. Scouts, well, Scouts had straight up retired to the wash room without a word when he returned home, covered in blood and glassy eyed. Nobody really begrudged him his alone time.

“So you expect me to believe that this guy has been running a double life for the last… I don’t know… decade?” Lydia snarled, pacing the recently cleaned Vlindrel Hall’s dining room. The ice that one of the Justicar’s threw at Argis had been chiseled away and the remaining frost left to melt, much to Argis’ quiet joy. As it turned out, the Justicar’s who infiltrated Markarth had near enough neutralized all of them before nearly escaping with Lucia. Probably for a hostage deal, or worse. But then again, the slavers were apparently gunning for any children, which made things sicker. Lydia had been helping in the other house with Jordis, both of them getting dragged into a battle outside when the first attack hit, which had them fighting their way through the backstreets before pushing as many civilians as they could into the Keep or into the Hall of the Dead. Serana had actually been in Vlindrel Hall with Lucia when the Thalmor smuck in, said that one of them set up a Guardian Circle it had near enough killed her. “Lucia managed to push me into the corner so I wouldn’t get burnt as bad by it, but the thing ended up just trapping me there. I figured I’d have to wait until it dissipated to chase after them but… well, you came,” she nodded at Argis, who simply shrugged.

It had been surreal, hearing about what he had done after he found those things in his house with-

He shook his head.

Serana had been a trapped onlooker as one of the Justicars froze Argis near enough entirely from head to toe to the wall behind him, knocking over all three bookcases in the meantime. If he hadn’t gone nuts and started breaking free, they might have gone as far as to simply encase his face and leave him to suffocate. But as things were, he had simply gone batshit insane. He had broken both legs free, at which the elf holding Lucia ran for the door. And it wasn’t until he had mindlessly began punching at the ice around his head to try and wriggle out of the awkward position he had been frozen into that another left, leaving two alone with the Nord to attempt to slow him. One of them started screaming when he wrenched enough of his head free to start trying to flat out rip his hair and his last frozen arm free. They nearly fell over each other in fear when the seemingly-mindless brute yanked a dagger from his belt to shear the hair caught in the clump of ice away and straightened up to roar down at them. At a new angle and knife in hand, Argis had cleaved a giant crack in the last of the ice encasing his arm and wrenched himself free entirely, just in time to catch the slower of the Justicars on their way out.

Serana didn’t explain what he had done, and he didn’t want to know.

The guards had kept an almost insultingly wide berth from him when Bard had begun leading him up the steps towards home.

“Look here snow queen, we are as just as mad as you are. Not even Big Boss knew about this guy, and he’s been walking into him every time the Jarl calls his ass. The reality is though that with the intel we have from Artan, this guy is the real deal. He has the seals, knows the handshake, and even has the secret catchphrase down to a perfect ‘T.’ He is Jaden’s man. And if you won’t take my word
on it, take the city guard’s. This guy was beating the shit out of any Thalmor that appeared in his way. Even helped the common rabble into the Keep when the first wave hit,” Bard shrugged. “As shit stands, we—“

“But that intel is compromised, isn’t it?” Lucia asked, rubbing at her face.

The adults looked to her, to each other, and back at Ondolemar, who looked disturbed. “She’s right. After Arnsien’s capture he could have told them anything. However, each of them had their own personalized greeting, handshake and even seal. I suppose you have noticed your uncle Jakk using a stylized plant symbol to answer letters from you? And Eirian Larethius uses the image of a small bird? My benefactor has his own as well, which I provided both new and old versions of.”

“What is Artan’s personalized seal?” Argis asked, pressing a hand to his throat in an attempt to reduce the throbbing. Just made it hurt more.

“The new one is a stylized white hand with black claws, incorporating the draconic alphabet. The letter ‘G’ in the dragon alphabet is at the centre of the palm in black.” The elf shifted in his seat, before he quietly answered. “A four pointed star was the old one. According to Jaden, it was because—“

“That’s enough,” Argis nodded, before pressing his hands to the table. “He’s the real deal.”

Lydia seemed unconvinced, probably because up until today the elf was pretending to be one of the people who just attacked their home. Still, Argis was too tired to deal with such things at the moment. “What’s the plan?”

“As it turns out, the Dominion is not interested in mounting an attack against Skyrim. The only Thalmor in the province are Eldunarto’s men on his behalf. Elenwen has given him leave to retake his ‘property,’” Ondolemar wiggled the index and middle fingers of both hands at that, looking affronted. “He is literally a lone dagger aiming at your thane at this point. The Dominion has beenfairing badly against the resistance fighters rioting and de-stabilizing the Isle, whereas Artan has been settling Skyrim into a new peace. The Empire has similarly been regrouping since the ascension of the new Emperor, especially since this one is considered to be well favored by noble and commoner alike. Apparently the boy’s work in local shelters for the poor has gone down well amongst the regular folk. As things stand, by taking out Artan, Elenwen wins a great deal. Her interference in Skyrim has been an effort to realize one goal, and that is to cut another leg from the Empire and give the Dominion full focus to beat down the resistance fighters. With the Empire one more province down and the Isle newly unified, it would be a cakewalk to invade. Artan is one of the main reasons that goal is a pipe dream now. Especially with that recent fiasco concerning Solitude’s Thane and the Jarl of Riften.”

“In essence,” Ondolemar shrugged, “Larethius is working alone, but the Dominion has an interest in how he fares. If he wins, then we will be invaded sooner rather than hopefully never. If he loses, however, the Dominion will most likely paint him as a mad vigilante driven to insane measures in order to rescue his sister from the wayward slaves who kidnapped her.”

“It sounds like you have it all figured out. But how are we going to stop a huge Aldmeri family with the backing of a fucking slave Empire?” Bard growled, but it was more tired bluster than anything. The room turned to a dreaded silence after that, and the brusque question became more of a funeral shroud around them than a valid question.

It was almost palpable, how heavy the question weighed on them.

Until Iona slammed a fist on the dininghall table and spooked them into clarity.
“We pull off its arms and legs,” Iona sniped, the old bite of her voice cutting through whatever tiredness lingered in the room. Lydia stood straight from slouching against the doorframe. Bard sat up properly, the girls perked up from their rather dejected slumps on the floor. They all looked at her, and the creepy twist of the ethereal on her face. “And then we cut off the head.”

xxx

He still looked exactly the same as Artan remembered. Artan guessed it to be an elf thing, or he had Altmer blood in him. It was something unspoken in the Isle, a quiet little rumor about half-breeds diluting the gene pool. Better than full dirt elves, and definitely not as bad as the Bretons, but still. Sharp nose, bright green eyes, sandy brown hair pulled up into a jagged Mohawk. His armor was similar, but obviously customized. It held Larethius’ seal across the chest.

As did the armors of the fifty odd men at his heels. They had set up some kind of bonfire in the center, one which his lookouts had reported to be the smoldering remains of houses. Either they were wrong, or Tavan had been a very sneaky rat.

Artan was surprised that he didn’t feel that same molten rage from way back when the Falkreath Sanctuary was raided by the Penitus Oculatus. He didn’t feel a thing, really. No fear, just a big empty void. Out of that nothing, something flickered, and he knew it was whatever energy the Greybeards defined as a Voice. It didn’t leave his throat as a shout, however. It sat in his chest, making every single hair on his body feel alive. It grew, pushing against the inside of his skin, bubbling just underneath, hungry.

Tavan was a monster.

Tavan used to have pick of the litter when some imagined slight against Larethius was cooked up. He had the blacksmith set him up with his own tools, his own cutters and tongs and pliers. The lucky ones only had their teeth pulled. It was regular to see a few khajiit house slaves with docked tails, so they wouldn’t knock over the ornaments.

Tavan was the one who carved Papa’s pike himself, and even put the khajiit on it himself. He was Larethius’ right hand.

“You look a lot better than your friend Arnsien did. Although, you would I suppose,” Tavan shrugged nonchalantly, before rubbing some nonexistent dirt from his nose. Artan could feel the uneasy shifting of the Legionnaires at his back, but he had nothing for them yet. He was basking in the building joy in his heart. Tavan was oblivious. “I hear you have been a busy kitty. Buying houses with stolen coin, joining the legion, and even shacking up with one of the locals! Even adopted a pair of kids, too. Cute really,” Tavan smiled, before ducking his chin demurely. One of the legionnaires twitched. “A shame that it’s all over.”

Tavan raised his head, and there it was. That ugly glint in his eyes. It was almost like looking a draugr in the eye; that stare. Artan had only seen it a few times other than Tavan, mostly in the dragon priest’s corpses after they awoke from their slumber, that dead-eyed rage.

Still, he continued, “You are a slave, remember? Little more than a pet. And it is time to go home.”

Artan charged, and the legionnaires followed a heartbeat behind.

Tavan looked almost hungry as they fought. He had his sword and shield, he was sturdy and surefooted, but he was just a man. Artan slipped under his thrusting blade, around his shield and slammed Dawnbreaker straight into the elf’s armpit. It was easy to lever his shoulder apart, feel the tendon pop and the high keen of metal against metal. The world stopped almost instantly after that. It
was almost as if he released Slow Time, the way everything shifted. The arm came away easy, especially after Artan altered his grip on his sword and straight up sawed the dislocated limb from Tavan. The elf was howling, in fear, or pain, or rage, Artan didn’t know. All he knew was that Dawnbreaker had cauterized the wound closed.

The Justicars were getting their asses beat into hell.

It took everything he had not to just rip into the elf with his teeth. The flicker had turned into a burning, insatiable hunger to demolish everything that this monster represented. To give in to years of fear finally coming to an end, to make sure once and for all that he would be free. That the near constant swell of panic every time he saw a bosmer would die off with Tavan’s corpse.

Absently, since his eyes were locked on Tavan’s creased face, Artan noted the sudden surge of bodies moving in his vision. But it wasn’t until some crying Thalmor fell into his side that his eyes left Tavan, and well a single wash of the Thu’um made that problem disappear in a very ugly spatter of gore. He could feel the residual sparks of energy around his face when he spotted her, pushing her way through the men and women to stare at him in unadulterated rage before that vision tunneled straight into Tavan’s head. Artan threw the still-stunned Tavan to the cobblestones and stepped aside for Talia, who seemed more like a rabid bear than anything.

Artan felt more than saw the resulting commotion at his side, instead his eyes were on the bonfire and the pikes standing upright amongst the tinder and roaring flames. He hadn’t noticed the pikes before, since he was so focused on Tavan. Focused on the straight joy he felt when he knew deep in his heart that he could have killed Tavan in any way he wanted. Whatever blackened husks remained of the bodies, their armors were mostly intact, if scorched. It made enough known to him. A few of them were assassins. And one was a thief.

Xxx

Artan didn’t stay at the Rift for long.

If anything, he stayed maybe an hour, staring at the pyre. Talia promised, blood-soaked and still picking the remains of Tavan from her hair, that she would send Jakk’s remains home to Markarth for burial. Artan had just enough in him to nod.

It was quiet, too quiet, on the return. He guessed it was because-

The house looked alright, even though apparently there had been an attack. He ran then, fast enough that the guards almost shot him in their attempt to quell any further attacks. But the moment he cleared Vlindrell Hall’s doors and near enough slammed headfirst into a wall, he knew enough. Argis shouted a few words and Lucia and Sofie were almost as fast as rabbits, squishing themselves between the two men easily. Artan didn’t know when he started babbling, or when the tears started. He barely had enough space inside his heart to feel relieved, relieved that at least something was still safe and sound. Argis had his hair cropped short since apparently he had to cut his way out of an ice wall, as well as a myriad of bruises and the mental burden of coming down from a berserker episode. Lucia was a little bruised, but as angry as usual. Sofie was quiet, almost silent.

But it wasn’t until everything had settled that everything fell apart again. They had still been knelt in the entranceway when Scouts returned from hunting, looking over their heads for Jakk. And Artan had stood, motioned for the Argonian to follow him outside. And that was where Garma told Scouts-Many-Marshes that S’eta was gone, and where he held that same Argonians hand while they cried, trying not to think about the amber-embellished engagement ring clutched between their hands.
Right, im very sorry that this took so long! Life has been a hurricane in a barrel the last few months, and this got put on the backburners. But, i do have half of the next chapter already finished, so hopefully that will be up during the next few weeks.

Also, id like to point out that Artan might be nice most of the time, but hes not actually a hero. like far from it, really. i wanted a dragonborn that reluctantly started looking out for people and then it snowballed, and even when in the peak of power he still has no idea what the "right" thing to do is. I like the idea of a hero that isnt what theyre chalked up to be. when the legend kind of goes too far, but really, hes just some guy who is doing his best, and sometimes that isnt good enough.

but whatever, ive been rambling.

Happy reading, and Thank you so much for coming this far with me! I'll do my best to update better in the future.

-Frog
Artan didn't really think much about what he was doing. The bodies had been cold for a few hours now, even the one that had more or less been welded shut by a very insistent incineration spell. Whoever that mage was, they really wanted the man wearing that armor to die. Still, Artan didn't think much beyond compiling evidence to push at the Jarl, if only to give himself some more time. Time for what, he wasn't even sure about any more. Time to form a battle plan, perhaps?

The priestess of Arkay, replacing Brother Verulus after his mysterious disappearance, seemed to actually wilt as he cracked open the crushed breastplate of another guard, more to look at the rather nasty remains of his insides after what looked like a lightning bolt hit him. He got zapped after someone had caved in his chest with some kind of warhammer, which either meant the infiltrators wanted to send a message or this man saw something after he got knocked down that he wasn't meant to see. Since the initial wound would have been fatal, the second option became redundant. Unless the mage was a particular sadist, he supposed, but by the looks of the rest of the dead, that wasn't the case. This particular soldier had been found near the Hall of the Dead itself, which didn't really illuminate anything special.

If anything, it didn't look like a run of the mill kidnapping.

Artan ignored the violent retching from one of the scribes the Jarl had given him for note-taking. The man was barely even able to stand up, let alone scribble a letter.

“My Thane?” one of the guards, an older man with a beard like a bears arse, asked quietly. It seemed as if he was barely containing his anger. And why not? Markarth was renowned for being impenetrable. A bunch of elven slavers had invaded their city, murdered their way through the guard and citizenry alike in order to 'kidnap' their children and the various refugee children from other holds. If it wasn't for his housecarls maintained presence in the city, then it would have been a disaster. The guards here were equipped to deal with Forsworn, but since the wildmen had retreated further into the bush things had gotten more lax with security. But even so...

If he hadn't had the children relocated here, even knowing what he did, then it might have been avoided completely.

If anything, this entire disaster had cemented in his mind that someone was leaking information, or Larethius had somehow managed to catch someone he shouldn't have. How would they know to go after the children in order to smother Artan's view and the Brotherhood's almost exact map of their camps? It was one thing to guess that the children had been telling the authorities about what they saw, but it would take the capture of a Brotherhood assassin, a higher up, or someone that had been informed about the Night Mother's uncanny ability to locate any target to get to this level. It may have just been a desperate attempt to cover their asses since the fire was getting hot. By Bard's reckoning, there were three major slaving teams left with any backbone. The others had been shattered.

It was either that, or something else.
A kid got caught doing the Black Sacrament, perhaps?

And since this wasn't a kidnapping, and the infiltrators hadn't seemed to keen on attacking the children, only a half-baked attempt to take his girls...

Artan cracked a few bones in his neck, if only to keep the lid on the ugly black fugue bubbling up in his throat. If he let himself, he could think that the thief on a spike wasn't S'eta at all. S'eta would have the necessary knowledge in hand for this kind of attack, if he was right and they were aiming for the kids. But he couldn't think of that, lest everything became a sickeningly black nightmare, where his entire being felt like it would shatter into nothing.

xxx

“My Jarl,” Artan intoned, ignoring the usual grumblings from Jarl Igmund's strange uncle. The man was more gnarled old tree-root than anything at this point, hissing all sorts of ridiculous things even when Artan received the ceremonial sword from their vault. Always with the 'pelt' and the-

“Artan, it is good you returned when you did,” the Jarl replied, nodding slowly.

“On that we agree. I've concluded my investigation, but you won't like what I have found,” the cat shrugged tightly, feeling Faleen's eyes on him. She hadn't really stopped looking at him since he climbed the steps, accusations and all-sorts riddled in her eyes. He didn't blame her.

“The raid was a cover up. Whatever they planned, whatever they wanted to do, they managed it. The robes they wore were imitations, having the typical embellishments and embroidery on the insides that are an exact match to the robes real Thalmor wear. They did lack, however the herbs and spices usually woven into the hems for good luck, and the traditional cleansing oils were nowhere present on the more... preserved bodies. High Elves that are raised in the Dominion are taught a certain way of how to prepare for battle, and not a single one has deviated from those traditions in my experience. It's the same way Nords leave offerings for Talos and leave Rosemary and Dragons Tongue outside their homes when they go off to war.”

“Who were they? What did they want? Surely not the children? These infiltrators were rampaging through the city at one point, they could have easily...” Igmund shook his head, disgusted.

“They probably did want the children, but they weren't the priority. The children are our most reliable source on the slaver rings movements, especially since no adult has been rescued so far. Well, no sane one at any rate. I think that the whole kidnapping stunt was exactly that, just a stunt to cover their true intentions,” Artan frowned. “And as for who they were, well, they were bosmeri slaves, my Jarl. Trained up to fulfill a singular purpose; to further their Master's plans. It was why when the guards managed to force the stragglers into a choke point, they fought as if their lives didn't matter, yes? It's because in their eyes, their only purpose was to do whatever was ordered.”

Igmund looked as if he was about to either be sick or cough up a lung. “They didn't even send in their own sworn-swords to fight us? They sent in....?!?” he cut off abruptly, visibly shaking with anger, sadness, indignation maybe? Artan wasn't sure he even cared, at this point.

“My Jarl, whatever they did, whatever they put here... I will find it,” Artan growled, feeling something akin to pins and needles when Igmund returned his gaze.

“Some will say our misfortune is your fault, for persuading me to let you bring these children into our city,” he sighed, sounding old and worn.

Artan couldn't feel a damn thing. “They can say whatever they like. I chose to stay here and fight for
Skyrim, even though it could mean my death, my dismemberment, just about any nasty thing you can think of. You've heard stories of what the elves do to their beast slaves, my Jarl. Of what they do to any who oppose their doctrine. The harsh reality is, that I have made my peace with whatever comes next. I know where I stand, and that is between whatever catastrophe that comes next and the people of Skyrim. The same way I did with Palutena, with Thonar Silver-Blood, with Ulfric Stormcloak, Maven Blackbriar, Eriekur of Solitude, the Snow-Shods, Alduin, the goddamn vampires, and well just about every other shitty asshole in this province. There wasn't really that much of an outcry when I was doing any of those things, really was there? But if someone has a problem with me asking their assistance in protecting innocent children, then they can grow a backbone and knock on any of my houses for a chinwag, cant they?"

Igmund didn't even flinch at the tone, or the words. His uncle was stunned into silence at the impudence. But Igmund sighed, “You have done much for Skyrim and her people, Artan. I just hope it will not be forgotten in the days to come.”

“My Jarl, at this point, I don't even care if people remember what I've done. I just want to stop burying people I've never even had the chance to meet yet,” Artan sighed.

Xxx

Lydia sighed and pulled Alma closer, the little girl happy enough to putter alongside so long as she had her doll in her other hand. It was looking to be tough work to encourage the children to file out of the cave system where they had been hidden away during the attack, waiting a few days extra just to be sure that the last dregs had been weeded out. The Jarl was happy enough to ferry them between his halls for meals and during the day, however at nighttime it was considered too dangerous with the current fighting going on. Assassins, he said. Artan didn't correct him, since it would be wrong to suggest that killing the Jarl would have been a move the enemy wouldn't try.

Artan himself had been on high alert, switching between the immediate job of picking his way through the guard and the townsfolk for spies, and then moving on to heal as many of the wounded as he could. Thankfully there were a lot of old-ways alchemists holed up in the holding, so it more or less fell to them when it came to infections and other more chronic conditions. The cat was more or less going over everything in the city for some "hidden motive" that the slavers had been exacting, but Lydia didn't see much of anything. It was a calculated raid in her mind, probably to get rid of the last witnesses or at least to take over Markarth. A city embedded into the side of a mountain sounded like the perfect place to set up a fortress, especially when the enemy in question had the manpower and money to do it.

Taking out such a fortified place would be a clever step before moving into an invasion plan, she supposed. She still wasn't wholly convinced of any such plan, but then Artan had not given her much to doubt before.

Absently, she wondered when Artan would actually have the time to grieve.

Alma tugged harder on her hand, probably to alert her to Calder shuffling up the long line of chattering children to reach them in its center. "How long do you think the munchkins will have to be hidden up in here like this?" he muttered at her, eyes flashing fiercely in his face.

"Until Artan has figured out whatever 'secret mission' these slavers have, I suppose," Lydia sighed back, rubbing at her face with a fist.

"But he still hasn't figured it out, and we're taking them back to the house." Calder snipped, leaning forward until the lad on his shoulders slumped into a more safe position. The nipper had been leaning back, trying to slap his friend with a stick, gods bless him.
“So what? Are we going to be pushing them on to somewhere else then?” she asked lowly, thankful for all the giggling and screaming for once.

“Well who knows… really?” Calder answered, but it was redundant. He shook his head like a dog. “Look… I have something to tell you, but… I don’t rightly know how to say it.”

xxx

Argis couldn’t really focus on anything, anymore.

He knew vaguely that Lydia had asked him to house-sit in Vimmiark Hall while the meeting between Ondolemar and Artan went down, but he was nonplussed as to why it was supposed to be him. If anything went down, he had a partially dead arm and the reaction time of a slug.

He knew it to be either the results of his... episode, or simply because he was spending so much time thinking about things. Typically, he was at peace. Worried about Artan and the kids, since they were all mischief-makers at the heart, but nothing world-breaking. Lucia had taken to keeping him within her periphery, and he tried to tell himself it was because she needed the reassurance that he was around and would keep her safe. But the other, darker thoughts made him wonder if in this moment he was the child being watched in case of an accident.

“Do you understand what would have happened if you were not there, Argis?” Ondolemar asked, seemingly appearing from nowhere. The elf stepped further into the room before settling in the opposite chair at the table, empty except for a bunch of maps and messages from across the Holds.

“I... I couldn't...” Argis shrugged, not understanding in the slightest why he couldn't explain, and even why he would speak about it to this man. He was until very recently a perceived threat, and Artan had yet to even vet him properly.

Ondolemar's eyes flickered, that strange kind of twitch that elves did when they focused on something. Artan said it was to do with the tiny muscles in the eye, but Argis honestly just tuned out anything to do with anatomy. It had been a lot more interesting to just watch Artan talk, in retrospect. Regardless, it was a distraction from the point at hand.

“I do not know if it even is my place to try helping with this,” Ondolemar sighed eventually.

“I... couldn't even control myself. It was a complete black out. I came... I came back but...” Argis wrung his hands, trying to find the words.

Ondolemar was quiet for a time, gold hands pressing gently into the tabletop and drawing unfathomable designs into its surface. They sat like that, content to simply be for a moment. Until he spoke again, “Artan trusts you implicitly with his children's lives. With his own life, and most definitely his secrets. If you cannot trust yourself, then you can trust in him. People say that you need to find strength in yourself to overcome adversity, but realistically that is not always achievable. So from an outsiders perspective, and you may ignore this advice if you'd like, but its okay to depend on other people until you can depend on yourself again.”

Argis looked at him, and Ondolemar looked back. The elf shrugged and displayed his palms, almost as if saying 'take it as you see it.'

“You are too hard on yourself, as I see. You allow other people the benefit of the doubt that you do not allow yourself. You believe that Artan can defeat one of the oldest families in the Dominion, but you do not believe yourself capable of overcoming what ails you. Have you never asked yourself why he hasn't run yet? Why in Hammerfell, in Cyrodil, in Elsweyr and in so many other places he
ran, but here he stayed? Here he built an entire empire of his own, but why? He was capable of it, but never did before. So why here?” Ondolemar shrugged again, “Maybe I'm curious myself. Jaden is much the same, but obviously nobody has the answers.”

“You elves are plenty scary, aren't you?” Argis huffed, settling back into his chair finally.

“Depends on the elf, I'd say,” Artan said, finally making his presence known.

Argis was kind of tired of everyone just randomly appearing without him noticing.

If Argis was surprised at the thick, roiling waves of danger emanating from Artan, then it was probably because it had been a long time since he had seen the khajiit like this. Ondolemar, to his credit, didn't flinch away from the scrutiny. They had smartly kept the meeting to Vimiark Hall rather than Vlindrel Hall, at Argis' request, and the Nord for one was thankful for the foresight. If Ondolemar had entered the house before being tested by Artan, well. It wouldn't just be waves floating his way right about now.

The table was between them, still in the same place Nepos had left the thing, with the elf sat at its surface. Artan, well, Artan was skirting the edge of the room and trying to look nonchalant. But even thick-shit Yngvar would have seen through that, gods bless him.

“When you water your blade just right...” Artan began, touching a hand to a ugly tapestry strung up on the far wall, his words making the tension in the room ripple.

“It sings,” Ondolemar replied, tone even.

“To what tune?” Artan looked from the tapestry to Ondolemar, pinning him easily in place.

“Dawn's birdsong.”

Artan seemed to still for a moment, before whatever awful thickness that had been in the room filtered out and two huge sighs drove the last away. “You could have told me you was one of his, it would have saved the aggro,” Artan snarked, a smile softening the edge.

“If I did that, well, where would the fun have gone?” Ondolemar struck back, smirking.

“Did you understand the duck joke?” Artan folded his arms across his chest and settled against one of the old dressers.

Ondolemar didn’t answer, but instead just pressed his lips into a thin line and shrugged. It started a loud, almost awkward tirade of laughter off. “I knew you weren't a real one. Jaden doesn't pick his boys by chance, does he?” the khajiit smirked, fully expecting a rebuke.

“He knew I could play the arrogant, self-absorbed twat card pretty well,” the elf sniffed.

“Not that self absorbed, since that mook didnt go to prison after all for the Talos worship, did he?” Artan flicked a wrist and started re-tightening some kind of leather bracelet that Sofie had probably made for him. Ondolemar shrugged and stood, “Possibly. However, I must take my leave. As it turns out, we may have our plans coming to a head faster than we had previously anticipated.”

Artan’s thu'um rushed out in a wave. “If that means what I think it means then I will personally be breaking some legs when Larethius is dead.”

The elf laughed, a high, bright thing, before he tugged his hood back up and stepped out into the hallway. “By the looks of it, all those people will be dead before you can.”
The elf left them alone, and it was obvious that Artan had been waiting for it.

The khajiit swept across the room almost as if he was floating, before simply stopping in front of Argis. It was slow but Artan put one hand on Argis' shoulder before leaning in, pressing his forehead to the Nord's. It settled something clawing at Argis' insides. It didn't make it go away, but it made a well of calm spring up in his chest. Another hand slid around his back, and the khajiit settled onto his lap. He had wondered if it would be hard to be so close after everything, but Artan had answered that question, hadn't he? It was easy to take comfort now that everything was quiet, and that's probably why they were crying. He didn't know who started, but his neck was wet from Artan's tears and he had long since covered most of the cat's jacket in snot. Both of his arms were around the khajiit's back, and something ugly in his head said 'cage' but Artan was pressing closer, holding on tighter. He didn't really know how long they sat there, or why they were crying or what was really happening.

But in the end, when they finally settled, he was happier for it.

Xxx

Lydia turned to Calder, the man looking for the most part as if he had found a bug in his ale. His face was taut, every line of muscle in him coiled like a bowstring ready to snap. She didn't want to push him, but she also didn't fancy the idea of waiting forty years for him to finally buck up enough courage to-

The floor tremored like it was falling apart beneath them, and then a huge plume of smoke swept up from the lower levels of Markarth like bats from hell. Children shrieked, but it took on that awful steel-on-stone level once that cloud covered them.

It almost immediately became chaos.

A almost man-sized chunk of rock shattered on the ground beside her, and she moved.

She was running, and Calder was beside her with guards pulling up the rear. There were children everywhere, the smaller ones being carried and the larger ones dragging others along and some just straight out sprinting to the exit.

Guards were screaming above the din, somehow, and Lydia was pushing tiny bodies forwards while Calder was screaming at people to run, and then Alma and doll were in her arms and that was it. It all broke into flashes of grey and black and colour and sound until she was fully panicking. The guards at the far end of the chamber were ushering in the faster children, and before long Lydia had passed along Alma to one of them, turning to push and tug and yell at anyone still in the cave system.

A huge pillar of stone smashed behind them, cutting through the cloud of stone-dust and there it was. Pinning Bjis to the ground like a pin through one of Artan's dried butterflies.

Calder looked at her. And in his eyes she knew what he wanted to do. They moved like lightning, ducking and weaving around falling rocks and straggling guards until they made it to Bjis and some other, screaming guard. The older, moustached man was screaming the seven hells and scrabbling at the rock, but it only even budged a hair's breadth. Bjis was howling, and Calder was yelling, and then everything just swirled into nothing but sound. Calder met the thing first, slamming into the underside of the rock and attempting to shift it back, but Bjis was hysterically clawing at his legs when the rock crushed him more, and Lydia had only just got there when-

That was when everything went black.
They felt more than heard the tremor.

Artan clutched tighter to Argis, almost as if the man would drop out from beneath them like a ghost. Lucia was at her door before Artan had even begun to respond. “What was that?” she squeaked, but Artan was moving to the door.

“Stay here,” the cat ordered, Argis at his back. Lucia didn't have time to argue.

The trip outside was forgotten when Argis slammed into Artan, prone outside the front door of Vlindrell Hall. “What on earth is going on...?” the nord asked, but he didn't get an answer. A huge dark slug of smoke and dust was surging from the Jarl's palace, leaking down across the city like an ugly mist. The guards were practically frantic, scattering across the steps like ants when the birds come pecking. Argis couldn't run, but he could jog. Following Artan down the staircases and then back up was easy, especially when the cat hissed “The children are still in there!” and then broke into a sprint.

Everything was wrong. She could hear the muffled screaming, somehow, above the thud-thud-thud of her heart in her ears. The dust made her eyes water, but she was too disorientated to do anything much about it except try to close them against the-

“Lydia....! Lydia.... can you hear me? Are you alive?” Calder's voice creaked out from somewhere to her left.

She moved instinctively towards his voice, but she was pinned. Something hard and sharp lanced through her thoughts at that, and she tried to scream but the dust choked up her throat. There was a lot of movement in the stones around them, but Calder's voice pushed through even those heart-shattering scrapes. “Lydia! Oh by the Nine! Can you move? Can you see?”

Lydia coughed twice, forcing her throat to work, and managed out a quiet, “Calder...”

There was darkness everywhere around her, and she tried to keep that animalistic panic rattling around her chest in line. Struggling would make it worse, she was sure. Her legs were pinned, although she had one arm somewhat free. There was some warm drool under her cheek, most likely pooling there while she had been dazed. “Calder... Calder whats happening?”

Tiny lights filtered through the rocks above them, and for a blistering second she thought they were dead. The rocks at her left side moved, and she startled when a bone-white hand reached through an impossible gap between the stones. “Grab my hand!” Calder snarled, almost as if he was pained. It took a moment of consideration before he decided to blearily respond, “I don't know whats happening, but those fuckers probably planted some kind of magic bullshit in the caves. Artan said he didn't know what their real motives were, right?”

She took his hand, feeling something inside her lurch when he squeezed her fingers.

“Those look like magelights, and... ah. I guess they're going to start trying to move the rocks soon, we'll be out of this soon, Lydia, okay? Just don't take a nap on me,” Calder forced out.

“Calder...” she couldn't even recognise her own voice, feeling that age-old fear creep up inside her like a worm. “Fuck...”

Some more of the stones above her lurched ominously, but thankfully held.
The worst part was being unable to see properly. The feeling of being pinned to the ground with a mountain above her almost shook her apart at the seams, but Calder seemed to sense her or hear her panting because he squeezed her hand again, “I ate Argis’ sweet roll the other day and I don't regret it.”

A panicked, warbling laugh burst out of her, threatening to pull her into hysterics. “He punched Bard in the head for that Calder!”

xxx

The guards were already pulling rocks and boulders from the entrance when Artan burst through the keep’s doors, taking in the entire clusterfuck infront of him. The children were crying, screaming and barely even coherent in their tiny huddle against Faleen, the woman's sure-footed bulk some kind of bastion of safety for them as they swarmed towards the exit. She gave Artan a grim nod as she passed, and he couldn't blame her for being rattled. Argis was at his heel just as he stepped forwards into the fray, Ondolemar's magic pumping out like a wave across the shore. The dust obeyed, filtering up and out of the keep in an orderly slug, giving the guards ample room to see where they stepped.

The entire tunnel into where Calcemo ususally worked was collapsed.

“What happened?” Artan barked, absently noting Serana and Iona bumbled into the fray. Jordis wasn't far behind, almost instantly moving to become part of the team clearing the rubble.

“There was some kind of explosion deeper into the ruins, the kids mostly escaped unscathed but a few people got caught up in the ceiling collapse,” a nearby guard rellayed, looking like she was half-way ready to run at the drop of a hat.

Artan nodded to her, absently calling two storm atronachs from Oblivion. They silently got to work, pulling stones and such from the huge mass of debris with their odd, magnetic pull. It said a lot that the guards didn't even blanch from their proximity. Artan and Argis moved as one, Artan tugging rocks free before growing annoyed and instead opting to move them telekinetically. Argis was slower, so much too slow at pulling rocks away, but nobody tried to stop him. Even when they managed to shift enough to release a now quiet guard from the debris, passed out from the pain of his legs being crushed.

“Bjis got hit by a huge ass rock and went down. Joim stopped to help him and so did that Calder bloke and your Lydia. Then the entire fucking ceiling came down and—” Another guard, Harrik, started shouting between straining under the weight of the stones he moved.

“Shit!” Artan didn't even have a way to get at them faster.

He flickered Detect life into focus, and noticed three people still alive in that rubble ahead of them. Maybe twenty feet from them.

“They're still alive in there! Get your asses moving!” Artan roared, feeling something sick twist into his guts like a snake.

xxx

“Calder I can't feel my legs,” Lydia gulped around the lump in her throat, feeling almost as if she was under a dragon. She could feel the cold seeping into her from the debris, and it didn't even hurt after a while.

Calder squeezed her hand. “It's probably because it's had that Hrongar humping the shit out of it for
the last ever,” he snorted, and it almost settled whatever clawing, black emotion that was dogging her entire-

She laughed, strained but still. It made her feel better, made her not think about what was happening.

“Everything is going to be alright, you know?” Calder said quietly. She almost didn’t hear him.

It was quiet for a moment, only the odd sound of dust and tiny shards of stone filtering through the crushing boulders above them. She almost could hear voices, the shouting of people trying to get to them, trying to save them. “Artan is coming, you know. He’ll get us out of here safe, you know it. He’ll grind those fucking monsters into the dust, and—”

Lydia stopped listening, because one of the lights had bobbed closer to her, offering some kind of solace that they could be reached, after all. It allayed the quiet, slowly frothing fear that Calder and her and whoever else got caught up in this would die here in the dark.

She looked to her side, gingerly twisting her head to look at the tiny bubble she had become trapped in, and saw him finally.

The guard was dead, undoubtedly. His eyes were still open, looking at her, clear as anything, his blood seeping along the stone floor around them like a flower crushed under a boot. Lydia felt something grip her hard around the throat, threatening to drown her in mindless panic when Calder cut through the fuge, squeezing her hand and reminding her she wasn’t alone.

She wouldn’t tell him about the dead man.

“I never told you about her, did I?” Lydia zoned back into Calder’s story with a snap, feeling guilt creep up on her like a thief in the night. How long had he been talking?

“She's due in a few weeks. I don’t know what i’m gonna do, really. I mean, I love her but what kind of life can I offer her?” He muddled through, and Lydia felt even worse. She squeezed his hand.

“Calder, you’re a good man. Shit with a bow, but i’m sure... i’m sure you're gonna be a great father,” Lydia squeezed his hand harder. To her it sounded like a wasteful platitude, but as the light bobbed in front of her, she felt the fear melt away.

“Artan’s gonna find us, and you’ll go out and find the nicest tree you can find. Maybe carve her out a few things for the baby,” she sighed, almost picturing it. “Why didn’t you tell anyone sooner?”

Calder laughed wetly, almost as if he was crying. “We're being dogged by that jammy cunt Larethius and you ask me why I kept impending fatherhood under wraps? Look at how they went for Sofie and Lucia! I don't want her or our baby caught up in that. I...” Calder was obviously shaking his head, the same way he always does when he’s confused. “I think i'm in love with her, Lydia...”

xxx

Artan was nearly frantic now. The rubble was clearing quickly, but not quickly enough. One of the lights had gone out, which meant the other two probably didn't have long, either. They could hear it now, as Serana and Iona hooked out huge slabs of stone from the makeshift tunnel and into clear space with their telekinesis. Lydia was singing, a low, off-key song that almost sounded like a lullaby.

xxx

“Where did you hear that song?” Calder asked, squeezing her hand again.
“Back in Whiterun, Hrongar used to sing it to his nieces and nephews when they found it hard to sleep. He said it was passed down through the generations of his family like a precious heirloom,” Lydia cracked a tiny smile, feeling her heartbeat thunder harder in her ears. There was something pressing down on her head, now, insistently like a tiny child denied treats. “I... I wonder if that old bear even would want...”

Something in her vision swam, and she felt more than heard the tremor of some mage putting down one of the bigger boulders.

Her leg snapped.

She felt her heartbeat thunder even louder, and something was shaking. Frantically, she realized it was her. She was shaking, her entire frame rocking and howling as the light became a pure unadulterated stream. Hands were on her, and she was screaming louder, and someone was telling her to let go, but Calder-

Everthing went black.

Xxx

Argis was screaming, the blood thundering out in waves, waves so heavy that Serana almost thought she would be dead from the wounds already. Artan nearly bowled a man over in his haste to get at Lydia, almost drowning in her own blood on the floor. His hands covered Argis’ on the woman’s stump, trying in vain to stop the bleeding. Iona was incandescent with fear, and Serana was hard pressed to hold her back. One slip and her instincts would lead her to kill Lydia, no matter how well intended she was.

It took an almost insanely long amount of time for Artan’s ears to flick back up. The golden mist rolled back into his hands, and he pressed his face to Lydia’s chest to hear her heartbeat.

Serana hadn’t actually seen a Khajiit cry before, but she never wanted to see it again.

4E 203, 1st of Suns Dusk

The fort was a fucking mess of soldiers, all different banners and heraldry. Fake of course, each of them were under Eldunarto Larethius’ employ, and the fake houses they hailed from were puppet houses, words on a bit of official paper and no more. It puffed out the Larethius family more than their frankly thin ranks could cover. Made them less of a target for other families to scavenge from. Really though, they were all mercenaries or the last dregs of the Outer Guard, penned in and forced to watch a threadbare fort in case someone realized who was visiting and figured to attack it.

The two assassins didn’t even flinch at the security.

The taller of the two took the lead, pressing them through a seemingly random set of corridors, servant passages and ventilation tunnels until they finally came to the upper wing. The proprietors would say it was the ‘familial wing,’ however bullshit that claim was.

A bit like claiming to be the king of a garbage trough.

It was easy. The taller assassin fell back, allowing the shorter, angrier one forwards. It slunk down the high wall like a spider, tiny and unassuming in the guttering light from the fireplace. The room was thrown into a strange, flickering light. Intimate. The assassin didn’t even twitch at the thought. It was almost easy, especially when Amaliea stood from her seat at the windowsil and swept across the room, finished book in hand.
It was so easy to cross the room to her, to slide up behind the woman and drive a dagger into her cold black heart. She didn't scream, her icy eyes almost eating the assassin alive as he watched the last of her life leech out between them and across the floor.

And just like that, the tables turned.

4E 203, 7th of Suns Dusk

She woke slowly, but the world was blurry as if she had her entire head encased in sheepswoll.

She squeezed the hand in hers, feeling whatever latent panic in her heart dim at the comfort.

It took forever, but eventually she looked up at Artan, his keen eyes boring into her skull. They were their regular green, rimmed with red somehow as if he had been crying. Her thane didn't cry, never had as long as she had known him. Whatever they had dosed her with had left her dazed, for sure.

“Do you want some water?” He asked, voice low.

She squeezed his hand.

He stayed.

“What do you remember of... do you remember what happened?” He asked. It had taken him another while, long enough for her heart to stop its hammering in her chest. For a moment, she couldn't answer. The feeling of the bed against her back reminded her of the mountain pressing down on her, the feeling-

His claws pricked her hand, and she came back.

“They planted something in the ruins,” she creaked, her bones making awful noises as she squirmed in her cot. “Where... the children? Alma?”

“All safe,” Artan nodded, voice the softest she had ever heard it.

“And... Calder? How is he? He... His family will want to visit him...” She said, feeling something missing in her head clamor for attention. The missing space yawned infront of her very eyes, almost as if....

Artan shook his head, eyes going glassy.

“He... he didn't make it, Lydia.”

She felt that space fill up with water, almost enough to drown out everything else.

“He... he was alive... he spoke to me... he was...” she shook her head, but the water kept rising and-

“His... his entire pelvis and legs were crushed by the rockfall. He... I... I couldn't save him,” Artan bit out, and she felt something warm cover the hand he held. His other hand, claws pressing against her skin.

“He's going to be a father,” Lydia said, futher splintering everything she knew about the world. It was said dumbly, almost as if they were at the pub talking over drinks again. Some juicy gossip to share with her friend. Artan shook like a leaf, a full-body tremor that made her feel dizzy.

“The entire time... he was dying the entire time...” Lydia didn't recognise her own voice, even as it rattled around in her chest like-
Artan cracked, the tears falling freely now.

She tried to move, to comfort him, but her leg felt too light. She looked down and-

Everything boiled over.

xxx

Artan felt almost like he was a spirit above, watching his own ridiculous life play out. He was methodical and almost emotionless while he pulled on his armor, a stylized version of the brotherhood's iconic leathers without any of the telltale embellishments. Over the top of his armor went the long tunic that he had commissioned by the Raidient Raiment sisters, a high collared thing that cut off at the knee. It was sleeve-less and had four slits, one up each leg and one at the front and back, mostly to allow him some mobility. Argis had asked why he had wanted it like that with so many swishy parts. Artan had simply said it was harder to get a clear shot in the leg if the enemy sees so much movement. Thankfully, the sisters had also included a detachable hood, one that simply buttoned onto the tunic around the collar. It was odd to wear something on top of his assassin leathers, but he was glad to have something more between him and the cold.

"It... it doesn't seem right for you to go alone," Argis said eventually, worrying his hands.

"Someone has to go to this Wintersand Manor and see what kind of shit they have. It might be where Larethius keeps some kind of information on us, or some kind of weapon, or maybe even a safe house for his family. Anything we can have as leverage, we best use it. Especially when they have no idea we are going for it. We need to force that piece of shit into the daylight. That Tusaril guy Eirian poked for answers said most of the major rings were dead and only his and Larethius' main guard were still active. If that's true, we might just--"

"Dont bother," someone said as they pushed into the living room, ignoring a loitering Jordis completely to throw himself into a chair at the dinner table. He threw his axe as well as its holder onto the spare part of the table, before looking at Artan who was flabbergasted, and Argis who was stunned. "It's already been cleared out for its information."

"Jaden," Artan shook his head, almost as if to clear it.

The elf rolled his shoulders before settling his bright eyes on the khajiit, completely oblivious to or ignoring Argis at his side. Jaden was straight up staring at him, those harsh, vivid green eyes boring into Artan's skull like a drill. It was almost as if everything about the elf had sharpened into a fine point, shored up around him like a barricade. He felt that age old prickle of lightning in his hands and feet, the instinct to run building like a hurricane inside his head. But he stood still, pushed it down, laid it flat.

"Garma would have run by now," is all he said, the sure admission cutting through the silence like a bell. The gathered housecarls were either too stunned by their confusion, or by some kind of magic held still and silent. Jaden paid them no mind, which was either arrogance or just some of that bone-deep confidence that the sommerset six seemed to have in spades.

Artan didn't know what to say to that. He was still Garma, still a brutal little ball of hate. But that wasn't all he was.

"Alduin, Potema, countless vampire lords, innumerable dodgy leaders and the avatar of a rebellion. You never ran. Why?" Jaden shook his head, the one long earring adorning his right ear jangling against his armor with the movement. "You actually faced down each of them of your own volition. Some poor wretch asked, and you..." The elf shook himself like a dog before he settled again,
"All Garma had was the people around him," Artan began. "And you wonder why I haven't run yet?" He smiled, a small, vicious little thing that made Jadens brows crease. "Garma can't make them run, but Artan can defend the line."

Some kind of aura seemed to overcome Jaden then, as the two stared each other down. "you would give up your freedom for a bunch of wildings in rags?" the elf laughed, the confusion and shock burrowing deeper.

"It's not freedom when its not my choice," the khajiit shrugged, thu'um finally settling into nothing. His eyes bled back into their regular green, and his fur settled around his throat. "I made my peace with this--"

"So that destiny garbage caught you on the nose then?" Jaden snapped.

"Destiny is a load of garbage," Artan cackled, throwing one of his gloves on the table. "I could have walked away at any time, any place and anywhere. But these people are mine," he was snarling now, pressing forwards into Jaden's space with both hands on the table and thu'um rolling down like a fog along the base of a mountain. "They are mine and I will not allow harm to come to them."

Jaden just stared. Almost as if the entirety of his world was crashing around his ears. "At one time, you would have slain them all if it meant gaining one more day away from Larethius."

"And now I would slay an emperor to keep them one more step away from him," Artan shrugged. "An emperor, or an empress, or a soul-sucking dragon, or a thousand year old leech, or even my own discarded master. He came to my house, attacked my people and shat on my doorstep. Would you rather I roll over and take it?" The fangs were out and Argis felt his hair prickle. A simple glance to Lydia, who was more or less a ball of lava in the doorway at this point, changed nothing. Jordis looked sombre, almost as if she had somehow predicted this happening.

They all knew that Artan -or at the very least, the previous alias of Artan- had been rather fast and loose when it came to people. But to have someone come into their lives when everything was in flux and to outrightly ask what the fuck he was doing, why he was even protecting the people... it was a blow.

And the simple, almost stunned expression across Jaden's face told it all. "You really aren't Garma at all, are you?"

"I'm still Garma," Artan straightened, tugging his sash from his waist and depositing all of his knives onto the table. He didn't answer more until he had settled into his favorite chair at his dinnertable in the kitchen of his home, "But that isn't all I am, anymore."

Jaden nodded, once. "Amaliea Larethius is confirmed dead at the hands of a mutual friend. Which both places us at an advantage as well as a slight disavantage."

"Who's that?" Jordis asked, bringing the two's attention to the group at large.

"My old master's wife," Artan supplied, eyes still picking at Jaden.

"She was in Skyrim all along?" Lydia snorted.

"The men caught while attacking the Winterhold College were most forthcoming in their confessions. We found her whereabouts from a thalmor agent known as Tusaril, as well as the number of men that Larethius himself has in his immediate honor guard. Which means it is time for
you to make your move,” Jaden motioned at Artan. “Talia has most of the Holds penning them in, and by the look of it he is alone here. His only assistance was his marriage to Elenwen's sister, since the recent reforms in slave legislation in the Isle. That and he has been treading on alot of toes in his attempt to get at you, all of which have fallen through with how you dealt with Maven and her entourage. As well as that inspired assassination of our reigning emperor. It means all his old spies in the Empire are dead ends, and well. Tavan's death landed a blow. He is desperate to have a victory, here. And here we are, with the best possible shot anyone could ever have.”

“Then that answers all of my questions, doesn't it?” Artan laughed, but it wasn't in humor. “We best make our move, right?”

Jaden stood, stony expression in place, striding straight out through the door like a thundercloud. Lydia pushed past him, hobbling forward to land hard in the chair, and ignoring the concerned looks threw both her crutches across the main hall and into the far wall's fireplace. They clattered uselessly to the stone after hitting the mantle piece, and she was the only one who didn't wince at the sound. Serana took up a chair beside her, throwing a foot up onto the nearby Iona's lap. Argis hovered by the girls' room, Ondolemar at his left and a silent Scouts at his side. Nobody commented on the absences in the room.

Artan was more or less silent for a good few minutes before he turned to them, eyes abaze.

"The contingency plan is in effect," he sighed, the armor piece landing with a thud when he threw it to the centre of the table.

"What's going on?" Lydia asked, rubbing her face with her hands. She went to touch her knees, but drew back halfway through the action to growl to herself.

Artan continued after a moment, "Jaden came through in the end. Where we have been running around in the dark lately when it came to... When it came to Larethius, well, now we have what we need. He won't take the murder of his wife laying down, and on top of that he'll be surrounded. He's legless now. That leaves us to take care of the head. The plan Eirian, Jaden... Jakk and I put together is coming to its endgame. But there is something important you all must hear..."

"The reason we know where to hit the slavers is because the kids we have been picking up have been... They have been performing the black sacrament to avenge their relatives. I've had the Brotherhood escort them here because... because it made sense to have them defended by the same people out for slaver blood. Two birds, one stone. And since the slaving rings know that the children are the ones taking hits out on them, they have been targeting the kids more in an attempt to keep themselves hidden. I figured that at least in Markarth where literally every outsider is vetted as if he were a peasant taking out a loan... Well. I miscalculated. And now we have a half-exploded keep and Calder... Calder's death is my fault. As well as Bjiir, and Toldin, and so many others."

"And your leg... that... that is my fault too. Because I never thought that they would do a double bluff and pretend to... and plant some magic trash in the fucking...!" Artan snarled, twisting his hands together. "This would never have happened if I hadn't gotten so goddamn soft! If I hadn't-"

"Hadn't what, Artan? Dared to start actually living?" Lydia snapped. "You started honestly believing that you were free and started living for yourself and the way you wanted to. Nobody can blame you for that, not after all the shit that's happened to you. And as for the kids, well, you're being a fucking shit about it, since they're basically bait for people who want to turn them into god knows what. But honestly, you are probably the only influential person to actually give a fuck about them. You could have had them set up in camps around the province with a bunch of assassins in the shadows around them, but instead you sent them to a fortified city. You sent them to a place where Forsworn roam the fucking hills killing anything that dares to intrude on their land, after obviously making some kind
of deal with Madanach on the side, am I right?"

Artan looked away from her.

"I thought so. So you have a bunch of crazed lunatics guarding the surrounding landscape, and then we haven't even touched what the Silverbloods would do to slavers. People coming in to take their own slave labor? People coming in on their turf? You had to kill one of them and threaten the other to bend knee to you, do you honestly think that Thongvor would let someone else take whatever pride he has left? You did your best, and you fucked up. And we are gonna have a chat later about recruiting any of those kids, but seriously you tried. And it's more than anyone else is doing."

"She has many good points," Ondolemar interjected. "Especially about Madanach. The local guard have noticed a lack of Forsworn lately, no? And yet I know for a fact that they have at least three clans still active with several hags leading them. You have managed to have two groups who despise each other work together unknowingly to achieve a directive, and in such close quarters. Any number of things could have gone wrong and would have meant disaster, but you managed them perfectly. This being only one instance, of course. You are also co-ordinating most of the province's counterattack. It is only natural that the enemy had to resort to such desperate measures. Slaves are not typically used as a strike team, especially when its for something this vital, so you could not have predetermined it. You already had a plan set up for the slavers, not the suicide squad that showed up."

Artan shrugged, apparently unwilling to reply.

xxx

It was easier than he expected to settle into the strange little hole that the girls had dug into the hill beside the guard's watchtower. They were quiet, Sofie pressed against the far wall with her books, and Lucia whittling away at another attempt at an arrow. They both looked at him, and both seemed to settle back into their places easy enough.

Artan sat beside Lucia, taking out a block of some kind of wood that Scouts had cut from one of the trees near Riften. He said it was perfect for whittling, so Artan had taken it under advisement.

He was half way through making a small child when Lucia said it, “Is Hroar going to get a burial?”

Artan looked up at her, but she wasn't looking at him. “Yes. I asked Talia to... to take care of him while they prepared everything. Would either of you like to go?”

Sofie twisted forwards, settling against his side like a puppy. “I... think so.”

Lucia didn't answer for a long time. Long enough that Artan had returned to his whittling, and Sofie had begun to flick at his tail with a hand. He wanted to make it all go away. He knew it was impossible, but he wanted to make the hurt go away. He may have given them a home, but he hadn't made it safe. He had failed them again, spectacularly. Hroar shouldn't have been a casualty of his incompetence.

“He fought really hard to protect everyone,” Lucia said eventually.

“I'm sorry he's gone. He was.” Artan started, but was cut off when Lucia crowded him, pressing her face into the collar of his jacket. Jordis was going to kick his ass when she saw mud stains on one of his prettier outfits, but he could handle that. It was easy to wrap an arm around each of them and let them cry it out.

“Calder... Calder's actually... he's actually dead isn't he?” Sofie bit out, and Artan couldn't help but
crack a little inside.

He nodded, and the sobbing kicked up an octave.

He didn't know what to say. He had no answers for them. No doubt they would wonder when the next one would go, who they would lose next. The housecarls were family now, and Calder.... Calder looked after them. He was grouchy and grumpy and could bite the head off just about anything. He was their Red Mountain. And even if they did win, it wouldn't even begin to... Artan pushed his thoughts away and gathered the girls closer.

He didn't know how to make it go away, but he could at least make it less hard.

Xxx

“What do you think we should do?” Artan asked, and it turned literally every head in the room to him. Dinner was over, and as usual the table had been made into a makeshift office with various reports from assassins, some muddied sheets from who knows where, and a dismembered hand for some reason. Artan didn't answer when asked, and to be honest, nobody really wanted to know who's it was.

“What?” Iona asked, eyes flickering to Lydia. The other woman shrugged, and Artan continued.

“I'm out of ideas here,” Artan sighed, throwing a leg up onto the table. “If Jaden's intel is right, then Larethius has at least three personal assassins with him, which normally wouldn't be a problem. However, they are all master alchemists, and all are adept at dismantling enemy magic and the like. They'd be on my ass like a rash.”

“And even if we punch through his soldiers to get at them, he will most likely hole up in a town or village and use the citizens as hostages in order to break our resolve. He must know he is outnumbered here. And a hostage situation would make Talia's army as well as the legionnaires numbers rather useless or at least give them a reason to pause,” Serana shrugged out a knot in her shoulders.

“So you're saying we need what exactly? Nullify his mages and these assassins and then we have a maybe fifty-fifty chance of kicking the shit out of them? But how would we even save the townsfolk?,” Iona downed the rest of her ale before continuing. “How would we even get close enough to these assassins? Because if we just take them out then one of your college friends could slap the rest with a paralysis spell, right?”

“Even then...” Artan shrugged again.

“The people wouldn't be in danger if you replaced the guards....” Argis pointed out. “Like playing bandits.”

“Have people systematically kill and replace his guards?” Artan looked at him, eyes bright. “And slowly pen his ass in.”

“And then what? The assassins would notice, right?” Lydia pressed her hands to her eyes, but eventually looked back at the others. “Unless you distracted them, I suppose.”

“A distraction big enough to pull in three master assassins?” Artan grinned, lacing his hands together. “A dangerous, big distraction.”

“I have an idea.” Ondolemar bit out. “But you will not like it in the slightest.”
They came at midnight, as if it was a rule that they had to be creepy.

Argis didn't see any faces, only the beaked hoods and the shadows where faces should be. He and Artan met them at the edge of the wilds, just beyond the guard's lookout. The last group of children were silent, somehow. Argis guessed it was the forbidding sense of dread in the air. He settled himself, ignoring how strange this all was. He was bitter inside about the thought of them being used as bait, effectively, and even more that it might have been for the best. Even the idea of something like that being for the best made his insides roil, but honestly, the idea that Artan's people were keeping an eye on the kids welfare made it less brittle. They were horrors, all of them, and maybe they needed those horrors to put the real monsters in their place. They would have died out there in the wilds alone if not for the strange help from assassins. With those three wretches setting the Legionnaires up to get murdered by slavers and bandits, they definetly would have died. The idea that it could have been so close, so many innocents caught up in something so huge. Absently, he wondered when it had gotten bad enough for them to need a group of insane murderers to protect the innocent.

The hooded figures were not assassins, that much he knew.

Sofie and Lucia were the last to go after the group of children split into five and each tiny smatter of children followed one figure into the roiling mists. One last figure stood sentry, looking out into the gloom like Argis was, apparently uninterested in the conversation going on between the father and his daughters.

“So, I need you two to do something for me,” Artan started, kneeling beside the wall with the girls. They had both been more or less uninjured except for a scratch or two, and Ondolemar had removed whatever glamour the strike team had woven on Lucia. Artan couldn't find any extra enchantments on her or her clothes. The house had been gone over with a fine-toothed comb after hearing about the mages running about in it. Nothing untoward, and by the sounds of it Ondolemar had been feeding the Thalmor false intel on Garma for years, so they more or less only had shaky rumors and guesswork from imaginative villagers as a skill-gauge, if he was even in Skyrim at all. If they had put anything in there, they wouldn't have known he would have found it. Still, it made him uneasy about it all. Especially since they now knew that Larethius was in Skyrim, obviously Ondolemar's smoke and mirror act fell through.

The girls were nodding away, and he returned the nod. “If things get bad, you need to stick together, and run.”

“What-” Lucia started, but he took her hand and then Sofie's, which effectively silenced her.

“It doesn't matter what happens to anyone else,” Artan sighed, trying to keep some semblance of composure. He wanted... well he wanted to whisk them away and hide. Bunker down until Larethius gave up on Skyrim. But at the hint of The Dragonborn's return, well, he would return with it and the problem would arise again. It was pointless. “If something goes wrong, you will activate those necklaces I gave you. Then you find each other if you aren't together already, and you run. It doesn't matter where. You can keep each other safe, I know that and you know that. As long as you keep those necklaces on, I will be able to find you.”

Artan opened his eyes, and looked from Sofie to Lucia. Sofie looked ready for tears, but Lucia looked ready to fight. “If you do lose them however,” he shrugged, trying for carefree, “I'll still find you.”

The girls looked to each other, then reluctantly looked back to him.
He knew this would be difficult. There was bound to be doubts in their minds that he would. He would either die, or he wouldn't want to find them and this was a joke, or he would be... somewhere else. He needed to break those doubts. “Regardless of what happened, I always come back. There will never be a time that I won't be looking for you, that I won't be doing my best to come back to you. I will never abandon you, you are mine as much as I am yours. And if you doubt that, then I'll always be sure to come back and change that. But you need to be ready in case the worst happens. Do whatever you can for the other children, and save who you can. But stay safe, and stay alive. Those necklaces are twins, so you activate them and they will respond to each other,” Artan tugged them both into a hug, pressing his face into the mess of hair between them all.

“If you don't come back... we'll find you,” Lucia snarled.

Artan felt his heart stop.

“You are our pa, and nothing will change that,” Sofie was nodding, her hood shaking with the jerky movements. Her flower basket hit him in the knee when she dropped it to hug him better. Lucia’s bow was poking him in the head, but if he was honest he was focusing on details so he wouldn't cry.

“I love you girls, more than anything. Nothing will ever change that, not distance or time or even a shitty ass daedra,” Artan sniffed, and the girls shakily laughed at the awful grotty sound.

Xxx

It was almost impossible to watch the girls walk away. More than once Artan wanted to run after them, maybe find a hidey hole to shore up in. There had to be somewhere the Dominion couldn't reach, right? Argis would never leave, though. And the girls would hate him for it, wouldn't they? The idea that this might have been their final goodbye weighed heavily in his heart, but there was nothing for it.

Argis' good hand slid around his clenched fist, fingers sliding between his own to loosen the fist he hadn't realise he'd made.

“They will be okay,” the man said softly. Artan looked at him. He wasn't sure who had sheared the rest of the man's hair to make up for the fact that he had cut most of it off himself. Cut it off while rescuing his daughters. Artan felt something bright light up in his chest. It was small, and it flickered helplessly against the dark, forboding feeling he had about their next steps, but it didn't go out.

“I don't want you to die for me,” Artan whispered, feeling that light gutter.

“I'll do whatever I have to do to protect you, Artan,” Argis replied. “I've made a lot of oaths to you over the years, broken a lot more. No matter what happens next, I don't regret a minute of our time together. If time went back like with those weird scrolls, I would take the very same steps again to walk by your side through this. We have been through worse situations, although I can't think of any,” the man squeezed his hand, ignoring or maybe just mercifully quiet about the tears.
I'm so sorry about how late this is. My old computer got wiped out and i lost literally everything to do with this, and it took ages to try and piece it all back together. Between that and a new job that works my ass like a horse during the harvest season, I've had like zero time for writing. I do however have an overall plan of action, so the next chapter should be up within the next month unless my plans get ruined, again.

IM SORRY IF YOU CRY ABOUT CALDER OR SCOUTS OR ANY OF IT I WAS LITERALLY IN TEARS FOR MOST OF THIS ENTIRE ERA LIKE LITERALLY SINCE I HAD THIS EVIL PLAN TO PUSH THE STORY THIS WAY IT STARTED OFF AS A JOKE AND NOW HERE WE ARE 16 CHAPTERS IN DO YOU KNOW HOW CLOSE IT WAS FOR LYDIA TO GO TOO DEAR LORD AND IT'LL GET WORSE BEFORE IT GETS BETTER BUT THE SUN WILL SHINE AGAIN I PROMISE

Thanks for reading, and thanks for the patience!
And thanks for the kind words!
~Frog
4E 203, End of Frostfall

Lorena was a tough, spiteful little bitch when it came to fighting. The moment the shit hit the fan, she was a whirlwind of daggers, flying feet and the pitterpatter-shatter of her thrown bombs scattering across the ground between the enemies surrounding them. The explosions were small, contained, mostly just a smokescreen with a few flickering bangs thrown in to cause panic. Lefty didn’t panic at all.

Jakk was in hell.

Lefty had him around the waist and across that room in an instant; well at least it felt like an instant.

Jakk's whole world was falling apart.

It kept playing over and over, even when the other assassins surged into the cistern and the fighting escalated into chaos. Lefty was pushing him through a bunch of tunnels and up ladders and basically hauling his ass through it all. and even then-

-Mercer laughed, but it was off. A few of the theives at his back shugffled restlessly. Mjoll tugged at Brynjolf's gauntlet.

He felt Lefty twitch at his side, and the whites of Lorena's eyes flickered in his peripheral when the dagger flew-

Jakk landed hard in the gravesoil, throwing up across one of the headstones in Riften's graveyard. Lefty was throwing a thalmor justicar to the ground after neatly vivisecting-

-fuck.

Lefty grabbed him by the collar, and Jakk stared up into his face but no words were exchanged. And then Lefty made him run.

Jakk didn't know how long he had been running for. He wasn't even mad. He just felt the deep, bone-chilling pain throughout his arm and chest. Whatever that fucker Mercer hit him with had been potent.

And when the poison hit him in its entirety, he lost whatever grasp he had on reality.

xxx

He woke up slowly, feeling almost as if something had literally crushed every single bone in his body. Some odd kind of lightning was dancing up his extremities, and eventually that gave way to simply pins and needles. He couldn't see, and he could just about feel himself breathing. It came in waves that made him feel sick, that he would have ususally attributed to poison. Some kind of poison.

He felt his eyes itching, and then his hair stood on end. There were two people close by, silent as far as he could tell. He waited. Waited until his feet and hands regained their feeling, and even then
waited more. His side had been bandaged from where some asshole had knifed him, and he wasn't tied up. It didn't mean much, really. It could be an act.

He almost laughed.

An act.

He was on his feet in an instant, startling the closer of the two into standing. She was too slow, and got disarmed before she could even properly draw her dagger. He had her in a chokehold with her own dagger at her kidney before-

The other hadn't even moved except to applaud him.

“Well done, cub. However, not everyone would regard their partner in high enough esteem to consider their safety in a hostage situation,” the man stood, fluid like one of Garma's atronachs. He held out his hands, “I give you a healthy eight out of ten, especially since our mutual friend here did not even notice you regaining conciousness.”

Jakk threw the dagger to the ground and leapt on Za'nir like a man posessed.

4E 203, End of Frostfall

“When I found Bryjolf holed up in the Sanctuary with Mjoll and all those people, I didn't know what to think. So I guess they somehow managed to get in after the vampire attack. Who even knows how long they stayed in there while the vampires were about, but after the slavers showed up and wiped them out, well. They said that the slavers had found the entrance through the Flagon and were on the way in, and that they only had a little time to get everyone out through the graveyard. It was pure luck that Artan and me were heading teams into Riften that day. But Mercer... He said that they were just a strike team, and that Saphire had overheard a man called... Tavan... that he said that Larethius was holed up in some barrow somewhere,” Jakk explained, tugging apart what was left of the chicken they had killed.

“Mercer told me that they...” Jakk growled, ignoring the pinpricks of pain as Za'nir scrubbed out what was left of the blood from his fur. “He said that... he said that Larethius had his men clear out a nearby barrow to use as a base in lieu of an actual building since it was less likely to have them detected. But instead it was just to lure me away from Artan so he could kill or catch me or whatever. Apparently Tavan paid him off. He knew Brynjolf wouldn't have it, and Artan would have hunted him to the end of the world and back... He wanted us to go and... Lefty... Lefty caught him lying and then it all went to shit. All of it just for some Daedric Key and a bag of gold! He was my guildmaster... I never... I never expected this. I can't believe I never expected this.”

They were silent for a moment, watching Lefty and Karliah sharpen their blade and fletching a few more arrows, respectively. The dark elf hadn't been mad at him for nearly murdering her, but then, she probably knew what it was like to be awoken by two strangers, what being on the run herself. Lefty was silent as usual, making Jakk's senses prickle with irritation. He hadn't even noticed Lefty before when he woke up, only Karliah and Za'nir, the khajiit only making himself known to Jakk's senses because he wanted to be noticed. Annoying old man, as usual.

“By my reckoning, this happened to our Garma too, cub. So try not to beat yourself up about it. You were given information by a trusted party, if anything, just be glad you live to fight another day. Something you still have yet to thank Lefty and Karliah here for,” Za'nir intoned, taking another sip
from his peppermint tea. "I had been tracking your movements since that Dibellan temple a ways back. Exceptional beauties there, I must admit. But even so, I would not have made it here in time...”
The khajiit rolled his shoulders out and cracked his neck, releasing the tension there some more.

“Who... what happened to the others? S'haira? Lorena?” Jakk asked, feeling his dinner start to try an escape through his mouth.

Za'nir cracked his neck, idling pressing his claws into Jakk's scalp. “Lorena is with S'haira. She was injured when Tavan's men attacked the Sanctuary. S'haira managed to get them both out in time. If your brother had been faster getting to the main square, he might have saved one of those that got caught. As it was, he didn't know. He most likely blames himself for that, as he is wont to do. The two of them went to ground in one of your brother's safe houses near the edges of that ridiculous fort Dawnguard. Having a castle is well and good, but one that you need to traverse a dark cave to get to when your enemies are night-dwellers? Astounding idiocy.”

Jakk didn't ask about what Artan might have saved the assassins from. He didn't want to know. Even the thought of... of Tavan made his entire existence wink in fear.

“Whos pocket is he in? You must know,” Jakk turned on the other khajiit, looking into the sharp, almost glacial blue eyes. Za'nir shrugged.

“Mercer is actually his own man after Maven was disposed,” the older khajiit pressed a hand to Jakk's head, flatening the fur. “Regardless of why, we have an almost divine opportunity to capitalise on this.”

“Artan doesn't know,” Jakk blanched under his fur.

“No. And neither does anyone else. Jaden confirmed your death a week ago. Which means Larethius most likely knows, if there really is a mole. Garma doesn't even know that I am in the province. Which means that Larethius doesn't know, and we can strike with impunity. The beggars that Garma has on his payroll still cannot pinpoint who exactly is passing on information, however whoever these individuals are have no knowledge of me and believe you are dead,” Za'nir intoned, looking expectantly at Jakk.

“We're going after his family, aren't we? Jab him in the eyes? Artan and the others have the whereabouts of the last slaving groups in the province, and when they're gone Larethius'll be surrounded...” Jakk shook his head, unbelieving.

“We push that yellow-bellied eel into the daylight for your brother to burn to ashes,” Za'nir growled, rubbing at Jakk's hand. “Elenwen gave him leave to retake what he deems is his property. Which means that he will most likely go to a well-fortified city and lean on the White-Gold concordat or the Dominion's backing to force Garma into confrontation. Probably along the lines of 'if you don't, I'll bring war here.' If he does, Garma will give his life for these people. You know that as well as I do. We need to keep our heads with this, especially when that happens. I know you love your brother and the family you two have built here, I do. But if there is one way to keep them safe then this is it. Larethius cannot leave this province alive, and neither can his men. If even one is left alive then it will be a liability. We can have this finished if everything goes to plan. If we do this right, everyone can walk away safe. I won't let anything happen to you or your brother that I can help, but we need to get ahead of this to make it work. I know I told you that nothing is more important than your loved ones, but in this you must think of the long game. Please, please don't-”

“I won't. We will finish this,” Jakk nodded, but neither of them knew who it was meant to convince.

Bile was rising in Jakk's throat, at what he wasn't sure. Because it would be over with one more
mark? Because his Scouts believed he was dead? His nieces, his friends? His own brother? The idea of assassinating someone when he swore to give it up... Larethius wanted them to be assassins, and the idea of carrying on the profession just like their master wanted made him feel sick. But if it meant that they didn't have to hide... they could be free.

Well and truly free.

xxx

Lefty reminded him of Scouts. It wasn't in his movements or in his quiet, almost unassuming demeanour. It was probably just that he was another argonian. Even if that was like comparing a diamond and a stone of Barenziah because they were both jewels, well. It still hurt to look at him. He wanted to run. Even as they made fast headway towards the fort where Amaliea Larethius was fluttering around in, well. Something dark and hard inside him wanted each and every one of them dead. Eirian... he still didn't know how he really felt about Eirian. He cared about her, and it muddled everything. She was still a Larethius. He found the cute airhead act she had when they first reunited in Solitude at the New Life Festival almost believable. The way it shook her to the core when she found a family within, well, it settled his trust in her resolutely. The way it seemed to crack something inside her, and the way genuine happiness came out of that crack at something so mundane as going to a friends house and meeting his family, the one he made...

S'eta wasn't a fool. He had known once to look at person and in an instant figure out a way to kill them. Even now he thought she may betray them. Get a couple of slaves in the way, draw Eldunarto out and then she gets the house the name and the status.

He wanted it to be different.

And Scouts was the one to make it different.

He made it all better. They talked about everything. Literally everything. And Scouts made it better. Eirian hated her brother. Eirian had made a life here, the same as the rest of them. She didn't want to own the house or have the name or any of that.

He smoothed out all the ugly little edges in S'eta that made him-

Jakk cracked his knuckles and looked away from Lefty.

Closure would mean the world.

A whole new one where there were no ghosts, no need to look at friends and believe the worst in them. He could heal up and walk forwards into a new future at the Argonian's side. He wanted that more than anything.

He just had to do one more mark.

And then everything else would fall into place.

He just hoped there was something to go back to, once this was over.

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4E 203, 1st of Suns Dusk

Jakk pressed his face into Za'nir's side, ignoring the chuckle from the old man. “How did we even
find out where she was?”

Za'nir answered while he refilled his pipe, “Eirian and those creepy old witchdoctors at the college honeytrapped a thalmor called Tusaril. He thought he would raid the college for its magical paraphernalia and get away with a hoard of potential weapons for the war effort. Well, the oncoming war effort. They trapped him up in their dungeon and may have tortured him a little to get information. It turns out he knew the whereabouts of lady Amaliea Larethius and her young son, Aethanar.”

“I am not killing some-”

“We are not killing the son, I assure you. The time constraints for this means that her maids will find her long before her son would even go near her room. And if rumor is to be believed, then he would most likely not mourn either of his parents passing.” Za'nir hummed, cracking his neck as he usually did when he felt uncomfortable.

“How old is he?” Jakk asked, because he didn't want to even think about what he could possibly hate his parents for. It had been six years since they had run from the Isle, and he didn't want to know how much worse Larethius got after his own slaves destroyed his leg and his dignity.

“Twenty odd. Apparently his mother keeps him close as a way to 'protect the family name from gold-digging harlots.' It's a cover for his apparent distaste for his father's... Well. His mother obviously is able to somewhat shield the lad since her family is what put Larethius on the map to begin with,” Za'nir shrugged.

“Elenwen's sister,” Jakk sniffed in distaste. “Who knew that would end up in a clusterfuck?”

“Well, it may have not ended in a clusterfuck, my dear,” Za'nir sneered, all fangs.

Jakk waited for the punchline to the joke. The black khajiit smiled wider. “I am high esteemed Embassador Elenwen, at your service,” he bowed slightly, as much as his already crouched position would allow. “She's been dead for the last few months or so. I've been replying to her superiors for that time. Did you never wonder why she sadly refused to come to Maven's aid during the inquest? Apart from the public scandal, of course?”

“You're the fucking mole,” Jakk shoved at him, nearly pushing Za'nir from their shared tree.

“It was scarilly easy, if I'm to be honest. It's easy enough to tell the bigwigs back on the Isle that its an inopportune time to be starting an invasion, especially with The Beautiful on the rise again. Between myself and Jaden, it's been a cakewalk keeping the elves on their island. And when you want that Mercer boys location, you may have it.” Za'nir shrugged. “But until then, are you ready?”

Jakk shook his head and tugged his hood down lower, “As ready as I'll ever be.”

4E 203, Early Evening Star

It was quiet, almost unbearably so without the girls. Artan was quiet, for once. Lydia wasn't talking anymore, to anyone. Argis didn't have much to say. Everything had become rather muted, the last few weeks. Scouts had become completely silent, and wore that amethyst ring always as if it was the sole thing keeping him together. Iona and Serana were gone more than here, keeping tabs on the outer wilds in an attempt to ferry messages between Artan and Jaden and Eirian, since there was nobody else. Ondolemar was trying to put in place his plan, a suicidal attempt at mitigating the damage, but who knew how well he was faring. To the world at large, he was still a Thalmor, and until this all ended, he wanted to keep the pretence alive.
Artan ran his hands up Argis' arms, pressing his thumbs into the corded muscle around his shoulders as his palms reached them, trying to work out the stress. "Just a quick trip to the market, the sunshine will do you some good."

Argis didn't think so. The citizens were torn about the attack, and he had-

Artan pulled him out of his thoughts, literally, by taking his hand with one of his and picking a basket from its place at the door with the other. They were silent walking down the steps, and although the atmosphere in the market was subdued, nobody called out. A woman stopped them, but only to quietly thank Argis for his bravery. It didn't touch the hard, numb place inside him but it did make something rattle in his head. Artan squeezed his hand and began asking around for some fresh meat.

Argis waited at his back, but he kept drifting.

It didn't take long to fall behind. There was a few people between them now, but Artan kept looking back for him, giving him warm smiles that made it all bearable.

"You!"

Argis turned, sluggish, but he didn't have it in him to be faster.

Throngar pressed forwards, pushing his face into Argis' as if he belonged there, teeth bared and face like thunder. "It's you and your Thane who brought this down upon us, the same way you got so many of our brothers and sisters and children killed in that raid on those heathens in the hills. Never seems to touch the likes of you, always comes down on the regular folk like us, right?"

Argis felt his insides freeze up, but before his brain had fully comprehended and even begun to panic, Artan was between them. Tiny, tiny Artan at about his throat-height and Throngar's own armpit-height was stood between them.

"You mean in the raid planned by your brother to pour more money into the Silver-Blood coffers? That raid? The one your brother told his Forsworn cronies about in order to murder some of the best blades in this city to better cripple the guard and allow the crooked little shits who slipped in afterwards? The guy who sold the lives of citizens here by the blink of an eye in order to secure a chokehold on Markarth tough enough to keep the elves out? Really? You wanna talk shit? Make sure you ain't taking one first, mate. Don't wannan get caught with your pants down," the cat snarled, ignoring the light applause from the crowd at the market. He pressed a hand to Argis's stomach before leading him away by the gauntlet, ironically towards the Silverblood inn.

Throngar shook himself, and shouted after the cat, "That's mighty talk coming from an outsider!"

Argis felt every hair upon his body stand up at Artan's laugh. Artan showed the citizens and Throngar a calm, amused facade of a man who knew, a man who was in control and a man who was completely ironclad in his beliefs. Argis only saw the white-hot burn of his eyes, the way his back straightened and his fangs gleamed in the daylight. He saw the man who put down dragons and saved villages and threw himself infront of innocent people in a firefight.

Artan actually turned to look at Throngar, the poor bastard unknowing that the Thu'um wasn't the only word that Artan could kill with.

"I ain't the one who has to wait in line for the Jarl, or the one who gets sneered at behind his back by the people here. They accepted me long ago. They already see me as one of their own, not because I live here. They see me as one of their own because," Artan let go of Argis, pressing forwards until
his nose was against Throngar's and the Thu'um was everywhere in the air, the gold mist exuding out like a huge cloud bound for earth around their stock-still forms.

"I would defend them and theirs to the very last breath. Whereas you would flog them for their last copper. Your family spent the best part of ten years beating these people into a rut with nothing but a false hope and a lie to back it up. And like I said to your brother in that shithole bank he made up," Artan pressed forwards even more, tail taught and back firm, "I'll say to you, stand down before I cut you down. You are not taking anything else. You are done. One way or another, I'll demolish your shitty attitude and your shitty house until the only thing is left standing that matters. The innocent. The good. The people here are good, and they're trying to get better. I will not allow some gobshite like you to jeopardise that ever. The warrens are empty and the streets are clean, and suprise suprise that happens easy as cake when the Silverblood dick gets cut off. Hm. Doesn't take a genius to realize what you've done, cunt."

Artan pulled back, oblivious to or ignoring the silence in the crowd now. He sneered, the expression marring him. "I look after what's mine. And these people are mine. I am not going to allow harm to them, regardless of the cause."

"So if the cause is you!!" Throngar growled, taking a step back towards Yngvir.

"I'd leave," Artan lost his strained, taught frame and settled into an easygoing, casual stance. Argis saw the tension melt out, felt the calm settle finally.

"If I was the problem, I would leave. I'm not an idiot, I can understand why people wouldn't want me here. I brought down-"

"Artan?"

Everyone turned, surprised if one of the crowd, but realistically it was maybe a handful of people that had been too engrossed in the debacle to not see the Legionnaires rock into the city. Hadvar looked worn, as if he had aged forty years in a day. The men and women at his heels looked similar, only their pristine legion armors holding them under the same banner. Argis recognised a few, mostly from the raids on stormcloak camps years ago. A lifetime ago, now, it seemed.


Hadvar himself looked as if he was about to be sick. “High Queen Elisif has asked you return to Solitude within the week. There... A Noble from the Summerset Isle is there with his men. He has documents naming you as his slave, and he wants you returned to him. He has the whole city on lock down, and Tulius has his hands tied with the Dominion. I... I'm sorry."

Lydia took another swig of wine and pressed her fingers into the bandages around her leg. Ondolemar, Artan, everyone had said to not aggitate her stump. But fuck it all. It wasn't like she could damage it more. Iona was a silent companion, and even though it rankled, Lydia knew in her heart that Iona was just worried. She wasn't hovering because she thought Lydia was inept. She was there because-

The front door splintered open, making Iona dart for the entranceway. But before she was even there, Argis was home. Well, something that looked like Argis.

The man had drawn up to his full height, something she hadn't seen since before the attack on
Markarth, and his entire being was radiating some kind of sickening edge that made all of her hairs stand on end.

“Larethius went to Elisif and got her to order Artan's surrender. They're taking him to Solitude,” Argis snarled, near enough in Iona's face, making her back up a step or two. He stormed further into the kitchen an began rifling through everything.

“What in the world are you saying? Elisif would never-” Iona began, but Argis turned a heavy, almost suffocating look on her.

“She just did. And he left with them.” He turned back to rumaging through the drawers, oblivous to Iona's panic. Ondolemar swept in a moment later, just when Argis had begun ripping drawers from the counters and throwing them aside.

“I just heard. I can get people on it but we need more,” the elf rubbed at his robes before tugging a sheaf of papers from his satchel. Two armed Brotherhood assassins appeared at his back, both tugging more papers from their various pockets and laying them on the table alongside everything else.

“What in the world can we even do? It will start a war!” Iona cried out, panic rising as a beggar ran into the house and handed Ondolemar even more papers.

“If you honestly think its over then you've been away too long, Iona,” Argis snarled, finally finding what he was looking for. He threw the tiny crystal at Ondolemar, who caught it deftly.

The elf ran a hand over the crystal's surface, and spoke at it when it started glowing. “Larethius moved first and has Elisif and Tulius in a chokehold. He's threatening war unless Artan get's handed over. We need people in Solitude ready for extraction.”

There was a terse silence while they waited, maybe a few seconds before a reply came. “I'll have my lot in there ready, elf. Make sure nothing else leaks,” Talia's voice filtered out.

“Larethius already knows that someones coming for him, but he won't know from where. I swear my life to that, wildling,” Ondolemar snarled back, eyes like fire as Argis pushed past him to the assassins.

“You need to get your people away from tracking those slavers and onto this. Your Listener needs you,” he growled at them, making the shorter one quail a little in his boots.

“Aye sir,” the taller assassin nodded, before grabbing the other by the arm and turning tail out of there.

“You are going to send a message,” the nord grabbed the beggar by the arm, but she didn't wince or back away like many others had. To be honest, it was probably the most remarkable thing any of them had seen all their lives. “Artan is in trouble and he needs help.”

“Are we honestly going to provoke a war?” Iona asked again, looking more determined by the second. Her eyes had begun glowing again, and her fangs were out.

“There's nothing to notice if theres nobody to tell,” Argis bit back.

“Wow. And he always used to tell us not to throw our lives away for some asshole,” Lydia broke in, downing the last of her wine and slamming it back to the table.

“I'm trying to build a life with some asshole,” Argis laughed, all teeth. “We can't do that if he fucks off to some island.”
Elisif sighed, feeling something dark and cold crawl its way up her insides. The elf was sat on the other side of her dinner table, eyeing one of her servants with such a look that it made her entire being want to crawl into a hole and never come out. Artan was telling the truth before, and she understood it now. Understood it with a clarity that shattered whatever view she had before of the world. She could understand why Ulfric had gone off the deep end and taken a whole slew of people with him, if this is one of the people who tortured him for years.

“Are you so sure that he will heed your call, Elisif? A cat without a leash tends to go where it pleases, in my experience,” he asked, but his eyes didn't leave the serving girl.

Elisif flashed a smile, one that was more for his gathered assassins than the man himself. Keeping up appearances and all that. “Of course. He is as bound to the land's laws as any other. I'm sure he will return, he swore an oath to the people here. If it is deemed best for Skyrim that he return to his Master, then he will comply.”

She felt sick. Just even saying the words, the way her voice didn't betray her at all, the way he nodded back with a small smile, it all made her feel sick.

“He was bound by Dominion law as well, and yet he ignored those. Do you honestly believe that this backwater little Province's laws carry more weight than the Dominion itself?” he looked at her finally, and Talos almighty did she wish he hadn't.

“Of course not. But then, he wasn't given much of a choice, especially if he wanted his children to remain citizens of the state,” Elisif took a delicate sip of wine.

Eldunarto smiled at her again, this time aprovingly. “You used his own children to strongarm him back? Why Elisif, you alone make the rest of the wretched monkeys that makes up your race almost redeemable. How on earth did the queen of a garbage pile manage to attain such a callous heart?”

Falk twitched at his station by her shoulder, but she just smiled back. “If you marry right, you can attain almost anything, my Lord.”

Eldunarto laughed, and Falk twitched again.

“Where are they?” Eldunarto asked finally, taking a sip of wine himself.

“They are on their way here. I have people on that, actually.”

“Oh? The very best that the six-fingered sister-fuckers here could provide?” Larehtius chuckled,
sweeping into standing so he could walk towards one of the drapes. He pretended to look at it, before picking away at one of the threads holding it together. Falk looked ready to kill him for defacing a hundred-year old tapestry, but Elisif stepped in.

“A Thalmor agent actually. I decided that you had to have the best when something as important as the treaty was at stake,” she replied easily, swishing her wine a little and making a show of smelling it again.

“Oh? Who?” Eldunarto asked, and she felt that pinpoint gaze land on her like an owl spied a mouse.

“Ondolemar.”

Eldunarto's grin widened, “That old fool from Markarth? That would make sense, especially after those heathens broke in playing at almighty Thalmor Justicars. He must be clawing at any scrap trying to gain favor with me. How sweet.”

Elisif didn't answer, instead taking a bite of one of the little cakes that had been placed on the table, instead.

4E 203, Late Evening Star

By Auri-el, it was quiet.

Laufen tugged his scarf tighter, ignoring the way Torian's eyes flicked to him. The older guard was always jumpy, always ready. Eldunarto had made him into a paranoid, twitchy shell of what he once was. Torian used to go shield-sledding across the slopes when they were young mer, and now...

It didn't bear thinking about.

Laufen closed his eyes against the wind, and opened them again only to watch. Taking Solitude had been an experience. Larethius had been incolsolable after the murder of his wife. So much so that the small mill on the slope to the city had been burned to the ground. Thankfully, nobody had been inside the thing when his master's flame spells had started, but it only meant that the people in the city would get it worse.

Solitude's guards had come running, and it made it easy to simply kill them.

The plan had been to force the High Queen into handing Garma into their custody. Tulius had his hands tied, since the documents were within the laws of the White-Gold concordat. All they had to do was wait while the Legion ferryed the cat to Solitude and then they could leave.
Until Larethius decided they were taking too long. How the man planned to hostage an entire city like Solitude was completely beyond any, even a good portion of the Inner Guard, but nobody questioned him.

Larethius' assassins had made the spearhead for a new vanguard.

Where he had gotten them from, nobody quite knew. The old directive for using slaves as bases to be made into personal assassins had failed with the cats years ago, and everyone knew how it made broken something inside Eldunarto. It nearly broke his house to replace his entire stock, but Elenwen made it happen. Replacing the guards who left House Larethius after witnessing the purge, well, that was almost impossible. It was something even Elenwen couldn't entirely fix, even with her reach.

And even now, his Master's full insanity was coming to a head.

He claimed that Elenwen was dead, and someone else was puppeting her letters. Insanity. Nobody could have gotten to the Ambassador. Not even that wild dog Ulfric, or even Tulius with his snake-bite politics.

Even so, Tulius himself had been holed up inside the Blue Keep with the High Queen and most of the guard for the past three days. How on Tamriel Larethius had managed to completely swamp the city with the troops they had... well. It seemed like the humans were more concerned with bringing down a new war with the Dominion. No birds were allowed to fly and the entire city was locked down. If they misstepped then Larethius could order the entire city to be massacred, and only his word would matter, especially with Elenwen's backing. The Dominion's reach was as inescapable as ever, it seemed.

It was most likely the only reason the ugly stale-mate had occured. There were maybe two hundred regular troops, maybe three hundred odd bandits and thugs left over, maybe fifty slaves kitted out like the infiltration team sent to Markarth, and well that was it. It probably meant alot that most of the Legion were in the wilder parts of Skyrim attacking the now abandoned slaver cells. How those men must have felt knowing that Larethius had set them up as bait to make Solitude easier to dominate? Some of them probably felt proud.

Laufen was quick, and managed a quick glance towards the three assembled assassins dotted around the townsfolk. He could understand.

The main square was quiet, almost deadly so. They had been the first to set up a small squad here, and so had to take care of the seige eqipment that had been... aquired on their travels. In the current moment, they had reached a stalemate. The main body of the guard were out in force, mostly keeping citizens in their homes and attempting to placate Larethius' men.

It was literally only the quiet agreement that the city was under a hostage situation that kept them in the green. Larethius was placing alot of faith in the fact that the Legion and the Queen didn't want to start another war. But by doing this, it meant that they were well open for attack. Nobody to tell the Dominion that they were wronged if nobody survived, right? Were they waiting here for a slave who would never arrive, instead waiting for the Legionnaires to return? Or for this 'Talia's army to land on their backs?

Hopefully the fleet Elenwen sent would dock before that, however. Until then, they were all stuck.

The people who lived in Solitude had been ridiculous in their refusal to accept attack. Through it all, Laufen prayed to Auri-El that they surrendered. And Talos swept down that feeble prayer like he cut down men with his sword.
The ones they saw - and he was sure without a doubt that some of the citizens had hidden themselves even now- had been few and far between and always the same ones. Obviously Larethius' reputation had spread like wildfire here, and if only the ones they saw were recognised then there would be hell to pay when the rest rose up. If anything, Solitude's guards were the ones who held the most scrutiny. All were 'babysat' by a set Inner and Outer Guard. Larethius called it 'keeping tabs on the innocent, to keep from further slaughter.' It made Laufen wonder if he actually believed in the lies or not.

One of the assassins moved.

Laufen's eyes were on him in an instant. He wore a long, dark cloak fitted with many angular bronze slats, making it even harder to spot his arms and hands in the shadows. His head was covered completely in a simple dark mask, the obsidian shining bright in almost any light. But even stranger was that this particular assassin, well, Laufen had never seen him wield a blade, or a mace, or any other kind of weapon. He didn't smell of magic, or anything at all.

He didn't even speak.

He strode until he was infront of a small group of citizens, one of them obliviously putting more meat into her friend's basket out of her own. Probably the butcher's daughter or maybe an inn worker-

He swept in, until he could grab at a small, almost waiflike barmaid that had been silently crying as her basket got filled with food. His hand had barely grabbed her hair before she screamed, bringing down the ire of the nords around them, but all noise cut off when the assassin cracked her across the head with his free hand and wrenched her up over his head by the collar of her dress.

The people quietened, almost comically so, while they waited.

Well, all of them were waiting, really.

The assassin kicked a nearby Outer Guard from one of the nearby siege engines, one that Larethius had refused to use because of the damage it would do, as well as the fun it would rob him of. They didn't have much to use with it anyway, so it had been deemed loot, more than anything else.

He threw her into the cup of the catapult and stomped on the lever.

She didn't have time to beg, but as she flew she screamed, a long warbling wail that almost lasted forever, until it cut off as she passed over the Blue Keep's walls.

The silence that followed did last forever.

xxx

Za'nir held the unconscious girl closer, pressing a hand against her forehead, her wrenched arm and then moving to her stomach, checking for anything else that might kill her. It had been so close, so damn close but he managed it. If asked how, he couldn't have answered. His magic was barely even notable, only bothering to learn enough to manage telekinesis and a few invisibility spells. But it had been almost easy to push a strength spell into her bones as she flew, and even easier to catch her from the air, to soften her fall and somehow make it all out alive.

"Who in seven hells are you?!"

Za'nir turned, and S'eta was between them and the large nord at the top of the tower with them, the man's dark hair a stark streak against the bright stones of the Blue Palace.
“Captain Aldis, I'm Jakk, Artan's brother, remember? We met a few months ago at Maven Blackbriar's trial? We're here to help,” Jakk held his hands up, and the rapidly growing group of guards surrounding them stopped, waiting for orders.

Aldis snarled, drawing himself up to his full, frightening height.

“Sorry to interrupt but I have limited healing capabilities and this woman needs medical attention. We will wait here at your command but she needs to be seen by a healer,” Za'nir broke in, bringing the attention back down on him.

“Thom, you go get Sybille. And you two,” Captain Aldis growled, pushing through his clustered guards to stand in front of them, “you or Thane Artan need to get us a shot at this noble asshole. Those fuckers have been murdering their way through my men and the people here in dark corners and citing the concordat everytime to wiggle out of it. Tulius and High Queen Elisif have their hands tied with this Dominion shit and by Shor's beard I am not letting the best Thane this city has seen get headhunted by a bunch of rich little tarts in skirts. We clear?”

Za'nir nodded once, “Crystal, Captain.”

xxx

Thom made it to the central sitting room with ease, only knocking over one vase on his way down. Sybille was with Elisif and that elf noble, so he made sure to tuck his amulet of Talos into a nearby plant pot, pray for forgiveness from the gods that he hadn't hidden it earlier, and stepped inside.

“High Queen Elisif, Lady Sybille, Lord Firebeard, please excuse my intrusion. An altercation in the market occurred and a woman needs immediate medical assistance on the battlements,” he bowed at the hip, making another quiet prayer.

“Oh my, what on earth happened?” Elisif cried, standing from her seat and moving to pat Thom on the shoulder. He took the cue and straightened, nodding once. The elf and his men were gone, probably to go peruse the gardens again, and just a tired-looking group remained.

“She had been thrown over the battlements by one of the catapults, my Queen. One of the mages here visiting from the College managed to catch her before... well before she landed. The mage isn't a healer though, she can barely even patch the poor girl's arm. She's on borrowed time my Queen, she needs Lady Sybille.”

“How did-” Elisif started, but Captain Aldis broke into the room loudly, sweeping around like a bear on the hunt.

“My Queen, everything is fine. One of the Lord's assassins launched her at the battlements and she survived, barely,” Aldis shook his head, almost as if he could smell something awful. “My mother suggested that lots of fresh air from opening up all the doors would help a wound heal. I can have that done soon as.”

The Queen's head rose, her razor-gaze almost cutting Aldis in two. Her head shook minutely, barely even a movement before she looked to Melaran.

“Melaran, have that done for me please. You once told me it's best to take precautions before a wound is left to fester. Make sure that our guests are also well accommodated. Lord Eldunarto told me that a few of his soldiers were upset with the lower kitchen staff.”

“At once, my Queen,” the elf nodded, before striding straight of the room.
“Please, Sybille, check on the poor woman. And please, co-ordinate with Captain Aldis and Melaran. We have a high esteemed lord to attend,” Elisif nodded, once at each of the last remaining people around her. “We had best not leave him wanting, no?”

xxx

Eirian was a bubble of tightly controlled rage, the edges of her vision flickering. Her fuck-head of a brother had actually gone to the Jarl and strong-armed her into dragging Artan in like a dog. She was glad she killed that pond-scum Tusaril like the rat he was, now. Argis was beyond anyones reach, now. His sole focus was in gathering enough people to thwart the entire thing and kill Larethius. He didn't even give a shit that the entire of the Dominion would come down on Skyrim like a plague.

He didn't care that Elenwen was hiding at the peripheral, ready and waiting to get at the murderers of her sister. Whoever the fuck had landed a hit on Amalia was going to have hell to pay when she got hold of them.

Fuck it though, even if they let them take Artan it would still mean war. Elenwen would see to that, and Eirian had no way of fixing it.

And so here they were, a huge mass of people speckled throughout the wilds surrounding Solitude like ants ready to attack another nest. How in the world Argis had managed it, she didn't know. All he had was the spotty information from Artan over the years, but he had managed to congregate a small army in order to rescue him. The beggars on Artan's payroll were the key, she thought.

Still, the amount of work put in on a maybe, the amount of lives that Argis had put on the line-

No. The amount of people willing to risk their own lives was astounding.

But then again, knowing Garma and the Artan he grew into, maybe not.

“Alright, whats next?” She asked, and Argis' head turned to her.

“We need Ondolemar in place and you need to be ready with Drevis. The plan only works if Larethius believes the lie. We'll have Talia's men in place in the houses, and thats that. We crush them.”

Eirian nodded, and the two regarded each other for a few moments while the hushed bussle of soldiers and mages and werewolves swept around them.

“I am glad that after everything else in his life he met you, Argis. I don't know if anyone else would have gone this far,” she said sincerely, but he shook his head.

“Nobody's here because I asked them to come. They're here for Artan, and they have all gone so far,” he shook his head to clear it and straightened. “Now let's go get him back.”

xxx

While the others were gone and only a few guards were near, Jakk confronted him.

“You and Jaden are using him as bait for Larethius!”

Za'nir's head turned, and Jakk almost stepped back. The khajiit looked for the first time ever like he was ready to cry, whiskers tight around his face and ears twitching. “And using his love for these people, yes. There was no other way.”
“I can't believe you! Why-”

Za'nir grabbed him by the shoulders, tugging him into a hug. “That thrice-damned monster won't lay a hand on Garma. Not now not ever again. The plan will work. Larethius will die. And everyone will go home happy. He will see his daughters and his lover again and it will work out. Trust me when I say that this was the only way. There always had to be a plan B when it came to Larethius. We are in a box here. It is not what I had planned in the begining, but it was all I could do with what was there. I tried everything to get Larethius' true location, and nothing worked. Only this.”

“I... I can't” Jakk shook his head, clawing at Za'nir's armor and confused. He didn't know whether to pull away or what and-

“I have spent over a decade of my life protecting you cubs, I will not stop now,” Za'nir pressed his thumbs into Jakk's shoulders, almost as if trying to press the truth home.

Jakk, well, Jak didn't know anymore.

He had nothing left. He had to trust that Za'nir had their backs.

He had never given reason for them to doubt him before.

Chapter End Notes

im not even a little sorry this time. But like in all honesty, we're gonna be wrapping this story up soon, especially since I'm considering a sequel. I've been really late in updating this but I have been trying to build a backlog of chapters so I can update every week or so. Hopefully that plan will actually materialize instead of dissapear into the dogs gut like that dropped bag of crisps did.

I hope you enjoy reading!! And thank you for all the kind comments guys,

~Frog
Blood and Fear

Chapter Summary

♥ Be careful what you wish for ♥

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

4E 204, Morning Star

Artan was sat rather moodily on the cart, eyes watching the clouds. The wagon was full with Nords, and even an Imperial. He ignored them. He watched the clouds. He even ignored when they started appologising, begging forgiveness. One of them started crying. He didn't have the energy to placate them, or baby them with platitudes.

He wanted to be strong.

To tell them it would be okay, and that they were only following orders. Elisif was probably in a world of shit right now. Tulius was probably worse. He knew the possibilities when he started a full campaign against Larethius and his slavers. He knew this might happen. Took the fool long enough to realize he could just go to the authorities. It just spoke of how mad he had become.

It showed that everything that Artan had said about him was right.

How many people were dead because of all of this?

He felt it, all the awful shit he had done. Was this what happened before Taneth got overrun? Were the people watching on as their world fell apart at the seams, watching as the Dominion strode into their homes without even a hope for-

He snorted. Shook his head to clear it. How much had changed in a few years.

He didn't even understand what had compelled him to hand himself over. Argis, he couldn't even think about Argis without seeing his face, the face he pulled when Artan said yes.

The thought that the Dominion would come here at Eldunarto and Elenwen's behest was reaching, but possible. All they had to do was claim that the concordat was breached and that was it. A few words from her and their entire province would be like Elsweyr and-

The cart rocked again, and Artan felt his stomach roll.

No. This was the only way to keep his friends, his family, his girls and Argis safe. He would go back to the isle, and that meant Larethius wouldn't be here. His men wouldn't be here, breathing down the necks of innocent people. How many had slipped through the cracks before he visited the Night Mother and got concrete locations of the cells? How many were on a boat already, maybe even still hoping blindly that it would work out?
FUCK IT ALL.

HE COULD ESCAPE AGAIN. OR GO OUT IN A BLAZE OF GLORY AND TAKE THE ENTIRE OF HOUSE LA'RETHIUS DOWN WITH HIM. THEY WOULDN'T HURT ANYONE AGAIN, THAT WAS FOR SURE. HE COULD LAY LOW; THEY DIDN'T KNOW ARTAN, THEY ONLY KNEW GARMA. THEY WOULD UNDERESTIMATE A SLAVE, THE SAME WAY THEY ALWAYS DID, AND THEY WOULD PAY. THEY DIDN'T HAVE TALIA OR EIRIAN OR ANYONE ELSE. ANOTHER HOUSE MIGHT RISE IN THEIR ASHES, WORSE SOMEHOW, BUT IT WOULDN'T MATTER WHEN HE WAS DEAD, WOULD IT? FUCK THEM ALL.

IT WAS SLOW TO SOLITUDE, AND EVERYTHING WAS GREY. THIS TIME LAST YEAR HE WAS AT THE NEW LIFE FESTIVAL AND EVERYTHING WAS FINE.

EVERYTHING HAD BEEN FINE.

WHEN THEY GOT TO THE EDGE OF SOLITUDE AND STOOD BESIDE THE RUINS OF KATLA'S FARM, HADVAR TURNED TO HIM AND ASKED IF HE COULD PUT MANACLES ON. ARTAN COULDN'T EVEN AGREE BECAUSE HE WAS LAUGHING TOO HARD.

XXX

IT WAS NIGHT WHEN THEY STOPPED, AND ARGIS HAD SOMEHOW ENDDED UP WANDERING INTO THE SPARSE TREELINE ALONE. WELL, THAT'S HOW HE HAD PLANNED IT, BUT HE ENDED UP COMING ACROSS SCOUTS, SAT IN THE DARK WITH THAT AMYTHST RING IN HAND.

“DO YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT?” ARGIS ASKED, MONOTONE.

SCOUTS BARELY EVEN ACKNOWLEDGED HIM, JUST HUMMING A NEGATIVE IN RETURN.

“WOULD YOU REALLY GIVE UP THE MAN HE FELL IN LOVE WITH SO EASILY?” ARGIS SNAPS, AND ITS OUT TOO FAST FOR HIM TO CATCH IT.

SCOUTS LOOKS AT HIM THEN, REALLY LOOKS AT HIM. “I'M NOT A MAN WITHOUT HIM, ARGIS. I'M JUST A TRAINED MURDERER.”

“THAT'S NOT ALL YOU ARE, AND THAT'S NOT WHAT HE SAW,” ARGIS SHAKES HIS HEAD. IT'S EASY TO STEP INTO SCOUTS' SPACE, TO PRESS A HAND TO THE ARGONIAN'S HAND, TO CLOSE IT INTO A FIST WITH HIS OWN, THE RING BURIED IN SCOUT'S PALM. “THAT'S NOT WHAT WE SEE.”

SCOUT'S DOESN'T ANSWER, BUT HE DOESN'T GET UP AND WALK AWAY, EITHER.

ARGIS COUNTS IT AS A WIN.

XXX

IT WASN'T UNTIL THE SCREAMING STARTED THAT THINGS REALLY HEATED UP. THE SLAVERS IN THE COURTYARD HADN'T FLUNG ANY MORE SCREAMING CITIZENS AT THE BATTLEMENTS, AND THANKFULLY SO. HOWEVER SILENT THE HOURS AFTER THAT WAS, IT WAS NOTHING COMPARED TO THE almost CHILLING LACK OF SOUND AFTER THE FAR-OFF WAILING STARTED.

ZA'NIR PLACED A HAND FIRMLY ON JAKK'S SHOULDER IN SOLIDARITY.

BECAUSE REGARDLESS OF THE NEWLY EruptING BUSTLE AROUND THEM, HIS EYES WERE TRAINED ON THAT HILLY SLOPE UP TOWARDS THE CITY LIKE A HAWK WATCHING A NEW MEAL.

CHEERS BROKE OUT, AND THE CASTLE SHUDDERED AGAIN WITH NEWLY HEALED HOPE, “THE DRAGONBORN!”

THE CITIZENS WERE SCREAMING BELOW THEM, BUT IT TOOK A MOMENT TO REALIZE WHAT IT WAS. THEY WERE
screaming, crying, howling that thrice damned song that was sung across the entire province after Alduin's fall, and it crept up to tangle in the winds until it became almost ethereal. The enemy below them were trying to quiet down the singing, but it was hopeless.

Jakk felt it in his gut, the moment the screams from Solitude's gates hit a higher pitch.

The citizens start to struggle against the line of soldiers clearing a long, wide line in the middle of mainstreet, now. Jakk crowds the battlements, almost as if he could jump to their aid just by wishing hard enough. Larethius' assassins had begun to trickle towards the group nearest to the city gates; three dark blots whizzing across rooftops as if their lives depended on it, but it was worthless. The sound of the gates opening rallied the last of the still-keening citizens, some of them trying to push harder, but Larethius' men were having none of it. After a few well-placed punches and kicks, the people fell back further into the city, but still close enough to see whatever happened.

It's almost surreal to watch as a huge plume of imperial legionnaires storm into the courtyard proper, his brother striding along between them as if nothing unusual was happening. He looked almost otherworldly in some kind of fitted, high collared robe with long tails trailing out behind him.

Jakk watched as the last few legionnaires flooded into the city, leaving a gaping hole in their wake. Nobody else came in after them to join the rather strange scene in the centre of Solitude. None of Talia's soldiers, nor a Companion or anyone else. There were no housecarls at Artan's back, or anything. No assassins, either.

Za'nir's hand tightened on his shoulder.

The wails started when people noticed the chain. The collar. The way Artan's head was held proudly, even so. The song of the dragonborn that some of the people had been singing died out slowly, leaving just a few quiet cries and then an almost deathly silence to take point.

Nobody made a noise when Larethius barrelled out of the Blue Keep, his advisors and bodyguards hurriedly following him.

"What a surprise! My dear sweet Garma! Overestimating himself once again by thinking he could play housecat forever!" Eldunarto Larethius laughed over the eerie silence, arms spread wide. One of mages was obviously amplifying his voice, allowing it to carry over the city square.

Za'nir's hand tightened again.

Artan smiled, and even from here Jakk saw the intense confidence flowing through his brother like a river. He called over the morbid silence with glee, "It doesn't matter what happens to me. You'll pay one way or another for everything you have done."

But Larethius' head simply tilted even more. And then he smiled, and Jakk's hope fell apart.

"Did you forget how we play this game?"

In an instant, he wasn't in Skyr anymore. He was in the main hall, Garma's hands around his wrists, feeling something crack deep inside his chest. Their father moved like he was in pain, as if everything was pain even his fur, and he growled like a wild thing. His tail was gone, and his claws were gone, and his ears- And then Tavan threw her as if he was throwing chicken seed into the ring. Things weren't making sense. And then Master turned to them, and S'eta felt hands on his shoulders, around the back of his neck, pressing his collar into his skin. "Don't worry, all I am going to do is teach you how to play a little game. It's my favorite game, infact."

The smile that cut his entire world apart.
"Pick which one goes on the pike with the nordic dogs."

- 

Za'nir shook him, and everything snapped back into place, and he wished he wasn't here. He couldn't watch this. Everything clicked like a clockwork automation into place. Because one of Larethius' Thamlor had Sofie and Lucia by the hair, dragging them down towards Larethius like-

Artan was silent as stone, he wasn't even breathing.

And then he was moving like everything else was made of stone.

Anything and everything in his way got shredded, leaving legionnaires who had his chains in the dust. The thu'um rang out, and the chains and the collar hit the floor as he became ethereal, just a moment was enough, and the screams rang out, and the Thalmor holding the girls flinched back. Larethius was between them, and then-

Artan fell, a knife in his leg. One of the bird-like assassins had an hand in the collar of his jacket, and something in his brother's face cracked. A huge explosion of fire and smoke poured out of his chest, shattering the woodpanes and glass from the surrounding houses. Just as quickly, it all melted away as another assassin buried a blade into his shoulder. Poisoned, it leech away all his magic, and the cloaks around the two assassins who had him pinned were pushing away all the harmful flames. In the end, Larethius' two assassins had Artan pinned like a snake under a boot, one of them going so far as to slip another dagger in between his teeth so the blade settled against his tongue.

The legionnaires stopped dead.

Elisif gasped, almost falling forwards off the battlements beside Jakk before Falk steadied her.

And Za'nir was almost crushing him now.

But Jakk couldn't even breathe.

Things began to swim, even as Larethius postured and laughed.

Hadvar stepped forwards from the throng of legionnaires, and dropped his sword to his side. "My Lord, you have... You have what you wanted." He looked almost sick to the bone, but his eyes kept flitting to the girls, almost as if he was pleading with a god about their fate. Larethius surely wouldn't kill children, would he?

"They wouldn't... they wouldn't...?" Elisif asked quietly through her tears. "They are just children!! I thought...! They were supposed to be somewhere safe! How in the world did he find them?!!"

"These men are from the Dominion my Queen. There is nothing they would not stoop to," Melaran supplied.

The Thalmor walked the girls further down the steps, to the point where the Inner and Outer Guard had created a large ring of people around Larethius and Artan. Sofie looked almost wild, dress ripped, eyes streaming with tears, and her face slightly bruised-

Lucia wasn't fighting.
Her face was blank, eyes glassy.

The elf threw them into the centre of the circle where they knelt silently. Neither looked to the last looming assassin at their side, his covered face turned to Larethius like a loyal dogs, just awaiting the order.

Jakk moved, but Za'nir held him back. "We can't."

"I can't let this happen, I can-"

Za'nir hissed, "He has both of them like that. If we move now, he could easily kill them both. Easily."

"He will kill them anyway if we don't do something!" Jakk shrieked back.

Larethius' voice rang out above them, echoing across the city. Magic, no doubt. "And to think we would come full circle like this. Do you still like to play games, Garma?"

Artan was silent, twitching like a demon in the assassins combined grip. His magic was flickering, but useless around him, sparks dying before they could even grow.

Larethius' eyes flashed. "Pick which one you want to live."

Jakk nearly pushed Za'nir from him and over the battlements in his haste to the stairs, but slammed into something hard and tall. A hand grabbed him by the jaw and forced his face up, and he was then looking into the eyes of Jaden, his piercing green eyes cutting him to his core. Before the tears started, and his arms wrapped around him like a vice.

He was letting this happen. He was the leak.

He screamed, shaking in his grip. But even as he looked over the battlements, Artan was similarly breaking apart at the seams, screaming loud enough that blood pooled in his mouth from the blade cutting his tongue. Larethius didn't wait for an answer, and instead motioned towards the third assassin at his heel.

"You will never run away again,” Eldunarto smiled, quiet and serene.

A huge plume of sound, of outraged screaming broke through the crowd of people -Solitude guards, regular citizens, Legionnaires- and there was a rush against the line of Larethius' guards that almost broke through.

The Assassin didn't flinch.

He plunged his sword into Sofie's chest.

Sofie exploded into fire and brimstone, fully encasing the assassin. Her arms wrapped under his fire-resistant cloak to punch into his guts and lift him from his feet, and her face twisted into some kind of horror from oblivion in the next instant. Her entire form roiled and waved, until she was a huge, looming flame atronach with whirling battlearmor that made her seem indomitable. The atronach opened her mouth, and Penelope screeched out into the daylight like a vengeful goddess.

The assassin who had a blade in Artan's mouth yanked it out and plunged it straight into the other assassin's throat, under his jaw and unhiging his mask like opening an oyster. Blades fell from Artan's kneeling form easily until he could stand, at which every shop door across the marketplace sprung open and people surged out. Talia's men near enough crushed every single slaver against the
walls, giant hulking Companions dotting between them. Fleeing mercenaries and bandits were silently shot by Aela and Serana from the rooftops. And just like that, everything changed.

Lucia shifted and burst the same way Sofie had, changing into Valencia easily as Drevis Neloren and Eirian swept out of the Winking Skeever to dispel whatever illusion they had cast on the atronachs to hide their true forms.

And as Larethius watched his entire world fall apart and the last of his Inner Guard attempted to keep him alive, more of his men pouring in from other fortified parts of the city, the Thalmor at his side began to cut his way through his fellow soldiers. One by one, Larethius' men tore off their helmets to reveal blue-painted faces, and began to tear the living shit out of their supposed friends.

And it wasn't until that Thalmor tore off his hood that Jakk saw Ondolemar, his face painted blue. Magic flooded the entire area as Larethius began casting, but it didn't change much. He was pushed, along with his few spellcasters and loyal dogs, until his back was against the Blue Palace gates. Even then, his back was still to Argis and Jordis, who had somehow... how in the world did they manage to infiltrate the Inner Guard?

The last standing assassin to Larethius helped Artan tug the very last dagger from his back before tearing his huge beaked mask from his face, revealing-

*Scouts?*

He shook the huge fire-resistant cloak from his shoulders, revealing a modified leather armor similar to the brotherhood leathers, and even from this distance he was different. He looked so lethal. So unlike himself.

*And he still thought Jakk was dead.*

Even as they slowly wrang the life from Larethius, Jakk felt his entire being shake. Jaden held him tighter through it all.

It all made sense.

Larethius made sure his assassins were able to quell magic. They all knew the dragonborn was a mage, a powerful one. They were all focused on him. And after Scouts replaced one, it still left two. So they infiltrated Solitude early, had Elisif get them all in, and had a honey trap ready for when Larethius attacked. They probably had tunnels all throughout the city underneath the streets, and managed to get people straight underneath Larethius' guards. The houses had been full of Talia and Eirian's people, and were ready to strike in an instant. After the first push the Inner or Outer Guard wouldn't have bothered to sack a house twice, and they banked on that. They even had Argis and the others pretend to be mercenary guards to have them in prime position to start cutting down the real enemy. It would have been easy to overtake a cart on the road, especially one where the Legionnaires were dragging their feet. Eirian had summoned Valencia and Penelope, and Drevis had covered them in an illusion ready to cut down one of the assassins. Larethius had believed whatever story was told about how the girls had been caught, and that was it.

He blinked into focus to see Artan pushing through the throng, the tight-knit little circle around Larethius.

And like that, everything felt lighter. It felt like something was building in his chest, building so high and so tight that he felt the pressure behind his eyes. Another one of Larethius' spellcasters fell to Jordis, and yet another Inner Guard fell to another of Talia's soldiers. Talia herself was in some kind
of close-combat battle with what looked like some kind of heavy-set tower of a man.

The spellcasters chanting rose above the din, and began strike at the various soldiers with lightning from their little cocoon of guards. It became suddenly redundant, when Tolfdir made himself apparent by casting some kind of mass-stone-skin spell. How such an old man managed to cover so many was astounding, but even then it was only the maybe twenty or so that were closest to the frontline of the ring. Jakk looked to him, seeing a bright golden circle of light surrounding him and several other mages. A mana well thing, maybe? Artan had said about a type of magic that allowed for instant magika restoration when paired with the right skills in a mage's arsenal.

Faralda covered him while he recovered, by raining hellfire down on that tiny group and forcing the enemy spellcasters to ward up instead of throwing their magic around. It rallied the soliders, and the noose tightened.

Until Larethius did the impossible.

He screamed, loud enough to make the men and women near him flinch away, and stomped his feet into the dust. The wind shook from his robes and hands like a hurricane, snow and ice and lightning flooding out in huge, rolling waves that made the clouds above shudder and roil in tandem. Men, women, elf, nord, friend, foe, everyone in his vicinity was thrown aside like dolls by a child, hitting posts and walls and—

Artan was still standing.

The sky overhead suddenly turned, almost as if someone had blown out a candle, as the words rumbled across the landscape like a word from some deity, making the flags shudder harder and the lamps gutter. The clouds swept in like a herd of stampeding sheep across a formerly silent field, all gathering around a single point, the eye of an impending storm that clawed at Castle Dour's very foundations. The rain pelted down like hail, thundering from the sky like arrows from Sovengarde itself, and then the lightning split the sky.

It started like sharp flickers of light, followed by the earsplitting crack of thunder and followed by the rabid howls of the wind.

Falk was yelling now, grabbing at Jakk's elbow, but the khajiit shrugged him off and gestured with a hand, "It's Storm Call. He's negating that snowstorm by calling a thunderstorm!"

The mortal realm went silent, wary of the raging elements around the city. Until Artan shouted again, and the sky cleared. And then it settled, the reason, the rhyme and everything burst into movement again.

It was moments before it was Larethius' men stood alone to face whatever fate the Dragonborn had come to deal them, somehow rallying even in spite of being blown away by their Master.

Artan had a bloodied and hissing Dawnbreaker in one hand, and the almost glittering mace of Molag Bal in the other, face mottled with blood and gore with the residual golden mist of the Thu'um tracing around his fangs like flames from a dragons maw. It wasn't surprising that half the men ran.

"Ah! A few of your friends came to help you! Do you honestly believe a bunch of lumbering humans could protect you from me?! " Larethius howled over the fighting, pushing away one of his guards who attempted to press him further away from the slaughter. The bodyguard struggled with Larethius before the elf slammed a hand back, jabbing a finger into the man's throat with enough electricity coursing through to kill him instantly. He pushed the dead man away from himself, before whipping around to fully face Artan again.
Dawnbreaker twitches in Artan's hand, but he stands steady, the gold in his eyes not even flinching from Larethius' silver-cloaked form. "As if you didn't need a bunch of humans in painted animal skins to fend off Oblivion," the cat snarked, fangs out now. To his credit, or maybe a hint at his madness, Larethius didn't flinch.

There was a huge surge from the legionnaires, one managing to completely decapacitate a one of Larethius' hired mercenaries. His head flew straight up, almost threatening to hit Eldunarto before one of his Inner Guard smashed the thing away from his master with a well-timed shield. "You failed to kill me before," Eldunarto laughed, head tilting curiously, blood from his dead man's head speckling his cheek.

There was a lull in the fighting, where the people pulled back, regrouping around Artan as if he was their bastion of energy in this fight. Maybe he was, pushing magic into them, healing their cuts and their bruises, pressing courage into their hearts. he had probably downed a mana potion or twelve at this point. Larethius' men didn't look the same, not as stable, not as cared for. Just a bone-deep fear, one that made Jakk's heart hurt and burn and-

Artan laughed. His eyes flashed, and even from this distance Jakk could see, they could all see-

He looked like a monster.

"There is nothing to stop me now," the words rang out, punching the breath from nearly all in attendance. Jakk felt an overwhelming urge to run, hide, to disappear. The frontline of Larethius' men quaked. But the men and women at Artan's side didn't even move an inch. They stayed strong, even as he continued. "You will pay for what you've done."

Jakk felt that fear bubble into hope, just at the confidence, the force behind the things his brother was saying. He felt the underlying rallying cry at the words, felt how the Legionnaires and the few men on Castle Dour's battlements readied themselves.

The elf was screeching above the din, his eyes blown wide enough and his brows cutting into his nose like thunderbolts. But even so, even after everything, or maybe in spite of everything, Artan moved to meet him when he drew his sword.

Artan was like a flood.

It was almost instantaneous, how he surged forwards and broke the enemy frontline, blade nearly invisible against the shine of their armors. The soldiers broke rank, stumbling and smashing into one and other in a panic, ignoring their officers barking orders and basically causing pandemonium. And that was all before Artan started blinking in and out of existence, literally. It took Jakk a moment to realize he had been casting some kind of spell, and the blink of the khajiit returning to visibility was the moment he was killing an opponent, whatever illusion broken in the instant.

The screams grew, and grew, and then the fleeing started.

Men and women trying to push through the hysterical central ring of soldiers around Artan were meeting a solid wall of bodies, some even going so far as to start hacking away at their allies to get away from the 'daedra' felling their friends like flies. And beyond that were the rallied soldiers of Solitude and the Companions and the Housecarls, stabbing into that flailing mass of bodies. Larethius' last two spellcasters were dragging him back and into the Blue Keep's courtyard, somehow managing to hold back the ball of wild-dog screaming and thrashing arms Larethius had turned into.

"It's almost scary, how easy he makes it look," Falk intoned, making the few able to look away from
the slaughter glance in his direction.

Jakk looked back to the fighting, now branching out more with how many men were fleeing. That is, until a huge plume of magic erupted from the centre of the storm, bringing the fight to a standstill if only for a breath, before the horrified people running away from the dragonborn turned and ran back towards Artan, blades ready and warcries sounding out across the battlements.

"What in-" Elisif shook her head, bewildered.

"Courage spell," Za'nir supplied, "It makes them forget they're scared shitless and makes them run into the kill box."

"Why the fuck aren't we down there helping," Jakk forced out, struggling again in Jaden's grip.

"We-" Za'nir started, but Jaden interrupted him.

"We are plan B, S'eta," the elf supplied, ignoring the terrified gasp from Elisif.

"You told me that this plan would be completely-" She started, but Jaden interrupted again, and ignored Falk's growl of protest.

"It was our best bet and it still is. You knew-

"FUCK!" Jakk screamed, bringing their attention down on the fighting again.

The ring had grown wider, and Penelope and Valencia had flanked Artan. Larethius and his two remaining spellcasters were throwing everything they had at the other three, but it was a waste of time.

The atronachs and Artan whirled around each other, hurling bolts of fire and magic into the courtyard, one catching the doors to the palace aflame and boxing in Larethius and his men. A huge pillar of rock flew out, catching Valencia in the chest. One of Penelope's firebolts caught a mage in the head. The other fell to a twist of lightning in his face, and Penelope was thrown back by a huge wave of ice that Artan barely managed to escape.

The instant that it was just Larethius and Artan staring each other down, it all fell apart.

Artan drew another dagger, and Larethius readied his sword.

And when Larethius threw it at him, and Artan dodged. It gave Eldunarto all the time in the world. Both hands came up, and the entire square lit up with the magic power the elf was harnessing. A huge pillar of lightning shot out and burned Jakk's eyes into closing, and for a moment everything was white and he could only hear his blood thumping in his ears.

When the world came back, Artan was face down a few yards from Proudspire.

xxx

Argis lifted his head up just in time to see that Artan landed hard, and he didn't get up. So, somehow managing to thrash and push and gut his way towards the lazy ass fucking cat-

He smashed Spellbreaker into the head of a dazed soldier, braining him with the jagged rims of the shield. It got easier the closer he got to Artan, what with the fighting breaking out further into the city. What with that spell fading, the Inner and Outer Guard were fleeing. It left him with a precious few seconds to get Artan on his feet. It only took a second to pull a healing draught from the small
bandolier tucked under the inane sash these morons had to wear as a part of the Inner Guard. It only took a moment to roll Artan ove-

Argis was numb. There wasn't that telltale boiling in his head, that palpable heat that told him he was about to go berserk. When he was younger, just after his squad got annihilated, it would get so bad it would press against his eyes like hot pokers, threatening to push everything out of his skull. It would tear the edges of his mouth, burn deep in his chest until he felt like a molten pit of lava, ready to explode.

He felt like he should explode. He expected it to thunder out of him like a typhoon, and it never came. Larethius was laughing, high and wild, and it wasn't there. He expected to be blind, only feel that whirling nothingness as the world fell away. When his mind went too far, couldn't bear the heat, and just blacked out. But he was numb. He pushed through the failing inner ring of guards who were barely even fighting now, and the last dying dregs of Larethius' men. He didn't feel himself move at first. He didn't feel his fists. He couldn't fathom how he was walking, running, screaming. Even when Larethius turned to him, smile still plastered across his face after he murde-

Even when his hands caught around the elf's throat, and he tried again to do that abominable spell, Argis couldn't feel a thing. Artan's ring, the one he gave him, ate whatever Larethius tried to push at him, and in his desperation the elf managed to deplete all his mana. Especially after-

Argis pressed him down into the cobblestones and punched him hard enough to rattle his own teeth. The magic stopped. And Argis hit him again. Even when he felt the pop of magic behind him -one of Larethius' wretched spellcasters no doubt- he didn't give a flying fuck. He broke Larethius' nose with the next hit.

*This wasn't part of the plan*. The plan was to get rid of the assassins, replace a few guards, and trap the supposed 'lord' in a honey trap. Artan wasn't meant to-

Sofie and Lucia were safe, oh Talos *how would he even tell them?*

*Everything he did to try and get him back and... fuck!*

Argis smashed a fist into the elf's face again, feeling that low-burning rage starting to flicker. He could paste this goddamn little whelp into nothing and it wouldn't change a thing.

*It wouldn't make anything change.*

Fuck, *this was it, wasn't it?*

*He led a half the province here just to fail-

*Just for it all to fall apart.*

*Why did he let him go? He could have just said fuck off and picked Artan up he weighed about as*
much as a wet towel on a good day how could he have let this happen to his-

xxx

The second the air calmed, Cicero was ready. Listener's lover was sure they would try to run, like rats from a cat, and he was right. Oh was he right!

It's easy, so wonderfully easy, to set up beside the docks. To intercept the fleeing soldiers trying to gain some kind of safety from the Dominion boats. Listener's Lover didn't know the fun, didn't know the joy of Cicero.

How glorious it was to see the life leave their eyes, still alive but dying inside, when they realized the boats were a lie. Silencer Za'nir was clever, oh so clever.

A head rolls, many more roll, and he's in the Mother's embrace, blood flowing freely across the harbor cobbles, and his brothers and sisters surround him.

It's beautiful to see.

The Soltude guard are slow to arrive, faces blanched and eyes like scared horses.

But Cicero, oh poor Cicero is too far gone to talk. Is he singing? Is he screaming? He doesn't know.

But he can taste it when something hits the Listener. The others jerk and screech, and they are all connected. The Mother is whispering, something old and he doesn't-

xxx

It hit him hard, and he loses himself in a hurricane of pain.

He doesn't know how long it takes for his eyes to clear, but he can't feel himself open them. The lightning stopped his heart, he knows.

He barely stopped it from killing him.

But he's dying, and he can feel it all leeching out, flowing out like riverwater through a delta. He doesn't know why, but he pushes. Some animal fear, something deep inside. It's roaring through his chest and he pushes into-

The magic flows through him, plugging him up, restarting his heart like another thunderclap, forcing his limbs into movement and forcing everything into a pitter-patter lightning across tin-

He forces himself up, and the worlds ending.

There's still fighting around him, but he can easily pick Argis out in the madness.

Better get back to it, he supposes.

xxx

Someone's hand landed on his shoulder, and he felt something snap inside his chest.

He felt the tears then, the ones he had been crying without knowing. His entire face was wet, his face his throat his armor and his hands were speckled with clear dots swimming in the blood. He turned, and-
"I told you that Danica didn't talk shit," Artan grinned, the residual thrum of healing magic covering him like a low-hung cloud. His eye was swollen shut and one of his front teeth were obviously cracked, and his fur looked singed half-way to Sovengarde but he was standing and smiling and-

"Magical mumbo jumbo."

Argis snorted. Maybe he hadn't...?

He had healed, right?

And you can't heal the dead. And you can't bring them back-

So-

"Come on, up you get. I think this mincemeat is ready for the oven, don't you?" the cat smiled, and just like that, things settled. It wasn't okay, but it wasn't the end of the world.

Argis stood, spat at the elf at their feet, and pressed a hand against the nape of Artan's neck. Artan felt it then, the flood in his heart.

"How could this happen," Larethius whined through his missing teeth. "How could I be defeated by a bunch of worthless mutts in tatty cow-leather and-" he spat, trying to clear his throat from all the blood.

"Even if I told you, you would never understand," Artan said neutrally.

The hand around his neck tightened, and he felt the thu'um brush against his teeth again.

Artan limps a few feet forwards and brings down Dawnbreaker straight into Eldunarto Larethius' head, growling, “Blood and fear.”

They watch together, when Artan takes a step back into Argis' arm, as the last few twitches stop and the elf soils himself in death, and is eventually still.

A few soldiers and guards filter over to look, and a few happy, disbelieving laughs filter up.

Everything is silent for a few moments. And then the cheers break out. The world shakes with the cheering, the celebrating, the relieved crying, the men and women and children running from houses to clutch at their soldier family members, their legionnaire sons and daughters.

Argis pulls Artan until the khajiit is settled under his chin, resolutely trying not to shake. But Artan is shaking, and literally winding around him like a vine. His chest is vibrating, air pushing in and out and he's shaking like a leaf in a hurricane. So Argis hugs harder, whispers quietly, and breathes slowly for them. And it takes long minutes, but Artan falls into step with Argis' breathing, and together they settle. He can fall apart later. Right now, Artan needs him to be strong. He has to be strong, just for now, just until they can get home and be safe. They have all the time in the world now.

It's finally over.

Argis presses a hard kiss to the crown of Artan's head, muffling everything he wants to say, to shout, everything into Artan's neck. And Artan is crying-

"Garma?"

The two turn, and everything falls into chaos.
Artan's hand flies up, and everyone flinches from him as if struck. Banish Dead flashes out, but it does nothing. His eyes flicker in disbelief, and then Argis feels the rage roll off Artan in a huge wave. "This isn't real-" Artan is shaking again, hes crying harder, and hes pushing forwards and pushing back into Argis and- 

"It's really me I- I mean I'm not I'm- I'm not a thrall it's me, S'eta," Jakk warbles out, and Argis almost moves forward himself to comfort the khajiit. They're both breaking into hysterics now, with Artan pointing Dawnbreaker at Jakk and Jakk's crying but Artan doesn't move and he's crushing Argis' elbow--

"Is this a dream or something?" Artan laughs wetly, his head jerking to the side as if he was hit. The Thu'um is gushing out now, currently harmless but still volatile in a sharp-golden mist around them, still ready to strike. He's shaking, and Argis doesn't know what to do here. "Am I on a boat towards the Isle, drugged up? Did we win? Or is this Vaermina again?"

Jakk steps forwards, and that's it.
Artan moves like lightning, lunging forward and bringing Dawnbreaker down towards his own leg, Jakk's arm between them and his shoulder in his brother's armpit the only thing stopping Artan from shattering his own kneecap. Argis throws his free hand around both of them to grab at Artan's blade arm, effectively locking the three of them in. And Jakk? Well Jakk presses his face into Artan's throat and cries.

"He's real, Eltbet," Eirian intones, apparently trying for reassuring. Instead, she sounds rattled. Her eyes are blown, and her hand is around the arm of a tall, pitch black khajiit. His fur looks almost like a night sky, shimmering almost like starlight when he moves where the sun catches him. His eyes were like sharp blue blades in his face, face twisted in grief. For what, he didn't know.

Until Artan looked up, and-

"Za'nir."

The black khajiit lopes forwards, until he's thrown both arms around all three of them, pressing his face into the free space beside Artan and Jakk's faces. "I kept his survival a secret in case the plan fell apart. Larethius needed to die, you know that. But now I- My plan was a horrible one. I should have got word to you about S'eta. I shouldn't have strong-armed him into following my lead. The using you as bait, the facimiles of your children. I-

"I nearly let Ondolemar talk me into having Durnehviir drag Larethius into the Soul Cairn to hopefully suffer forever. I think we can all agree we have shit plans," Artan warbles, hand clenching tighter around Argis' arm.

Za'nir snorts.

Jakk ducks around and out of their little circle, running full-pelt at Scouts until their together again, and the crying kicks up an octave because he's Artan's brother and they both whine like children. He's running, sprinting, until his arms are flung around a listless Scout's shoulders. A wordless cry rings out, and they're on the floor, knelt and sat on the cobbles and whatever statueque state Scouts had regressed to breaks like a mountainslide. He's crying, and crying and crying and-

Artan himself rubs a fist across his wet nose, just in time for a shaken Elisif to appear with Falk and
Bolgeir at her side.

“So the plan worked after all? Thank goodness,” She sighed, patting at her wet eyes with a hankerchief.

“You were in on it?” Artan laughs, strained.

“Of course. Did you honestly think we had any intention of letting that monster take you?” she frowned frightfully, fire and ice all whirling up in her eyes at the notion. “However, you could have told me about the atronachs. I almost believed... well.” She shook herself, taking Falk's arm as he offered it.

“It does well to have friends in high places, no?” Za'nir smiled, and Artan landed a swift but light punch to his arm.

“We are going to talk about this bait thing, old man.”

Za'nir twitched uncomfortably, before nodding resolutely. “I think I will have you paid in full and more in due course, cub.”

“What are you-” Artan began, eyes flickering at the other khajiit, but he was interrupted by another.

The young man was a tall, pale-gold Altmer in what looked like a kind of long tunic, embroidered tastefully in contrast with his father's gaudy way of dress. Eirian stepped forwards to introduce him.

“This is Aethanar Larethius. Heir to the household and new Lord of the estate.”

“Aunt Eri you make me sound like a pompous old fart already and I'm barely four-and-twenty,” the elf groused, pouting hard enough to make his cheeks bubble. He turned to the rest of them, and nodded in greeting, before handing Artan a sheaf of papers held in a pretty silver-gold binding.

“These are your new papers declaring you and your brother as freemen in the eye of the Dominion. As the new Head it's well within my power now to give you some peace that your lives on the run are over. The rest of the slaves in my father's... well. They will also get their papers when I return to the Isle. If they want to stay on as paid servants, I will give them the option, however they will also get whatever travel or new housing they ask for. It's not enough, but it's a start. Don't expect anything like war from the Dominion either. That is all accounted for.”

“What did you tell them?” Argis asked, because Artan looked as if he was in wonderland.

“That my poor father had a breakdown and burned down the holiday villa, of course. He was mad enough about fire that they will believe it. And besides,” he nodded to Za'nir and smirked, “I have the ear of Elenwen, after all. What I cannot hope to achieve, she is sure to handle.”

Za'nir barked out a laugh, “I am sure she will.”

“What on earth is going on?” Artan asked, pathetically pawing at his head.

“Tea first, and then I'll update you, cub.”

XXX

“I can't believe you killed Elenwen and set up a base in the fucking Thalmor Embassy you old fuck,” Artan rubbed at his head, waiting for when he woke up from this dream. Za'nir had been running interference in Skyrim for years after he caught up with them, sometime after it came out about Artan's ascension to Dragonborn. He had been watching from the shadows, pulling a few strings here and there but mostly just watching for Larethius. He had been in league with High Queen Elisif
when the slaver thing went live across the province, and even had her as an accomplice to catching Larethius. How he managed to persuade her to go so far was anyone's guess, but Artan was glad she did step in. He also had spent time getting to know Aethanar and basically got him into the mindset of a house takeover.

This was all completely insane.

“Do you remember when you were younger, just after your father and mother were murdered?” Za'nir asked, settling further into one of the plush chairs at Proudspire's dinnertable. “I told you that nothing lasts forever. Not even the bad things that seem eternal.”

“You promised that we would be happy, one day, if we were brave enough to... to...” Artan shook his head, swallowing hard around the lump in his throat.

“It must have been scary to place your trust in them,” Za'nir said, watching Artan carefully. He put his tea down, stood and stepped towards where Artan was sat, before leaning down and pressing their foreheads together and rubbing a hand lightly across the scruff of the other khajiit's neck. “Look at where that got you. Look at how far you have come, cub. You and S'eta are free.”

Artan cracked, throwing both arms around Za'nir and sobbing into his shoulder once, before he shook out the feeling of being so small and settled again in his chest. Za'nir didn't tell him to stop crying, and he didn't offer any other words. He just let Artan cry into his shoulder for a long while, until Artan stopped on his own.

“Sofie and Lucia are holed up in Dawnstar. I got a few people to build up a new house on the sly, and I may have broken a few laws by building without a permit, but I doubt they'll give a fuck with what's happened,” Artan sighed, pushing away from Za'nir. The older khajiit nodded, before he stood fluidly and took a step back.

“Yes. Once again, I am sorry that we used their images in such a way. I can't imagine how that must have felt for you,” Za'nir pressed a hand against Artan's shoulder. They'd both lost count of how many times it had been that the older khajiit had apologised for it.

“I just can't believe you managed to have Argis agree to any of it. I wouldn't have liked to have seen what went down in that conversation,” Artan laughed, tight. Za'nir didn't laugh.

He took a step back and craned his neck, twisting it around until the bones cracked. He looked around, almost as if he was nervous, before he eventually set Artan straight, “He didn't know about mine and Jaden's involvement. Only Ondolemar did, and even then, with our status as Plan B, I doubt he told anyone of the entirety of the plan.”

Artan sat up straighter, staring Za'nir down until the other assassin looked him back in the eye. He wasn't lying.
“You're trying to tell me that those people... that Argis was fully ready to... ready to start a war with the Dominion over me?”

Za'nir shrugged, patting Artan on the shoulder again.

“I believe I may be able to get the steward of Dawnstar off your back, but until then, your lover wants to talk to you.” Za'nir said, before dissapearing -literally melting away into the air like a show pony- and Artan was alone. It took five minutes for Argis to meet him in the kitchen, as pale as ever but with a little pink in his cheeks. His scar was brighter than ever, a silvery shine that stood out even in the low-light.

Artan stood and stepped to meet him, pressing his face into the space underneath Argis' jaw and twisting both arms around the nord's back, keeping the touch on his bad arm light as to not disturb the new bandages. He wasn't even slightly surprised that Argis had managed to agitate it more with all the fighting he had been doing. Artan would have been sending a few healing energies into the Nord, but-

Argis' arms came around his back, thumbs pressing gently into the little dips behind his ears and massaging softly, pressing forwards and down until their foreheads were touching. It was only then that Argis let the breath out, Artan feeling as it rattled through his chest unsteadily. Whatever it was that was troubling him, he knew they could handle it. Whatever-

“Did you die?”

Artan pressed his lips together, mindful of his cracked tooth. He still needed to see that face-changing woman to get it fixed, but that was a long way off for now. He didn't mean to, but he dug his fingers into Argis a little tighter before he remembered and rubbed the mans arms in silent apology.

Then he shrugged. “If I hadn't been saving that bubble of energy in my conduit, I would be.”

Argis let out another breath, this one even shakier, before he slid both arms down and crushed Artan to his chest, trying and failing to breath slowly. Artan pressed even closer, touching his nose to Argis' throat before continuing. “I'm lucky he got me in the heart. If it was the head, I'd be dead. That spell Danica taught me neutralized the bolt before it could stop anything else, but... but I needed to restart it. I... It almost drained the whole thing just... just stopping the lightning. I...”

Artan shrugged again, not knowing what to say.

“Please don't do that again,” Argis said.

At first, Artan didn't understand, so Argis eventually kissed his forehead, hard, and pulled back slightly. It was only to press another hard kiss to his cheek, before he tucked Artan back under his chin and held tighter.

“I don't care what the stakes are, never ever give yourself up like that again. I don't care if its selfish or what but just...” Argis shook his head, swallowing around the lump in his throat.

“I...” Artan started, but didn't know how to finish. So he did what he did best; he bumbled in. “I... I... I couldn't just do nothing. He wouldn't have stopped. And the people... I mean i'm the Dragonborn to them, and I mean shit I spent like a whole year telling them to stuff the stupid song and all that-”

“It's not all you are,” Argis pulled back, looking Artan in the eye. “You aren't... you aren't invincible. What do you think would happen if something... if that...” Argis shook himself, unwilling to continue.
Artan didn't know what to say. There was a feeling in his chest too big to even comprehend, but he understood some core thing in what Argis was saying. He couldn't put it into words, but he felt it. He felt warm.

“Something bad happens every time we split up,” Artan began, trying to sound light.

“It’s because you have a nose for trouble,” Argis rolled his eyes, a small quirk at his lip.

“And you always pull me out of the fire,” Artan carried on pulling back to make looking up at Argis easier.

“Well, yeah,” Argis shrugged, nonplussed. “Have you ever smelt burning fur? It's gross as all hell.”

xxx

It took three days to get a message back from the recently built Dawnstar house, which Artan had yet to name. Apparently he had been paying all sorts of people on the sly to get it finished and set up as a safe house for the children, but money well spent. ridiculously, some people had started drinking and partying before they even cleared out the bodies from the square, and when Sybille eventually declared Artan and Argis well enough for travelling the celebrating was in full swing.

Mercurio had been missing for two days, which said enough about the level of intoxication in Solitude.

Elisif sent a delegation of soldiers with them as a safeguard, especially since Artan was more or less a potato with his muscles being mostly mush from the magika-depletion and the fact he hadn't really begun regenerating it with all the healing his body was doing. Argis wasn't much better, since he still had a cold arm, even after the healing. The fractal scarring across his left side was spotty with how it felt, some parts being completely numb and other parts being wildly sensitive. Sybille said it would probably never get better, but to thank the divines that it wasn't worse and he still had good use of his hand.

The cat almost broke the sky with the level of whinging he managed to force out on the way, but as they got closer and closer, the whinging turned almost annoying. Argis didn't know how his patience got so strong, but he guessed it was because they were heading home. Home to the girls, and Lydia was probably there too with Iona. The vampire had left at the first chance she got, leaving Serana behind with them. Watching the Legionnaires balk at and then eventually sing drinking songs with a vampire was borderline hysterical. Artan blamed it on the weird bush-weed that Sybille had given them to ease the aches and pains.

But still.

It took a week in the wagon to get to the house, tucked up on some ridge and surrounded by snow and such.

Most of the group shat themselves when a dark-robed figure stepped seemingly from the bough of a tree. Artan nearly broke his damned neck when he threw himself out of the wagon, only the quick-footed strangers lunge to save him keeping him from faceplanting into the snow. Lefty pulled Artan up and pushed him back into the crook of Argis' arm where he had been huddled against 'to protect from the snow.'

The argonian gave a quick, sharp nod to the rest of them before pulling out a crystal from his pocket, much like the one in Proudspire. But before he could use it, two little demons appeared from the house, neither wearing their cloaks and a laughing Erandur at the door behind them. It took half a
minute for Lucia and Sofie to get into the wagon - Lucia vaulted the drivers bench and leaped and Sofie climbed in over the side like a spider- and just like that everything got even louder.

Between Lucia screaming bloody murder at Artan for daring to try to give himself up to Sofie crying that he was home and then the two noticing Jakk and Scouts, well.

It was a very, very loud reunion.

Chapter End Notes

AN UPDATEEEEE!!!!!

Nearly there kids!

I literally died when I read the comments this time. literally any time i see a new comment i scream at my phone. kind of an awkward turtle on the bus ill have you know.
I didn't expect someone to guess my fairytail ending where it all ends up okay! :')
(eespecially since i've been killing and maiming literally everyone)
The last few chapters have been pretty hard since I've been doing my best to be serious about them, and honestly writing serious stuff is great and all but I've literally got 500 plans for silly things in this fic its unreal. There's an epilogue to go after this, and then possibly a sequel. I mean, Miraak is still out there, right? :)

Thank You so much for reading and sticking with it this far! I wouldn't have gotten nearly so far with this tiny ass pipedream without people reading and being so sweet about it all!
I hope you carry on enjoying my work!
•Frog•
Epilogue: Beloved

Chapter Summary

I am my beloveds, as my beloved is mine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

4E 204 Suns Height

Riften was abuzz with life, what with the recent Merchants festival ending. Seeing the Thieves guild take a moment of relaxation and stop stealing was novel and convenient in the eye of the public. It was more of a wedding gift to those in the know.

Argis sighed and pulled his collar again, trying to settle it around his neck. He never, ever enjoyed wearing finery. It felt wrong, and obstructive and it rubbed at his scars the wrong way, but thankfully those Radiant Raiment sisters had done a wonder in tailoring something to accommodate him. It was just his nerves fraying on him, this time. Sofie and Lucia were already at the temple, probably already badgering Maramal about the flowers and the right incense to burn during the ceremony.

“Never thought I'd see today coming, if I'm honest,” Artan broke his reverie, stepping easily under Argis' raised arms and against his chest. “I mean, fuck. We're really getting old.”

“That's coming from an agent of Mara who's set more people up than a Jarl's eaten hot dinners,” Argis huffed, pressing a hand against Artan's neck and tugging at the high-necked collar with his other hand.

“Still though, putting together all the food and booze for the reception, and then there's the invitations and ughhh...” Artan rolled his eyes so far his head rolled back, allowing Argis to give him a quick peck. “Thank whatever Daedra going Sofie knows flowers otherwise that'd cost the house.”

“And then there's all the money that actually got sunk into it,” Argis nodded, trying to keep a straight face. It failed miserably.

Artan's eyes narrowed and he jabbed an elbow into the Nords ribs, grinding the cap between the
bones and causing Argis to yelp and jump away. “I'm serious here! Jakk's thief friends said they wouldn't work during the wedding or reception but after that...!? Bam! And then there's Melka! I mean she's great but I never expected her to RSVP to the invite! How the hell can-”

“You're just moody that they managed to bust into your creepy pit of doom under the house,” Argis pointed out before grabbing the cat around the waist and hefting him up. It took a little maneuvering, but he managed to start walking them towards Honeyside's front door. “I never thought you would be the one to grumble over a little fun.”

Artan mock gasped down at Argis, ducking down across the Nord's shoulders to get under the door. “Are you accusing me of becoming.... a fuddy duddy?!”

Argis snorted hard enough to nearly drop the Khajiit on his head, “More like a fuddy daddy.”

Artan scoffed, “that was awful.”

The Nord rolled his shoulders and set Artan back on his feet, making sure the cat was looking him in the eye when he replied. “I'm hilarious.”

Artan shrugged and tugged at Argis' arm, leading the way through the market and towards the temple. The day was pretty, and thankfully the girls had agreed that their month-long prank war was on pause for the next few hours. Artan started off being proud at their ingenuity, but it quickly wore off after Sofie managed to set up a trap that turned his fur bright green for a week. She had never explained how she managed it, and honestly Artan didn't want to know. Between that and the millions of bugs Lucia had set up to fall from the living room ceiling when someone set off a tripwire, he was glad of the respite. Erandur was surprisingly chill about the whole escapade even after he grew twelve feet of hair off his chin.

“Argis sweetheart you are many things, but funny isn't one of them.”

The nord gave him a pointed look before grabbing Artan's hand to stop him. He seemed to straighten, and then; “why did the blind man fall down the well?”

Artan blinked at him. “I don't know. Why?”

“He couldn't see that well.”
The cat laughed hard, caught himself halfway and managed to just let out a few sniggers past his fist instead. “That was awful.”

Argis laughed back, rubbing at the back of his neck with a hand. “You laughed, which means it can’t have been.” Artan stepped up towards the temple, the silvery embroidery on his long tunic sparkling in the sunshine. He had never worn such nice clothing than he had in the last few months. He had somehow managed to get a lifetime discount from the Raidient Raiment sisters, and after that? Bam. He had explained once that the kind of clothes he preferred cost a fortune, mostly because they had to be tailored to fit him and required a new pattern for the seamstress. It was probably because of all the bells and whistles he wanted, in all honesty. It looked like a long dress, however with the huge slits up the side of either thigh, it would have been a pretty scandalous one at that. As it was, Artan wore lightweight baggy pants underneath, usually ones that matched the tunic or a few shades darker. It was sleeveless and high collared, covered in tasteful embroidery on the fancy ones and just plain and simple on the day-to-day ones. And all of them were ridiculously more sinful than the noble attire he wore for the New Life festival, seemingly a lifetime ago now.

“It's good we're going to the temple, since I need to purify myself after that joke,” Artan snarked back, turning to Argis slightly when he reached the top step. “Are you ready?”

Argis gave him the look, “Are you?”

“I'm shitting my pants,” Artan deadpanned.

“Well, think of it this way, you won't have to pay the Public Indecency Tax for Honeside anymore,” Argis shrugged, pressing a hand to the small of Artan's back. The cat sighed and pressed close, grumbling quietly into Argis' throat.

“I still can't believe they made me Thane again.”

“I still can't believe you managed to convince Mjoll to run for Jarl. I mean, the amount of shit she'll start for Jakk will be intense,” Argis rubbed at his Artan's back with a hand. “He's gonna have a field day with that.”

“It's called retribution Argis.”

The Nord looked down at Artan, but the cat shook his head, “I found out they banged in the pit of
doom under the house when he broke in and he needed to pay the price.”

“I get where Lucia and Sofie get it from now, it's all clear to me,” Argis chuckled, pressing his hand into Artan's back and steering him towards the temple doors. “Now are you ready for a wedding?”

“I think I'm gonna throw up,” Artan replied.

Argis nodded, “Good, you already know the drill.” He pushed open the doors, and to be honest, he wasn't sure at what he was seeing. He knew Scouts was good at whipping up some good decorations since he had done both birthday parties for the girls. Between the food and the decorations he came up with they were perfect days. And he didn't disappoint now, either. Near enough every surface was covered in lilies and various wildflowers, vases, incense and some things Argis didn't know the name for. Scouts himself was at the altar, talking to Maramal.

He looked amazing. He wore a silky kind of short trousers that billowed out around his legs, fastened under his knees with wide flat cuffs, and over those what looked like a huge swath of thick fabric that stayed open at the front, held up by a fat rope adorned with big shining beads. He was shirtless except for a sheer white robe that went under his strange belted cloth that lined just underneath it. It's left wide open, baring his chest and the shining scales of his throat and breast, arms covered by long sleeves embellished with bright flakes that make Argis' eye hurt. He has a thick torq around his neck, bright silver against his throat and almost as bright as the silver threads weaved into his feathery hair.

Argis pats Artan's shoulder, letting him move towards Scouts and the priest, and went to take his seat with Lucia and Sofie. Lydia was sat between the two girls, one hand around each of their arms and listlessly keeping the girls from hitting each other. “We're in a temple, can't you two keep your braids in for more than a minute?” Argis sighed at them before sitting beside Sofie.

The two of them were set up in matching dresses, although Lucia's was a pale grass green and Sofie's was a pale blue. Making them both sit down and get their hair done was nearly impossible, even with the truce going on, and Argis was just hoping they stayed presentable until after the ceremony. After they could set the dresses alight and rub mud all over their faces for all he cared -they could always have a bath later- but the idea of causing any sort of mess in the Temple made his teeth itch.

He was thankful that Maramal and Dinya liked them so much, or they'd have to watch through the window.

Lydia was strapped up in a beautiful tunic and matching braccae, all some kind of style that the Sister's said was all the rage in Cyrodil. Lydia was as enthused as expected about the backstory of a fancy suit, but was more than happy with how comfy the thing was. Dark, dark blue and
embellished with almost-white blue thread, she looked regal. Argis had been in too much of a rush trying to get the jobs Artan delegated to him to really look at her, but now he could really appreciate the work the sisters had done on all their outfits. Artan's crazed-commander act of conscripting poor souls to the wedding chores wouldn't end until he got into the wine at the reception, Argis supposed.

“She ate my sweetroll Argis I demand destitution!” Lucia snarled from Lydia's other side, attempting to get under the woman's arm. It just meant that Lydia could get her in a headlock and allow Sofie to get a kick in on her head.

“You mean restitution,” Lydia supplied helpfully, at which Argis shook his head.

“Demolish her, but after the ceremony,” he nodded gravely.

Sofie whirled on him, “traitor!”

Argis shrugged, and when she lunged to tickle him - blast that cat for telling them he was ticklish - he swept her around to sit on his other side and scooted into the seat next to Lydia. “You betrayed your oath to keep cute and throw flowers on the floor, don't tell me I'm the traitor.”

Sofie huffed and settled down, especially after Artan swept past them and flicked her in the forehead. She squeaked, but sat back down after a huff. Talia was quick to slump behind them and ruffle her hair, “tough luck princess, his forehead flicks hurt like fu-”

“Kids, Tali,” Lydia threw over her shoulder.

Eirian pushed Talia up another seat so she could fit in the isle and heckle them both. “Is nobody going to compliment Tali's hair? I spent four hours doing that-”

“If you mean paying off a group of children to do it then yes you did a great job elf,” Talia shot back deadpan, which made Eirian push her in the shoulder. Talia didn't even look like Talia after she had grudgingly let Artan and Eirian at her. Her hair had been brushed out into a cloud again, held back by clips and flowers, and she wore a similar suit to Artan, but a vibrant red instead. She had opted to leave the 'pinchy asshole shoes' at home, but other than that had drawn dark khol around her eyes to replace the warpaint.

Eirian had decided a wedding meant a almost-terrifyingly expensive dress that made even Artan's eye twitch, made of silky stuff that Eirian had called 'taffeta' and 'chiffon' and honestly went so far
over Argis' head that he just nodded and smiled through the tirade of textile and seamstress words that left her mouth. It looked beautiful, and well worth the money for the craftsmanship. It did mean he would probably have a heart attack every time she had a glass of wine in her hand, though.

“Oi!”

The lot of them turned to watch Artan flick Eirian and Talia in the head before stepping forward to take a seat beside Sofie. “They're gonna start in a minute, and I haven't spent the last half hour corralling the riff raff for you lot to start.”

“You're talking to the Harbinger, whelp,” Vilkas pointed out, a few rows behind them.

“I didn't agree to join back up so that-” Artan started back snottily, but a smirk and an eyebrow from Eirian shut that down quickly.

The cat turned back around, hands up in surrender, just in time for Dinya to start up the musicians.

Argis knew that these ones had travelled all the way from Solitude for the occasion -another string Artan had pulled to make the day amazing- and they were worth the trouble. They shut up the nattering crowd easily, even the crackling Melka, and the ceremony began as everyone in the pews stood up. The soft, almost ethereal music floated throughout the temple, setting the stage rather perfectly for Jakk to enter. He looked even more wonderful than usual, and Argis was surprised he even had a higher bar than the usual.

Jakk was dressed in a beautiful white tunic with a high collar and long sleeves, cut high on his thighs at the front and draping out to his ankles at the back; all embroidered heavily with a silver threat and pearlescent beading. He had a thin, almost misty fabric underneath his tunic as well as sluicing out from his shoulders, meeting neatly at his wrists with bright silver bracelets that matched his anklets. Jakk wore the same billowing trousers as Artan, although Jakk's were so shimmery that they almost glowed in the strong daylight streaming in behind him, making the Khajiit look divine.

The hushed awe that gripped the room was a testament to that.

He took a sure step forwards towards the altar, Za'nir like a shadow at his back before the older Khajiit slipped around the edges to take his seat beside Lucia. Jakk had said before he didn't need a bodyguard, but Za'nir had insisted that it was to be safe. Argis thought that since Za'nir probably saw the brothers as his adopted kids, he wanted to be close for this part. He blinked away the thoughts and looked back to the altar just in time to see Jakk reach it; and the silently crying Scouts.
Scouts is smiling, hard and wet, and the two share an almost imperceptible nod they share when Jakk's fingers ghost along his.

The music lulls until the room is silent, Maramal taking the podium before them with a huge smile across his face. “You may be seated.”

The gentle rustling of the guests sitting down filled the room, and Maramal waited quietly to begin. “We are gathered here today to witness the confirmation of a bond, a bond strong enough that even our Lady Mara is touched by its light. Mara asks only that we live soberly and peacefully. That we honour our parents, and preserve the peace and security of home and family. And I know in my heart that I see that encapsulated fully by those before me.”

Maramal turns slightly, gently waving a hand to Scouts, “Would you like to begin your vows, young man?”

Scouts nodded, and turned to Jakk with a jerky twist. “I... I promise,” Scouts gulped hard. Jakk pressed a hand to his, the pads of his hands soundless on the scales on Scouts knuckles. It gave the Argonian a second wind, since he nodded harder and his voice rang out clear. “I believe in you, and the people we will become together. I promise to always love and cherish you, no matter the rains we face or the sunshine on our heads. I will be your lover, your husband, your accomplice in mischief and your biggest fan. I will work every day to become the man you deserve and more,” Scouts breathes, smiling even harder and tears falling faster.

Argis can hear Lydia sniffling and the girls are squeaking, and he is sure he can hear Artan nearly hyperventilating where he's trying not to cry, but its Jakk's tears that are the loudest and the snottiest when Scouts draws his vows to a close, “And pledge my love, faith and honour as I join my life to yours.”

“I don't think I can beat a vow like that,” Jakk snorts, rubbing at his eyes with a hand.

“I never believed in love or soulmates or anything like that, you know,” Jakk starts, smiling hard enough his face probably hurts. “Never did. Never had a reason to. And then you showed up, and everything changed. You make me feel like I'm invincible, that whatever happens or whatever comes our way that we can handle it together. You make me want to be a better person, the best person, so that I can walk by your side and see you happy. I can't promise it will always be sober,” he chuckles, Scouts mirroring him, “but I will always be there for you, whether you need me or not. I will protect you and I will love you with everything I am. I'll give you hugs when you're sad, and I'll wave your coat of arms on a huge flag when you win, but I don't think I can ever explain how happy I am that we're going to face the rest of the shitstorm together.”
Argis can hear Artan flinch at the swearword, but Maramal doesn't stop Jakk, who's wiping his face again. “You know me better than practically anyone in this world but you still manage to love me. I thought that the first time I told you I loved you and you said it back was the best day of my life, but I get the feeling you're going to make a living out of proving me wrong. And i'm so glad it's going to be happening for the rest of our lives,” Jakk smiles.

It took a moment, and Maramal nudged them out of their little bubble. “Would you like to exchange the rings?”

Neetrenaza and Brynjolf stand from opposite pews and the two hand the rings to their respective friends, and return to their seats. Artan doesn't miss the glistening in Brynjolf's eyes, and he doesn't miss the bounce in Neetrenaza's steps.

Scouts fumbles for a moment, before taking one of Jakks hands and slipping the ring on. Maramal smiles again, and motions for the Argonian's attention, “That's the wrong hand, son.”

Scouts coughs out a laugh and Jakk is holding back what had to be a belly laugh, and they quickly swap the ring over onto the right hand. It's beautiful, even more so than Artan remembers, two flawless amethysts and an opal centrepiece all set into striking silver coils. Trust the soppy bastard to get a ring to match his brother's eyes. Jakk slides his own ring onto Scout's correct hand, murmuring something that makes the other man snort, and that settles that. The ring is warm gold against Scout's skin, a beautiful flecked gem at its centre that almost looked like summer sky. Artan didn't want to know how Jakk had paid for it, since it looked like something that would cost a house at least. If it meant what he thought it did, then it was well worth the price.

Scouts looks choked, fully ready to start outright crying, head shaking and eyes wet. “You always remember, don't you?”

Jakk shrugs, and Maramal asks, “Does anyone in attendance have a valid reason that this beautiful couple cannot be married?”

The incredulous silence satisfies Maramal immensely, and he pointedly doesn't mention the various faces shooting murder-eyes at each other, daring someone to object. Lucia sits up a little straighter in her seat and levels everyone with a hard stare, enough that it has Jakk sniggering at the altar.

“Marvellous. Now, I pronounce you--”
The door almost comes off its hinges and the priest stops, everyone in attendance turning to stare at the Bosmer in the entranceway. He’s breathing hard and he looks half-singed, hair a complete mess and it isn’t until he pulls the arrow out of a strip of his ruined shirt that Artan notices it's even there.

“Jakk you can't do this-”

“It's been ten fucking years Thronn how the fuck-” Jakk starts, but Thronn continues, smashing through whatever he was going to say.

“You can’t do this-”

“Sort it please,” Artan cuts through him, waving a hand.

Thronn looks ready to start a fight but Lefty and Saphire collar him before he can start. There's a sharp scream as Saphire drags him out the door and Lefty salutes as he closes it behind them, leaving the congregated in a moment of bewildered chuckling and well-natured heckling.

“You're married!” Maramal throws his hands up, and he hasn't finished his sentence before Jakk is between Scout's open arms and kissing his husband. The crowd leaps up, and cheers rattle the candle-sconces, and someone has thrown their flower-petals early and almost smothered the both of them with the sudden cloud.

“Food time!” Jakk yells after he's spit out a rampant few petals, and the resounding whoops are deafening as the crush towards the doors begin. Artan looks to Sofie and Lucia, and the two have their bags ready and look bloody ravenous. Artan shoos them ahead, gives Argis a quick peck and turns to Jakk and Scouts, who could have been mistaken for drunkards at this point. Scouts is beaming, almost glowing, and Jakk is vibrating with his joy.

“Glad for the both of you,” Artan smiles, dragging both into a hug. “Are you ready to get pelted with shit?”

“Fuck yeah,” Scouts nods hard, and it makes the brothers laugh hard.

Artan skips out the door, not even slightly surprised that the guests have already lined up and have their bags ready. He's quick to run to his troublemakers and have Jordis shove a huge bag into his hands, and by the time he's turned around Scouts and Jakk are at the door.
Jakk shrieks when first wave hits, and as the two stumble-run their way to the temple gates, Jakk actually falling at one point, which just makes Scouts pick him up. The Argonian had the gall to try to run away, and the mere image of Melka and the thieves chasing their asses down the main street to pelt more flowers at them would be burnt into everyone's eyelids forever.

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Jakk is leaning on him hard enough to shatter a bone, but Artan's too tipsy to mind. He's stuffed with whatever the hell the mystery meat was that Dinya had cooked up for the reception, and honestly he was the happiest he had ever been. “Have you guys figured out where you're going to live, now?”

Jakk purrs low and drinks a little sip of his wine, “Goldenglow Estate.”

Artan flicks his ears at his brother, “What? Doesn't that weird recluse live there?”

“Not anymore. What with Maven gone, it's free real estate,” Jakk shrugs, giving Artan a smirk.

“You stole a house,” the khajiit laughs, rubbing at his face and probably rubbing cake into his fur.

Jakk rolls his eyes and flicks his free hand, “Master Thief?”

“Little shit more like,” Artan nudges him with a shoulder, downing the last of his wine. Jakk nudges him back, and the two stand together. “I'm happy for you, S'eta.” Jakk looks up at him, grinning hard enough to split his face.

“I'm happy for you too, butt-baby,” Jakk smacks a hand against Artan's cheek a few times, hiccups and wanders back inside, leaving Artan alone outside The Bee. Keerava was ecstatic about being booked to host the wedding reception, although it was after Scouts made Jakk sit down and profusely apologise to her after some past slight. Whatever the maniac had done, Artan didn't want to know. He had his hands full with Lucia and Sofie since the truce was over officially now. The thieves had taken one look at Bard and Lefty and left the larceny out for the night, and thankfully Jordis was quick to get them started on drinking games to keep them out of the game. Lydia had been entertaining herself by getting into arm wrestling competitions, and the last he saw her she was against Talia. Melka had fit in well strangely enough, and had been bonding over pretty hats with Eirian and Iona, of all people. He figured Argis thought he didn't see the pinched stares he was sending the hag, but he did. Thankfully he was mostly talking with Scouts, who had been in a dazed euphoria for most of the night. How he had managed his and Jakk's first dance without landing on
his face was one for the record books.

Brynjolf huffed a greeting when he walked past, smacking Artan on the shoulder before slipping back inside. When he had left, Artan didn-

Jordis swept by, fiddling with her hair. She took one look at Artan and set her shoulders, staring him down and daring him to say something the entire time she walked back into the pub. He held the sniggers until she disappeared and therefore out of smacking range.

He was damned lucky.

He was thinking about it until the moment Argis wandered outside, paper streamers covering his entire head and shoulders. Argis brushed a few bits off before he caught Artan's quirked brow and answered the million dollar question, “Someone gave the girls some kind of modified crossbow that shot paper string, so apparently that makes me a target.”

“Well shits,” Artan grins, plucking at the streamers with his claws. It doesn't help much, but Argis appreciates the gesture. “Would...” Artan begins, and the way Argis looks at him, intent and curious almost chokes the cat entirely. “Would you like to get away from here for a little while?”

Argis smirks, brows coming down hard above his eyes. “Why Artan, you wouldn't be suggesting sneaking off for a little adult nap-time?”

“You're never gonna let me live that down, are you?” Artan asks, deadpan, and Argis laughs, hard and bright.

“Aggressive cuddling?” Argis asks, and Artan groans.

Argis steps into Artan's space, gently nuzzling Artan's cheek with his nose, “Assault with a friendly weapon?”

Artan's giggling now, pressing his face down hard into Argis' throat, and no matter how hard he tried he couldn't muffle the snorting laughter coming out. “Fucker.”

Whatever Argis is going to say is drowned out by an almost deafening crash from behind them, and
the two dart around the Bee's wall just in time to see Lucia take off running and Iona going after her. Jordis is fast behind, and Sofie is laughing hard enough from where she landed in one of the marketplace stalls that Jordis' just has to pick her up to catch her. Eirian's half-prone, holding onto the marketplace fence with all her might while Jakk's weighting down her legs. She's kicking and laugh-crying and trying to shake Jakk but laughing too hard to really manage it. Jakk is face down and trying to crawl away over Eirian, but Lydia is stalking his ass down even with her crutch. Artan pulls Argis back around the corner just as Jakk's hysterical laughing hits another octave as Lydia must have reached him. A loud smack rings out and Jakk laughs harder.

“Go, just go,” Argis says, shaking his head. Artan takes off running, and Argis isn't far behind.

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Honeside is blissfully quiet in the night. The house is usually always busy; bustling with life the moment the entire gaggle of people following Artan around the province. Jordis usually comes when called from Solitude, and Iona obviously lived in Riften. Lydia was more of a constant presence in the various houses, only really returning to Whiterun to handle bills and rest her leg for a few weeks of the month. Artan was debating on just giving her the house for good, Talos knew he didn't need six odd houses. The girls enjoyed adventure, and were always happy to hit the road. Between having more things to shoot at for Lucia and the ability to train Sofie's conjuration away from spooked citizens, it was perfect for them. And Argis, well.

Argis looked soft amongst the lighting candles, large hands sure to cup the stems and quick to pull his hands away after they'd been lit. The fireplace was left alone, but Artan lit the few sconces they had with a flick of magic, making Argis sigh and shake his head. He was going to say something, Artan knows, but his words catch when their eyes meet across the room.

Artan doesn't know how he managed to get this.

He doesn't really understand how Argis puts up with all the weird shitstorms that hit them. After a long conversation about communication and honesty, they are better than they were. The secrecy around the slavers and Larethius' intentions hit them hard, and Artan thinks he understands. 'Better together than apart,' right?

Artan steps towards him, sure-footed but slow, stopping maybe a few inches back, enough that he can feel the man's breath fan his face. “You looked very handsome today,” Artan murmurs, unwilling to break whatever mood this was between them. Argis huffs, quiet, but still, “And you are as beautiful as ever.”

"Flattery will get you everywhere, Nord," Artan smiles, basking in the chuckle it earns him.
“Good to know, puss-puss,” he whispers back, touching a hand just over Artan's heart.

Artan sighed and pressed closer, until there was no more space between them, until he could feel their hearts thundering against each other. Sometimes he forgot just how big Argis was, how much taller, broader, thicker he was. His hands were huge, and still scarred and in some places the skin was hard as rock, but they were as gentle as ever when he touched a finger to Artan's collar.

Argis pressed his mouth against Artan's cheek, trying desperately to push some of his anxiety down. He'd been waiting what seemed like forever for another step forwards, another step closer together. The more he had thought about it though the easier the wait was. You couldn't have anything meaningful on the run, and the idea that Artan had spent most of his life with shallow stumbles into a broom closet with whoever took his fancy rubbed him the wrong way. He wouldn't judge someone for that, but it wasn't something someone could do forever. Just surviving, finding fleeting comfort where you could. Artan deserved the world. Argis hadn't thought much about even having a fleeting fuck. He'd given up on the whole idea of settling after the failed Forsworn camp and after Lisbet left. Didn't seem like it would ever happen with how most of the city thought of him as a half-blind, washed up old soldier that probably left his squad to die.

So he had planned to live out his duty, whatever the Jarl gave him, and that was that.

And then Artan had shown up and-

Argis had forgotten how good it could be. How good it felt to be connected to someone else like that. He couldn't imagine waking up without Artan's armpit in his face now. Argis shook his head. "We can always just go to sleep if you want," the Nord said, "there's no rush."

“It's alright,” Artan sighs softly, nuzzling against Argis’ jaw, “I trust you.”

Argis's heart nearly punches a hole through his chest at that.

Artan pressed forwards even more, until his hardening erection pressed into Argis thigh and the two shared the startled breath that spread between them. Argis canted his hips against Artan, until their cocks pressed against each other like brands, dropping his face even more into the crook of Artan's neck. The Khajiit purred when Argis' hands slid under and up his tunic, feeling his large hands splay against the soft fur of his stomach, fingers dipping between the hard slats of muscle. Artan's claws were like lightning across his back where he had shoved both hands into the neck of Argis' shirt, probably tearing it but damned if Argis cared. Artan's fangs were at his throat and the thrill of fear, of danger, shot straight to his groin.

The desire burned all the way through him when Artan's claws glance against his skin. It was Artan's growls in his ear, asking him to take his shirt off, asking him for more, drowning everything else until all he knew was the rub of fur against his thighs where Artan wiggled even closer. It was Artan's white-hot burning cock against his, trapped between their bodies, wetting his stomach when he touched just right against the Khajiit's tailbase and bit at the special little contour below his jaw. The way Artan melted into his touch, he was dimly surprised he hadn't set alight yet. Artan, lockbox Artan, was trusting him with this. Trusting him with a part of himself.

It just spurred Argis on.
He was slow to step back, and Artan was quick to respond, pushing and maneuvering them towards the bed with almost preternatural ease in the semi-dark. His hands were out again, fingers deft and sure-going as they undo and tug at Argis' clothes, and Argis is equally swift in getting Artan out of his tunic and trousers. Artan bites down hard on Argis' bare throat when he gets to the Nord's pants, clawed hands curling around the meat of his arse under his trousers, and Argis groans loud enough to wake the dead. Artan purrs when he begins to lick at the marks he made, and Argis feels his toes coil against the cold floors at the attention. It's easy then, to press a hand against the underside of Artan's dick, to feel the shudder ripple between them.

He wanted with every kiss, every touch and every bite and every whispered, “Oh Fuck.” He wanted and as Artan allowed him to touch his entrance with the oil the Khajiit had pulled from Talos-knew where, allowed him to press his fingers in, trusted him to-

Talos Almighty.

Argis pressed harder, until his knuckles met Artan's tough little ring. The khajiit's face twitched from pleasure to confusion quickly. "Argis...!"

"Do you want to stop?" Argis leaned back a little, feeling the khajiit's arms tighten around his neck, hard.

"I.... Nope. Just a little weird!" Artan wiggled, seemingly uncomfortable. “Do something?” He asked, strained, and Argis crooked his fingers.

Artan arched like a bow, taught and tight against Argis as if death itself was knocking at the door. The moan he unleashed, rocking between them like a gale, bled into the heat in Argis' stomach like booze on a wildfire. He didn't notice when he had pressed his teeth into Artan's bare throat or had tightened his grip to grind Artan down against him harder, grinding the khajiit's dick into his hip as he went. Artan bucked, and somehow ended up with Argis' dick slipping underneath, pressing hard against his balls and Argis' knuckles, making the Khajiit twitch hard at the sensation. Argis was slow about pulling his fingers out, and just as slow when he pushed an extra finger in. Artan groaned hard, and Argis' teeth clamped down harder. Just wanting more. More sounds, more of the sight of seeing Artan undone, just more more more-

"Fuck!!?!?" Artan grinded down hard, oblivious to or simply too overwhelmed to notice the twitch of Argis' dick against his balls, intent on pressing his hips down until Argis' fingers were entirely inside. Artan rolled his hips, forcing a moan up from Argis when the breathy, almost lost sigh escaped from Artan. It was easy then, to move his fingers, to press into the spot that made the Khajiit's back go like a reed in the wind, to feel the sudden and hard clamp of his muscles around his fingers.

"Tell me what you want, and I will give it to you gladly, love,” Argis grinds out, shocked at how gravely he sounded to himself.

Artan twitched all over at endearment, ass twitching down until he nearly crushes Argis' fingers, and his arms clutched tighter and tighter around Argis shoulders. His dick twitched like some daedra had taken over between them, Argis using the Khajiit's sudden weakness to reel him in tighter against his chest.

"Argis, I want you to fuck me right this-"

Argis flipped them in an instant, pressing a hot tongue against Artan's in a flash, swallowing the the wet, broken noise he made when Argis flicks his fingers inside him. It makes something crack inside Argis, the want nearly destroying whatever control he had. Artan was beatiful. He was beatiful and
"Tell me if I'm hurting you? This..." Argis shook his head, trying to clear it, but Artan was having none of it. He grabbed his hair and pressed his claws into the dip behind his ear, growling low, "Argis, you're being a sweetheart but I'm gonna die unless you give me something here," he rolled his hips up in a sinful grind, one that made Argis' brain short-out for a minute, and fuck that was it.

Argis came down hard, sliding his fingers free and pushing the hilt of his dick against that tight ring of muscle in a single movement. It was slow going, even with the preparation. But Argis felt like he could do this forever. Milking Artan's dick with his free hand, peppering the Khajiit's face with soft kisses, advancing inch by glorious inch. Every time Artan sighed and gasped and his muscles let up a little more felt like victory. Only stopping when he got too tight, and only starting when Artan allowed, until he was buried. And then he pressed his face into the crook of Artan's neck and breathed. He took in that goddawful scent of burnt roast that the caterer had fucked up earlier and the scent of flowers from picking dragonstongues with the girls and-

Just Artan, underneath everything.

Nothing could have stopped him kissing at Artan's mouth, at his throat, at his ears, pawing at his ass, his legs, pressing hands to his chest to feel his heart, Talos save him. He didn't move his hips, he waited. He waited he didn't know how long, he was so lost, caught up in Artan's thundering pulse around his dick and Artan's gentle hums. Artan was pressing his fangs into his throat again, his claws were across Argis' back again and his thrice-damned heels were pressing into the meat of Argis' arse like a fucking horse-

Artan nodded the go-ahead, and Argis when slammed forwards into Artan it caused a sharp moan to filter out. The Nord looked to Artan, who whined back, eyes glazed and brow set. "Don't stop now," Artan groaned, grabbing at Argis' hair and doing a sinful twisting grind with his hips that-

Argis started up a brutal pace, hands catching in the hooks of Artan's knees and folding him up, aiming and hitting that bow-spot every time, drinking in all the praise and all the cries until the words all ran out. Artan stopped even making real words, instead mashing together Aldmeris and Yoku and a bunch of other shit that bleeds out into growls and-

His claws trace into Argis' hair to get some leverage, to pull him down further, to let him bite and tongue at the join of Argis' neck and shoulder, tugging closer and closer and only slipping to Common to ask for more and-

He could feel every pull of Artan's insides, the wet smearing his stomach and catching in Artan's fur, the stick of his sweat between them. Argis pushes Artan's leg onto his shoulder and catches his cock, just the touch had the Khajiit bowing hard enough to make a space between himself and the bed. All it does is press him harder into Argis -there's nowhere to go with how close they are- and he screams. Both arms are suddenly coiling around Argis until he was literally caught in the web of them, dick digging into Artan's prostate like a promise.

The feel of Artan coming undid him. The tremendous pull of Artan going over the edge, holding onto Argis as if he was the one and only thing keeping him tethered is what done it. Argis gets hit by the wave when he follows, the pleasure whiting out everything else for a long, wonderful moment. He can feel the Thu'um washing over that, filling in the cracks in his head where he can't think about anything else but pleasure, and he's too far gone to feel scared. He can smell the lightning mixed in with Artan, and-

Artan's arms are warm and strong when he comes back to himself, fingers soft in his hair. Artan's heartbeat is slowing down against Argis' cheek, and the low, almost inaudible purring is so soothing
he feels as if he could fall asleep.

Argis sits up reluctantly, looking down into the eyes of the man he loves. Artan looks like he's been dragged through a hedge backwards, and by Talos as his witness Argis felt that love grow even more. “Twenty gold says someone comes to check out what the Dragonborn is shouting at.”

Artan laughs, “they're gonna get a fucking suprise and a half, aren't they?”

xxx

The thu’um shuddering out across the city almost has guards scampering for cover, but Lydia is on point. She yells up above the chatter across the marketplace, stopping momentarily from carrying Jakk back to the Bee. “Iona stop them before they get to the house! It's a false alarm!”

“Aye,” Iona nods, throwing a squirming Lucia to Scouts, who’s trying his best not to laugh. Eirian was being carried, somehow, by Farkas back into the bar already. Somehow since she was laughing and twisting like a snake in his grip, and Lydia honestly would buy the man a drink for just being able to hold on.

“What in the Nine was that?” Jordis asks her when she gets close enough, Sofie perking up from her position across Jordis’ shoulders.

Lydia grimaces, “I don't know and I don't want to know.”

Chapter End Notes

Dear fucking lord it is done. I'm so happy that you lot have stuck by this story, even with the few months of random haiatus from computer breaks and life shitstorms. From you darlings leaving comments to you cheeky lurkers, i am just so happy that you've all been reading so far and enjoying my work. I had so much fun writing this and just everything with this, and its been a blast having people along for the ride. I'm planning a few things like oneshots and a sequel, and this time I'll be writing a few buffer chapters before I release anything so at least there will be decent updates for once.

It's been long and hard getting this shit together into a cohesive story and i'm bloody ecstatic that its ended on a good note after all the shit ive flung at these poor bastards.

I've had a few glasses of wine to prepare to post this after the goddamn taxing banging scene cause Talos knows i'll be too embarrased when completely sober, so i hope you enjoy it as much as i have enjoyed writing it. this started off as a joke when i made a kitty and tbh i never expected this to get the traction it did. I'm just happy that other people enjoyed the story.

So if thats that, then thats that i suppose. If you want me i'll be drinking enough to forget
i actually posted smut on the internet :D

Thank you so much for all the kind words and the encouragement, and I hope I'll be seeing you for the next parts!!!!

I mean, there's only Miraak to go, riiiiiight? (◕ᴗ◕✿)

As always, Thank you for reading!!!!

♥Tipsy Frog♥

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