**Foe-Tongue: A Historical Fiction**

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Mature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Major Character Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>F/F, F/M, Multi, Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, Elder Scrolls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Altmer/Nord, Altmer/Human, other flings mentioned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Original Altmer Character(s), Original Nord Character(s), Original Argonian Character(s), Elenwen (Skyrim), Ondolemar, Ulfric Stormcloak, Thalmor Justiciar, Galmar Stone-Fist, Elisif the Fair, Rikke, Minor Characters, Balgruuf the Greater, Skyrim Non-Player Characters, Various Skyrim Characters, Too many cast members to list, Original Characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Thalmor, Not the Dovahkiin, Slow Burn, egregious lore, biracial nord/imperial, Torture, Character Development, heroic archetypes, high speech skill hero, level one to epic level journey, break the haughty and become the mighty, all the main characters are on the autism spectrum, pansexual and demisexual and asexual characters, Enemies to Friends to Lovers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2015-10-21 Completed: 2016-07-23 Chapters: 64/64 Words: 165397</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Foe-Tongue: A Historical Fiction**

by [BetterBeMeta](http://archiveofourown.org/users/BetterBeMeta)

**Summary**

Concerning events of 4e 201- 202 and the heroine Wyrenna, her origin as a cunning figure of her own design, her emergence as a new paradigm of Nordic warrior-heroes, her investigations into Thalmor intrigue, and her resulting impact on Skyrim's history itself.
The grave dirt still stuck under her fingernails. Wyrenna hadn’t yet washed her hands. She kept them in her gloves, the entire journey west and south back from Darkwater Crossing.

It was cold, anyway. Gloves were fine.

Besides that, the journey had even been peaceful. No bandits, soldiers, or even fellow travelers to meet her all the way to Whiterun and even then the traffic had died down to a murmur beyond the farms and into the wilderness. Even off the road wild creatures were scarce. Wyrenna supposed it was kind for the Gods to leave her alone to grieve. Still, that counter-voice suggested that company would help. It sounded like Ilyas-Tei. She missed the Argonian now more than ever.

Still, wolves didn’t make good company, so Wyrenna was glad they kept away. Siegfried expected his sword returned in perfect condition. But a good Nord didn’t leave Bruma without a good sword, or so he’d said. She pushed back the hemlock scrub in her way, feeling the short needles scrape her face. The landmark was around here, somewhere.

There it was. A trailhead, up into some hills. Wyrenna followed the directions Siegfried had given her, backward. South of Ilinalta, find the shrine of Talos. Then, there was a way through the Shriekwind highland. South through Falkreath, and then west and south into the mountains to the hidden pass across the border. The route shaved a whole six days off rounding the foothills. Impressive for a shortcut, but trappers did know the best ones. She’d be back in Cyrodiil in a week, best estimate.

Though to what she’d go home to, she didn’t really know.

Muddy footprints crawled up the path to the shrine. She was surprised to hear voices. When she had last passed this way, it had been abandoned. Yet, now a small handful of worshippers and one priest gathered around the idol: small offerings placed, heads bowed. They looked at her and she froze like a deer. When they saw that she was a Nord, their concern transformed into relief.

That was the strangest characteristic of these more-northern peoples, even compared to a town like Bruma. No matter your coloring, dark hair or light hair, prodigious height or her own mediocrity, wan skin or tanned skin, they could just tell. Just from looking at you. Farther south it wasn’t always so clear. She wondered what they would make of him, if her Chorrol-bred Da could stand next to her.

“Ah, child… have you come to pray at the feet of mighty Talos?” the priest said to her quietly, aside from the worshippers. He had a kind look to him, but haunted. His accent was thick. Wyrenna bit her tongue on her own more southern words to follow.

“I have,” she murmured, unsure how else to explain her being there. “Though… I haven’t done much of it, before.”

Her Cyrodilic speech combined with such a confession suggested an unsaid conclusion to the man. “Ah, you come north for pilgrimage? You are brave to defy the Empire in these times. Talos smiles on your virtue.”

“Thank you,” she said, glancing at the statue above her. “I need to go quickly… but thank you.”
“Take as much time as you need to bring Him along with you, on your journey.”

Wyrenna took a seat on a nearby hewn-log bench, lowered her head, and thought deeply on her life. How did one pray to a God they never had been permitted to address? Would He be angry? If He cared at all? Then again, it wasn’t as if she was a complete stranger. She took the silver-wrought amulet of Talos out of her shirt, looked at it a bit. Some of Da’s best work. A little tarnished now, but still good. The pieces people had been willing to buy were gone, leaving few mementos. But no one would purchase the totem of a forbidden god. Good old Da.

So, Talos. Sorry for not thinking much on you, outside pub songs. You being illegal, and all. But, uh, I’m no good at prayers, so here we go. If it’s not a bother, can you look in on Sovngarde a bit? If that’s something you can do? I just want to know if Mother’s all right. It looks like I missed her. Can you tell her I’m sorry? I mean, that’s ridiculous, I guess I’ll be following her when I get old. But could you tell her? And Da? Are they happy together? Or are they apart, like they were when they were alive?

As always, praying was the sort of thing that posed many more questions than it answered.

But, um, thank you for bearing with me. And watching over everything with no credit, while you’re outlawed. I guess. It’s nice of you to do that for free. I appreciate it. Don’t let those other gods get you down. Or any Daedra. You’ll be legal again someday. Maybe.

And, hoping that was good enough for Talos and a long enough pause for the priest to not judge her as some sort of tattle, Wyrenna put her memento back in her shirt and got up to be on her way. This was the exact moment that Oblivion decided to break loose.[1]

First, it was the Thalmor. Three tall, cloaked figures splashed into visibility, as quickly as a stormcloud could release a driving rain. There was fire, and the nearest woman’s skirts went up in cinders. Wyrenna froze overwhelmed by fear, but was bowled over by the woman’s husband (?), who physically grabbed the closest Altmer and threw her down the hill. Trapped under the heavy bench, Wyrenna struggled with pine needles in her mouth and brown dirt in her eyes, smacking her head as she scrambled to run.

Then the bandits came. A whole mess of them. Armed to the last member: axes, bows, hammers, broadswords, clubs. For a moment, all parties stood off. Awkward, barging into somebody else’s business like that. But it didn’t last long. The priest yelled, something magic happened, and he bolted. The Thalmor leaped forward after him. The bandits charged into the fray in response.

Run, girl! Run! There’s no other time!

She did, instincts screaming as she finally gained traction on the shifting ground. She ducked under a ball of fire. One of the Thalmor was dead, the priest lay in a crumpled lump by the altar, and she wasn’t sure what those ashes once were, but there was a suspicious femur sticking out of them. Wyrenna didn’t want to look twice. She tripped over a bandit. A second bandit.

Someone grabbed her hair from behind. It was a large Nord, wearing mismatched leathers in varying sizes too small for him. His beard was aflame, but he didn’t seem to mind. He held a wickedly sharp hatchet. She felt her head yanked back. He reached out with his weapon-arm in front of her. He’d slit her throat, she instantly understood.

Wyrenna’s frantic gaze met an enduring stare: the stone visage of Talos.

She ducked down in the direction the man was dragging her, tucking close to his body. He lost his grip. Then, yelling, she elbowed him in the kidney and he crumpled forward over her. He bowed
down right into where she finally was able to draw her sword.

There was blood everywhere. On her, on him, on the ground, on the idol, everywhere. As she was in the midst of processing where it had come from, the penultimate bandit burst into flame. The last one took one look at her, and the Thalmor, and ran. He didn’t get far before a fireball engulfed him and sent him shooting thirty feet into the air by force. Some of the cliffside collapsed. The dead bandit hit the ground with an irreverent smack.

“Not a step, heretic.”

The voice was cold as Morning Star and impeccably Alinoran. Still dazed by what had happened, Wyrenna turned around slowly. Only one of the Thalmor remained. His gloved hands were still smoking, obviously the most ferocious wizard among them. Across a field of corpses, they were now alone.

“There is no escape for you. Surrender or die,” he said. Die at once, or die later, she heard. But in her heart, any later was better than to see Sovngarde now. Wyrenna raised her hands and dropped the sword.

Sorry, Siegfried.

As her wrists were bound together there was only the dead to stare at. The dirt under her fingernails, in her gloves, itched.

Chapter End Notes

1) Though only figuratively on this occasion in history.
“It really wasn’t what it looked like,” Wyrenna said, marching behind the stride of the Thalmor enforcer. The roads weren’t so clear anymore, but those passing along looked at her with nothing but pity and solemn oaths. Her captor ignored them.

He ignored her now, too.

“I’m on my way back to Cyrodiil,” she said hopefully. “Someone gave me the shrine as a landmark.”

The slog continued on, over dry needles and scrub litter.

“The amulet isn’t even mine, it’s my Da’s. It’s not even blessed by any priest or at any temple. It doesn’t do anything. I don’t even think it’s made out of the right materials for holy tokens or some rot like that anyway…”

“Be silent, or you will be silenced,” the Thalmor commanded.

“I’ve only ever prayed to Talos the once, right there so they’d leave me alone,” she said desperately. “It wasn’t even a very good prayer. And it ended up with becoming your prisoner, so I doubt any Gods were even listening…!”

Wyrenna had considered even more in her defense, but suddenly her thoughts didn’t match her words anymore. Tongue-tied, she spat out syllables. It was like trying to grab and hold water. He’d magicked her!

Biting her lip, Wyrenna took refuge in her own thoughts. At least those were still hers. Maybe he’d be more pliable if she could try again when he wanted her to talk. Resisting him now would just get her hurt; he’d only accept what he wanted to hear, when he wanted to hear it. She knew this from other experiences.

It would have been easier if they’d taken the road the entire way, but for some reason the Thalmor wanted to avoid it. It led through a settlement. Wyrenna guessed his appearance would disturb local Nords. Instead, the roofs of Riverwood below remained ignorant as she trudged tired and bound along the basin’s worn slopes.

Just as they’d forded the river again and descended from tentative pines onto yellow tundra, a bellow rolled down from the pitched peak of the Throat of the World. Wyrenna’s heart seized, startled as the sound washed over her. Then assurance— silly of her to behave that way towards sudden thunder. But then, it hadn’t been thunder. Within it, there had been a single incredible word.

“‘Dovah-keen?’” she said, tongue finally loosening. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

The Thalmor before her seemed unmoved, but he did turn to talk. A sliver of scorn peered over the edge of his hood. “I don’t care to know.”

“You don’t care in general,” Wyrenna said hotly. “But what would anyone open up the sky to yell about?”

“What, then, would you yell if you too were an outlandish sky-voice?”

“Something like ‘help,’ actually,” said Wyrenna.
He shoved her along, disdain twisting his lip. His teeth were very white.
Wyrenna could feel the edges of the cobbles through her boots, and it was only the end of one day’s — and night’s— march. The Thalmor’s stamina was greater than hers, Masser climbed high before he finally conceded to rest and sleep. He ate, hardtack and jerky, and then slept. Wyrenna wasn’t given anything. She sat and listened to the sound of rough water nearby.

She didn’t expect courtesy. What she did expect was to be restrained further in some way. But then again, how could he? Their camp was little more than a sheltered overhang, with a fire set by magic onto a bundle of smouldering brush. Wyrenna yawned loudly, exhausted. Yet…

She waved her bound hands before his bowed head. He’d pulled his hood down, crossed arms over his chest. It was an awkward reminder that despite her predicament, he needed rest as any other mer might. Just an ordinary wizard. One with the belief that she was a dangerous criminal.

Quietly, as if he was a deer to startle, she rose from the fire and the camp. She crept with her hard boot-heels away from the crumbling ground. The Thalmor didn’t move. Backing slowly away, the fire’s warmth waned on her skin. Then she turned and ran. The direction was unimportant so long as it wasn’t into the river. Away, quickly. Those were the priorities.

Stumbling, feeling her head float and feet ache, she measured a good ten strides before it hit her. She had never been so afraid in her life. Thoughts crashed down upon her in quick succession. Where to go. What to do. That she was going to die. It was only a vague alarm that this was not an ordinary sort of dread next to the arch of night shadows that reared and swallowed her comprehension. She missed her footing, choking on the hammer in her throat.

Pure and black against the fire, the shade of the Thalmor moved with extended hands, fingers claws in her mind. His eyes were hidden, yet clear. They appeared only the way she could have imagined them. Pitiless and fey. And yet, the vision faded as she gasped for breath. He shrank, no more vivid than an ordinary mer.

“You are exhausting,” he grumbled, and reached down with a black leather hand to pull her back to the camp. It connected, what he had done, and how.

“How dare you?” she screamed, threw his grasp off and made to kick him in a sensitive location. “How dare you use a spell like that on me?”

But with her hands bound and teetering in the dark, there was no leverage. He laid her flat easily, humiliating to her. He was weak-wristed; she’d thrown a punch before in her life. But the grass scratched her cheek.

A gesture, pressure released, and the ground seared with a warmthless light. Like the stars. “Now that you’ve proven to be more trouble than you’re worth, you can stay there.”

He’d cast a rune around her. Wyrenna had a vague idea of what these were. But enough of one to know that if she moved in any major way, it would likely vaporize her. She lifted her head, shivering. The fire didn’t reach here. Instead, she was left to watch as the cloaked mer trudged back to where he had rested, settled against the stone bluff by the camp, crossed his arms, and returned to sleep.

At least, she thought, it was far enough away that he probably couldn’t hear her cry.
The morning came too early, and if Wyrenna had slept it was only between tense gasps, terrified she’d turn over and forget what she was sitting on. Her guts curled inward, ravenous. Licking her own lips didn’t quench them. When she realized her hands were numb she quickly huffed over them, then seized up in horror. The rune didn’t seem to care about that movement. She hunched into a tight ball.

A hand hauled her up by the collar. If the rune mattered anymore, it didn’t matter to the Thalmor. He wedged her between a stump and the ashes of his fire. The sun stung Wyrenna’s eyes until he blocked it out.

“You will talk, and you will do it now,” he said. He said this as if it was a fact of life, like that the wind ought to blow or the sun ought to be in the sky. Her mind discarded this hazily, eyes drooping. She felt faint.

“Whatever you want,” she said, most of her voice sticking in her throat. This seemed to please him, insofar as he could be pleased. It was difficult to focus. She didn’t remember him seeming young, yesterday.

“The shrine. Who is its patron, the connection to worship? Where did you learn of its practice?”

It took a moment to realize what he was asking her to tell him. “I don’t know,” she said. “I didn’t come there to worship.”

“That line is not acceptable. The truth, now.”

“It’s true. I was told the shrine’s location as an old landmark. I was following a route home to Cyrodiil.”

The set of his mouth was immovable. “I see that you are going to be difficult. Hold still.”

And Wyrenna wanted to do anything but that, because in his off hand he held some unknown magic. She struggled up against the stump, trying to pull up, kick him in the face before he cast. With his other hand he held her down.

But, no, of course not. He’d not do something like that. The magic bit was somewhat strange but of course she was safe here, with her new friend. He seemed upset, face as sharp as a knife. It didn’t hold many lines, but the few around his eyes creased as he stared at her. “What’s wrong?” she asked, not quite able to recall his name. It was on the tip of her tongue, of course it was…

“Tell me who directed you to the Talos shrine south of Ilinalta. Who is its patron?”

Oh, he wanted directions, too? He sounded quite far from home. “Siegfried told me the way, an old trapping route. South of the shrine cuts right through Falkreath, gets you home quick.” She tried to consider the second part of his question. “I don’t understand what you mean about the rest.”

“Who organizes its worship?”

“Why would you want to know something like that?” she asked, squinting her eyes. “I don’t know. Talos worshippers. I don’t live here.”

“I know you know the answer. Don’t misdirect me,” he snarled. “You were among the faithful
“Stop it, you’re frightening me,” Wyrenna said. When was the last time she’d met this person? She couldn’t remember. “I only wanted them to leave me alone!”

Everything familiar about him ebbed. What had seemed congenial, a good confidante, it was gone. The keen angles of his face, owl-yellow eyes, wheatgold strands sticking out around his neck, she’d hardly seen them before. She had no friends that were Thalmor. She had no friends who starved her, marched her, magicked her.

She pitched her head forward, feeling his skull rattle with a satisfying smack. The white bruise and white pain woke her fully. “You horrible elf!”

The Thalmor stumbled backward. Her head was harder than his, at least. Bared teeth, a groan, and his hood fell loose. His long hair sorely needed a brush. “You’ll pay for that,” he said.

“Go ahead! Get it over with!” She gripped tight fists through her bonds. “I’ve got nothing to be afraid of.”

Which was a lie, but damn if it wasn’t a good lie.

Unfortunately, it didn’t work. “If you have no reason to fear the Thalmor, then I will gladly give you one.”

He grabbed her throat, grasp hot enough to feel raw on her skin. If he was to summon flames into the soft flesh he could kill her instantly, melt her, char her. And yet… and this was surreal…

“You’re taking me somewhere,” she said. “I can’t show up dead, can I?”

“I know when to stop,” he said confidently.

But he didn’t start. And she didn’t move. Wyrenna realized that neither of them could safely call the other’s bluff. If they bluffed at all.

“I’m hungry,” she said plainly. It wasn’t a question. She didn’t want to give him that leeway.

“You can eat when you are truthful,” he said.

“Here’s your truth,” Wyrenna said. “Sovngarde is lovely this time of year.”

The Thalmor released her, rummaged in his own satchel, and threw a heel of hard-baked bread at her. She held it in both cuffed hands.

“I’m thirsty,” she said. He cast his waterskin at her. It was warm, but it washed the dirt down her throat.

“I’d like to rest for a while,” she said, trying to milk this for all it could produce.

“Very well,” he said. He cast another rune under her. In the daylight it was fainter. “Stay.”

At least she was sitting this time. Wyrenna waited for him to turn around and walk down the hill to make a rude face in his direction.
Wyrenna had never really wanted to see a pack of wolves so close. She was lucky, she supposed. These in particular were fat and happy off of the autumn game, and they were smart enough not to approach the rune that held her captive. Perhaps they could smell it, somehow. Fire was a thing to be left alone. A tawny timber and two stunted blacks circled her for a while, sniffing and trying to circumvent the magical threat, but gave up when they found rabbits an easier thing to chase. Still, Wyrenna knew that she couldn’t leave her trust in the jaws of wild animals. A bear might be bold enough to risk its life.

From where she sat, she could see some small corner of road. Anyone coming would have to look back and up to spot her, and yelling was no good. The river’s noise covered anything on its far bank. Wyrenna watched the men come and go.

Once, an Imperial march came leading two soldiers in padded mail and blue tabards. She made up her mind. Escape first, then the Stormcloaks. If this fate was what they were fighting.

The Thalmor returned by late afternoon. Disgruntled, but his mood had never exactly improved, had it? Still, he came bearing preparation for a long march: bedroll, dry foods, waterskin. He released his rune with what felt like an after-thought.

“Can’t you just get a carriage?” she asked after a new drink. Well-water, not river-water this time. “If you can buy all of this?”

His face stretched taut over his cheekbones.

“You tried,” she said experimentally, lining up his reaction. “But you were refused.”

“That’s enough, worm,” he said. “It isn’t any of your business.”

“Then gag me.” She paused. “I’ll bite your fingers off.”

His slender eyebrow arched even higher towards his forehead. “You wouldn’t dare.”

She curled her lip as she’d seen the wolves do and gnashed at him threateningly. He rolled his eyes and stuffed bread in her face, this somewhat newer than the day previous. The most dreadful thing was that she had to accept it from him, or starve again. She chewed with a bitter silence.

The sun dipped low. While the light was still good, the Thalmor produced a new line of strong rope and bound it fast to her wristcuffs. Then he knotted it around his arm, like the lead of a peculiar dog. There was no rune that night. But being leashed was somehow more degrading. She was not a risk to be contained, but a beast to be restrained.

If that’s what he wanted, then…
The ground by her left foot exploded, instantly baking the dust she’d kicked up to glass. Behind her the rope dragged on the ground, doubtlessly with a Thalmor glove still attached to it. She ran over clods of dense grass. Wyrenna’s exhaustion was secondary to making the Thalmor’s life as difficult as possible. His point to wear her down until she became passive was clear. Wyrenna steeled herself that she might grind his endurance to a stub as well.

If she didn’t succeed this time, it might be easier the next. Or the next. Or whenever he too began to drag with frustration and low energy. If they were going to have a battle of will, Wyrenna knew she couldn’t be caught the weakest.

So she ran. Hopefully, the spectacle would attract attention. Some highway guard, maybe. Soldiers who’d mistake the Thalmor for a warlock. Something. Yet, when they’d joined the open road it was barren. Veering off of it wasn’t better. Less so, with fireballs screaming past her right side. Though his aim was strangely poor—he may have meant to scare her to a halt, rather than reduce her to bits. The land was slowly rising, crags thrusting up from the waning mat of tundra. He may have been taller, but she was better on the uphill. She’d lived among mountains half her life.

“Halt!” she could hear the Thalmor yell behind her. He barely had the air for it. “Stop!”

Wyrenna fell down a bank and grazed her knee on the gray stone. Suddenly, her wish for saviors seemed granted! Then denied. Bandits, not more bandits! This was their camp out of the wind.

“I have a—” she gasped, puffing. She tried again “There’s an elf, he’s a—”

“I don’t know about elves,” said the closest one, a stout-looking Redguard with long braids. “But you picked a very bad time to get lost.”

“Gods! Are there any honestly employed people in Skyrim at all?” she cried, throwing up her bound arms in surrender. With luck, they’d let her go if they saw she had no valuables, and stall the Thalmor chasing after her.

At that moment, another sound came from the sky, another bellowing cry. It seemed a popular form of communication these days, Wyrenna thought. Yet, there wasn’t anything like words to it. It sounded like a beast. But no troll or bear could ever have such a throat. The array of iron-clad men and women in front of her froze.

“That’s no werewolf,” said one, a woman to her right.

A massive dark shadow wiped over her, what sounded like a whirlwind passing above. Not a bird, either. She lifted her head, and saw a great wing just out of her field of vision.

Wyrenna turned around. The Thalmor blundered into her. He’d never before showed weakness of any kind, but his slender eyes spread like the yolk of an egg all around.

The members of the brigand gang stared at them, then at the sky again. Whatever they saw blanched them. They turned and sprinted south as if Oblivion itself had opened at their heels.

But that wasn’t what was there.
The thing set down with a crash on the lip of the crag. Wyrenna, barely able to trust her eyes, came face-to-face with a beast only extant in legends of her ancestors. The teeth of the dragon alone were as long as her forearm. That was enough to break her paralysis, run!

The dragon opened its mouth wide and let forth some evil curse. “Yol Toor Shul!”

“Back!”

With two hands, the Thalmor threw forth a shining barrier just as the gout of fire hit. Wyrenna cowered in his wake, staring at the black sliver barely holding fast against a kiln’s roast. The ends of her hair curled and smoked. The torrent felt longer than it had to be, instants creeping by where she feared the elf in front of her would break, incinerated utterly.

But miraculously, the dragon ran out of breath just as the elf scraped the bottom of his magicka. She could see him tremble from so close. No more flame to spit, the dragon lunged with a maw of swords. Wyrenna hauled the Altmer backward, balling his robes’ collar in bound fists. The snapping bite cleared only feet away. She dreaded what it could do to merely clothed flesh.

“Run!” she yelled, a bit too loud for him so close. But it didn’t matter. There wasn’t any time for who he was, and who she was now. If he’d been winded, he’d recovered simply from shock and together they sprinted for the cover of the hills. The dragon pushed off the ground.

“Where?”

“There!”

Set into the rising land before them, ancient carved stones marked a round hillock. Wyrenna had heard that there were many old barrows dug into Skyrim’s mountains, the burial sites of ancient Nords. The dragon swooped, raking the ground just next to them with talons longer than scythe-blades. Still, she dove and nearly fell straight down into the open cairn.

Thank Gods, thank the Gods, there was a door!

Something tugged her hands forward, then up. Wyrenna screamed, dangling by her cuffs. The Thalmor yelled in turn and grabbed her arm, took his dagger and cut her binds. The dragon flew off with the rope it had seized, and possibly the Thalmor’s glove, too. Wyrenna fell, only a small ways lifted from the ground, and nearly collapsed upon the tomb door before she could muster herself to open it. The dragon was circling back. Her wrists ached, but with free hands she had the leverage to pry open the heavy iron door and throw herself inside. The Thalmor grasped her shoulder and dragged her deeper, and wisely—a thorned head appeared in the doorway, arching from above on a long serpent neck.

“Yol Toor Shul!”

It lit the tomb like a summer bonfire. Both the Thalmor and Wyrenna pressed against one of the side alcoves and watched the plume of flame scar the floor with ash.

She was covered with dust, and the dark came again soon. The dragon could be heard snifffing, snarling after them. Yet, after a stretched pause, the sound of wings carried over the stone. They waited again. The dragon didn’t return.

“What in Oblivion was that?” the Thalmor said, half a curse and half a breathy utterance. His face was invisible in the dark, but Wyrenna couldn’t forget how scared he had looked before.

“That was a dragon,” she said.
“Of course it was!” the Thalmor yelled, blindly spitting in her face. “The issue is that it could not have been a dragon; dragons are extinct!”

“Well, it definitely was a dragon,” said Wyrenna. “Do you think it’s gone for good?”

“I know nothing of and care absolutely nothing for dragons,” said the Thalmor. “If it is, good riddance.”

Something like large stones fell to the ground in the dark behind them. It wasn’t so random as a cavern collapse; more like several slabs had just decided to leap forward and smash on the floor. Dim gleaming stares burned like star points in the gloom. Wyrenna could hear shuffling feet, a muted groan. “Please, let this day end, already!” she cried, only imagining what new, awful thing had beset her now.

“I would not hope for too soon an end,” said the Thalmor, and from his own hand issued a cone of flame. Three awful, rotted figures staggered. Nordic skeletons, or living corpses of some kind? There was no Necromancer around, this little Wyrenna knew of such dark arts. Skyrim, what an awful place!

Still, they did not like fire, and after a roasting they crumpled to the ground. Their bodies, whatever mummified fat and bone remained, burned well enough for some small light. It smelled foul.

Wyrenna picked up an ancient sword, felt the cracked leather of the handle shaft. This time, though the Thalmor’s hands still rose and smoked, she didn’t care. There was nothing more for her in caring. The danger of the Mer in front of her felt laughable, now. Not in that she could repel it, but that she could no longer afford to invest effort in it.

“You and me, we’re going to talk,” she said harshly. “Right now.”

She knew she didn’t look a warrior in only her filthy apron, trousers, scuffed boots. The Thalmor expectedly was unmoved. “I see no reason to,” he said. “Submit, and you will live.”

“You and I both know that’s rot. Why do you want me so badly, anyway? I’ve told you all I know. There’s nothing here for you, Thalmor.”

“You are the only survivor of the Ilinalta shrine I can report,” he said, surprisingly sincere, yet barbed. “I cannot bring back only myself as proof of the conflict.”

Wyrenna remembered that the two he’d brought with him were dead. “You need a witness? Just a witness?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the Thalmor said. “You are not merely that. You were caught red-handed praying to Talos, the false god. You deserve whatever sentence Northwatch deems appropriate.”

“Oh, stop this right away,” she replied. “Put those hands down and listen to me! Can you imagine what would have happened if they asked me if I was a pilgrim and I said ‘no’?”

He did not move, but seemed to select a different spell. Wyrenna raised the sword a little higher, gritting her teeth.

“It hardly matters,” he told her. “You are a prisoner, a heretic, and a fugitive. You are my resource to use, and you will go to Northwatch Keep.”

“Mara’s heart, listen to yourself!” she yelled, then coughed on burning fumes. “You daedra! I have told you all I know, I will not suffer over nothing!”
He shot a spell from his off-hand at her. She was ready this time, ducking right and staggering closer. He was within striking distance, now—if he made another move, she resolved to herself, she’d cut off his hand. “Listen, elf. I just want to go home. That’s it. You know it would be wrong to torture an innocent bystander. If I go with you, and testify as to what I saw, could I then return to Cyrodiil?”

“I don’t bargain with Nords,” he said coldly.

“You will, or you’ll have to kill me,” she said. “And I’m no witness to you from Sovngarde.”

“You are annoyingly persistent,” he said.

She looked him right in the eyes this time and saw his discomfort for it, feeling no particular confidence but the grimness of what might happen to her. “I came to Skyrim for family, and ended up burying them,” she said seriously. “My conscience is clear, and you cannot break it.”

“We’ll see,” said the Thalmor, who very suddenly was her friend, her terribly angry friend. What had she done, really she had to put the sword away and…

He wasn’t her friend, a friend would know she’d only fall for a trick once. She kicked straight up between his legs with the toe of her boot. Truly, she hadn’t been expecting that to work but he crumbled like a crushed egg, crying out in agony. He had to catch himself on two hands. One gloved, one bare on the dusty floor. He arched his back, curling inward. For someone so tall and all-legs, it was a little ridiculous.

She leaned down to him, laying her blade on his neck. “So, we bargain?”

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It wasn’t really a very equal deal, even if she’d cornered him into one. Wyrenna fastened up buckles on her secondhand-new greaves. They, and the rest of the set of strangely-fitting leathers and chain she’d assembled from the bandit camp, likely would not stop the Thalmor. Nor would it stop much at all. She barely knew how to put the incomplete cobble of armor on herself. She’d seen Zass-tei do fittings, even helped him when she was small. But that was different.

A little bit of extra protection felt nice, though. After the dragon, and all. Not that it would be much help then, either

The land grew colder the higher they climbed into a snowy ridge. Most useful had been the cold-weather gear packed away into that camp: the furs and the gloves, and the oil-skin wrappings for her boots. Still, trudging up the frosty banks, Wyrenna pined for her knit woolen socks, her scarf, mittens, hat at home. Snow there was much friendlier.

Still, the Thalmor had the worse of it. He consented to a fur muffler, but grumbled at its stink. He went without one glove over settling for a mismatched set. The bare hand went stuffed in his armpit when he didn’t need it. He’d said something rude before she’d finished her comment. Perhaps his robes were padded— mages threw an awful lot of elements at each other— but she could still see him shiver. Once or twice he summoned flames to warm his fingers, then cupped over his flushed red nose.

She caught him looking, though, when the ancient arches and walls piled high from the mountainside. There were ruins in Cyrodiil, of course. She hadn’t really walked among them, but Wyrenna had seen one or two old Ayleid structures from a distance. The ancient inhabitants of Labyrinthian, however, had a scope to rival the Imperial City. Who knew how far the twisting halls, roofs ripped to the sun, once had stretched?
Recent inhabitants had designs, too. She eyed the man-cages hanging from abandoned ramparts with discomfort.

“Are you sure this is a good way to travel?” she asked, over the persistence of the wind. Her eyelashes were frosted. “Are there easier roads?”

“None so direct,” the Thalmor said, and left it at that. With her wrists free and a blade at her waist, he seemed hesitant to arm her further. Useful talk counted. Then again, her damn mouth had gotten her past his defenses so far and into relative freedom.

They entered the maze. Or fortress. Wyrenna didn’t know that much about this place, other than that it was the site of important magic. But it really was no longer so vexing aboveground. The serpentine catacombs and dungeons beneath, it was said, twisted in ways known only to the Gods themselves. But outside it was just cold and ruined. “I really can’t imagine building a city like this. Seems chilly.”

“The first era predates any invention of common sense among Men,” the Thalmor snapped bitterly. “If such innovation has yet been made at all.”

“Well, you decided to come through here,” Wyrenna pointed out.

She really didn’t understand the context the Thalmor cursed in.

Still, this place was a place of her ancient ancestors. Surreal to think of. She felt little connection to these weathered stones. It was easy to imagine oneself as part of a legacy of kings. But it was just as likely she was descended from the beggar that once had slept bare here, or the serf brought in to shovel the constant snow.

Agonizing hours passed through the march, punctuated only by evidence of hunters and stripped remains of a bear, ice trolls, and other big game. The red stains were buried by new white, frozen until some fanciful thaw.

When the other side of the hill swooped down in front of them, it was a relief. Until, inevitably, the Thalmor slipped on black-iced stone in his leather boots. He sailed forward, hit the pristine mountainside and began to tumble. Finally, his yells came to a stop as he wedged in a snowbank of impressive size and depth, dark robes caked with snow.

You know, she thought to herself, you could run right now. Right while he’s a sorry oaf and can’t chase after you. You could run down the mountain and never have to suffer him again. But she’d leave footprints, and he wouldn’t be down for so long…

“I’m an idiot,” she said to herself and bounded down after him, cutting waist-deep ruts in the piled powder. From the muted light below him, the Mer was fighting the snow with fire. He wasn’t having much luck. Wyrenna wrapped her arms around one of his broomstick legs and yanked. No give, he really was stuck. She began to dig him out with numb fingers.

He sucked in frigid air with a gasp. His face was bright red, ice-chafed, and his clothes were soaking wet. He’d melted a cone beneath him and had been slowly sinking deeper. “Well done, Archmage,” said Wyrenna.

“I don’t need your c-comment,” the Thalmor bit back at her. His breath clouded the crisp air, punctuated by the waxy snap of frozen stunted trees. He leaned on one briefly, ducked under the icicles to compose himself.

“You need a lot more,” Wyrenna argued. “You’re not prepared to go through mountains like these.”
“Your concern, also, is unneeded.” he said warningly.

“I don’t give a horse’s ass about you,” Wyrenna said. “I just say so when I see a fool.”

The Thalmor shivered. His robes were beginning to ice stiff. He stuck his bare hand back in his armpit and trudged on, drying his sleeves with flames. Wyrenna almost was tempted to push him down the hill again to see if he’d learned anything.

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The mountainside was dotted with sprawling ruins. Some of them had roofs, simple egg-piled structures that had weathered well with lime mortar and enough ice to freeze solid half the year. One of them made a good enough shelter, after evidence of a sabercat’s prior occupation had been cleared away. The wind beat at the walls, but with snow to block a draft there was warmth enough. The fire’s smoke filtered out through where bricks had loosened enough to fall.

What little the Thalmor communicated had expanded to include basic direction. Gather wood. Prepare supplies. Make camp. Wyrenna bit her tongue on asking if she was his prisoner or his porter. He aspired above menial labor.

She chewed her dried beef in silence as the water melted in their scavenged bowl. Snowmelt was better than a river, but not as good as a spring. Even before he considered eating the Thalmor unhooked his robes and spread them out to dry, leaving him in a close-fitting garb.

“If you breathe a word of this to anyone, I will be sure you are tortured in excess of what is owed to you,” he said. Then he stripped off his sopping chemise and dried it, too. He crossed his slender arms over himself, shuddering close to the fire. He was yellow all over, quite thin and underbuilt.

“Who would I tell?” Wyrenna said, unhappily considering inquisitorial lines of questioning.

“Don’t stare,” he scolded.

“It’s not as if there’s much to look at.”

That shut him up. With a firm harrumph he yanked the satchel of supplies away from her, exhumed his own portion, and ate it while avoiding her eyes. He ate it like it was a chore, and finished only half. Wyrenna made a show of pretending not to notice him, either. Then she took off her own fur cloak, untied a few of the leathers, and set them to dry as well. She huddled over and shook the heavy chain-shirt off of herself. It settled to rest in a liquid pile.

She felt filthy. A week’s grime caked over her skin, itchy with dry sweat. How the Altmer managed to remain clean-seeming was a great mystery. Dusty, maybe, but he wasn’t dirty. She raked fingers through her hair and felt it stick where she pushed it.

“I think I have a right to ask how I’m going to end up,” she said firmly. “If you’re going to keep our agreement, anyway.”

“You have absolutely no ‘rights’ to speak of. The mutual agreement that you will not run, if I do not correct you, is a mercy.”

He was much less menacing without his uniform. “Stop that,” Wyrenna said tiredly. “I hope you don’t talk to everybody this way.”

“Only the lesser races.”

“Hmph. It hardly matters what you know,” The Thalmor said. “You will go to Northwatch Keep. There, you will be interrogated. Perhaps I may put in a word for you, on your ‘agreement.’ But what becomes of you is not within my power to control.”

“You really know how to make a girl feel confident,” Wyrenna said.

“Your confidence is unrequired. Your obedience is. Good behavior will speak much louder than I may.”

Wyrenna’s skepticism remained strong. “What kind of ‘behavior’ are you looking for?” she asked, hardly able to consider any way to get the Mer in front of her to stop treating her like dirt. “What should I expect to do?”

“Speak when spoken to. Ask no excessive questions. Answer only in a constructive, useful manner. Respect those in a position of superior order,” said the Thalmor. “Precisely the opposite of what you are doing now.”

“I never knew a half-dressed custard elf was of any kind of superior order,” Wyrenna grumbled. Her captor did not dignify it with an answer. “Say, you don’t have a hairbrush, do you?”

“Yes,” said the Thalmor.

“Can I— you know— use it?”

He was repulsed by the very idea. “Eheugh! Barbaric! No wonder the lot of you are teeming with lice.”

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Her pilfered furs made a good enough bedroll, for the Thalmor had not bought one for her. Still, like all other mornings of misery, her back ached from rough sleeping. Insulated in the stone and drifts, their makeshift shelter had kept warm the entire night on embers. She was marched out and into the snow nearly at dawn to continue the slow crawl north.

“Hail, Thalmor!”

At first it seemed unlikely that her captor would stop for any group of mercenaries on the road. But their leader was Altmer and there was not a Nord to be seen. “You are interfering with official Thalmor business,” the Thalmor said firmly to the group of seven that had approached from the other direction. “Unless you have specific and authorized purpose, move along.”

“And we do,” the mercenary leader said, in no accent in particular. Either very well-traveled in the Empire, or very good at concealing his actual origins. “Our charter’s paid for by your masters, boy.”

So her captor was younger than this stranger. Who could tell with elves? Then again, much of the Thalmor’s manner and way of acting seemed deliberate to conceal any age, any affection or even any element of his true personality or self. If he had one at all. His hooded face, while windburned, was still smooth and supple. This other elf had crags.

“This is highly irregular,” the Thalmor said. “I must demand your designated password, as well as any seal or documentation of authority.”

Wyrenna sat like baggage while the mercenary leader produced a tightly-rolled scroll, closed with
iridescent gold wax. What he relayed as a password was actually a fairly long recitation. But after
tight-eyed judgement her captor did relax. “Very well. Take the Nord with you. She’s useless, but I
must have you testify I removed her from the scene. I will await further instruction in Morthal.”

“Sure, sure. We will provide official escort, of course,” the mercenary leader said. His company,
stiff-faced and professional, stood to attention. “Perale, Iccoms, take the girl. The young Master here
is in my charge.”

“What for?” the Thalmor asked.

“Circumstances change. War’s getting worse all-around. Upstairs heard about it, hired us to patrol for
you lot.”

“I see,” said the Thalmor. “Very well.”

“Wait! We have a deal,” Wyrenna said, suddenly finding her tongue. “I’m not—”

The Thalmor shoved her along, towards the two that had come forward to receive her. “Deals
change.”

And that was that. They parted on the road, one climbing up the hills, the other marching west to the
flatlands, or so Wyrenna assumed. The mercenaries were rougher than the Thalmor had been, if that
was possible, and lurched her forward every step she began to lag. They did not make to bind her
hands or disarm her. It occurred to her that they didn’t know what her relationship with the Thalmor
was. They had not once asked if she was his prisoner.

It was about ten minutes before Wyrenna noticed something very strange.

“Thank you for taking me to Northwatch Keep,” she said, experimentally. There was no recognition
in the mercenaries’ eyes. “But I thought it was to the west, not the east.”

“Shut your mouth, girl. You’ll go where we say you’ll go.”

“I mean, if the east is full of Stormcloaks…” she said.

“I said, shut your mouth.”

Not something merely strange, she thought. Something very wrong.

If they weren’t taking her where she thought they were, there wasn’t time to hesitate. She lunged
forward and yanked the round shield off the mercenary’s back, felt the flimsy tin buckle snap under
her grasp. Then, she flipped it over like a plate in two hands. She bashed him on the head with it
before he could catch on. He crumpled to the snow. There wasn’t the luxury of hoping she knew
what she was doing. Swinging around, the steel edge collided with the second mercenary’s temple. It
slid on his helmet, but he stumbled on the cobbles and grabbed his face.

Wyrenna cut off of the road, feeling the snow rise up to her calf. She was chased, already only just
behind her. The thick drifts slowed him, though, just as she was. Soon the hills laid out before her
and somewhat in the distance she could see flashes of fire and light. It confirmed her suspicions, that
all was not well with this interception.

In the lifeless Bruma winters, Wyrenna had enjoyed many pass-times while there was no work for
children to be done. Ice-skating, snow-fights, building snow-soldiers: but by far her favorite when
she was young was snow sliding, down hills with sleds. Well, this was not a very clear hill, she
thought, and what she had in her hands was really not a sled, but really what were such details to a
Nord like her?

She took a flying leap at the downhill, the steel shield under her belly, and hit the snow’s surface. There wasn’t really any way to steer, she discovered, or any way to stop her face from crusting over with spray. But it did leave the mercenary far behind as she gathered velocity. A little too much velocity, she soon feared, trusting to luck to narrowly miss the landscape.

A landscape that was quickly including a magic fight between two Altmeri wizards.

Wyrenna closed her eyes and waited for whatever was going to happen to her, to happen. It did. her shield-sled caught a floe of ice and shot like an arrow directly at the mercenary leader. Busy with guarding himself with wards, he did not notice the large, dark shape speeding toward him. Wyrenna collided with a deafening crack of interrupted magic, possibly some bones, and a tangle of limbs. The shield went flying and stuck into a bush some yards away. Wyrenna when she was able to open her eyes stared down into a slush of mud and ice. She wondered what direction the sky was now.

There were some more sounds— probably some more fighting, some more magic. Wyrenna lay there, blinking up at some bowed pines while the world spun. But soon, a figure stood over her, in her light. She winced.

“This was a terrible mistake,” she said to the Thalmor, who seemed singed. He had a nasty burn on his one bare hand.

He neither agreed nor disagreed. “On your feet,” he said.

“Which ones?”

He hauled her up by the front of her collar. Wyrenna felt several new bruises and a slightly sprained ankle. She’d had worse, she told herself. Then she stumbled around. Then she stood and told herself again she’d had worse.

“Get moving. We make for Morthal, by evening.”

Wyrenna rubbed her head, patted herself down. She hadn’t lost anything. There were five bodies scattered all around. The Thalmor had killed them all. Only now she noticed the deep slash in the arm of his robe. He pressed his gloved hand to it, muttering at the pain. Wizards could heal their wounds, she guessed, but they couldn’t erase how it hurt. Or the evidence that they’d been attacked.

He then seemed struck by something, as if his impulse to command her had afterthoughts. “The two that had been sent with you, what became of them?” he asked of her.

“I don’t know,” Wyrenna said, yanking the steel shield out of where it had come to rest. She swapped her cracked sword for a newer one. “I smashed one of them up. The other chased me, but I left him behind. Who knows where they’re going?”

The Thalmor stared at her patting down the dead bodies with a kind of silent horror, as if he was watching some primitive creature eat its own young. He cleared his throat. “Then they will report back to… whoever commissioned them.”

“Maybe, if they’re good mercenaries,” Wyrenna said. They didn’t seem to be. They didn’t carry much gold, or they hadn’t yet been paid. "They had the papers you asked for."

“Which is what disturbs me,” he said. “And why Morthal is our new destination.”

“Not Northwatch?”

Chapter End Notes

1) Wyrenna, through books of fables may have known the name of Labyrinthian but it is not possible she could have known the name of the Merethic city Bromjunaar over and under which Shalidor’s legendary maze and proving ground had been made manifest. She thus confused the name of Labyrinthian itself for the great ruined capital.
The inn could have been a pile of stones with a canvas roof, Wyrenna would have still been happy to see it. She hadn’t noticed the cold in her toes or her fingers until she’d stepped inside and found herself gravitating to the fire. She stripped off her gloves. The snow melted from her hair in lukewarm rivulets.

Then, there was a strict order of things. The inn was only sparsely filled. Morthal didn’t look much more than a village. Still, that meant while the distrustful eyes regarding outsiders lingered, they were few. The Thalmor set about to routines of civilization so quickly Wyrenna half-expected he’d been planning what he’d do for days on the road. Bed, food, drink, board were done in barely a minute. Including some demands the innkeeper turned her nose up at until Wyrenna paid herself.

The bath the Thalmor demanded be drawn was cold by the time Wyrenna got to use it, and she wasn’t fond of bathing in a Thalmor’s leftovers. But the grime on her face was thick enough to wipe a finger through. The water held a suggestion of some scent she couldn’t place. It was funerary. Some incense? Wyrenna couldn’t fathom that he’d carry something like perfume with him. Thalmor were very strange.

Still, she was clean. Then, with sterner soap, her clothes were clean. And she was fed, after a while. But the Thalmor did not retire to sleep. Instead, he drafted letter after letter, unable to decide on wording. Where Wyrenna was far more comfortable to be indoors, he seemed less so.

She picked up a copy and read what partial draft he’d written. It just wasn’t natural for anyone’s handwriting to be so neat, she thought. Legible, though. “Valamand,” she said, testing the name in her mouth.

“Yes?” the Thalmor said, immediately turning to her— and then remembering his task and turning back.

“That’s your name,” she said. “You never actually introduced yourself.”

He continued with pen and ink. “That is not important to my mission,” he said. “That you know now poses a problem I frankly no longer have time to consider.”

“It’s impolite,” she said.

That seemed to get a rise out of him. He pushed the inkwell back and leaned over his too-short chair to make a sour face at her. “You really have no basis to demand propriety in your situation, worm.”

“Wyrenna.”

“Excuse me?”

“Wyrenna is my name,” she said. “Please use it.”

“Perhaps on your documentation of arrest,” he said. Then, Wyrenna realized he was serious about this threat when he asked, “No other names, then?”

Wyrenna had to think about this. “You mean a clan name? Or a family name? No, none,” she said. “Neither my father nor my mother bore titles or more names.”

The faint relief on his face puzzled her, until she figured out the context. “You were worried you had
arrested someone worthwhile!"

“It is good to know that you are as inconsequential as I took you for,” he said, and returned to
drafting. Wyrenna read his newer work over his shoulder. “Go away,” he said.

“No. I’m reading.” Then after scanning the document, “Who’s this Elenwen?”

“My superior,” Valamand said tersely.

“You think she really knows what’s going on?” Wyrenna asked, sitting on the bed across the narrow
room. She was peering over a precipice into a greater problem than she could delve into safely. Her
first thoughts were of home and of safety and of the possibility of torture. The next were those of the
incorrigible busybody she knew she was.

Valamand seemed sincere with her, oddly, with his next words. “There are three possibilities. First,
that she does not know, and ought to be alerted. Second, that she does know, and is either working
to correct this problem or has been outbid in it. Third, that she ordered mercenaries after her own
Thalmor agents herself.”

“Why would anybody do something like that?”

“It wouldn’t be for me to know,” said Valamand tiredly. “I only am sure that the commission was
legitimate.”

Wyrenna remembered the rather elaborate pass-code, and the documents Valamand had now seized.
It seemed over-much. “Is impersonation a common problem?”

“You ask far too many questions,” Valamand snapped.

“Listen, elf. I only ask you these things because I don’t know anything that’s going on. I’ve been
threatened with torture, magicked, marched halfway across Skyrim, and I know nothing to show of
it,” she said very seriously. “What I want to know is if this is over. Can I leave? Are you still
determined to take me in for a crime I didn’t really commit? Or are you going to pull me into this
mess that— really—I don’t care about?”

Her voice was dark-fogged. She sniffed the tears back down her throat. Valamand regarded her
scathing words as if she’d spilled something on the floor, and spoke as if he’d demand she’d clean up
the mess. “I’m afraid I know as little as you do concerning the situation,” he said. “And so, you shall
be detained accordingly until I receive further word.”

“You can’t stop me from leaving,” she said hotly, though she knew he could. He could, any number
of ways. But she had to say it, feel it in her mouth, to keep that thought real.

“Perhaps.” said Valamand. “However, tracking one Nord down again is a triflingly easy task for a
highly trained and superiorly bred Mer like myself.”

He even began to smile. Wyrenna was more shocked that he was entirely serious in praising his own
self than she was at his nonchalance for hunting her and then dragging her off again, screaming into
the night.

She considered committing a petty crime and then begging to be thrown in jail, if only to be rid of
him.

The candles burned down until she was forced to take the bedroll and sleep on the inn room floor
while the Thalmor took the bed. The fur and leather padding smelled like whatever he put in the
bathwater. Lavender. That was it. She was being lorded over by an elf who smelled like a morgue parlor. Well, that’s all then, Wyrenna thought as she finally began to drift off. Whether I die old and gray or tomorrow, there’s no way I won’t be laughed out of Sovngarde now.

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‘Detained accordingly’ seemed to mean ‘conscripted as a minion.’ It was Wyrenna that was given the task of venturing out to give the missive to a courier, and then to notify the Imperial Garrison of the Thalmor’s presence in Morthal. She asked if it was important to also inform whoever was in charge (the Jarl?) but Valamand had merely peered down his nose at her. He had a way of making her feel profoundly stupid with only the slightest glance.

Valamand himself did not leave the inn. If someone was commissioned to look for Thalmor on roads and in towns, she conceded that walking openly wasn’t so wise. A disguise, she thought, might be a better idea. But Valamand would have expired from sheer revulsion before dressing as and pretending to be one of the locals.

There remained this problem: the dwindling of his purse, and her own purse he had confiscated from her. She had not brought much money. Septims were to buy supplies and board only for a quick foot journey, not an indefinite stay in some unknown frost marsh. Requesting a stipend from superiors was not an option, considering communique with them was Valamand’s entire objective. Valamand himself refused to work for board or lower himself to menial labor in any way and washing dishes for Jonna would only cover so much of the fee.

So it was only with a mild threat of burning or punishment or inquisition that Valamand agreed to let his prisoner venture out in search of odd jobs. Rather, he ordered her to do so only after she had suggested the idea and he had once discarded it, as if he’d thought of it without her bother. Wyrenna decided it was wise not to press the matter. Let him continue to be a priss indoors with that horrible bard. She got to escape, after all. In a limited sense.

The locals didn’t like her. They didn’t like anybody, but at least she was a Nord. If they’d learned that Valamand was a wizard, however… the rumors concerning the town conjurer suggested there would be trouble. She kept her mouth shut.

Morthal was cold and wet but at least bright in the day and pleasant weather enough. There were a few ways to make coin, she learned. The sawmill was the most sure, but also the least in need of help. It wasn’t as if she could pass for a swashbuckler or a mercenary herself. Tavern brawls and fistfights were the limit of her aggression. And she had no desire to go hunting criminals; that was for the authorities, not some silversmith’s daughter. There was just no money in dancing for tips in such a small town. There were a few pretty ladies but none she felt would have useful sympathies. The men weren’t worth it. Her relative lack of fear of Falion the wizard leant her a job or two running errands. But do that too often, she thought, and people would begin to think you’re his familiar.

There was no general store in Morthal (incredible) but there was a somewhat-absent alchemist (less incredible) in common need of ingredients. A semi-daily need, for her experimentation. Venturing out into the swamp was dangerous, she knew, but what other choices were there?

After the first few days running away from grotesquely enormous spiders, Wyrenna showed up at the imperial barracks with her dubiously acquired sword and secondhand gear, and the dented shield.

It wasn’t exactly the picture of military order. Not much activity in Morthal, after all.

“You want… what?”
“I want lessons,” Wyrenna said seriously. “If no, then sorry to bother you, I’ll try someone else.”

The soldier, a tongue-tied Redguard, stared at her as if she had pudding on her face. “Lessons in what, citizen?”

“At sword and shield,” Wyrenna said. “If you aren’t too busy.”

“Do you want to join the Legion?”

“No, I just want lessons at sword and shield,” Wyrenna repeated, unsure why men tended to be so thick all of the time.

“Quaestor! Get a load of this.”

Another soldier, an officer, stuck his head out from the back door, somewhat unprofessionally. “Eh? What does she want?”

“Lessons at sword and shield,” Wyrenna said a third time. “If you would be kind enough.”

He emerged, a tall Orc with a deep voice and dark green skin. “Why would someone like you,” he said, looking at her with some distaste, “Want something like that?”

“My life has suddenly become a lot more dangerous,” she said honestly. “And I thought: your job is to face danger. If I’d like lessons, you seemed a good place to begin.”

“Forget it,” the Orc said.

“Why, are you busy?” Wyrenna said, even-toned, holding her ground. “If it’s a simple chore, I can do it for you, if you’d like.”

The two men seemed shocked, though she hoped it was with confusion rather than with annoyance. The Redguard merely looked worried. The Quaestor curled his lip in frustration, then amusement to her own surprise. Perhaps tenacity was a way to win someone like that over.

“All’s boring as dust here, anyway,” he muttered, then turned to his bewildered subordinate. “I’m taking her to see the Legate. You wait here.”

“Yes, sir.”

Wyrenna found it harder to keep up with the Orc’s stride than she had her Thalmor captor’s, despite their similarity in height. Maybe this officer had purpose, where Valamand hardly knew where he was going. Aside of this, after some unfortunate trotting to keep up and the cold morning air, she was swept into Highmoon Hall. Sheepish that she had been herded some place so important, Wyrenna kept her head down as if it would cause the guards, the steward, the Jarl herself—Mara’s breath—to take less notice of her.

“Legate Duilis, sir. I request permission to use free hours for… hrm, a project.”

“Speak, Quaestor,” said the high-ranking gentleman in front of her. Wyrenna looked at his armor and what decorations he bore. He noticed immediately, turning his interest from the full-spread table map to her somewhat lop-sided setup. Compared to his steel and uniform pleats, her jury-jettisoned cuirass felt to evaporate. She could have been naked.

“This girl, she came to the barracks asking for combat instruction. I request to run her at least through basic exercises.”
The Legate seemed interested, at least. “A new recruit?”

“No, sir. Only asked to be taught. Odd girl, but I like the look of her.”

It was a bit humiliating to be treated as some third party, standing right next to them. But if this was how soldiers had to beg for things then she pitied the Orc more than felt sorry for herself.

“Interesting. I’d have your name, Miss. And your reasons.”

Wyrenna was glad, for once, that her southerly accent was solid on her tongue. This man spoke in a different one, far more forged of the Niben basin than she was. But there was solidarity between them even in word. “My name is Wyrenna, sir. I am travelling in Skyrim, though I don’t know for how long I’ll be staying. I’ve got a bit of a delay going home. But in the time I’ve been here, my life has suddenly become dangerous. I’ve been waylaid half a dozen times: bandits, spiders, the walking dead, mages, a dragon…”

“A dragon? When?”

“Oh yes, a dragon,” Wyrenna said. “Sometime about last week, to the north of Whiterun hold. Somewhere south of Labyrinthian? Terrible creature, nearly burned me to a crisp.”

“You mean to say you came up through Labyrinthian?”

Wyrenna ignored the bare-tusk stare of the Orc above her. “It’s lovely this time of year,” she said, and even she had to admit that was a web of understatement.

“By the Eight, girl— you’re serious, aren’t you?”

“On my honor as a Nord, I swear or my Da’s a dead dog’s arse.”

The stone-set grimness and horror of the man’s jaw was reward enough. He looked at her as if she was some array of hazardous materials, arranged to catch fire. “Instruct this girl immediately, Quaestor Volgag,” he said in disquieted worry. “Or no doubt she’ll stumble upon some other, greater danger. Or ask trolls to teach her.”

Happy her goal had been fulfilled, Wyrenna turned her eye to a new point of interest. There was the map spread all over the wide fir-beam table, flagged with wax-and-paper in red and blue. It was obvious enough what each location stood for, even to her, and she committed the information to memory. Perhaps she’d have to return with charcoal and a scrap, to take a better note or make a rough copy.

Wyrenna was less happy, but equally thankful for the exercises that followed. They continued through noonday and into the early afternoon. She returned blistered, sore, but with extra coin from tidying the guardhouse. If Valamand knew or noticed what she was up to he said nothing of it.

“Show me some tricks,” said Wyrenna, to a party of considerable political difference to those that had taught her the day previous. It had taken rising before dawn and jogging past the worst of the swamp hazards to get there. But it was worth it to reach the Stormcloak camp by midmorning. It was quite some distance away and she was proud.

The Stormcloaks themselves were just as stymied by her as she was with them. She had never seen such a homogeneous clot of Nords, not even in Bruma— and these all were men, all of particular same age, and all possessed beards dense enough to lose a Khajiit in.
Wyrenna had no fear of large men with beards on a good day, but the lack of company was enough to make her think twice about joining the Stormcloaks. They all seemed to recognize her as a Nord on sight, though, and were friendly enough because of that.

“What exactly are you asking for? Why would a girl like you need to know sword and shield ‘tricks?’” one of them asked, and Wyrenna supposed he was the quartermaster. He did not wear gloves despite the biting chill and his knuckles sprouted blond fur against the cold.

“Well,” said Wyrenna, gauging her audience. “Lately, I’ve been having a difficult time with elves.”

“Aye!”

“Hear, hear!”

“True enough, lass! True enough!”

Someone handed her a bottle of mead. She drank some to be polite. It smelled faintly of juniper berries, but tasted mostly of liquor.

“You want to join up, girl? Make your forefathers proud, you know!”

Wyrenna weighed her next words carefully. “Not yet. It’s not safe for me to, yet.” She paused. “The Thalmor don’t know I’m here.”

If they’d been jovial before, they seized up in quiet confusion. Then understanding, then horror. “You mean to say… that you, just one girl… you are sought after by the Thalmor personally?”

“Not so much sought-after as considered a high-value prisoner,” she said quietly.

“Ye gods! What exactly did you do to them?”

She pulled out her amulet of Talos, tarnished but still silver, for them to see. Whatever they assumed she meant by it, it cleared up all of their doubts and sent them into a kind of solemn mourning. The best and most believable stories, she had once been taught, are not ones that you tell, but the ones that you can cause others to tell themselves. Most everybody, especially people of strong convictions, has things they will clamber over reason to believe are true, no matter what. For the Stormcloaks, it seemed to be that any veneration of Talos was reason for elvish inquisitors to descend upon a worthless girl without mercy.

Which almost resembled the truth. But Wyrenna suspected that what she had experienced, and the assumptions of these men, were very different.

A red man stepped forward, with hands like mauls. The only thing more vibrant than his hair was the cherry flush of his bulbous nose. He spoke with an accent thicker than a Winterhold snowbank. “Very well, then. Draw your sword, face me, and you’ll get your ‘tricks.’”

Wyrenna didn’t understand for a fistful of heartbeats, and neither did several of the other Stormcloaks for they reached out to dissuade him, “Surely, you don’t have to rise to this!”

“Brynjar!”

“Brynjar, Bone-Breaker!”

Wyrenna realized that a man titled ‘bone-breaker’ wanted to test her in combat. She felt faint. Still, these men were Nords, and she was a Nord, and if she wanted to keep herself on good terms… she
drew the secondhand, cracked blade, and stood at what ready position she had been taught by Quaestor Volgag. What little she knew of playing bully would have to do.

She hardly had gained her feet by the time he thundered over the chalk soil, sword tied firmly into his scabbard. Still, he’d beat her with the leather-clad cudgel he’d fashioned of it. Her shield was a poor defense against his bulk. Soon she was stumbling backward, losing ground to him.

“Good! Good!”

That he’d praise her for this seemed unfitting for the Stormcloak’s advance-and-take-all attitude. She was too knotted in her throat.

“Be nimble, if you are small! Move as frost flows around rocks! Keep moving, girl!”

Wyrenna hardly had time to consider the loose circle of men watching her now. She could imagine what he meant. It seemed impossible to try at the end of his blows. Her shield arm ached already. Brynjar would inevitably outlast her, she realized, unless she acted quickly. Catching her stride on the crumbling ground, she dug her toe in and slid to his right side. She felt him catch her blow, let him push her into his blind spot. Yet, when she made to stab into his unguarded flank she felt a sharp rap on the top of her head.

“Do not hesitate, girl! If I was a skinny elf, would you wait? The shifty vermin are ravenous for an instant of weakness.”

“I’m sorry,” she said ashamedly.

“Do not be. Instead, survive! Again!”

He attacked her once more, from a seemingly infinite well of stamina. The cold was forgotten, sweat and heat stirred on her skin save where the wind scoured her cheeks clean. Her sword crashed only upon metal, his own kite shield, and the hammer upon her other arm betrayed the force for which he’d been named Bone-Breaker.

“You must always stay moving in a real fight. If you are tired, sleep among the dead!” he said to her, grinning a yellowed grin. “To move is to defy the enemy! Never let them live long enough to know you’ll strike left or right.”

It was in this way, hours of this, that she did learn the beginnings of footwork, and of long nerve.

“You must never be predicted, girl! Embrace the chaos of battle, for in it, a Nord can hear the poetry of Talos himself!”

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“And exactly what have you been doing that merits such bruises?” The Thalmor said, with only scorn in his voice. That she had bruises was of no consequence. Wyrenna suspected he felt he ought to have inflicted them himself.

“Getting money,” Wyrenna said tiredly, feeling her legs sting and wobble, her arms creak numbly. She stuffed her dinner down her throat and laid down immediately to rest. She threw a thin pouch of septims at him, what the alchemist had given her for an armful of fungus. She closed her eyes, ignoring the Thalmor’s black gilded boots only inches away from her nose.

“Then it’s true what they say,” Valamand said in distaste. “To find a barbarian, find a fistfight.”
“I don’t have time for you,” Wyrenna replied. “The only thing I have time for is sleep.”

"If it keeps your mouth shut."

Wyrenna rolled over, now too irritated to drift off. "I guess you don't know to respect someone trying to shut their eyes?" She grumbled. "You know, dream a little?"

"I've not suffered so much random nonsense as a dream in twenty years."

"What a thing to be proud of," Wyrenna snapped. "How you killed something in yourself."

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Quaestor Volgag was an Orc, but he came from the Imperial City and he held appropriate values. He wanted to see her every other morning promptly after ordinary drills, with her kit prepared, ready to work. After whatever menial task and marginal pay he'd provide her was complete he expected her at attention and ready for instruction. Thankfully he was still an Orc and did not much care about the unexplained bruises and blisters Wyrenna was accumulating on off-days.

“I see you getting lazy over there,” he grunted, watching her perform the requisite number of swings. “Form up and do ten more.”

Wyrenna could have wept. That was ten more on top of the seventy-five she’d already done. “If it fends off a spider, isn’t it good enough?” she asked, momentarily forgetting she was talking to a ranking military officer. If he took much offense, he kept it to himself. She wasn’t under his seniority, after all.

“No, it isn’t. You fend off that spider, what then? Will it be good enough for the next foe? Or will they be better than you?”

“Good point,” said Wyrenna, but was loathe to think that she’d be using this against something ‘better’ than spiders. She completed the final twenty-five-and-ten of his drills, feeling her wrists ache dully. It was only the most basic of swings, and tedious to the very end. Wyrenna wondered if there was some happy medium between throwing her into a brawl and treating her like a child, when it came to sword teaching.

Still, the Quaestor wasn’t done with her yet. “Come now, I’ll show you personally why laziness will kill you, girl. Stand and face me, ready position.”

He approached her, hard-reed training switch in hand. She had one too, and it was even heavier than the real sword she owned. Getting hit with one, while nonfatal, was an experience she wasn’t keen to sample.

“At ease.” She dropped her stance.

“Ready position.” She took her stance up again.

“Defensive position.” She raised her shield, peering out from behind its off edge.

She waited that way for a full minute, anticipating some attack.

“Girl, you must learn to control yourself,” he said critically.

“What? I’m not doing anything or moving at all!”

“You don’t know what you’re doing, you don’t know what control you have and don’t have,” the
Quaestor said critically. Then he struck her firmly across the shoulder, right over her shield’s defense. “If you are in control, then how did I hit you?”

Wyrenna was speechless. It hadn’t occurred to her that even at rest, she might know nothing about her own actions. That she might be inexpert at even the most mundane things, such as walking, standing, breathing, even sitting still. Things one would take for granted in daily life. She raised her shield up a little higher, imagining if he’d hit again he’d get its edge and not her neck.

“Good, you at least learn what you’ve got wrong,” Volgag said. “Proves your head’s not full of cornmeal.”

Then he began to strike her. Not terribly hard, but in places she had no idea were exposed: off shoulder, lower leg, knee, even the top of her head. “Your sword may be what kills them, your shield may stop them, but your body is your real weapon. Be aware of it at all times, know it, control it. Keep track of your arms, legs, elbows— or you’ll lose them for good.”

Wyrenna had little idea how to respond to advice like that. Did one say ‘thank-you’ after being made to question the position of one’s own body parts all day and all night henceforth? Then again, being a good listener was thanks enough. And she was: on, and on, and on, and on.

It was a situation hardly considered, but apparently there was no lecture like an Imperial lecture, and no Imperial lecture quite like an Orc’s.

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Aside from all of this, Wyrenna was satisfied, somehow. The short term wasn’t appealing, and neither was the cruel and terse elf she had to get back to at the end of each day. Nor were looming visions of what lay ahead.

But it was the first ordinary work she’d ever had. The first real income she’d ever made for herself. Well, maybe not for herself. Mostly for that elf. And maybe it wasn’t very ordinary, being a double-dealing setup of defense lessons from two politically opposed factions, interspersed with various odd jobs and selling unidentified plants to the local alchemist. But after quite a while feeling worthless, like baggage, and biding time until something more terrible happened, this was her form of prayer.

Still, the days passed. And perhaps a few weeks passed. And no word came, no letter from Elenwen or whoever Valamand had contacted. It would be beneath him to show some change in composure. But he was also not as subtle as he portrayed. If he got no reply, Wyrenna wondered, what would become of her?
Frostfall

Chapter Notes

To fully understand this interlude, and how it came to an end, we must now approach it from another point of view. Wyrenna did have somewhat more adventures and misadventures. But for now, we will instead be her warden Valamand.

With respectable discretion, of course— how could any human reader understand what it was like to be Valamand, brilliant example of Mer perfection, prodigal enforcer of the Thalmor’s will? It would certainly be too much, and above our station to even consider, to entertain placing ourselves in his crisp tar-leather boots. It would be fanciful folly to think we could rise to the measure of his height, his bearing, his quite excellent pedigree, his exemplary marks in all tests, evaluation, and Thalmor certification. Much less aspire to sycophant ourselves before his arcane ability.

But still, we must try. And for the sake of trying, we become the keen-eyed and gilded Valamand.

Valamand, who has not left the Moorside inn for nearly one month.

Valamand, who has not left the Moorside inn for exactly three weeks, four days, and twenty hours.

Valamand, who has been waiting desperately for a reply from his superiors for approximately that amount of time.

Valamand, who has not received one.

Watching the Nord come and go, when she could just as well left and not returned. If these humans had a weakness, he had long considered, it lay in their smallmindedness, their conceptions of honor at the risk of life and limb, yet no proper cause worth martyring for. The Nord returned with money at the end of each day simply because if not her, then who would pay for the room? Simply do not present to her that not paying for said room was an option, and she would not deviate from her course. Predictable. As a child might be.

She bungled as a child might bungle, if she accumulated such purple bruises playing among the marsh for spare septims. All that mattered was leaving Morthal, and soon.

Really, he couldn’t take much more of this.

“Its nice to see you settle in,” one of the local women said, another Nord. They all looked the same, to an extent—all bleached, all formed of squares and unfashionable shapes and with such unfortunate, troll-like hairiness. At least the one in his charge had the good sense to spare the world such an unflattering display. This one, clad in somewhat less clothes than the northern chill ought to abide, did not possess that same modesty.

“We could use one as handsome as you around,” she added, licking her lips.

Or any subtlety, it seemed.

“Get away from me, this instant,” he said, staring up where she leaned over him. Her expansive décolletage dangled pendulously close. “I have no desire to talk to you.”

This woman, she did not make much of his refusal. Rather, she lingered an uncomfortably long time
Finally she lifted as a pale bosomy cloud might from over his head, and sauntered off to accost the innkeeper, and finally to leave. And hopefully, Valamand thought, to bed. With some reeking peasant, befitting her status. That left only Valamand, his barely-acceptable vegetable soup, and the tortured verses of the abominable orcish bard in the far corner. The presence of a Thalmor was enough to repel any other ill-advised company. Which suited him well. He scraped his spoon along the bottom of the wooden bowl, dredging for what this frozen land professed to call tomatoes.

This was when the Nord burst through the inn door, speckled with blood. Sword still drawn. Her freckles were black peppercorns on canvas. She’d made some effort to wash herself off, but still smears lingered and her hair was sticky with frost and sweat. It was enough to break Lurburk off mid-line. Not that the orc remembered the ordinary ends of lines. She wordlessly walked up to the front bar, leaned her sword against it, and fished out the night’s septims. Then she approached the staring Valamand with a look of plea and dread.

It did not bode well.

“We need to talk,” she said.

That was less well, if the last time she had made such a demand was any example.

“I do not need to do anything,” he said. “Nor are you one to give me orders.”

She struck him. She struck him hard, across the jaw with a strength he had not known from her. Of course, he’d been at the end of her weeping fury before. This was different. There was a meter in this blow. Keener, sharpness in her knuckles the instant she pulled back. The strength of her arm. The innkeeper and the orcish bard stood agog, and Valamand conceded they were right to. To strike a member of the Thalmor in public… it was not done. It was not done and broke what little grace of order he’d afforded her. What happened next, however, baffled his immediate intent.

She drew close in to him and leaned into his right ear, “I need your help, and I need it without these locals looking on.”

Valamand looked at her, rattled and reeling. She was streaked with swampy muck. It was ridiculous, he thought, but his first impression was that she’d hit him to make a story. That a Nord might have a problem with an elf, that was easy to explain. But no, there was no reason, no way she would create a ruse like that. Or have the skill to, or would know it was a challenge to his status. Nords were not subtle people. Yet, why hadn’t she struck again? And she was not drunk or he’d have smelled it on her. Along with the usual Nord stench.

It was completely against what he considered his interests, to entertain that she might be more complex than he’d first assumed. Or even worthy of question. Still, as he saw the desperation in her, it would not do to underestimate his foe.

And, while we are Valamand we must understand why he said “Very well,” and stood, rising above her head. With a meaningful glare at the innkeeper, he ushered her to their rented room and proceeded to lock the door. Without being Valamand, or at least understanding his reasoning, it would be impossible to see why he conceded to this action. By all rules of order he should not have regarded this Nord as more than a petty captive or a slave that had acted unforgivably out-of-turn. He obliged her for what he swore would be the second and last time.

For, unbeknownst to Wyrenna and despite his impeccable breeding, credentials, and respectable place below his superiors, Valamand was not actually a very good Thalmor agent. In fact, Valamand
had been reassigned to Skyrim after a catastrophic failure in Anvil. With some small embarrassment, Valamand was a mere fifty years old. And in his place of shame, defensive pride of his own merits at so young an age he was also blind to the possibility that his will was easily bent. That while he was heavily indoctrinated, some neglected part of him remained unshaped, pliant, and possibly even human-ish. Something that elves often grew out of, but he had not.

No one knew of this small problem for on the outside all was stiff robes and brittle gold and harsh words. Not even Valamand himself.

“Have you seen Alva?” the Nord asked quickly, finally putting her sword away. It was an uncharacteristic display of trust for one who had five-knuckled him a moment before.

“Pardon, who?” asked Valamand, sneering at her. He rubbed his aching nose. “That name means nothing to me.”

The Nord looked to the side, at two hefty gourds sitting decoratively in a bowl. “You know… she is a local, really pretty, she sometimes comes in here…” She took the gourds and fit them to her own chest demonstratively.

“Oh,” Valamand said, catching her uncouth meaning. “I believe a woman was here only a few minutes ago. She made the unfortunate choice of pestering me. I refused her advances.”

This, for some reason, disturbed the Nord. She looked as if he’d dodged a flaming arrow. “Oh no,” she muttered. “She’s hungry…”

“No, no, you don’t understand,” said the Nord. “She’s literally hungry.”

Because, of course, Alva was a vampire.

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Or, so Wyrenna very highly suspected. Her tale began with scraping the pockets of everyone willing to pay in Morthal, and in so doing encountering Thonnir—a mill worker. His wife had left him some months ago without explanation. The prevailing rumor was that she’d joined the Stormcloaks. But, Wyrenna said that was very odd, because the only Stormcloaks in the area were men. Big, hairy men. And none of them had heard anything of Thonnir’s missing wife.

Predictably, Valamand cut Wyrenna off to demand what she was doing consorting with Stormcloaks. She merely demanded he “hush up and listen.”

So, fearing that there had been a murder, she had approached the authorities about it. Who then took her to the Jarl. As it so happened, there had recently been two other deaths in town, and it was in dispute if that had been an accident or if it had been a crime. Jarl Idgrod was no foolish woman, Wyrenna had learned, and was canny to that the two events may have been related. And the promise of coin for poking through some ashes was appealing. She’d never been one for shades and superstitions, herself.

Which was, to her horror, exactly what awaited her in the gutted husk of Hroggar’s house: the ghost of one small child who had died in the blaze. Valamand was incredulous at this, that a child might have enough magicka or presence of soul to linger after death. But he could not deny that based on the clue the ghost had provided, Wyrenna had found herself facing a terrible discovery. Thonnir’s wife, exhuming the grave the child’s ghost played over. Thonnir’s wife, as a vampire.
What happened then, she said, was a moment of panic. The vampire attacked and Wyrenna killed her. It was an awful experience, she said, but numb. The fight explained the blood on Wyrenna’s collection of leathers, Valamand said, but not how she had survived it.

Wyrenna replied that she wasn’t a warrior, but she also wasn’t a chowderhead. The marsh was dangerous. Skyrim was dangerous. He was very, very dangerous. And she’d be completely daft not to “do something about it all.”

But, she admitted, it was still shocking to her that she’d killed a vampire— sick woman— with her own blade. That it was like hearing about another her second-hand, some sort of fib story.

Valamand interrupted her to point out that a vampire was not a ‘person.’ By all rights they were half-dead, daedra-damned and a hazard to all civilized life. Wyrenna did not contradict him, but seemed doubtful of his reasoning. It did not make her feel much better about it.

She continued her story while nervously eating a piece of fruit left in their room. The color returned to her face, somewhat, but her hands continued to shake. Hroggar had been close behind, shocked to see the dead vampire— Laelette. It was he who told her that Laelette was Thonnir’s missing wife, and had dropped a spare clue that she’d begun to spend time with Alva before her unexplained absence.

Which placed Alva as a prime suspect for being a vampire as well. And starting the house fire, if Laelette hadn’t. Jarl Idgrod had agreed, when she’d made her hesitant claim. But she demanded proof.

This was where Wyrenna had come to Valamand for help. One of the Thalmor was probably skilled in all things inquisitorial. She was no burglar, she confessed, and had little idea of how to investigate further. But, she said, if he could use his authority to determine if Alva was indeed a vampire, she wouldn’t have to break the law.

To this, Valamand was unsure himself. He was a wizard, he said. Not so much anything else. There were lessers under the Thalmor for breaking-and-entering.

She didn’t need a minion, Wyrenna answered: only someone official who might be important enough to enter a house of a stranger. Neither the guards nor any of the Imperial Legion stationed in Morthal were keen to help. And to get a hold of the key simply wasn’t possible. Even if Jarl Idgrod permitted it, Wyrenna had no skill with locks or thievery.

Valamand even told her himself that he wasn’t sure how she talked him into it, but after all of this he did get properly kitted. He did unlock the room and go with her to Alva’s house late that night. He did knock on the door, clenching reddened knuckles where he went without gloves.

There was no answer, despite that candles glowed through the mortar and board walls, under the crack above the floor. Valamand banged above the knob, polite pretense lost. “By the authority of the Thalmor, I command you to open your doors!”

Someone inside was startled. They stumbled to their feet. There was a mild clattering inside. Several heavy bolts and the grind of the lock vibrated through the boardwalk timbers, until Hroggar could be seen in the doorway. He filled the gap, opening only a thin slit through to speak.

“You don’t have any business here, elf,” he said harshly. “There’s no Talos here!”

“I will be the judge of that,” Valamand said. He pushed the door wider open, the warm air rolling out over Wyrenna even in his shadow. “Stand aside, this is a search.” Next to the Thalmor, Wyrenna
was hardly notable. She slipped through the door in his wake.

“You don’t have the right to invade like this, elf! I have half a mind to throw you out!”

“On the contrary, I have every right to do as I please. And more.” His mouth upturned so slightly, the driest hint of satisfaction. “But of course, if you are as prudent as you claim, you have nothing to hide.”

“Yes! Yes, of course,” Hroggar said, sweating through his linen-spun clothes. “But be off quickly. This is a private home.”

“Charming.” Valamand said with no change in expression, nor any note of sincerity. “Now, I must ask of you several questions…”

That was the word. If Hroggar noticed her slip away from Thalmor escort, he was too preoccupied with the elf to chase her, or to even speak out. If there was one thing the Mer was good at, besides throwing fireballs, it seemed to be demanding attention to himself. Though Wyrenna imagined these two things were somehow related.

She wished it was a joke, but there was an actual coffin in the basement. Directly in the middle of the room, not even hidden or shoved off to the side. Not disguised as something else. A coffin. If she were a vampire, Wyrenna imagined, it might be less incriminating, less stereotypical, and just an all-round better idea to sleep in an ordinary bed. Maybe it was a symptom of the vampiric disease. The inexplicable need to be a cliche, and such.

Inside the coffin was a journal. Wyrenna read the journal.

Her eyebrows rose high.

“Oh my,” she said, and tucked it in the crook of her arm. Then she opened the door and trudged up the stairs again.

“—And I’m telling you, elf, I’ve never been to Cheydinhal, I don’t have a brother, and,” Hroggar noticed Wyrenna ascending from the cellar, “you’re not allowed down there!”

“Um, sorry, I was just leaving,” Wyrenna said. “Nice, uh, basement.”

Still, Hroggar seemed upset. Upset enough to ignore the Thalmor still questioning him and pull a hatchet off the mantle. “You! You’ll never leave here—”

He stopped. He stumbled around, as if lost. Valamand looked rather pleased with himself. “Never leave here without…?”

Hroggar, dazed and illusion-addled, blinked, staring into the sun. “You shouldn’t leave here without… er…”

“A drink!” Wyrenna said quickly.

“That’s right,” Hroggar said. “No leaving without a good, strong drink! Here, elf— this’ll put some hair on that chest!”

He shoved two full bottles of mead into their hands. Valamand held his like an unwanted baby.

“You shouldn’t have,” he said, through grit teeth. More at Wyrenna than at the mazed Hroggar.

Wyrenna laughed nervously. “You’re sweet,” she said to Hroggar. “Good-night! Uh, goodbye!”
Valamand pushed her out the door as if he was pushing an errant hatstand into a closet, like so much clutter. The door shut behind them. They didn’t linger on the step and Wyrenna didn’t care to, if Hroggar could come to his senses and realize what had happened.

“That went pretty well,” Wyrenna said. “I mean, I don’t like you magicking people, but at least you didn’t light him on fire.”

“I hope you haven’t wasted my time,” Valamand said. “Whatever you have there had better be worthwhile.”

“Here,” Wyrenna said. She gave the journal to him. It was dark. The Thalmor spent a moment clustering around a nearby watch lantern, and when it did not suffice he lit his own mage-candle. He opened the thin volume and paged through it skeptically.

Then he froze.

“Well, then,” he said.

“I need to get this to the Jarl, right away,” Wyrenna said quickly.

“Then do so,” Valamand said, visibly concerned about the contents of the journal. Unlike Wyrenna, he read quickly, and didn’t have to skim. His mage-candle flickered out the instant he closed the volume.

“Come with me,” Wyrenna said.

“Absolutely not!”

Wyrenna snatched the journal from his fingers, closed it, and peered up at him through the foggy night. “I’m not any kind of authority, I’m not an investigator. I’m just an errand girl, at best. I don’t understand how you can discover something like this, and then go hide at the inn with a lousy bard and half-rate food!”

Valamand opened his mouth to retort, but there was no acid that could leave his lips quickly enough to corrode Wyrenna’s righteous fury. He seemed smaller to her, lesser. Worthy of fear, but less worthy of respect. The two came together, the latter smuggled in without her noticing. But she was loathe to see it leave.

“I don’t ask people I hate to help me for no reason. If I had anybody, anybody, else, I would ask them before asking you,” she said, and felt the wind whip around her hair, sting her ears. “Any human would do!”

As blows went, her words struck true. Wyrenna didn’t know much what he’d do. But he wasn’t a Nord, or any laborer. He didn’t start a fistfight, begin swinging. He stared down at her, and though his jaw was set in pained neutrality she could see a bruise in it, some ache of ego. He leaned forward to meet her gaze, as if he’d remind her how low he had to stoop to curse her.

“Then ask one of the local rabble,” he spat, composing himself quickly, cool as ever. “And bother me no further with this.”

“Yes, you’re very busy,” Wyrenna said. “All of that patting yourself on the back and praising that you were ever born.”

Valamand, with hands stuffed in his armpits and puffing steam into the night shot her one last scathing look. Then he turned, walked away into the town streets without another word. Wyrenna
watched. And she followed when he turned to Highmoon Hall, and not to the Moorside Inn. Not really with pride, but with a bitter scorn and triumph that this elf could be moved, that she had done it twice, and that to an extent his authority was hers to command.

She remembered he’d vexed Hroggar so strongly he hadn’t been able to remember what an axe was for.

To a limited extent, she had to remind herself.

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When faced with problems, Wyrenna liked to think about the most reasonable solutions. She’d been given quite a few of those in her life, problems—mundane ones. But now, marching in the bleak fen, questions piled atop one another and the given solution itched her like a too-tight lace.

Vampires, massing nearby! Send soldiers?

No, only a civilian mob.

Vampires, massing nearby! Send the hold guards?

No, only farmtools, torches, and some silversmith’s daughter.

Vampires, massing nearby! Send experienced mercenaries and vampire-hunters?

No, send this errand girl with only a month of swordsmanship behind her, and some citizens that ought to be protected from vampires.

Vampires, massing nearby! Alert literally anybody in a league’s radius?

No, we have exactly one Thalmor wizard right here, recalcitrant or not.

“What are you wearing?” Valamand sneered at her, only footsteps ahead of a local swordarm, a few mill-workers, and the absent-minded town alchemist. All irate, all yelling, all pitchforks-and-pitch.

Wyrenna sneezed. She’d borrowed a spare helm from the garrison, promising to return it. The tight muffler had been pinched days ago from the Stormcloaks, and on top of everything was her own furs. Hjaalmarch was cold, but she was still sweating steam through her clothes. Only her eyes were visible, peeking out under the uncomfortably heavy visor.

“I wasn’t expecting to fight a vampire last time,” she said, voice wavering. “I couldn’t prepare…”

“You look ridiculous.”

“I don’t want any of them to touch me, all right?” Wyrenna said worriedly. “I’ve heard that’s how it spreads. The disease, I mean. You may be able to stay back and throw fire at them, but… I… well…”

She knocked her steel blade and banded-oak shield together, suddenly feeling like she’d forgotten how to use them. If she’d really ever learned at all.

“I’m not sure any vampire could stomach you,” Valamand said.


Wyrenna could feel the force of his eyes rolling behind her.
The strange lights that Wyrenna had seen occasionally in the marsh, running back by night, were easily explained now: a line of dim-burning beacons. For what, she only had two guesses. So that vampires could find their lair again, and perhaps to lure unwitting passers-by to its maw. She hadn’t been raised by fools. She knew not to go to strange lights in the wilderness. But there were people less lucky than she.

And, Wyrenna noticed, all of it, the waypoints, were covered in remains. Mostly human, but a few may have been elf. No animal bones, but candles wedged in the empty jaws of split skulls and oilrags within bellies of shattered ribs. Disconcerting, she thought. Also, tacky.

She couldn’t help but notice that every time they passed one of these monuments, the mob lagged a little further behind them.

“Kill the vampires!”

“Kill them!”

Those sounded less like conviction and more like answers to doubt. Wyrenna knew she should have argued harder to bring soldiers.

“That cave… does look sort of spooky, doesn’t it?”

“Cowards! We must kill the vampires!”

“Yes, but, er, let that elf go in, first!”

“Milkdrinkers! I’ll kill every single one of them myself!” That was Thonnir, white-knuckled around an old sledgehammer. First in enthusiasm, he was the least in preparation and Wyrenna cringed to think of him charging in alone.

Wyrenna looked at the mouth of the cave and quickly considered her options. In life, too.

“I’ll go in first,” she said, horrified that she said so.

Everyone else was, too. There was an actual warrior there, after all. And a man shaking in fury enough to practically be. And a highly-qualified agent of the Aldmeri Dominion. Even the silly bard was at least an Orc.

Then again, she thought, she was an outsider. Who many of them had come to see practicing with the Imperial Legion and braving the marshes. What they assumed about her, maybe it was enough to carry her words. Valamand, however, was not fooled in the least.

“I’ll go in first. Who knows if the vampires are in there, or are out here at night, looking for people to eat,” she said. “Thonnir should stay here, maybe, in case.”

She held her composure in their speechlessness, hoping they bought it. And, astonished, Wyrenna saw them do just that. Lami donated several potions, curatives, she’d brought. Luburk even offered to sing a rousing ballad to wish her victory—no, no thank-you, never, please, don’t do that.

Sword in hand, Wyrenna descended into the vampire lair.

And of course, Valamand had to go with her. He cursed, but he had to. “That was your intent,” he grumbled. “You volunteered me, by volunteering your own self.”

“You still chose to follow,” Wyrenna said, beating back the fangs of doubt with each step. “You
didn’t have to come. You don’t even know if you need me, still. You could just leave.”

Valamand cast a light from his off hand, illuminating the lichen-crusted ceiling. “Suicide will not save you,” he said harshly.

“What?”

Wyrenna didn’t take her eyes off the mouth of the tunnel, eyes darting from side to side. They descended a rickety shaft, the scrambling of spiders not far ahead. “Thonnir, he has a son,” she said. “I don’t know about the rest. But they have things, in Morthal. To go back to. I don’t, really. So it made the most sense that I ought to go.”

“Oh, please. Spare me your delusions of heroism.”

Ah. There were the giant frostbite spiders. Two fat ones, scar-less and hairy. Wyrenna watched Valamand pick them off from afar, cobwebs going up in flames. The largest one got nearly as far as her sword-reach before it succumbed to burns. She stepped over it, gagging on the smell of bitter carapace.

“Heroes aren’t anything but garbage,” Wyrenna said, hoping he’d be able to dispatch the rest of what lay the tunnels ahead. “No hero’s going to save my life from you Thalmor, no matter what you promise.”

Valamand’s cast-gold face was set as he spoke. “Fatalism doesn’t suit you. If you were to be broken, you would not even be here.”

Maybe he was right, in his own way. Maybe there was still hope. She would not have spent so long delaying the inevitable only to embrace it. A sweet reek hung in the air, dripped down the walls, made the worst vision of her future seem so real, enough to avoid by cutting things short in this place. She pinched her eyes shut. Thought of Ilyas-Tei. Zaas-Tei. Venava. Maybe even Siegfried, if he was lucky. Those people, maybe they were still waiting for her. Maybe still missed her as much as she missed them.

Those people, they stood at the beginning of the road in Bruma. While fresh and strong in her mind, they were stuck firmly in the past. They could not help her now. Maybe, in that way, they were heroes to her.

When Wyrenna opened her eyes, she faced the first person she’d kill with intent in her life. Not a vampire. Not someone beyond saving, but one of their thralls. She did her best to forget about the fast-talking silversmith’s daughter, who was of no use here. The sword and the shield, that was who she was tonight.

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“Maybe we should have tried this in the daytime, when they’re asleep,” Wyrenna whispered, creeping as softly as her rattling chain and creaking leathers could allow. Valamand had it easier in his dark robes, though his shoes were hard and cut the ground sharply. She peeked down the hall into what seemed like a main banquet. What the feast was, that was both obvious and grotesque.

The first vampire had gone down easily enough. Almost unsettlingly easy, for all that she wasn’t any expert in man-slaying, let alone vampire-slaying. Just a quick plunge in and out of a body, a crack to the head from a shield, and the creature (person) wouldn’t rise again. Laelette had been hazy, a panicked struggle, but without that fog of horror things were different. Tales of vampires made them
sound like such fearsome beasts. Wyrenna had never considered that some must be new and weak, merely ordinary people beyond the grasp of healing or reason.

Others, however, weren’t so minor. It was difficult to see in this helmet but at the head of the table, a sunken figure counted out gold in pouches, showered his place with coins and with blood. That, she supposed, was Movarth.

Wyrenna looked at where she knew her sword was. What are you doing here? What business do you have, facing a master vampire? You’re no soldier, no mercenary, not even a fighter. You’re someone’s daughter, holding a blade. You strong-arm the rare leerer at the pub, at the most. If worse foes could be defeated by amateurs, then they wouldn’t survive the years or centuries to become so fearsome in the first place.

And besides, on the far-flung chance that he somehow tripped on a rock and brained himself to death, what was she doing? Wyrenna looked at the blood feast before her and felt a distinct lack of ambition. Whatever the limited fruit of promises and sly words, Wyrenna doubted she’d be living her own same life after the Thalmor were through with her.

“We can hardly wait now,” Valamand hissed back at her. “Even if, now that you mention it, this is a marked example of poor planning.”

“Well, neither of us thought of it, so the blame’s on both of us,” Wyrenna said. “Just the two of us, we have to get rid of all of these vampires.”

When she said that, it sounded like cleaning out an infestation of ants. Like it was a problem to be solved. Wyrenna decided she liked it that way, to at least pretend that it was possible, that they had the tools to do it and merely had to consider the execution.

It struck her, looking at the gentle outline of Valamand’s hood, that she could abandon him. She could escape while the vampires consumed him and perhaps be free. She could run, make up some story to the angry mob, and be on a cart back to Cyrodiil within the week. She could do anything, really. Even plunge her sword into his chest right here, while he wasn’t expecting it…

Yet, despite all that he had done, her skin crawled under her muffler with the thought. She was ashamed she’d even considered it. The vision still persisted in her mind. Wyrenna wasn’t sure if she did that, she could consider herself worthy before Stendarr, before any of the Divines, before the memory of her father, or even simply as a Nord.

How silly.

He didn’t deserve it.

Valamand spoke, “I count four,” he said. “Though some may be hidden from view. At this distance I cannot say how many of them are actually vampires, and how many are their slaves.”

Four. Four sounded like such a reasonable, almost possible number. She knew Valamand had killed more foes than that in one encounter. She’d even seen it, though she hadn’t been paying perfect attention. But his backup had been a pair of trained Altmeri inquisitors, not some housegirl with a pointed object.

“Do you think you can… you know…” She mimed a large explosion, dim in the shadows.

“Something like that?”

“Certainly,” Valamand said. “In fact, that is precisely what I suggest. Hit them hard, quickly, before
they have a chance to recover. Movarth, perhaps he is fearsome. But I have yet to meet anyone able
to swallow a fireball and walk away.”

“That’s the plan?” Wyrenna somehow didn’t feel assured. “Rush in, that’s it?”

“A formal frontal assault is somewhat more sophisticated than ‘rushing’ in.”

“Gods. I should have brought Thonnir after all.”

Valamand shoved her across the back, weaker for his poor vantage where they were hidden. “You
will advance, full sprint on my signal. I will support from the rear. If all goes well, then they will not
last long.”

He really didn’t have to elaborate on what would happen if it went poorly.

“On my mark. Stand ready,” he said, hiding the light of his first spell behind his sleeve. “Attack.”

Wyrenna did. Every nerve questioned it, but she did, and she felt the eyes of every horrible vampire
and ghoulish servant snap to her as she burst into the hall. Movarth himself. She sweat, she had a
stitch in her side already. Raising her shield and not slowing her stride, Wyrenna let out what she
hoped was a ringing war cry.

“Die, vampires!”

It could use some work. The vampires stood their ground, the nearest licking its lips and casting
some sort of terrible magic at her. She felt heavier, lightheaded. It stopped, thankfully, when she
planted her shield right into its nose with a strangely-satisfying crunch. The vampire squealed,
grasping its face with two hands. Wyrenna did not stop. She would not stop, not for anything.

A well-knotted axe struck forth into her path, and no shield could dare block its force. The hefty
arms of the one who cast it, they reminded her of someone, in that instant of mind-time divorced
from passing moments. Brynjar. How he’d bruised her.

And the man before her, he was suddenly the rocks and she was the frost. Wyrenna flowed. His
swing bit the dirt, he bit her blade. It worked out well, that way. The ground before her feet traced
the cold glow of muted, circular runes—Movarth’s right-hand vampire. But it was only another
rock. Stationary and far easier to avoid than the Bone-Breaker had been. It shattered into force
behind her, and she did not see who had blundered into it.

The Master Vampire himself was nearly within her reach when the world around her exploded. A
hammer of sound battered her bones, the heat and flare of force nearly throwing her over the
vampire’s tall throne. Everything on the table flew in a different direction: plates, bones, wine, and a
shower of golden septims. A second explosion followed close behind, and a third. Each was
blinding, and each felt hotter in succession. Each resulted in louder shrieks from the foes around her.
And then none after.

From the flames Movarth tore like a beast unbound: open palms hooked into talons. His fanged
mouth gaped wide, his scream of bloodlust was so horrible Wyrenna couldn’t find her nerve.

Valamand was yelling something, and she didn’t know what it was. But, her mind filled in the
words, in the voice for her.

“Defensive position!”

Her limbs snapped to fend off Movarth’s crushing barefisted strike, feeling his augmented strength
rattle her wrists.

“Ready position!”

Quaestor Volgag wasn’t here, though. No one was here but her and the Thalmor, and now the evil Movarth Piquine. Wyrenna pulled back into her body, feeling her feet and awareness spread out as the world narrowed. He’d seemed taller a moment ago, but Movarth was smaller than her. Perhaps more heavily built, perhaps a vampire. But shorter, hungrier, frenzied. Burning.

She felt weak.

Movarth suddenly was bombarded by a volley of firebolts. He hissed, throwing up his arms to catch them on his gauntlets. His reflexes were sharp, but it broke his concentration. Wyrenna dug her heel in, angled her shoulder and fixed her shield, and shoved.

Even a master at fisticuffs could not defend both flanks at once. Movarth stumbled, momentarily overtaken. To see a Master Vampire fumble, her eyes lit up. Hope breathed in her ears, ghosted upon her limbs, the praise of Kynareth. Morale and strength redoubled, Wyrenna advanced, shoving again, seeing him crumble before her. She forgot who she was. For a second. An instant. In which, she let loose a roar that shook the cave roof,

“Die, vampire!”

and buried her sword directly into Movarth’s open mouth. He choked on blood. First, that he’d recently consumed. Then, his own. The blade that Wyrenna withdrew was dark, almost black. Movarth himself crumpled to the floor and did not move. Still and true in final death.

Wyrenna stood over him, shoulders and breath steaming, swirling in a dizzy euphoria. It felt good in the way the worst things felt good. It felt good in the way too much ale felt good, or sex with a forbidden paramour. Wyrenna could lift mountains. Wyrenna felt her stomach lift her dinner.

“I’m alive,” she said, staring at the damage. “We’ve won.”

Valamand stepped into the light, which she now noticed was not the light of candles, but of everything flammable in the room. He was somewhat bruised up, but largely unscathed. His vulpine eyes lit in the fire’s warmth, and she was surprised to see, well… surprise. As if he hadn’t really thought it would work. And yet, here she was.

Her laughter was laced with bile. Valamand merely rolled his eyes and began looking up and down any side corridors. Meanwhile, Wyrenna leaned her sword against the overturned table and dug out one of the elixirs that Lami had given her. It was a small vial in opaque glass. She removed her borrowed helm, up-ended the contents down her throat, while pinching her nose. It tasted like burnt fish soup. Still, better than to risk having caught the vampiric disease.

“I would not be hasty to declare victory just yet,” Valamand said, eying her sword with a newfound distrust. “There may be more, waiting or asleep. What are you doing?”

His question interrupted the girl as she’d began picking gold coins off the ground and gathering them into her up-ended helmet. “There’s a lot of money,” she said, though she felt that it ought to have been obvious.

“This is not a treasure-hunt!”

“I’m going to give it to the town,” Wyrenna said seriously, cutting him off. “Gods know they deserve something out of this.”
Valamand didn’t argue. He merely downed his own dose of curative potion and let her pick through the debris. Whether he thought it was barbaric, or pragmatic, went unsaid. Finally, she collected the head of Movarth Piquine from his cooling body, and continued into the cave’s further tunnels.

Wyrenna had never held so much money at one time in her life. And there even was a small cache of treasure, hidden in what she could only assume was Movarth’s private lair: golden wedding bands, heirloom knives, the contents of who-knew-how-many pockets. She gathered these up, too.

Leaning against an alchemist’s bench was Alva. Almost as if she’d grown tired and sat down to rest. But her skin was paper-white, the bruise on her was bloodless, and her ribs jutted at a fatal angle. Wyrenna did not feel pity for the woman, but a sense of regret. She’d seen Alva quite a few evenings, days and weeks ago. If only she’d known, or had been able to learn of her condition.

Valamand took one of the moth-eaten linens hanging from the near wall and settled it over the woman’s body. Her glassy stare could chill no more.

“Now, all is done,” Valamand said, even and metered as a poet. “None remain to see the dawn.”

“Hey, Valamand?”

He did not answer.

“You kill a lot of people.” Wyrenna said, and did not let it hold doubt. “How do you do it?”

“Quickly.”

Wyrenna could see his mask cast in plaster angles and judgement and unknown intent. “No,” she said. “How do you stop thinking about it?”

He looked at her indirectly, but very seriously. Even more seriously than when he’d wanted a confession from her.

“Quickly,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

1) Assuming, of course, that you are human.
2) http://i.imgur.com/5sRPtM6.png?1
To understand what transpired next, we must again labor to be Valamand. Difficult as it may be. In emerging from that cave, to be pushed aside in favor of this bloodied girl. To see her hold aloft the head of Movarth Piquine and not understand why her damn hands shook, if she cleaved it off herself. To see her refuse the praise of her fellow Nords, or try to. Nords, he thought, seemed difficult to refuse.

Perhaps even among Nords, it was not her place to be praised so. But if that was true, then her kin discarded that fact or otherwise remained ignorant to it despite her insistence. Valamand received no commendation, nor did he want any from such base peoples. But he did watch as she drowned in it, and was not able to take his prisoner away from the joyous mob.

She flew on their wings back to the Jarl, who was old and keen and almost Mer-ish for what she was worth. That woman slit her mouth with smile, and gave the prisoner a title. A title! How the girl refused, stammered and made a humiliating show. What a fool! No requests to negotiate, no composure. Simple flat-out rejection.

Still. Nords were not to be denied. Valamand watched her be named a Thane of Hjaalmarch. Both as slayer of Movarth, and in return for her great generosity. She kept only a small purse for herself. The rest, she gave to the Jarl as she’d promised and had not accepted any naming of additional titles.

He did not speak to her over the next morning’s feast, and ate his boiled pudding alone. Strange that she did not drink, or celebrate this gain, if Jarl Ravencrone was willing to stoop to bestow it. Very nearly insulting, even. Yet, that Nord seemed off her stomach. She ate with the Imperials, especially that Orc of some rank. Doubtless he wanted her for the Legion, but she refused him as well.

She approached Valamand well after midday, once the festivities had wound down and all had returned to ordinary work. It was at the courier’s waypost, halfway to the road. She carried his satchel of supplies, the bedroll. Her new sword, new shield. She wore her new armor, well-fit. She carried her old furs.

“I want to leave,” she said.

And Valamand could not imagine why, or why she would approach him with such a demand, or that even now she could think herself permitted to make such a brazen request.

“You are now titled, what little meaning a Nordish title may be worth,” he said. “I detest it. But I can no longer bear you off in chains.”

“You don’t need to,” she said. “I’ll come on my own.”

Why?

“You may purchase land here. You may do… whatever it is Nords do. You will never be a vagrant in this place,” he said. “Vagrant that you are. It escapes me why you would not spring at the chance to grow your interests in your homeland.”

“This is not my homeland,” the Nord said. “I’m not… These Nords here don’t understand that Skyrim is not the home of every Nord. Someone with a tie to this land deserves this title. Not me.”

“Absurd,” Valamand said. “You wept at length of your coming to Skyrim seeking new opportunity. You have found it.”
“I came seeking my mother, her name, her care;” the Nord said, reaching for more and more words. With each one, she stretched thin concepts to him, concepts that Valamand was not sure had any distinction from one another. “Without that, I don’t want to start on my own. It would just be me, alone. My name would begin here, in a land that’s not mine.”

She could have been speaking about varieties of clouds, or counting clovers in a field.

That girl must have seen him wrinkling his brow. “I shouldn’t explain,” she said. “You don’t care, and you wouldn’t understand. You’re an elf. Whatever started your name, started centuries ago.”

And she was correct, despite she knew nothing of Luxurene or his estate’s long repute. But her weak suppositions, to Valamand, were dimly more familiar. He thought back to their inn-room. She had previously had no other names, or titles. She did not possess any living family, as she mourned dead kin. This Nord knew no trade, nor had been employed honestly. Perhaps her late family had kept her as a sort of daughter-slave, to tend the house. Which was a barbaric state of affairs, Valamand thought, but there was no figuring the relations of Men.

It definitely wasn’t the predicament she was attempting to make clear to him, but Valamand concluded that this Nord was of low birth among Nords. She was an outsider to Skyrim’s ways and society. She did not rank herself as worthy to accept a title, or to live her life as nobility elevated above those with a more direct ancestral claim to the land. Or, that was his theory. That because Nords were not astute, the Ravencrone had not understood that this girl was below her appropriate attention.

“You’re correct,” he said. “I really do not care, if you are so low as you regard yourself. But as for leaving, you are free to go. Whether you accept it or not, you now are a Thane of this country, and thus a citizen. Without tangible evidence, I cannot remove you into custody.”

This, the girl boggled at. Was her mind so small as to think there wasn’t a proper order of things?

“You didn’t seem to care before,” she said.

“That proof is no longer valid enough before the scrutiny of local petty kings,” Valamand said, loathing every syllable. “Unless you’d like to admit you carry what I know you carry, in front of one.”

The Nord’s mind wasn’t so small as to blurt out a confession by accident, apparently.

“I still do not understand why you’d want to be in custody,” he said.

The Nord crossed her arms. “I never said that. Just that I want to leave, and you ought to be leaving, and I thought you still needed me to testify,” she said. “I did give you my word, though I don’t know if your people will arrest me anyway.”

Incredible. Incredible in their folly. That they’d rather be detained over breaking a promise. Nords, at times, were almost admirable. Almost.

“Why,” he asked, squinting down at her, “would I ‘ought’ to be leaving?”

“Sending letters isn’t working,” she said. “You should probably… I don’t know. Go in person?”

“After this much time, it would be…!” Valamand curbed his tongue. “You cannot know what my superiors would think if I was to show up after a month’s furlough. Never mind what among them paid mercenaries to dispatch me.”
Wyrenna was a Nord. And Nords were dauntless. “The longer you wait, the worse it’ll get,” she said. “And if you show up, even if they did want to kill you, then I guess they’ll do that then? How long until they figure out you’re hiding in a dumpy town like Morthal?”

“True,” he said.

No, take that back. Take it back.

Valamand cursed his tongue, and that a Nord’s always seemed to be quicker.

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However, to Wyrenna, all of this was yet another verbal victory. She knew nothing of the judgements he had placed that had led up to his accidental agreement. Just as surely as he knew nothing of her honor, and how it ached in undeserved status.

Which was ridiculous, considering she’d slain Movarth.

Maybe more accurately she might say that she ought not to have deserved it.

Still, Wyrenna could imagine the sun watching her, on the road to Solitude. Yet another detour. Northwatch wasn’t where his superiors were? Or he could have been still avoiding them, hiding as a thread in city’s cloth.

Wyrenna wished she could hide, too. She looked over her shoulder at the sun, or whatever dwelled behind it. Maybe one day she could come to terms with her strangely-earned title. But never if the Thalmor decided they did need her after all and ripped her from where she might put down roots.

Was this what choosing your life was like? There was no wanting in it. Only ever-more rituals that she hoped might forestall disaster. And the sun said back to her, what would be a disaster for one with so little to lose?

That mind’s-voice sounded too much like Valamand. An absurd solidarity; she feared him still. But it was the best she could do, to keep her word to him. It was the most important thing she still had. And his situation was… she tried to consider it. It was even pathetic. He just wouldn’t admit they were the same. Both waiting for the word of judgement.

There were bodies in the road. Wyrenna wanted to run past, but she settled to walk. Crows scattered at their approach. No one on the ground was merely wounded. All were dead.

“Stormcloaks,” Valamand said. He rolled one over with his boot, revealing congealed Windhelm colors. They’d laid there for hours, if not a day. All of them had been fairly picked-over, no coin purses to be seen. A few had even been stripped of mail or helmets. One of those caught her eye.

She had to use two hands to lift his mass, revealing a tangle of red braids.

“Brynjar Bone-Breaker,” she said. “So this is what became of him.”

“You knew this filth?” Valamand asked. “You had said something about this lot.”

Wyrenna smiled, despite herself. “I had a good thing going on, for a while,” she said. “One day, clean for the Imperials and learn from Volgag. Next day, run to the Stormcloaks and be beaten on by Brynjar, and pick toadstools on the way back. Neither were the wiser.”

Valamand stared at her. That just made her smile more, a better reason to be proud than any title she never had wanted. That was how Wyrenna felt her name was most firm, what note she deserved.
Wyrenna, fooler of elves and fooler of men and fooler of orcs and all kinds.

“You should have stayed with the rebels,” Valamand said.

“I considered it,” Wyrenna said. “Even if just to get some revenge. But Skyrim’s not my home. I don’t know what they’re fighting for. After meeting them, I think they’re fighting only to fight.”

She closed Brynjar’s eyes.

“That’s not the kind of life I want to live,” she said.

It was a nice sentiment. It would have been, if a sabercat had not bounded off the rock above her and crushed her to the ground. Wyrenna cried out, shoved her fist up into its snarling mouth. It choked, unable to bite down, but its crushing teeth mauled her elbow. A lance of pain sent her boneless. Then seized her with a scream that she wasn’t sure could be so loud.

The red world spun. Her sword ended up in the beast. Sharp claws scraped her ringmail. Heat flashed in her face, she felt her hair sizzle. The great cat whined and snarled, flopping off of her. Wyrenna vaguely knew to sit up on the road, where she saw the beast charge at Valamand some ways away. Its paw made mortal contact with the ground, within a circle of a rune. It was blown skyward as sure as if it had stepped on a keg of lime and saltpetre.

There was a second sabercat. It watched. But, regarding the wizard’s threat it chose instead to eat carrion, the bones of Brynjar Bone-Breaker.

Valamand approached her like a cloud, merely a black smear in her reeling vision. He said… something? Something insulting, probably. Then the world spun right-side-up.

“What did you do?” She asked, staring at her limb. It jutted out oddly, uncomfortably.

Valamand did not seem concerned, or impressed. “The illusion you are under now alters your perception of pain,” he said. “I assure you, you are still in agony.”

“Can’t you… do something about it?” she asked. Look at his face. Not at the wound. Do not look at the wound, or the angle of the bone underneath it. Wyrenna told herself these things.

“No,” he said. “I am a battlemage, not a healer. With luck, there will be medicine further on.”

“Find bandages,” Wyrenna said.

“Do not order me around,” Valamand scoffed.

“I am sitting here with a broken arm!” she yelled. A crow flew away. The other sabercat left, unwilling maybe to deal with this nonsense.

Despite his disdain, he did fashion a sling out of one of the Stormcloak tabards, and did wrap her arm firmly in what clean linen they had. He cut it with Wyrenna’s sword, reclaimed from the dead beast.

“Let this be a lesson,” he said sharply. “You may deceive idiot Stormcloaks and the Imperial army. But you cannot spite the Gods.”

They found a stray horse abandoned in the battle, grazing off the nearby ditch. Valamand had to strain to lift Wyrenna in armor atop it, but he refused to lower himself to riding a Nord’s horse. Wyrenna did not speak much after that. She went back to thinking about her life, and what to do with it. Feeling the waning sun’s gaze.
It struck her that while he had shown her nothing but harsh judgement and scorn, he had not once bid her be quiet, or called her scum or any low creature’s name since they had set out anew. There was only frigid regard. Better than disregard. Not by much, but better.

Still, his demeanor changed nothing of who he was. Men could behave however they wished, to shape a reaction. Wyrenna had learned that long ago. Calculated or otherwise, these things had a purpose and she would not be fooled.

The illusion wavered quietly. Wyrenna clamped her eyelids down so her tears would not escape. Now more than ever she would not show weakness. Her vulnerability was not bought with the least of civil tongues. Wyrenna vowed she’d strike first.

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There were no healers in Dragon Bridge. There were no doctors, either. Nor priests, nor any apothecary, or other individual that might do anything significant for a broken arm. In fact, Dragon Bridge was not much of a village, or even much more than just what it’s name implied. Aside from said bridge, there was a lumbermill, a few cabbage-patch farmhouses, lodging, and a guardhouse of some kind. Valamand had looked at it knowingly as they passed, but otherwise had not made any indication that it might be of assistance. But the sky grew dark, and the shadows grew long, and the inn grew in Wyrenna’s mind until she was so glad to see it that she almost strained her injury slinging off the horse.

It was a few septims extra to tie the bay gelding up outside the inn. Wyrenna considered she might have kept more of the reward from Morthal for herself. But really, the Four Shields was remarkably similar inside to the Moorside Inn, and did not cost much more either. Even with the fee for hay and water. So long as it wasn’t an extended stay…

Her arm throbbed as she twisted to undo armor buckles and to shed her mail. It was a humiliating few minutes before Valamand groaned and demanded she stand up, for him to help her.

It continued to be humiliating afterwards, but a different breed. At least it was interesting hearing him curse and pick at the laces. His hands were an odd shambles: a mix of reddened, windburned skin and manicured nails. His fingers were slender and longer than her own, like a harpist’s or a calligrapher’s. His movements were agitated. She was a child, Wyrenna read in them. A child and perhaps unclean, or otherwise he touched her as little as possible.

She smacked his hand away from the edge of her gambeson as he made to lift this final part of armor away. “I can do that myself,” she snapped. And wrenched her elbow sharply while doing so, but she’d never reveal it to him.

Brand new, and the padded jacket was already stained with blood. Not much; the beast’s teeth had only punctured her once, and broken the bone there. The rest was spilled-ink bruising.

“Give me your arm,” Valamand demanded.

“I thought you didn’t know any spells that could help,” she said.

“I don’t,” and there was a kind of indignant disgrace in the back of his throat. “But it must be cleaned properly. Or, one could have it sawn off later.”

“Fine! Fine! Just…”

The idea of asking him to be gentle with it was laughable. Wyrenna didn’t finish, merely rolled up her sleeve more and let him clean it with fresh water and the whitest of her linen rags. At least this
hadn’t happened during her monthlies, she thought. That would have been a disaster.

Just because he washes your wounds now, she thought, doesn’t mean he’s any less who starved you, marched you nearly without rest, insulted you, reneged on a deal, and acted in terrible, racist ways while you slaved to pay off his inn room. Wyrenna was fully capable of expanding a long list of this Mer’s crimes, and did so. But they did not erase the drawn quality of him, the dark circles under his eyes. She had not noticed much of his face, Wyrenna thought, but she did not remember it looking so much like a skinny horse, or a frightened dog. Elves often felt strangely too-well-seamed-together. But Valamand, as loathsome as he was to her, was downright frazzled.

“You’re afraid,” she said without sympathy. It was her observation.

Valamand ignored her.

“Don’t do that thing,” she said harshly, “where you pretend not to have heard me for some reason. Why do you do that, anyway? I know you’re listening.”

“An inferior ought not to presume she knows the mind of one higher in station than herself,” Valamand said. “You could not comprehend it anyway.”

“I’ll tell an inferior that when I see one,” she said, sure it would make his blood boil. “You really are scared of this Elenwen, then? Or just the assassins?”

Valamand was sure to wipe a blot of water into her raw wound, then. It stung. “Do you have anything else to pester me with, beyond constant inquiries into my business? Of where we are going, and what awaits me there, and what awaits you there? You had all the opportunity to remain in Morthal: safe, protected to an extent. You forsook it.”

“It’s not as if my world contains much more at the moment,” Wyrenna said. “You should be happy. You’re the center of attention. Not that you’d ‘lower yourself’ to hear if I talked about me, besides.”

Valamand did not dignify her with an answer, merely began splinting her arm with a spare switch for the inn’s fire.

“I’m sorry I fooled myself into having even a second of concern for your problems,” she said. “Or that I even was silly enough to ask after a hunted mer, as his hunted woman.”

It felt good to get it out after a month of biting her tongue, afraid he’d burn it off. But it was worse to see him stare at her like an errant smudge of dirt or a dog that had just wet the floor.

“Very well,” he said. “I’ll bid you speak.”

“On what?”

“About yourself, apparently,” he said. “Consider your approach, while I get your yowling trap fed.”

There was really not much to consider before he returned with a plate of cheese, a loaf of bread, and two bowls. A better meal than in Morthal, but served with just as much disdain. She had to sit sideways for her slung arm to not bang up against the small table. She extended her period of grace by beginning her stew. Rabbit. Hot enough to burn her mouth.

“Well?” Valamand seemed impatient, or even haughty in her predicament. “Regale me of your pitiful former life. I’m sure my report could use it.”

“Well, you know some already,” Wyrenna began. “My name. No real family name. Da and Mother
are both gone, now. I guess I still have a little family, but not by blood. Da’s old apprentice, Zaas-tei, his family. Argonians, a good sort. But I’ve said my goodbyes, so they’re getting on without me probably.”

Valamand looked bored. “You know well how to tell a tale that has nothing in it,” he said. Wyrenna bit her lip. She’d been doing it on purpose, but he seemed to think she was just being dense.

She had no choice but to start again. Honestly, this time.

“I was born in Chorrol in 182. Da was a silversmith working there. I don’t know what he did before that. Mother had came years earlier with soldiers from Skyrim, helping after the war. They never married, it wasn’t my mother’s custom, but they had me. I don’t remember much of the Great Forest. We moved north to Bruma when I was small. Mother missed mountains.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Valamand said bitterly.

Wyrenna looked at him, feeling him lie. “You have a homeland, too. You must miss it sometimes, don’t you?”

“Was I not clear? Don’t presume you know of me.”

Wyrenna chewed her stew in irritation, swallowed, and spoke more. “We lived there for many years, I chased the Bruma boys around a bit. My father got an apprentice, and he brought his wife and daughter from down south. They didn’t like the cold at first, but they got used to it, I think. I got a bit older, chased some boys and girls in other ways. Mother left. She missed mountains further north.”

“I don’t suppose they have schools, or any better places to spend your time.”

“I know my letters. I’ve read all the books Da owned,” Wyrenna said. “I learned how to run the house. I handled all of the money, and learned to bargain with it. But you’re right— I don’t have a trade. Movarth had more septims than my Da ever brought home at once.”

She nibbled some cheese. It didn’t feel fair to say her life had had little in it, but elves had a strange way about making a person feel insignificant. She hadn’t been on the world for very long yet at all.

“Anyway, Da had always been ill. He’d caught something when he was a child and never had recovered properly. Within the past year, he died. Zaas-tei inherited the shop, and he has a wife and daughter to handle his affairs. I’d spent much of my time taking care of Da, and when that was over I didn’t have much to do. I didn’t want to impose, so I decided to leave for Skyrim. Mother and Da had never stopped sending letters. So I sent one to tell what had happened, packed my bags, and set off. Siegfried told me how to go and it’s his fault that you found my sorry self at that shrine.”

“So you’ve incessantly said, begged, and pleaded,” Valamand said, unimpressed with her tale. “Perhaps he is worth looking into, if you are not.”

“Siegfried’s not a Talos worshipper, that I know of. The Temple of Talos in Bruma has been boarded up since before I moved there. Before I was born. Not even regular worship of the Eight happens in there these days,” Wyrenna said. “The only thing worth arresting Siegfried for is maybe a bad lay. Maybe.”

Wyrenna had previously not known it was possible to look even more repulsed than he already had been looking, but Valamand accomplished the feat. Wyrenna smiled, because his discomfort was deserved in more ways than she knew how to articulate.

“To continue, Mother worked shipping ore to Windhelm and goods from Windhelm to surrounding
mines. Her latest job was with a caravan serving Darkwater Crossing. Which is where I found her, dead at the site of some battle. I don’t know who actually did it. But from what I can tell, someone on either side mistook her for the enemy, cut her through and left her lying in the road.”

That lit the Altmer’s gaze. Not her mother, probably, but something in her story kindled his interest. His attention focused, drowning out some of the tightly-strung fatigue in his presence. And some of the cold distance. Wyrenna wouldn’t say his demeanor was transformed, but she was at a loss to be taken seriously by the Mer. He was, at least vaguely, a different creature.

“A-anyway, that sort of ended plans to work in Skyrim. So I buried Mother, and then began back the way I came. If I ever make it, it will be a little humiliating to have to return to Zaas-tei and say the whole thing was a failure. But I hadn’t thought to stay in Skyrim long without Mother’s support. It’s not really my home.”

“You just explained at length how you came to forfeit your home in Cyrodiil.”

“Yeah,” Wyrenna said. “I grew up there, but it’s not home much now, either. It’s better than you Thalmor.”

If Valamand took offense, he said nothing on that and instead made a different comment. “You have only yourself to blame for following me willingly this time, when you could have made a new home,” he said.

“I told you already. You wouldn’t understand. You’re not a Nord,” she said. “Just because you live in a place, or have a reputation in a place, doesn’t make it home. It doesn’t make you tied to it, or deserve to be tied to it.”

“I don’t follow,” Valamand said, juggling her attempts to make the concept clear.

Wyrenna sighed in exhaustion. She sopped up the last of her stew with her bread.

“Stop that,” Valamand said, appalled. “Use the proper utensil.”

Wyrenna ate the bread to spite him. Then she tried again. “Home is where you come from. Not you, but of everything leading up to you. Some people figure it’s where their ancestors are buried, other people have a house they have inherited from their parents, or even objects that once belonged to family long ago. It can even not even be a real thing, like the memory of a great hero. It’s what you uphold when you defend your honor. But it’s easier for Nords in Skyrim to have something like that. Every family here is old, every rock here marked something of theirs in the past. But my history begins with just my Mother, who had no family or ties to anything I know. And Da was a Colovian, so who knows about that?”

Valamand’s face was unreadable.

“In Cyrodiil, nobody cares much about these things. Half the time you can’t tell if a human is Nord or Breton or Cyrod-blood, depending on who their family has in it. But here, everyone can tell. And they can tell that while I’m a Nord, I don’t have what they have.”

It was impossible to know how Valamand would reply, as a faint cry came from above the board-and-slate roof. It grew into a throaty roar as it drew near. The entire town of Dragon Bridge hushed to hear the wake of wings beat the night air. Heavy strokes into the distance, the North and whatever awaited the dragon there. The horse tethered outside calmed down, after everything else felt safe to move again.

The night was a long one, and sometimes beyond sleep. But when Wyrenna did drift away, she
dreamt not of dragons, but of the stiff, scaled faces that had bid her goodbye. Especially Ilyas-Tei. Wyrenna hoped they weren’t waiting for her. Not now.

Valamand did not retire to bed but nursed a pot of tea, then a bottle of wine, deep into the night. When he thought she was asleep, she sometimes would look over at him and see him staring into the drink as if there was something past the bottom, shaded by his golden hair.
“Good. Clench a fist. Yes, I know it hurts. Everything will be fine.”

Wyrenna barely remembered the huge chapel of Stendarr. She’d been a child. But the Temple of the Divines in Solitude was not the same sort of place as that: closer, rugged even in this city that stood sharp-cut against Skyrim’s wilderness. The priestesses were typical, however, and had looked onto her in pity when she walked in with her broken arm.

Sister Petreia had been the one to see her, take her to another floor where other more-badly wounded rested. First there had been more clean cloths and boiled water. Then gentle hands setting her splint again, dabs of wine and vinegar that stung like a spider’s bite. Wyrenna no longer felt sick looking at the wound, only a numbness. She clenched her fist.

Sister Petreia’s touch was full of light. Wyrenna stared, but the wondrous nature of the magic faded fast when it began to itch. Bones aligning and fusing was cringesqueamish. The smooth, scar-less skin dredged up a film of dark grime. Wyrenna supposed that was the dead flesh that could not be healed, and had been replaced. Her bruises faded as stains ran from linens in bleach. The spell did not erase her freckles, though where it touched the spots did seem fresh.

“So incredible,” she said. She moved the arm. Her nails had bit into her palms.

“It’s not a very difficult spell,” Sister Petreia said. “Which is a relief for your sake. Try to use the arm, but get some rest. No charging off for the Legion for a while.”

“I’m not a soldier,” Wyrenna said, a little sheepishly.

Sister Petreia shook her head. “Ah, I didn’t mean to presume. So many fighters have come recently, and with the battle wound…”

“It’s all right,” Wyrenna said, rolling her sleeve down again. ”But I wish I didn’t have reason to defend myself.”

“These are dangerous times,” Sister Petreia said, and did not comment further. Wyrenna began counting out the septims from what she’d been given for the service.

“Is this enough?” she asked. Petreia nodded. It didn’t seem like enough. She’d never been healed this way before. Apothecaries, sure. But when she’d gotten old enough to really get hurt, no priest resided in Bruma. And as she’d never gotten the chance… “And… if it’s not too much trouble, how would one learn a spell like that?”

The priestess furrowed her brow. Wyrenna remembered that Skyrim had an interesting relationship with magic.

“I’m not sure if I have the skills to teach you,” she said honestly. “Though you might want a simpler spell for your first try. I hope this isn’t too off-putting. I just wasn’t expecting a question like that.”

“Who should I ask, then?”

The priestess shrugged. “Maybe Rorlund might have time to show you. Aside from that, there may be books for sale, somewhere. If all else fails, I know there’s a wizard at the Blue Palace… but I am not sure you’d want to go there. Nobles aren’t everything a common person is comfortable with.”
“Believe me,” Wyrenna said, “any company after the company I’ve been in would be a silk blanket.”

“With that arm? I would believe it, child,” said Petreia. “Just be sure you do well for yourself, though. If you are in poor hands, and you find yourself with such wounds… our doors are always open. Please consider us.”

“I will,” said Wyrenna, but wasn’t sure if any of the Divines could really save her from the sort of things she had faced in the past weeks. She bid Petreia a polite farewell and walked down into the main chapel again. After some hasty and uncertain respects to Stendarr, she was on her way over the city’s cobbles.

Well, the castle’s cobbles. The castle bled into the city, or the city bled into the castle. Those buildings closest to the chapel were occupied by Imperial soldiers and the courtyard rang with Imperial drills.

There wasn’t anywhere for her to go. Valamand had split from her and swirled over the streets to some urgent destination. He told her to wait someplace conspicuous. Wyrenna picked the shade of the castle’s walls and a wooden bench. Just as good a place as any. She watched the enlisted practice.

It wouldn’t be reasonable to ask for lessons here, she thought. Maybe in Morthal, sparse and spare. But there would be no way she could walk out of Castle Dour without wearing the Emperor’s colors.

She studied from afar instead. She made note of the exercises and thought to try them later in private.

Then, Wyrenna took a long look at herself and asked what was wrong with her.

She was here, in Solitude. She was here and while Valamand remained, he’d face serious difficulty if she chose to give him that. She could, money willing, stay here in partial safety. She could even risk leaving for Cyrodiil by ship or by caravan. Once again, money willing.

Continuing to think about the sword as a matter of survival was foolishness. It was asking for something. What that was, Wyrenna didn’t know. It tasted like bile iron.

But she found no amount of convincing herself would bolster her, or assure her that all was well. She buried those thoughts in movements, in footwork, in guessing which of the ones before her was the better fighter, and how they might win.

Survival was easy. There was no planning for the future or deciding where she’d like to be. It was easy to call that life, simply not dying.

But to consider where to go, what to do, that was the labor of lifting a mountain. Wyrenna even blamed herself. Valamand was no good to her. Yet between the prospect of leaving on her own and following his lead, she’d chosen to supplicate the Mer who’d sooner see her forgotten in the ash of Nírn than risk the wrath of his kind.

The sword was an inadvertent beginning. But she was not the biggest fighter. What was the end for her? She did not see older herself proudly a warrior and a swordswoman.

Proudly a killer.

Wyrenna was not sure she could see her older self at all.
Not for the last time, we must endeavor to be Valamand. Please, bear with him now.

There’s intensities to waiting. Elves often learn this at a young age. When one’s life spans centuries, much of it is doomed to be empty space. A great many things that humans might foolishly rush passes ponderously slow, in the hands of another Mer with hard-groomed patience. But different breeds of waiting are not equal, and Valamand was experiencing a new and evil tier to the hierarchy of delay.

More than a month of silence was one thing. No news was safety, if he could put everything off. But now, with the hawk and the letter away a reply could not be anything but swift. All he had to do now was wait. A day, at most. Maybe there would be an unseasonable blizzard. The bird could die in the swirling snow.

His breath quaked, the cold air made thin in his lungs. If not for his poise he could have dropped to sleep there on the frozen cobbles: too exhausted for even nerves to deny. Still, the shaded walls of the fortress-city cut the sun as it dropped low. He’d been awake to see it do so on the day previous, too.

Strangely for a Nord, Wyrenna had an unfortunate habit of not standing out in any way. He found her on a bench across from the Castle Dour courtyard, huddled under her furs. Why she hadn’t stood somewhere more obvious escaped him. Perhaps she was typical as a Nord for not following direction.

“So, how did it go?”

She asked this as she asked all of her questions. With delusions of familiarity, of her entitlement to his attention or answers. Yet, as a barking dog, she’d not be quiet until he fed her some scraps. “I was not reprimanded or apprehended on sight,” he said. “But it is impossible to know the situation. I sent a secure message, and I await a reply.”

“There’s no one in charge to talk to in your offices here?” The Nord wrinkled her freckled nose. “It doesn’t sound very useful to keep.”

“It is not my place to question the First Emissary,” Valamand said. “If it was, I, not she, would be leading the Thalmor here.”

“What is your place, then?”

What an odd question.

Valamand supposed that it was not obvious to her. She couldn’t possibly know, being below any sort of hierarchy of superior Mer. Let alone the peerage of nobility. However, and it gnawed him, something she had said only yesterday stuck in his mind. That Nords too seemed to be able to tell where each other stood. Which were of higher status and which were lowborn like the girl, without holdings or known breeding or a record of accomplishment. While this Nord knew her own place among Nords, she knew nothing of how far below himself she dwelt.

The ant knows nothing of the eagle. He gestured sharply for her to follow him. Wyrenna frowned at it, may have been insulted. But she followed anyway, as blindly compliant as an animal.

“My place is above you, and all your kind,” Valamand said with satisfaction. “It would do you good to remember that.”

“I didn’t ask about whatever you think about Altmer in general,” she said, and he could hear the displeasure in her tone, “I asked about you, in specific.”
“You are not obligated to receive an answer. In fact, on principle you ought to be denied one.”

The warmth of the Winking Skeever was welcome, though the noise was not. But this inn, unlike the one in that wretched backwater dump, had thick walls and rooms with sufficient space. And enough patrons to stand warily by and let him pass, pay the fee, and stare as he vanished up the stairs.

Sometimes these things were all one had in a barbaric country. If they would stare, let them fear. It was a power over them that Valamand knew dwelled in his uniform. He relished it.

If only this girl understood that power.

“I forgot,” she mumbled. “All things must be communicated the Thalmor way. In a series of insults.”

Valamand imagined the sound of her distaste as akin to an unruly bird, or a braying mule. It wasn’t a perfect solution. Such an accusation ate its way into him. He had quite a lot more to himself than insults. Especially compared to the featureless drudgery she’d described of herself. The Nord merely did not deserve any of his attentions and it was not within her right to demand him to indulge her curiosity. That was why her challenges and endless taunts had to be turned away, lest they begin to chafe. Prisoners were not supposed to be kept this long, that they developed a need to know. And they were supposed to remain prisoners within an officer’s power, else be disposed of.

He was tired. He was so tired, he thought, and yet sleep did not feel like an escape. He was so tired, he did not feel like eating. Not even the unexpectedly fresh fruit set out in this inn room for guests. Every focus within him was spent merely to keep from collapsing facefirst onto that bed on sight.

The Nord was noticing, that was the trouble. They weren’t supposed to notice that superior Mer could at times be merely mortal. It was the birth of such… impropriest questions, and he was finished, finished enduring them. He considered Silencing her again, and it struck him he had not considered that for many weeks. It had proven ineffective in the long run, he’d concluded. But there were three solutions now. Silence her, kill her, or give in.

How had that last one begun to look so appealing? Funny, he felt itchy. He hadn't noticed filth on him somewhere.

“My place is as a Justiciar of the Thalmor, an enforcer of the Aldmeri Dominion. I am a battlemage,” he said, then forced his lips shut, hoping that the Nord sitting on the other bed would leave him alone. He rolled over on the mercifully soft sheets, too exhausted to even take his boots off. Much less use magic, or murder her. Yet, he could feel her expectant stare keep him awake. Damn her thrice-cursed presence!

“How had that last one begun to look so appealing? Funny, he felt itchy. He hadn't noticed filth on him somewhere.

“No, no of course that wasn’t all. And she knew it too. And he hated her for this game she was able to play with him. But whether or not he spoke on his ancient and ancestral kinship at Luxurene, there was no solution to her inquiries, no correct way to approach them. Refuse them, and let her implication that he was nothing stand. Correct them and end up feeding her with information, freely giving her things he was loathe to let her have. Perhaps the bare minimum would sate her, for she had no measure for the length of the truth. But it was unlikely.

If he had possessed even the smallest iota of strength left, he would have tolerated her comments and discarded them. That is why, right now, we have to be Valamand to understand why he made this choice at hand.

“I have been studying magic and its application nearly my entire life,” he said, evenly metered in
resignation. “A mer of my natural prodigy is majesty in high demand. I am quite sure the College of Aldmeri Excellence and and the High University of the Sun fought over my placement fiercely, and even now are sore that they have lost me to the Thalmor’s superior calling. It is through the Thalmor’s patronage that I prosper as a mage, even in this land of crude and unsightly magic.”

The girl laughed at this. Valamand bit his lip in confusion. It was a joyless laugh and rough on his pride. He wanted something else, but what escaped him.

“I don’t know much about magic,” she said wryly. “But between blowing things up, setting them on fire, playing with people’s minds, you might not want to talk about crude magic.”

The mer stared at the Winking Skeever’s plaster ceiling and counted its cracks.

“Because that’s your place to me. No matter what you say, or how great you think you are, you talk of nothing but the Thalmor and your magic’s a blunt weapon. You’re a tool. Without the Thalmor, you’re not anybody at all.”

Valamand did not listen to her. But he could not help but hear her. Her words entered his pointed ears and drizzled like boiling water into his brain. Argument stuck in his throat, but he was too tired. He could hardly relate to her the importance of his island, of his bloodline, of its hand in constructing Crystal-Like-Law in antiquity. He took count of the magicks he’d learned, most likely so beyond her comprehension she would marvel. But what made him most furious of all was how his thoughts had to twist over themselves and bungle to reach a defense against her words. It would take longer than she had to live to explain just how simple she was. It was not worth it. She would never and could not ever understand.

This is why we had to be Valamand that night, because otherwise later events would have no point of origin. Because that night, after many nights, he did hear her and it is difficult or impossible to unhear things. To kill an idea. Valamand had studied this extensively, and even based several experiments in Illusion on this principle.

He should have known better.

Instead, her words seemed trivial, no more than child's taunts and left to roam in exhaustion. We had to be Valamand to understand exactly why these words were dangerous to him. Though he may have ripped them to shreds they settled quietly, made a lair of him and began to breed: lurking beneath his golden hair, behind his golden eyes, under his gold-stitched hood.

Valamand slept finally, after nearly two days awake.

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Valamand vanished. At first in the morning, it seemed likely that he had Thalmor business or had received the answer he had requested. Then, the mer didn’t return to the inn room. It was one less belly to feed, Wyrenna thought, but his absence didn’t bring the relief she thought it would.

She turned to her skills to make the money she needed to survive. Which, she maintained firmly, were limited to the odd barter and golden word here and there, knowledge of numbers, and her Nordic freckled face where such a thing was common. Armor and a sword didn’t hurt, but mercenary work seemed faraway and ridiculous. Instead, she offered her services to the Khajiit forced to camp outside the city walls. They needed supplies, and could not enter Solitude. Wyrenna was happy to be their go-between, and made a little coin for herself in the process. It wasn’t enough for both the inn room and a book on Restoration magic, but Wyrenna hoped to sometime sneak a read if a shopkeeper would let her loiter.
It still rubbed her heart that she had no real plan for the future. An Argonian had even asked her if she’d like to make a quick septim or two, in the shadow of the shopheads. Wyrenna knew better than to take him up on his offer, whatever it was. She wasn’t quite comfortable with shaking her behind to buy her bread.

Evette San’s offer was much better, though, and only slightly less illegal-feeling. While there were strict tariffs on Imperial goods, Wyrenna was not sure that citrus from Anvil was subject to the hefty fee that Evette lamented. Especially if sailors kept the fruits by the bushel themselves. It would be like wood elves taxing liver. The spices from the south of Elsweyr, though, required negotiation.

This is how Wyrenna, no family name, came to be arguing with Victoria Vici, who she assumed was a lady of some high stature, over the shipping docks of Solitude.

“If Evette can’t make the payment, then she cannot receive the shipment,” said the noble-born Imperial very clearly. Her words were pure Nibenean heartland, and stark against the cry of northern gulls.

“See, that’s the problem. I’m sure Evette can make the payment,” Wyrenna said in what she hoped was her most sympathetic voice, “but holding up the shipment delays how much spiced wine she can make, and how much she can sell.”

Victoria Vici was pretty, with skin as brown as a doe and a fine profile. Wyrenna did not really think to compare herself, only that she may have been younger, paler, and somewhat taller. She had little idea of what the well-to-do thought of commoners, only that Vici hadn’t insulted her yet.

“If this shipment reaches the city, I’m sure that Evette could pay the fee off soon. Everyone loves her spiced wine, especially with the festival coming up,” Wyrenna said, remembering what the older woman had told her.

“I thought that the Burning of King Olaf wasn’t on this year,” said Vici.

Wyrenna leaned forward, just a little. She didn’t smile, but did her best to be earnest. “Yes, and everyone’s going to miss it, especially her wine.”

“It’s true, I do like her spiced wine,” Victoria said, rubbing her chin. The normalness of it shocked Wyrenna, who was used to tales of nobles and lords and ladies being quite different from ordinary people. “All right, you can tell Evette that her shipment will be in shortly. But I do expect some compensation for the books, at a later date.”

The smile Wyrenna selected, or hoped she did, was somewhere between “frank” and “winning.” But it was honest. Success meant a little payment, and a happy woman who’d seemed nice enough.

“Thank you, my Lady. You’re very generous.”

“Well, you are most welcome, miss. Being the emperor’s cousin lends one to being watched, at all times. I’m glad you see good things,” the woman said, in a way that reminded Wyrenna that she likely had some small training at making speeches. “But Evette will want to hear the news. You’d best be along.”

Wyrenna had left and walked a ways down the docks before she realized the extent of Victoria Vici’s words. She’d known the woman was of noble birth but…

*She had just convinced the Emperor’s cousin to waive Imperial tax?*

Wyrenna felt dizzy. She sat down on one of the boardwalk’s many low crates and watched the workers patch hulls. The most recent in berth were a flotilla of light junk-rigged freight ships, with
pure white sails and gleaming underbellies. They sat low in the water, though to Wyrenna she had no idea if this was unusual or not. It made little sense to her why one would unload several smaller ships rather than one huge one. But they unloaded all the same, in crates that two strong sailors struggled to move, or heavy casks that one person bent double to carry alone.

The dock folk were familiar, at least. Not in the sense of being what she was used to— but the same kind of people, the same sort she’d known before. Only, her memories were full of hunters and expeditioners and caravanners stopping in and then moving on once Bruma had traded enough furs and other goods from the Jerall Mountains.

No. One of them didn’t quite belong. Wyrenna squinted to make out one among them who didn’t speak to any other peer, or even look at them. The job he did was awkward, and yet those he worked with were silent on correcting him or telling him to work more quickly. It was a tall Mer, his yellow hair tied back with a lace.

It took her a minute to line the figure up, when he was not dressed in a dark robe.

Wyrenna marched up to him, shocked, and cornered him behind a large stack of heavy boxes. “Valamand! What in the world are you doing here?”

The Altmer she’d addressed cast his head down and pretended not to know her, trying to push past to return to work. But Wyrenna wasn’t fooled. Her hands shot out and wrenched the jug of water he was holding and hefted it to the boardwalk. He could not avert his eyes. Yes, it was Valamand.

He looked different out of uniform. Smaller, maybe. Without the swell of his presence, his indignant eyes were just that. They also seemed less powerful, less cutting. His long hair wasn’t better for being pulled tightly back. It made his face look pinched, somehow.

“You are interrupting official Thalmor business,” he sniffed. Wyrenna bit her lip and denied herself the urge to laugh.

“I’m sure I am,” she said. “Care to explain it?”

“No,” he said.

That was the end of her good graces. “Listen, Thalmor. You drag me all over creation and I’m stupid enough to follow you willingly after— you don’t get to vanish without a trace and leave me with nothing to show for it. You’d better talk quickly, or I’m throwing you in the bay and you can swim back to the Summerset Isles.”

An Altmer in poor dock-worker’s clothes was much easier to threaten than a uniformed enforcer. But there was no better reminder that the two were the same Mer than the look he gave her. It made her grit her teeth, to be regarded like mud on the underside of his boot.

“If you must know, I am on-duty and this is a surveillance detail,” he said angrily. “And you’re lucky I don’t kill you for hearing that.”

“I think you owe me a better explanation than that, elf,” she replied. “Or at least tell me if I can go home, if you don’t need my word anymore.”

Valamand looked at her, and then looked at the docks, then looked at her again. Each time, his expression flashed a shade of disgust, discomfort, shame, anger, resignation rather impressively. Finally, after almost a minute of indecision and grumbling, he opened his mouth to speak. “If you must know, these are the orders I received as answer to my own report.”
This didn’t make much sense to Wyrenna. Seeing her confusion, Valamand continued with a sneer. “Whatever hearing she will accept, it will have to be in the future. At this moment, the First Emissary must be appeased, and this is her chosen penalty for being so late to return.”

“You vanished for over a week,” Wyrenna said. “ Couldn’t you have made time to at least leave a note?”

He revealed white teeth venomously. “It didn’t seem important.”

She really would have pushed him off of the dock, if not for a great commotion down the other end of the wharf. Two white-shirted men clambered out of a much-tormented dinghy. Crowds immediately surrounded them. Between Valamand and the disturbance, she chose the latter: cursed at him, turned around, and ran down over the creaking planks.

It wasn’t until she pushed past the gawkers that Wyrenna realized that Valamand had ridden in her wake. He easily peered over her shoulder to see not two sailors, but three. The third was motionless in the small boat, quite dead. The others were substantially wounded and the crowd was patting down to their knickers looking for spare doses of medicine, some even shredding their rags for bandages.

“What is this?” Valamand said, sharp dialect instantly piercing the babbling mob. “I must know what’s happened here, immediately!”

He didn’t get much of an answer, beyond a few odd looks. Wyrenna uncapped her waterskin and knelt by the closest of the two, after shoo’ing a hesitant old man away. “You can drink,” she said. Wyrenna lifted her head and scowled at the nearest of the able-bodied sailors. “You! Go get a healer! Now!”

It was a little alien. Being obeyed without question. It was the armor, it must have been. Where Valamand shrank in plain clothes, Wyrenna wondered if she had become larger. Someone even started to copy her and began nursing the other sailor’s wounds.


“My name, it’s Vaslus Rufus, I serve— served as deckhand, on the Icerunner,” he stammered past Wyrenna’s drink. “One of six ships… she ran aground and pirates…!”

His next words were frantic, though Wyrenna could extract a vague location. That, and the name, ‘Blackblood Marauders.’ The man was not well enough to share much more.

When the guards came, and a healer, too, Valamand was gone. Wyrenna caught his long legs vanishing up the tidal staircase. She chased him, surprised at the speed with which he’d abandon his post. The last thing she would do was let the elf out of her sight again lest he be lost for an additional week.

“This does not concern you,” he said.

“I’m concerning myself,” she replied, absolutely sure that it was unwise.

“Why? There will be men to kill, and cargo to be reclaimed. You will not be paid.”

Wyrenna did not allow herself to think. It contradicted with too many things, like her aversion to mercenary work, her knowledge of the mer she was leaping to follow, her own mortality and safety. But it was a direction, any direction.
“Because I want to do it,” she said. “That’s the only reason that I need.”
As with all things on Nirn, one thing led to another. Valamand led her back to the Thalmor Headquarters, and made her wait outside. He emerged in uniform, though Wyrenna noted it was only hastily thrown on over his plain disguise. This led them quickly to the market for supplies, and that to the docks for a small rowboat of their own to cross the channel. That led them to the swampy shoals on the sea border of Hjaalmarch. Open-bellied to the waves, the Icerunner spilled its contents.

Discovery of straggling pirate crewmates led to a fight. Wyrenna was not clear on if arrest was possible. She did her best to negotiate, but this was not a world where such things worked out like that. Her new armor, this time, did its job. Blows glanced off of it in a way that her old chain did not provide. She fared unexpectedly well, even though Valamand’s explosive support made it difficult to gauge a fair fight. She felt a hollow ache at this unfair fight.

Wyrenna realized that most others on the field of battle were not trained or expert swordsmen, or warriors of great renown. Hardened, maybe— but ordinary people for all their hostile ways. Maybe, in another life, these people could have been someone’s neighbors, owned a plot of land, or even have worked honestly at a tradehouse. But not this life.

Maybe Wyrenna too could have been someone else, and never seen that dreadful look in another’s eyes. But the bitter acceptance began to settle on her like a powder of snow, that her time might be measured in the length of swords.

The pirates, too, led them to another place. The cargo was away, dispatched to somewhere high up on the coast. Some place that once was Broken Oar Cove, now some closed cavern or hidden hole. This, Valamand was sure, could only be the bandit stronghold. They got in their small rowing boat, and each taking an oar, crossed the bay. Wyrenna distracted her aching arms with the smell of salt marsh and the herring gulls. It was sweaty work. She expected the elf to complain, but so long as he considered this errand his work, he went to any length to complete it. Admirable, but Wyrenna remembered the Aldmeri Dominion was no friend of Men, or of anyone but itself.

Helping the Aldmeri Dominion was sudden in her mind. Her reasoning had bent towards the Icerunner, the sailors’ loss, to justice, to plenty of inappropriate things that no wise busybody should have ventured near. Valamand’s welfare also had been a factor. If this cargo he was set to watch had slipped out of his hands. His repentance to Elenwen would be ruined.

That, she thought, was also a stupid and thankless thing to care about. But she was learning that causes often chose their champions, not the other way around.

It was evening when they finally rounded the northern cape past the lighthouse and continued on foot, splashing through shallow spray and bare beach pools. The water here was colder than anything Wyrenna had ever felt, the mere mass of it off the sand pulled the heat from her bones. She looked out from the ice-chewed shore, saw the curve of the grey world. She realized this was the first she’d seen of the sea. Not the bay, or the rivermouth. The ocean and what could lay beyond it.

But set within the land the mouth of the cove did not yawn, but more puckered into an O surrounded by fallen boulders and gravel shards. Sand fleas darted in and out of the cliff, feeding on rotted wood.

The entrance of the cave led to the tunnels themselves, a tidal lagoon enclosed by stone and beginning to cloud brackish. With the advantage of surprise, the first few watchmen were easy to dispatch, even if their deaths were not comfortable to Wyrenna’s conscience. She wished there had
been more of a choice about it, that she could tell them to go home.

But this was their home? Built out of the lives of others? Or did they do what they had to do? Did anybody truly have to live this way?

Beyond the creaking ramparts and maze of shadowed wharfs was a grand decommissioned warship, held aloft on massive timbers and secured into the stone wall. A spider’s maze of levels, rigging ladders, and secondary rooms almost made it a castle with no walls. It loomed open to the cavern darkness.

Wyrenna lurked with Valamand on the other side of the great drawbridge. This felt familiar, though she’d only been in this position once before. There were not four to face at a Vampire’s feast, however, but…

...and Wyrenna had to count…

“That’s seven, I think. As many as ten, maybe more,” she whispered.

“Simple enough,” said Valamand, a scoff at her percipience.

“For a frost troll?” said Wyrenna. “Don’t say you want me to charge in like last time.”

“How ridiculous. Of course not,” Valamand said. “No, watch. Then tell me of the inelegance of magic.”

The faint light of magicka burned in his grasp. He selected a target with a thumb, a pirate eating dinner laid out on the fortress deck. Wyrenna saw how he aimed with his shoulder and elbow. There was only the slightest flick as he threw the magic in an incredible shot. Far away, the pirate yelled and smashed a crewmate’s face into a bowl of soup.

“What did you do?”

Valamand’s sights aligned with an archer, tiny as a beetle at distance. A second crimson flash, and the bowman became convinced that the fight on deck was invaders or rivals. The commotion grew, the axes came out.

“Illusion’s greatest ally is the mortal mind, its imperfect nature. It need not run on reason, but is more often bound together by nothing more than a cobweb of assumption. Baseless inventions. Nevertheless, they must be maintained.”

Wyrenna watched as the violent multiplied in confusion, even those untouched by Valamand’s spells turning against their own.

“But these figments, they are easily manipulated. In particular: the misbelief that at any given time one is safe, that those close around mean no harm…”

“That’s horrible!”

By the faint light of his spellcraft, Valamand’s face flinched. The pride in it faltered, stuttered and failed. It was reinstated in only a moment. Plaster.

“The last thing they’ll see is who they thought to trust,” she whispered.

The elf turned away from her, and took the glow with him. "Go then, and continue your own way. See if pirates would return your sympathies."
He did not need to bid her to do so. Wyrenna was at the drawbridge lever before she could think of what was wise, she dropped it presently. Then, soggy boots on wormy timbers, she clambered onto the gangway. What met her was a carnage: archers cast down from their perches, brigands burst asunder, cutthroats cut down and butchered.

However a principle of Valamand’s strategy that had not been explained to her was: if two men fight, there is a victor. And if that man fights another, there again is likely to be a victor. And henceforth. Logically, the final survivor of such a struggle would be the strongest, the most formidable, the most fearsome man of the lot.

Captain Hargar was one such man, hefting a mace of solid bronze. He had the bulk to wield it, too, and Wyrenna soon regretted making an advance. Her shield was up nearly as quickly.

“Excuse me, but can’t we just talk about all of this?”

Clang! The man struck even harder than Brynjar. Wyrenna could feel her bones rattle down from her shoulder to her ankles. Still her arm held, and she did not stop moving. Not when he was so big, and she was small. One of his mad swings took out a solid pine beam, crumbling boards above her. Wyrenna felt her knees shake, wary of if he should find her ribs in the way instead.

Any time, Valamand would assist her. Yet, all was quiet behind. He was watching, maybe. He couldn't have abandoned her. Wyrenna felt eyes on her back even more furiously than she felt the attacks on her front.

Finally, the pirate captain backed her onto the drawbridge, where there was more room to maneuver. Provided she didn’t end up in the drink, though even the icy ocean looked comfortable compared to Hargar’s assault. Seeing no other choice, Wyrenna arced around his off side and landed a solid cut where his chain shirt did not protect him. Cursing, he brought his arm down in a terrible swing.

He missed.

Crack!

His head pitched forward, steel helm crashing against Wyrenna’s skull. There were no stars, but all was black and murky for horrible moments. Her spare meal heaved in her stomach. Something bright flashed before her eyes, and the pirate bearing down flinched and withdrew. In the haze, Wyrenna cast herself and her sword upon the man and felt the resistance of his flesh, knew that he was dead. Then she staggered to her knees.

She remembered suddenly that there was someone here with her, when she felt her head being lifted and a firm grasp brace her shoulder. They smelled somewhat like stale tidewater and sweat. What was that flower, again? She tried to recall…

The pain faded before the haze, and it was replaced by a wholly bizarre feeling. More clearly, she recalled the healing spell she’d had in the Temple of the Divines, but while the light of this one was the same, the caster was different. Not so much an itch as the sensation of hundreds of tiny pins seizing her flesh and nudging it into the correct place, so very orderly, so very precise. When it was through, Wyrenna was looking up into the impassive face of a familiar Altmer, who regarded her as a shirt to be patched.

At least he’d done so gently. “I thought you didn’t know how to do that,” she said, still feeling sore and like a rainstorm had passed in and out through her ears.

“An unfortunate and unacceptable oversight,” he said primly, “that has been since corrected.”
Trust him to dread not being an expert on something, Wyrenna inwardly groaned. Yet, he made no move to drop her. The longer she remained lying against his arms, the less comfortable he became until he was practically fidgeting for her to get up, for some reason unable to command it. As much as seeing him squirm was a victory, Wyrenna took mercy on his sense of propriety and staggered to her feet.

“That’s really it?” she asked, staring at the bodies, resolving not to stare at the bodies.

“So it would seem,” Valamand said.

“Great. Let’s get what we came here for and leave,” Wyrenna said. “And, er, thanks.”

Valamand had no comment for her gratitude, merely swept past her over the corpses as if they weren’t there and began tearing up the stockroom. “It would be a fairly large crate, reinforced. I only know that it is heavy.”

The stockroom was completely full of crates. Wyrenna didn’t enjoy giving him a look as much as she’d have liked. It was like trying to shame a sheet of marble. Checking every box was a fantastic waste of time. Instead, Wyrenna sighed and began rifling through the pockets of the fallen pirates, turning each face-down so she didn’t have to look at them while she did so. Patting down dead people was loathesomely becoming a sort of routine, a macabre necessity that took advantage of her strong stomach but still set eerie spiders dancing in her throat. There wasn’t much that she was willing to carry. Though she did find a series of notes and inventories of stolen cargo and, amazingly, a key!

A key! To a real pirate treasure chest with hidden pirate treasure! While Valamand searched below, Wyrenna snuck a peek at what she hoped was the Captain’s journal laid out on the table of his quarters. That was a contract manifesto. She tried another slim volume, she skipped ahead and read some of the most recent entries. Dumbfounded, she opened the small hatch in the wall, meant to be the inclosed cabin’s porthole. Sure enough, a husk of a gutted ship rotted down in the water. Wyrenna read the passage again. Then she looked again. There, in plain sight of anyone who might peek, was a large footlocker conspicuously waterproofed with white wax. She looked at the key she had in her hand, too.

Maybe pirates weren’t so imaginative.

The easy thing to do might be to just climb down several yards of rotted rigging, or even leap into the water to break her fall. Tedious and freezing propositions. Wyrenna chose instead to drag a spare board from the archery range and drop it off the side of the ship, forming a handy if rickety ramp across the barely-submerged deck below. A quick trip down the stairs, and a treacherous inching out onto her makeshift platform later, Wyrenna had torn the wax seal and stuffed the key in the chest’s latch. She felt the wood bend under her weight, her boots dipping low into the water. The rest of her remained dry.

Wyrenna almost pitched the key away when she found that inside was largely junk. Perhaps treasure to a pirate, but the coins were split off and away, and all pilfered jewels obviously had been sold. These curios were fairly useless, even if she supposed they might sell for something. But various urns full of exotic ingredients and broken hunks of rare materials didn’t exactly fit in her pockets. Digging through the pile, though, a silver ring stood out among scraps of what might have been star-metal or other unknown compounds. It was not ornate, even rough-beaten, but it had resisted tarnish and shown in the low light. Wyrenna had seen hundreds of such rings, and rings of finer craftsmanship, in her short lifetime. Yet, it seemed oddly unscratched for a soft metal amidst pirate treasure. It was far too large for anyone to wear on their bare hand, but the utility was clear when Wyrenna slipped it on. It was meant to be worn over a gauntlet or thick glove.
The wisdom or lack thereof in putting on strange rings didn’t occur to Wyrenna. But as it firmly fit onto her left hand, the biting chill of the flooded cave felt fainter, as if the heat in her body refused to be ripped away. She removed it with some tugging, and the cold returned. It was nicer with the ring on, she decided.

She looked left, by chance.

There, directly under the dock, was a half-sunken raft. On it was a single crate. Unlike the fetid, submerged boats, it was new. Someone had attempted to float this cargo, and its weight had overcome their barge. Whether out of incompetence or shame, someone had hid it right underneath their crewmates’ feet. A twisted rope still bobbed in the water, attached to a float. Wyrenna had to brace herself and drench her boots, but she managed to pull it out of its sheltered cove. “I found it!” she yelled, and heard the cave echo back to her. “Valamand, I think this is it!”

A skeptical head appeared over the upper railing. The elf was instantly less so upon seeing the crate. His grudging acknowledgement only accepted her feat as a matter of time, or an unfortunate only conclusion. Descending the plank stairs, he stood at the edge of the dock with his hands folded behind his back in authoritative refusal. Wyrenna sighed as she slogged to maneuver the barely-buoyant barge before him.

“Can’t you… you know… do something?” Wyrenna said, struggling and failing to get her fingers under the crate to try and lever it onto the dock. Maybe they could find a better raft, or…

Valamand assessed the crate. His expression didn’t much change, but his eyes focused intently on it. He muttered something to himself under his breath, and with a clench of a fist the raft rose in the water until it floated perfectly well. The small wake it dragged up almost knocked Wyrenna over.

“Ohay, I guess that is a nice trick,” she muttered, trying to ignore how pleased the elf suddenly was. She reached under to heft the box again, and had to heave two times before she could get it to move. “Oof! It’s still very heavy! Can’t you make it lighter than this?”

“No,” Valamand said.

Finally, the large crate was on the dock. Wyrenna wondered what it contained, if it was so valuable to the Thalmor. As she pushed it from her hips, she could hear the faint clank of metal on metal inside. Armor? Cast iron bricks? The crate was bolted with steel to prevent unauthorized access, though on the sides the ink label of the East Empire Company was plain to see. “Well, I can’t carry it all the way back myself,” she said, feeling the distance between the grotto and the Solitude docks more deeply than she had in hours. Valamand considered this for a minute, during which Wyrenna was sure he would say something snide. But at the end of it he only looked bleakly at the box and stooped down to grab the far edge.

“Lift,” he commanded. For a moment Wyrenna wasn’t sure if Valamand was commanding her, or the box through some further magic. But when the box didn’t miraculously rise, she scrambled to take her side and with their combined strength the large crate was mobile. It was hard to see much of anything beyond her load, but Valamand was forced to walk backward and she could notice his clenched jaw and quake of effort.

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The sun poured over Hjaalmarch before Solitude and its maritime sector were even visible. Sleep had stalled the march of the crate only as a pressing necessity, and their cold camp by an unsheltered fire was in the top ten least restful nights she could recall. Barring a night on top of a hissing rune. This time Valamand suffered as she did, however, and he could not hide it when hefting a heavy weight.
That she could fare better than him was a strange reality. She’d once thought he’d had every advantage over her. But he was not strong in all things.

More than once she’d caught his grip slipping and redoubled her own, bearing more of the load. She was flushed in the cold, but his steaming sweat was an overworked horse.

When finally the crate was with the rest of the crates, locked securely away, she caught Valamand slumping.

What straightened his back, though, was something Wyrenna could not at once fully understand. From her perspective, the sight of a prim-faced and rich-robed Altmer discussing import and expenses with Victoria Vici calcified him.

But, we do not have to be Valamand this time to learn why his eyes petrified, why he ducked behind a crate and cast off his robes, revealing only plain, grimy commoners’ clothes to the biting wind, why he balled all evidence of his station under one armpit and cast his gaze down to the boards and the loose nails that studded them.

Only one thing had caused such avoidant behavior in the Thalmor before, Wyrenna knew, and it was fear of a superior. Why he would humiliate himself this way, though, she couldn’t know. Wyrenna toyed with that he was afraid of being judged poorly more than he valued his own pride. But that was unbelievable bearing in mind his arrogance.

Wyrenna in her greed to know more decided to seem sensitive, but innocently oblivious. “Who is that mer?” she whispered. “Is he dangerous?”

“That,” Valamand whispered, “is High Kinlord Silabaene.”

“What, who?”

Valamand’s short patience closed teeth on her. “Spare me your ignorance! He is one of the highest figures within the Aldmeri Dominion! What is he doing in Skyrim?”

“He’s your lord,” Wyrenna said, peering out from behind the shipping pallet. “Oughtn’t you know?”

“That is precisely what troubles me,” Valamand muttered. “Every party even superficially associated with the Thalmor should have known of his coming, perhaps even months in advance. I was not warned. I suspect none were.”

“Do you want to follow him and see what he does?”

“No! Stars, no!” Valamand hissed, horrified at the very suggestion. “And enrage his private choice of elite guards? No, the First Emissary must be notified…”

Wyrenna looked at his clutch of nerves and sighed. “Then we’ll have to walk past him. He’s not made of spikes. We’ll get you to your offices and you can send a hawk.”

“Don’t patronize me, Nord,” Valamand grumbled, still frozen on his feet. Wyrenna grabbed his sleeve, and he slapped her off. Undaunted, she tried again and managed to yank him out of cover. They walked down the dock, up the stairs together. Valamand furiously contemplated his boots, and the High Kinlord paid no mind to him.

Wyrenna didn’t want to waste the opportunity to gawk. She didn’t dare guess how expensive his fine voidcloth vestments were, or how heavy they were embroidered with the sun and cosmos in white gold. His satin hair was twisted up in what was likely a blisteringly fashionable style, accented with
fine garlands of diamond stars.

I am not threatened by him, Wyrenna told herself. He is from a different world, and it holds no power over me. She drew herself up straight and proud, and measured the High Kinlord with her own height. Valamand actually seemed taller, though he hunched double and scurried for the cliffs like a rat. He did not speak for the entire walk up the hill to Solitude, nor when they waded past the midday crowd at the market, or even to tell her to wait outside the Thalmor office. He simply left her as he vanished inside. She was held at bay by the eyes of two cold-whittled guards.

He emerged, and just as he’d done this before there was no closure here, either. “You’re not going to wait in there for a reply?”

“No,” he said. Wyrenna wondered if he feared the Kinlord despite that he was not present. He even seemed repulsed by the guards, and quickly walked down the stairs away from them. The Thalmor were one body, Wyrenna thought, and if one feared the head, then one also logically feared the fingers. Even if such a person was a finger themselves.

“Then come with me,” she said. “Wait for a reply over supper.”

She wasn’t sure if Valamand’s look was because she was too bold, or if it was simply unacceptable for them to dine together without the pretense of utter necessity. Truly, Wyrenna felt very able to abandon his suffering, to leave him to fear the power of betters over him as he’d tried to hold over her. But, and she considered this a character flaw, she had never been able to resist the pitiful. When she was younger, she remembered hating it, and making a point to bully other children. When she grew older, the concept of forbearance grew in her mind. And then there was one who’d taken advantage of it, and she’d had to tear him down before she could be free. And now, when she was grown, she regarded her graces towards an elf who wanted none as a soft revenge.

She could this time be in control, to get him to rely on her barbed mercy. And she would assert that power, and let him have no more for himself.

“Somehow, I don’t think your High Kinlord will be anywhere near the Winking Skeever,” Wyrenna said reasonably. “And if he knows to look, why would he look for you there?”

His yellowed gaze weighed this, darting from her to the cobbles and finally back to her again with miffed purpose. “Very well,” he said. “There is no time to prepare a proper reception, anyway. If the High Kinlord arrives unexpectedly, then he likely is aware that we, below his station, are unprepared for his eminence.”

How he so smoothly transitioned from maximizing his own superiority over Nords, yet then prostrating his inferiority to greater elves left Wyrenna dizzy. It was enough for him to be arrogant, and easy to accept that as his personality. For him to be sycophantic at the very same time baffled her. Yet, when he framed Silabaene as a high idol, he was almost proud to declare himself lesser. Wyrenna knew well that she was no great Nord, but never thought to revel in that fact.

“Go, sit someplace you like,” Wyrenna said as soon as they cleared the tavern door. Valamand obeyed. But only as if her order had coincidentally aligned with his predispositions. Still, Wyrenna was grateful that he didn’t argue, and approached the host’s bar with purpose. Sorex was there. Midday was not much activity beyond minding the kitchens and serving drinks.

“What’s the supper today, Master Vinius?” she asked politely. The boy’s eyes lit up at being treated with respect. She’d overheard his desire to inherit the inn. Getting on his good side meant treating him as if he already owned it.
“Certainly, miss. There’s a beef and leek stew, and a special: venison with heart and mushrooms. More expensive, but I’d recommend it.”

“I’ll take the venison, for two, please,” she ordered. “With spiced wine, if you have it.”

“There’s a shortage, so that also will be somewhat more expensive, miss.”

Wyrenna winked. “Between you and me, Evette San’s shortage will soon be over. Tell your father to order now, and I’m sure neither of you will regret it.”

Between the tip and the sizable handful of septims (much of her savings thus far) Sorex Vinius was elated. He took her money with glee and soon returned with a large wooden salver. He also included a fresh loaf of olive-herbed bread: something that almost made Wyrenna homesick. She carried it over to where Valamand contemplated the foggy window.

In face, he could even seem bored. Valamand looked at the feast and Wyrenna hoped he remembered the stale crust he’d once thrown at her.

“You spared no expense,” he said flatly. “What are you trying to prove?”

“Nothing,” Wyrenna lied. Then she poured him some wine. “Yes, the Thalmor is upset and I’ll fetch him vegetables for supper.”

She tore off a corner of bread and chewed, and was sure that it was the best she’d had since she was a little girl in Chorrol. Then she remembered she was starving, and her arms and back ached terribly, and she set into her venison. Valamand cut his food into small square pieces as he began to eat, but as the meal went on she noticed he began cutting off larger and larger bites, unable to hide how ravenous he was. For the first time since she had ever remained with him, he did not complain about the meal, or its taste, or its preparation or ingredients or any sort of malcontent he had with it all. He meticulously cut away the gristle and ate the rest, and said nothing until his plate was clear.

“That was acceptable,” he said, arranging his silverware on the bare-scraps dish just so. It was not quite a topic-opener. If he did not know where to go from here, she thought, she would have to decide.

“You shouldn’t worry,” Wyrenna said firmly. “About the noble from the docks.”

Valamand did not choke in his wine, but his pause to drink from his cup was longer than needed. “I don’t—”

“Don’t you lie to me. You were more scared of that mer than you were of facing ten men, or a master vampire,” Wyrenna said. “I haven’t seen you look that way since that dragon.”

As with everything else in this meal Wyrenna meant to punish him with his obvious weaknesses, that stoicism would conceal. The mer did concede somewhat, unwilling perhaps to waste the energy on denying her. “What would you know of politics? Or the immense implications of one of the world’s most important mer arriving unannounced on a Solitude shipping dock?”

“But if you worry, it only suggests that he ought to consider you guilty of something.”

Valamand did not look like he had considered this much. Wyrenna both felt he deserved this fear, yet wished he would learn his lesson already rather than just panic more.

“For what it’s worth, you’re exceptional and driven, and you have nothing to be ashamed of. Except
the general sort of evil,” Wyrenna said, the praise feeling sour in her mouth. “You went out of your way to do your job, even against difficult odds. In the face of assassins, you did your best to wait for instruction over assuming you knew the whole story. It’s not your fault your messages somehow never arrived.”

“I am sure you don’t know what you’re doing,” he said, eyes slivering.

“I have no idea,” Wyrenna said earnestly, sure her words had an entirely different, unknown significance to the mer. “But I do know that not just anybody would chase lost cargo around the Karth river delta for the sake of a punishment job, or face an entire pirate crew for a single lost crate. Even if it is probably some kind of racist, Thalmor crate. You shouldn’t fear someone who should give you a promotion.”

Despite his scowl at ‘racist,’ his eyes lit with ego at ‘promotion.’ But the suspicion never left his voice, his words dropping briskly from his tongue. “Why are you doing this?”

Wyrenna had no easy answer. “The same as before. I want to. As for why I want to, I won’t say,” she said. “You once told me that the mind of my betters is not mine to know. I think your point is broader than you thought.”

“Listen to me, Nord. My favor is not something to be bought, and your unfortunate and unasked-for continued involvement in my business is not a game to be won,” Valamand said. “I don’t care for whatever subelven ritual you are enacting, or whatever discourse here you believe to be binding. You are uncomplex and hardly as clever as you believe. You are young and nothing.”

“Also, I think you did save my life yesterday,” said Wyrenna. “So if that is less mysterious, maybe consider that the reason?”
Early morning was always a time of solace for Wyrenna, but one now full of idleness where once she’d had much to do. Setting the house and shop right before her father rose, stoking the fires, making ready a meal or two— these required her to wake before dawn and often she completed them half in bedclothes and her dressing-gown. It was too easy to fall into leisure and sleep into the morning, in an inn room. Craving regular work and routine, Wyrenna instead put to taking care of herself and her own.

There were still some bruises, but they were faded and dull purple. She washed her face, extracted the brush and comb she’d bought some time ago, and began on her dark hair. It took more strokes than usual to set it shiny and clean. As always, it stuck out coarsely and she tied it back with her cotton thong. Her clothes, she thought, she had to launder. But after bathing bird-like out of the basin with a cloth, Wyrenna dressed herself and thought of the day ahead. In one hand she held her list of notes, of possible errands and chores she could do. In coal pencil at the bottom there was even a list of long-term prospects for her. All of them seemed fanciful, faraway. Which, she thought with a sore dread, was a bad sign if swinging a sword around like a menace was beginning to feel reasonable and ordinary.

As she was tying the lace on her left boot, a sharp knocking broke her focus. She just stuffed the loose ends into her wool socks, hobbling over to the small peephole of the inn-room door. “Who is it?”

There was no answer, but through the small opening she could see dark clothes and someone’s gilt-embroidered collar. She slipped the bolt and opened to a somewhat urgent-looking Valamand.

“What a surprise,” she said, not surprised at all. Still, despite that he was no longer a stranger, it was unusual to see him come to her door willingly. “What do you want with me, Thalmor?”

In truth, they had parted the night previous with a questionable animosity, neither quite sure if the other was their enemy. If the Thalmor no longer wanted her witness, they were no longer forced together by circumstance (and an arrest) and thus easily could have left each other’s company forever and never troubled one another again.

“There is an urgent matter that demands your cooperation,” said Valamand. “I suggest you comply.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I do not have time or allowance for your apish games or resistance,” said Valamand. “You very much do not want me to answer your question.”

Wyrenna was interested to see him quake. Not in fear of her, but in effort to maintain his composure. He seemed honest, steeped in the fury of her not taking him seriously enough.

“Threats aren’t a very good way to ask for my help,” said Wyrenna. “If that’s what you’re trying to do.”

“You misunderstand,” Valamand said, in his forced-even tone. “If I meant to threaten you, I would do so. I merely mean that should you not decide to come willingly, the consequences will be dire. So dire, that I cannot allow them.”

“Are you going to arrest me? Is that what this is about?”
“Regrettably, no,” Valamand said. “I have a recent assignment that demands your… consultation. For lack of a better word. But it is not secure in this place to speak more on it.”

Wyrenna finished lacing her other boot. Then she considered. “Fine, then. I might consult. But not for free.”

“I assure that you will be paid adequately for your service,” said Valamand. “But do not presume that this makes you my equal.”

“Whatever you say,” Wyrenna said, bundling her things into appropriate luggage. If she was not to return before the day’s end, she couldn’t leave her possessions lying about. “Carry this, will you?”

Valamand regarded the parcel containing her armor plates as if he would have rather done anything else. But he did take it with a grimace of distaste. He hefted it over one slender shoulder. Wyrenna took her small pack, stuffed her hairbrush inside, and slung it on her back along with her sword and shield. The patrons of the Winking Skeever gave fearful looks as Wyrenna marched out the door in the wake of Thalmor robes. Plate snowflakes swirled. She noticed more than ever before, the crowd on the streets sailed in a wide berth around them. They passed up the stairs and into Castle Dour’s yard where suddenly neither of them existed. Not even the guards before the Thalmor offices gave them a questioning glance. Valamand opened the dark ash door and bid Wyrenna enter. She crossed the threshold like a child. One toe at a time.

Wyrenna was not sure what she had expected. Luxury, trappings of a far-off land, hidden opulence to grind in her nose. But there was a thin film of grime on most of the furnishings, the clutter on the tables was old, and there was no one around. Only stairs up and down. Evidence that someone had been writing letters here. The air was cold, and no fires or lamps were lit. The light streamed in from fogged windows, specks of dust dancing in the early-morning sunbeams.

“What a dump,” Wyrenna said, before she realized that probably wasn’t polite.

“Yes, disgraceful that they did not afford us better,” Valamand said, mercifully missing her meaning. “But for all that it lacks in charm, it is secure.”

“So? Tell me what you need,” Wyrenna said. She set her luggage down in the least-cobwebbed corner and rubbed her chilly hands together. It wasn’t comforting to be alone with him in a ‘secure’ location, but she doubted any building in Solitude was secure from the Thalmor, if this one was secured by the Thalmor.

He dropped her things as if they were on fire and promptly led her down the stairs, where there was a tiny stove. Presumably this is where he had been bunking down. There was little comfortable seating except the stuffed-straw beds. He took one, Wyrenna took the only stool. As he was about to explain, Valamand retrieved a diminutive roll of parchment, studied it, and placed it on the side table within Wyrenna’s reach.

“Before I even begin, I want to make clear that this is all the result of an incredible set of misunderstandings, and in no way changes your position regarding the Thalmor,” Valamand said defensively. “Acknowledging that, you have mistakenly received orders from my commanding officer.”

“What? How?” Wyrenna said. “I’m not one of you.”

“The crux of the problem,” confirmed Valamand. “Apparently, whether due to her own workload or perhaps an improperly phrased report on my part, my superior has mistakenly assumed that you are an Altmeri agent, under my employ. Thus, she ordered me to retain your services in a new
“Can’t you tell her that I’m not?” Wyrenna said. “I don’t want to be involved with your business anymore.”

“Believe me, I do not want that either,” Valamand said, woebegone. “But I already stand on perilous ground with Her Excellency. To contradict her now would leave the operation in ruins. And at this moment, she has no one to spare.”

Wyrenna was aghast. “But how could she make such a mistake? That’s…”

Valamand’s tight lips and grim demeanor did not do much to mask his sheepishness. “In accordance to what we had agreed, I declined to mention the circumstances we met. Merely that you were witness to apprehension of Talos worshippers at Lake Ilinalta. In combination with summary of other deeds, it would be fair conjecture to say she drew her own conclusions about your character.”

“What, that only another elf can do anything right?” Wyrenna grumbled. “I like her already.”

“Irregardless, the First Emissary has arranged for your presence during my next assignment, and it would be unwise to decline,” Valamand said. “It concerns the unexpected arrival of High Kinlord Silabaene, and plans involving such an esteemed guest cannot be altered without great hardship. He is one of the most important mer in the Dominion. It would be as if Skyrim’s High King or Queen descended upon another Imperial province’s doorstep.”

Wyrenna took the scrap of paper he’d set aside and began deciphering it for herself, or tried to. It seemed to be written in a cipher or otherwise was rendered incomprehensible to her. “And what’s this assignment?”

Valamand paused, scratched his nose, and would not look her in the eye as he answered her question. “After a rapid correspondence with the High Kinlord that is above my level of disclosure, the First Emissary formally invited him as well as a second guest attending to a show of hospitality in two weeks’ time. After that, they make to depart, and I do not know their destination. But, the venue is to be here, in this office, and not at the embassy. And the First Emissary will not be seeing to them, but… I will. And you will accompany me, as hostess.”

Appalled, Wyrenna had to reassure herself that she heard correctly. “What for?” she asked. “If he’s so important, why would your Emissary snub him, put him in a dingy place like this?”

“Don’t be dense. The staff will see it clean in merely an afternoon,” Valamand said. “It was the High Kinlord that requested a smaller, private venue. And it was he that made the arrangements, to my knowledge. That the First Emissary, for some reason, will not attend is understood between them. Or as far as I know.”

“Weird,” Wyrenna mumbled.

“To be perfectly honest, I am not sure if the High Kinlord ever intended to be seen at the docks,” Valamand said. “But while the effort at hospitality will be token at best, and mostly ceremony, my presence was promised. Thus, we arrive at the snag. I cannot refuse the assignment, thus neither can you.”

Wyrenna realized something.

“My part in this might be a snag, but I don’t think yours is,” she said. “I think it sounds like your leader knows that all of this is very strange. Especially if you did finally end up reporting the assassins to her. And then, nicely, your Kinlord arrives and you’ve never mentioned if he gave a
reason why. That's probably what your Emissary means you to find. If she attended herself, she’d never get away with prying.”

Valamand seemed to catch on to what she was saying. It wasn’t clear if he was more mortified at the implication, or that a Nord has caught onto it before he had.

“This is a covert-diplomatic-intelligence operation,” Valamand groaned. “Oh, no… I was never interested in becoming an intelligencer.”

“A what?”

“One who gathers intelligence or information on a target, often by means of infiltration, negotiation, espionage, and subterfuge,” Valamand said, as if explaining to a young child with his own expansive vocabulary. “You may know the concept as a covert operative, a secret agent. A spy.”

Something about that idea just sounded right. It made her happy, made her feel exactly like she knew what the universe wanted from her. She belonged with that idea. Wyrenna liked it. She liked it a lot.

“I’m interested,” said Wyrenna. “But I don’t know how I can play hostess to a Thalmor lord. If he’s even as half a human-hating pill as you, he’d never buy it.”

Only the very rind of relief could be seen in Valamand’s eyes at her willing cooperation. But it was shaded with uncertainty. “As for that, I have no solution,” he said.

"How can you ask for my help and not even have an idea what I might do?” Wyrenna grumbled. "Aren't you a wizard? You're all too happy to throw magic at all of your other problems."

Valamand ignored her taunt, but her suggestion intrigued him. Reframing the problem as a challenge, that was something he had to remember did him good. He spoke with a restrained excitement only a mage regarding a new experiment might muster. “I could, with some study, craft an illusion that would make you appear Altmer for one day. You would not be able to speak, however. Your voice would give everything away.”

Wyrenna cracked a smile at that.

“What exactly is so funny?” Valamand said, brow knitting in frustration.

“Only your very pathetic insight into my abilities, smelly peasant,” said Wyrenna, mimicking Valamand’s accent. The Altmer jumped so abruptly Wyrenna thought he might get hiccups.

“How are you doing that?” he asked, looking at her as if she had revealed herself as some sort of daedric fiend. “When did you learn to-”

“I always have excelled at impressions,” Wyrenna continued, in his tongue. “Bruma is where Skyrim and Cyrodiil meet. You notice accents there, and you learn which have an advantage over others. You can learn them, once you figure out their tricks.”

Valamand was disturbed. “Stop that immediately,” he said. “Even if that is… remarkable.”

“It’s only a tavern trick. I’ll need to hear and practice more to keep it up for an entire evening,” Wyrenna admitted in her own voice. “You barely talk to me properly. So it’s not as easy as it could be to pick it up.”

He did not speak or meet her expectant gaze. Wyrenna was content to let him consider in silence, hunched over the bed like a long-legged crane. But she had to break it eventually. "So we are really
going to do this, then?"

"Apparently so."

His sunbeam skin was overcast.

Thus began the making of Renalia. It was not easy to construct someone from no one, carve a figure from bare wood. But Wyrenna was already already well-formed. A mere illusion wouldn’t be good enough if it had to whittle an Altmer out of her completely under its own power. The less about her to have to cover up, the more perfect the facade.

Her morning routine, now stationed at the vacant Thalmor headquarters changed drastically. First she rose with the soldiers down below and followed their drills before dawn. This was her free time. She copied the legionnaires and what they did.

But that ended quickly. By full morning light, an attendant wrangled her. Presumably, one of the "staff" that Valamand had mentioned. The servant barely spoke, even under Wyrenna's most needling demands, instead herded her charge into a tub of hot water. The scrubbing commenced with such thorough scrutiny that Wyrenna was sure they were trying to scourge the Nord right off of her. The attendant could have been Bosmer, but her fingernails were sharp, her eyes slit-pupiled. Tattoos etched a false snout and stripes over her face, up to ears coated in fine fur.

It figured that the Thalmor wouldn't trouble even what they considered a lesser mer with the chore of cleaning her up.

After, the new tortures began. The attendant gave her only enough orders to lay her nude on a table. Then she brought out the hot wax, tweezers, silk thread, razor blades, scissors, combs, unknown concoctions. Every day, a new body part had the hair ripped, burned, plucked, shaved off. They had had the mercy to begin with her arms, but soon moved to her face. Then south, and further south. Even parts that were already sparse had something torn forth, and when she was bare the treatment continued pulling unknown grime out of her pores. Then the attendant would polish her naked self with a pumice stone or fine-grit cloth.

Wyrenna had to concede that the resulting silken smoothness was pleasant, and only then did she fully consent. Only the Gods knew how many oils and creams doused her smarting skin.

The attendant used a white-hot needle to pierce her ears, leaving behind tiny glass pins. Wyrenna worried if anything else she endured was so permanent.

The attendant left sometime around noon, leaving Wyrenna plenty of time to nurse her new beauty wounds. That was the time when the castle servants would deliver the makings of the midday meal and dinner, and she would put them on to cook. The afternoon became a yawning abyss of study. She crawled through treatises on etiquette. There were essays upon which fork to use and how to address whom: what felt like an endless complexity of protocol. It was easier to swallow over bread and cheese but not by much.

“Tell me how I ought to actually behave,” Wyrenna said, watching as Valamand carved off a piece of the daily beef with his thin-bladed knife. “I’m getting sick of all of these pages.”

It was hypocrisy that her torment revolved around becoming clean, yet Valamand returned filthy. He was not enthusiastic about dockside surveillance. Even observing the High Kinlord's ship and movements he couldn't discern the mer’s purpose.
“That is a complicated question,” Valamand said, biting down on doubt. Wyrenna could easily identify it now. It hunched his shoulders in an obvious tell.

“Complicated,” Wyrenna said, parroting his accent back to him. “But important.”

“Do you think this is a joke?” he spat. “It depends on who you are claiming to be, as relating to a status much higher than yourself. I recommend not attempting to pass yourself off as only a shade below his peerage.”

“I’m not dense,” Wyrenna said, leaning back on the lumpy straw bed. “Who knows how long I’d need to study, to fake that?”

“Two thousand, four hundred, and sixty-two days,” Valamand said. “If one wished to achieve respectability in the lesser nuances of filioheraldic courtesy.”

Wyrenna grumbled.

Valamand instead began cutting his meat at the small end table. Every day he toiled at the docks, the cold strongly prodded his reluctant appetite. “The issue remains. It would be beneath the High Kinlord to know every Thalmor contact by name. But that will last no longer than an introduction. You must have a cover story, a false identity.”

“Nah,” Wyrenna said, and ate her own supper of salted fish on bread.

“Your arrogance will lead only to failure,” Valamand said, chewing sourly. She felt the urge to tell him not to talk with his mouth full.

Instead, she put her bread down and set her eyes onto him. “Not liking your plan’s not the same as having no plan,” she said. “If I didn’t know what I was doing, I wouldn’t risk it. No, you swan; I’m not going to try at something if I can’t succeed.”

Valamand opened his mouth to interrupt, but Wyrenna interrupted him first. “The more detail in a story, the more chances it has to go wrong. Your High Kinlord is hundreds of years old. The older a person is, the more time they have to learn what’s normal and what’s not.”

The Thalmor had to consider this, though. His mouth set grimmer than before, if one could expunge even a nonexistent hope. “Then how could you succeed in this, Nord? If you declare it to be impossible?”

“I never said it was impossible,” Wyrenna answered. “Only that I won’t get away with building a great many lies.”

“Then what will you say? You cannot tell High Kinlord Silabaene the truth of what you are! It would ruin the illusion I will be meticulous in crafting.”

“I won’t lie at all,” Wyrenna said.

“Your tactics are absurd,” said Valamand, continuing to clear his plate.

“You don’t know anything about people, do you?” Wyrenna said. “Have you ever actually tried to sell a scam like this, or make up any sort of story at all? Or are you not imaginative enough to?”

“Have you done so?”

Wyrenna paused. “Not one so important,” she said. “But I do know that you should never make a
bluff or threat that you’ll be called on. And you should never tell a lie you can’t falsify. And that if you cannot fool someone, you should not try.”

Valamand pretended not to listen, but Wyrenna knew he did.

“Only children believe what they’re told. Adults believe their experiences,” Wyrenna said, taking the time to practice her accent. “The people who are the best at bargaining prove what they want others to think. They act and live as if what they have to say is true. They don’t have to make up a story to sell it. What he thinks of me, he will think, and it’s that I must respond to. Feeding him some tale won’t do me a bit of good if it’s only more talk he can poke holes in.”

“Project from more forward in your mouth, not down in your throat,” Valamand corrected.

“-if it’s only more talk he can poke holes in.”

“Better.” He swallowed. “Uncanny, but better.”

Wyrenna finished her dinner. “If I was doing it with magic, then you wouldn't think it was uncanny at all.”

“Magic works, usually, in perfectly explainable patterns. In the hands of the competent, Magic is predictable over time,” Valamand said. “What you are doing now— no, that is something less comfortable. I do not know what High Kinlord Silabaene will assume about your performance. But you should beware he concludes you are a threat. As I have.”

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“Hold out your arms.”

“Didn’t you already take measurements?”

One of the sisters hushed her with a groan. Taarie or Endarie, Wyrenna didn’t know which. Yet, she held her arms out again like an albatross. Radiant Raiment had the finest clothes she’d ever seen, but the proprietors were sour. Almost as sour as Valamand. There must be less abrasive Altmer somewhere in the broad world, she thought. But not anywhere within her own poor luck’s reach.

Valamand hadn’t stayed, of course. The shopkeepers were just as cold to him as they had been to her. But he was able to leave, rather than having to endure treatment like a doll full of stuffing. Or a posed pig.

They respected him somewhat after he’d shown the deep pockets of the Thalmor. They did appreciate his order for something fashionable on Auridon. Wyrenna supposed it would be a rare request in fur-clad, mismerthropic Skyrim. Wyrenna herself, and her Nordishness, they were not so fond of.

She stopped trying to talk to the untalkative.

“Behind the screen, there. Take off those rags. Hold out your arms again. Don’t slump.”

Shoes-first, Wyrenna stripped her clothes. The window looked out onto the driving snow and a stone wall. There was little humiliation in her bareness. The tailors regarded her as if she was stitched from sackcloth. They measured her again, marking the near-negligible difference. Their waxed linen tape was cold against her skin, snug in unfamiliar places.

She hadn’t thought much of herself in the months she’d been away, nor had she ever been
scrupulous about her looks or body beyond for her own pleasure. Bruma was Bruma. Her lovers had liked her without such efforts. Her breasts sat shrunken in fast and exertion. Unfamiliar definition and tautness surprised her where she’d never had cause to be strong. The seamstress muttered something about the proper figure of a womer. And something about the Nordic resemblance to a potato that was beyond deciphering.

The dress still was covered in pins and chalk. It slipped on in a way that linen or wool did not, slick as water on her plucked legs. Wyrenna found the garment was heavier than it looked, but that was a small price to pay for the smooth drape. Still, it was not quite perfect. The tailors made her take it off, bending over low. Then the foreign undergarments appeared.

Wyrenna was sure it was not normal to crush one’s waist so. New pins went in the dress. It would be unwearable without the structure underneath. The sleeves were snuggest, bunching in ripples over her wrists to enhance their delicacy. Wyrenna reminded herself that she’d broken a few noses with those wrists.

Maybe this was arrogance, she thought. To think she belonged in a dress like this, to think she belonged pulling such a lofty scheme. Or to think she ought to be anywhere but where she began.

Such a common, terrible thought. She crushed it and chose this time to think with her false voice: the voice of Renalia.

It is not that you don't belong, she mouthed, but that you might belong anywhere. Or everywhere.

“Don’t fidget,” Taarie or Endarie snapped.
Wyrenna never thought she would be thankful for such a thing, but horrible social niceties came through for her.

The front parlor of the Thalmor Headquarters proved to be pleasant enough with a dust, the addition of rugs, and a warm fire. But the High Kinlord Silabaene had gravitated to the head of the table as if it had been his all along. Wyrenna worried she was a poor hostess, though remembered that deferring to superiors was the height of Altmeri courtesy.

Her own place in the hierarchy was unclear, but by following Valamand’s lead in all things she hoped she established herself as his subordinate. Thus, even lower beneath the esteemed company’s notice.

High Kinlord Silabaene’s other guest, though… a less rigid example of Alinor dignity and class segregation. As far as introductions went, Wyrenna met him as Athelcar, Sapiarch of Architectonics. Whatever that mean. What mattered was the unfortunate stickiness of his eyes. It was impolite to watch another diner chew, but his solution of lingering at her neckline was unpleasant. And impossible to challenge politely.

Instead, she pretended to listen as he began his long-winded answer to one of the High Kinlord’s questions on philosophy or politics or some-such nonsense.

Wyrenna recounted to herself the events of the few hours previous.

It was alien enough to see her reddened skin in the long mirror upstairs, feel the stiff line of the gown nip into her hips. The finished piece in dusky silk was girdled with silverweave, finished with a complex hemline that made her feel more a stormcloud than a woman. Newly washed and cut, Wyrenna’s pinned hair pushed her doubts of what was possible to do with it in the first place.

As painful as the attendant’s work had been, she had to respect the results. Wyrenna had never imagined herself dressed so gracefully even at her own hypothetical wedding.

Valamand, in his own close-fitting and mantled dress robes, was about to paper over it all with an illusion.

“So is there anything I should know?” she asked, uncomfortable with the very threatening-looking magic Valamand was weaving between his open palms. His brow was knit in concentration. His mouth settled on neither a grimace of nerves or a grin of challenge.

“You should hold still,” he said firmly. “You may experience minor disorientation. And don’t give yourself away.”

The spell itself was not an instantaneous cast. It lingered for several moments as he wound the illusion around her. As his healing magic, his Illusion similarly felt pin-orderly and even micromanaging, pulling together here just so, adjusting there, until with what felt like a heavy knot the glamour settled down onto her complete.

Wyrenna was not taller, but felt as if she was— and viewed the room as if she was, and Valamand tracked her eyes as if she was. His stare was unknowable, dark. In the mirror beside her, her skin was indeed a different tone, her ears seemed to taper to points, and her features were oddly altered. Yet, because she knew it was only a trick, she also could notice how nothing was truly different. Only, her sight screamed it was, to doubt what she knew was real. Anyone who met her disguise
before her true self surely would be fooled.

“That’s very,” Wyrenna caught herself, and switched her tongue. “That’s actually incredible.”

She turned around, curious that he’d said nothing. Valamand looked at her as if his time had come and Aetherius was shining on his bloodless face.

“Valamand?”

“Oh, yes, it is,” he said quickly, shaking his head. “Of course it is. It’s one of mine. Why wouldn’t it be?”

Wyrenna ignored his warm sweat of nerves and turned back to the mirror. “You should go downstairs and prepare,” she said. “I have… things to work out about the illusion. Private things.”

His ears flushed an interesting peach color and he needed no more persuasion to descend the stairs, leaving her alone with the Khajiiti attendant. Wyrenna pocketed a few useful items into a slit in her skirts: a hand mirror, a kerchief as any noble lady might carry. Then she picked up a rather generous moneypurse from the upstairs cache of funds.

“I must know your name,” Wyrenna asked of the attendant, who stiffened. Despite being there for the illusion’s casting, the Khajiit cringed at Wyrenna’s new resemblance to her Thalmor superiors. Wyrenna tried again, this time in her own speech. “Please, I haven’t learned it yet.”

“Tszanzi,” said the Khajiit, and Wyrenna might have thought it a difficult name if her own wasn’t so old-fashioned.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done, Lady Tszanzi,” she said earnestly. “I only have one favor or question to ask of you. But, I fear it is dangerous. I will pay very well, and afterward I guarantee that you will be able to leave the Thalmor’s service with no strings attached. I’ll take all of the responsibility.”

The ohmes paused. “Khajiit is loyal to the Dominion,” she said, “and will not abide traitors.”

“Nothing like that,” Wyrenna said. “I may have agreed to it, but I had very little choice to be here tonight. And go out of the way to look like an elf to do it. But I’m not going to pretend that we can learn anything from the High Kinlord. Such an important person can’t be so careless to let anything slip. Valamand’s an idiot to think I can really help him.”

Tszanzi stood agog at Wyrenna’s boldness. But, shyly she nodded. “It is agreed. This one has another idea, perhaps?”

And Wyrenna had then explained her plan.

But, at present, Wyrenna cut that re-assessment short. There would be time to worry about Tszanzi once the party was done with. Besides, the company was talking about her. Or about ‘Renalia.’

“And what is your particular relation to our lovely lady tonight?” said the High Kinlord Silabane. He had a voice like frosted glass. “She has been mum thus far.”

“Ah, about Lady Renalia,” Valamand said, vaguely stuttering. “She has been my… companion for a time now, and her presence requested by the First Emissary personally.”

Wyrenna gentled her eyes, placing her fork down as delicately as she could manage. “I beg your pardon, my friend. I would prefer to speak for myself, if it would be appropriate.”
Valamand looked as if he had eaten an entire lemon. Though Wyrenna was sure she hadn’t been impolite. The High Kinlord regarded her with a lukewarm interest. Athelcar merely leered as he had before. There were entirely too many mer here, she thought, and not enough women or womer or anybody else. “I apologize for good Valamand’s hesitation. I have spent the last nineteen years in Bruma, and he worries constantly on my social graces. But I would be delighted to speak upon whatever you wish, Your Eminence.”

“You may tell your tale, as much as there is to tell,” The High Kinlord continued. Contained was the veiled reminder that he thought her small and dull. But she had spoken with confidence where Valamand bowed and scraped. “Bruma is an unusual post, though it might be interesting minutiae.”

“Yes, it is highly unusual, but appropriate for my particular talents. You see, and this may be irregular, I am an expert on Nords.”

“Truly?” Athelcar asked, intrigued as if he had visited the grotesque. “Are they so worthy of study?”

“Worthiness has little to do with it. The unworthy must be conquered, but that can be difficult without insight into their ways. Nords assume that they do not need to understand what they wish to destroy. That is their downfall,” Wyrenna said, “As for me, my skill is that I am able to pass invisibly among Nords. I know their dangers, their minds, and the way to their confidence. It pains me, but in a crowd of Nords, they might treat me as they treat their own.”

“Remarkable,” said Athelcar. “Doubtless you are aided by their low intelligence.”

“They hardly notice what’s right in front of them,” Wyrenna said. “As for how my time in Bruma came to an end, I apologize for the length of this tale. But I believe we have two more courses coming, anyway.”

Valamand drank a very long sip of his wine.

--

We simply must become Valamand at this moment in time. It is not optional or hindered by difficulty. It is easy. For the first rare time in a great many years, there were no veiled complexities to emotion in being Valamand. No false-self of regimented thought. No veneers of grandeur or prestige. Not compared to his current company. Being Valamand is as simple and straightforward as being anybody else. It was perhaps that he was simple that tortured him the most.

There was so much empty space.

He could not fathom how such an excellent chance had become so dreadful. A chance to meet and gain rapport with the High Kinlord Silabaene himself! A rare and fanciful goal. His mother would have stood agog. It was the golden opportunity suggested when he accepted his affirmative action into Thalmor ranks. As merely a wizard, he could only ever aspire to be a Sapiarch one day in the very highest and most fortunate reality. But with the Thalmor the potential to rise in esteem was a shining beacon.

The chance to distinguish himself had felt real. Accord for his magical prodigy. He had craved respect not as an arcanist doomed to teach the less talented but as a bright hero of authority.

Alas, his fate was the foreign wastes of Skyrim. And even now, in this jury-rigged hope of redemption, the High Kinlord Silabaene merely ate his food. He spoke little and asked questions chiefly of his clamoring sycophant, who readily filled the space. Despite that he lifted his glass, the wine inside drained only so much as to be changed with each new course. Valamand could not
speak boldly, in hope to be heard. There was too much decorum stuck in his throat. It was beneath
the High Kinlord to entertain supplicants. This, Valamand had known. But he had not known that
the Mer would embody that spirit so perfectly, and regard him as so much a servant.

(A tool, which need not be elevated, a voice whispered.)

True, Luxurene’s noble heritage was tarnished somewhat by disfavor and disloyal relatives. But he
was pure-bred of Alinor’s most prestigious stock! He ought have been able to impress or at least
stand before the High Kinlord! Yet his name was not one to-know. If Silabaene was to be pleased,
they would have already been introduced. Valamand would never have been here. He would have
had another life entirely.

It was a foolish and selfish thought, but Valamand could almost feel sure Silabaene had Maormer
ancestors for his glittering stare, foam-cream skin, serpentine animus. But no. No, that was not done,
not thought. Silabaene was among the highest of elves and the blood of the stars flowed within him.

Blood of similar providence curdled in Valamand’s own heart. Only the favor of the times framed
Silabaene among the heavens and cast Valamand down upon the dirt. Unnoticed. A study in
worthlessness.

And worse. *Worse!* The Nord, Wyrenna, she…

The High Kinlord Silabaene of Firsthold, Sapiarch of Animadynamics and high officer over all
Thalmor from Anequina to the Imperial City to the lost Hammerfell cause, paid her attention. Her
illusion-cloaked face was Mara’s own image of serenity, her tongue a tale of Xarxes in confidence.
Perhaps they thought *her* to be *his* superior! Envy scathed him. How dare she? It was only by his
immense skill she could even feign competence before this company!

Perhaps his illusion had been *too* skillful? Had he enhanced her charisma as well as disguised her
appearance? She had never before seemed so engaging, so intelligent and well-spoken. Her much-
twisted tale pleased even him who had been there to witness it. Where it didn’t chafe. Valamand
considered. He had taken such pains, been meticulous and careful in crafting the most sophisticated
glamour of his life. He could not help but admire his own handiwork. But had he made her *too*
beautiful?

No. No, impossible. The very principles of his subtle genius hinged on altering perception, not sight.
Nothing so crude as replacing something already there with a more enticing image. He’d have
needed a template for that.

Still, there was the discomfort of finding his mind drawn to her collarbone, her elegant neck, the
constellations of freckles over her nose. There was something luscious in her smile, even though it
was surely false and part of her good act. Valamand looked back to his plate. The taste of food had
vanished. He bit down the need of his curiosity. It was not necessary to ask her questions. As good
as her bluffs were, she couldn’t actually be very enriching.

It was a trick of his own illusion, all of it. It surely was. That the illusion forced him to see her as
Altmer exploited something involuntary in his sensibilities, an appetite beyond his stomach. That
these high figures would approve when she was only a human, subelven and barely cultured... That
he too might…

She laughed softly, at one of Athelcar’s poor jokes.

… might find her rather fascinating.
He felt ill.

Which of course is why we simply had to be Valamand, though that time is coming to an end for now. We know what such implications are, but also the quiet evidence that made them almost appealing. Only one person in the room regarded Valamand as more than a prop or an eccentric boy. In a drought of esteem there was only one source of water, of security. It was not one that Valamand was comfortable to drink from.

But oh, the envy and the thirst.

--

“Well, that went as well as I hoped it could,” Wyrenna said tiredly as the moons climbed high outside, candles burning down all around Solitude. Finally, their company had bid good-night and was safely off the doorstep. Athelcar with a cordial goodbye and red apple cheeks. Silabaene merely dismissed himself, and they alighted into their fine carriage bound for the docks. Wyrenna slouched in her chair and up-ended the last of the fine wine into her glass. She grasped it by the stem in her fist and drank it with ardent, very Nordic gulps.

Valamand practically melted next to the doorframe, bent under nervous collapse. “They actually believed… I’m beside myself,” he muttered. “It worked.”

“Of course it worked. You’re a good wizard, and I studied hard,” Wyrenna said.

“You are a mountain of hubris,” Valamand said, shaking his head limply. He too settled at the cleared table, went so far as to lean on one elbow and massage his temples. “I can only hope neither of them come to call ever again. Excellent a field test as it was for my theories on chameleonic allucitation, ‘Renalia’ ceases to exist as of right now.”

Wyrenna could feel the illusion fading as he spoke, not intended to last longer than one evening. His release of will finally ended it, and in a wave of disorientation she found herself dazed and almost pouring her wineglass into her left eyeball. Wyrenna managed to feign the most Altmeri social maneuver she had practiced, the ‘I of course meant to do that,’ and soon was drinking like a normal person might have been expected to. Still, Valamand obviously had noticed. He stared at her with a sort of cheated disbelief.

“Don’t tell me,” she muttered into her wine. “I’m hideous now, right?”

Valamand’s arched eyebrow was an impenetrable answer. Instead he shook his head and sighed into his hands again. “Survival is a desperate and vain goal we’ve managed,” he said. “We’ve accomplished nothing. Not a single item of relevance came up, this entire night.”

“You from the Summerset Isles are great at speaking in riddles,” Wyrenna said. “But I wouldn’t say it was a failure yet. We did manage something. Maybe two somethings.”

“Oh?”

“Well, we now know for absolute certain that this very powerful Thalmor leader thinks you here in Skyrim are threatening. Powerful people don’t pay much if lesser people know their plans. Unless it’s very great trouble, what would they care? We’d be helpless against them anyway,” said Wyrenna. “Granted, that’s how I figure it might be. The most powerful people I knew back home were the head of the city guard and the constable.”

“And the second item?”
Three sharp knocks cut the dusty pause, a caller at the door.

“I hope that’s it,” Wyrenna said and rose to receive the guest. They entered, lowered their shrouded hood and yawned a wide cat’s yawn. Tiny snowflakes scattered into the room.

“This one returns;” said Tszanzi, looking frazzled but overall very pleased. “Successful, as well. To an extent.”

“I hope it’s the extent that kept you out of trouble,” said Wyrenna. “Was the information I gave you accurate?”

“Very much, yes. The guards, they were not even there to notice khajiit. Even an orc could have slipped aboard,” said Tszanzi. “Removing this would have been too suspicious. So this one made a copy, instead.”

Valamand watched this transaction with baffled eyes. Wyrenna took the small oilskin-bound folio from the Khajiit with thanks and reverence, thumbed through it quickly.

“It’s not very much,” she said in disappointment. “That’s all there was? Anything before departing Windhelm?”

“Khajiit could only find one thing to copy that was useful. This one is sure it is incomplete on purpose, for the High Kinlord is not the only one to read a shipping record.”

“I see,” said Wyrenna. “Still, a deal’s a deal. You did very well, and were very brave. Valamand, would you please get the coffer of funds from upstairs?”

“What is the meaning of this?” he demanded. “What have you done? What is all of… what is happening here?”

“Just go do as you’re told,” Wyrenna said. “I’ll explain soon. Tszanzi must be paid, and must be on her way before morning.”

“I— but—” Valamand groaned. “Very well, Nord.”

Wyrenna bit her tongue on laughter as he cursed all the way up the stairs. Tszanzi smiled the first time she had seen the Khajiit do so. She smiled as one unused to smiling, but naturally talented at it. When Valamand returned and Wyrenna counted out the coins, she set aside an extra half-again what was owed. It was enough to buy a small plot of land.

“Khajiit does not complain,” said Tszanzi in some small awe. “But this one is… surprised at the generosity.”

“Consider it partially for your silence, partially for good luck, partially for gods’speed,” said Wyrenna, “and partially in thanks. Without your help, all of this would’ve been completely worthless. I’m no Thalmor, but it’s sad that you’ll depart in silence. They ought to reward you for such important work.”

“A Khajiit receives a medal from the Thalmor? That would be the day, yes?” said Tszanzi. “But not today. Today, this one departs. She shall weigh friendly coin and face on warmer sands.”

“Good luck and fare well,” said Wyrenna. And Tszanzi left, and would never return to the Thalmor headquarters. Or any embassy of the Thalmor in any land henceforth. Wyrenna knew she would take space as arranged with the Khajiit caravan outside the city gates. It would soon be as if no Tszanzi had ever existed in Solitude, or had done any work for the Thalmor at all.
The door finally closed, and Wyrenna was alone in the room again with Valamand. She could hear his foot tapping behind her, the oiled click of a dress shoe. She meant to turn around with the same smile she’d faced Silabaene with (70 percent fake, 30 percent secrets), but found she could not. Regardless of his act of authority, she now saw how it served him. There was sincere fear, worry, cloaked within it.

Fooling him felt bad in the way the best things felt bad. Delivering the truth. Striking a well-needed blow to prove her fists.

“You will explain,” he said. “Now.”

Wyrenna did.
Wyrenna did, and she did more than once. Once to Valamand, and again to the First Emissary Elenwen. To avoid having to recount double, we will skip forward now. Only a little. But slightly to the north and the west, high on a perch overlooking the Sea of Ghosts. The hawks circled overhead, nesting in the salt-cut cliffs. No seagulls, or their cries, could be heard over the Thalmor embassy. Only the relentless thud of the waves, and the cracking sways of arctic pines on the beaten mountain below.

Before she could even consider going, Wyrenna made sure she was meticulously clean. It was a relief to bathe herself after weeks of an attendant, but strangely lonely. Still, she was able to use exactly the oils and soaps she desired, rather than the overpowering mess Tszanzi had been compelled to slather forth. Still, once her hair was clean and neat, her clothes fresh, armor polished, and her eyebrows tweezed (ouch!) Wyrenna felt prepared to face unknown territory.

Passing the threshold, however, she was no longer sure at all. The guards here did not make the courtesy to stand passive as they did in the city. They stared. And leered. And Wyrenna did feel unwelcome. She was no longer in Skyrim for the bounds of the Embassy belonged to faraway Alinor.

But she reminded herself, Skyrim was not her home either. This world, and the world north of Cyrodiil, were not her own. And, as she had told herself with the High Kinlord, they held no power over her. While Wyrenna did not make herself so proud as to meet any foreign eyes, she strode forth at Valamand’s side. She too was her own nation.

Inside, everything was as she’d expected the offices in Solitude to be. As she was bid enter, a wave of perfume hit her. Wyrenna didn’t feel faint. But her eyes stung from sharp and otherworldly incense.

While the building’s construction predated its tenants, the interior was furnished in no way Wyrenna had ever seen before. The walls hung heavy with banners in velvet and gilt-pulled thread, the white marble tiles cut by tasseled rugs. Wyrenna did not recognize the furniture’s red wood, and gauze screens separated wide rooms into private spaces. The gleam of sunlight shone from every fluted glass lamp. Even candles twinkled like stars, wafted a vague scent. Her own breastplate sent strange reflections on the walls.

They had not disarmed her. Wyrenna did not think that boded well. Or maybe they did not think one girl with a pig-sticker to be much of a threat, or they assumed Valamand had her under control. Still, Wyrenna took comfort in her armor. With luck, they’d be like the people at the docks and see her larger for the steel she wore.

The manor guards gave way to guards clad in glass, gave way to guards cloaked in golden silk and glistening oil-black armor. They stood in the cold courtyard, and Wyrenna did not see a single shiver or hair out of place. Each deeper step seemed grand, dissuasive. Wyrenna became ever more contrary in defiance. Valamand stooped, walked with heavy sighs and a dread only thinly masked by protocol.

She’d once imagined their positions reversed. It was possible they’d throw her in a jail and leave her to die or worse, yes. But in her mind, Wyrenna had done right. Whatever they did to her now could
not touch that. She coldly accepted that her life as she’d known it had come to an end months ago.

This was, instead of death, part of her new one. It was Valamand now that counted steps toward his fate.

When facing the First Emissary Elenwen, Wyrenna was sure to give her best curtsy first. It was probably fairly bad, but the womer made no indication of its character. Instead, her face stuck in an ambivalent sneer, a natural disdain as if at any given time she might ascend right out of the world and no longer be troubled by petty concerns. She seemed much older than Valamand straight away. Possibly, she was also made up to seem so. Where much of the art of paint and powder among Men was devoted to preserving youth, the hollows of this womer’s cheeks were dusted darker, the sharp lines accentuated. Her hair slicked back in a severe style highly different from the High Kinlord’s elaborate crown of plaits. The seniority in her obvious years, the experienced and intense aura she carried spoke for her where Silabaene was ageless and transcendent.

“I admit, this is not exactly the arrangement I expected,” said the First Emissary Elenwen, in an even more regal dialect than Valamand used. “Explain the presence and purpose of this Nord.”

“Honored First Emissary, this is the free agent I mentioned in my report,” Valamand said somewhat weakly. “I… I admit to and claim responsibility for any lapse of clarity, in brevity and short space as can be attached to a hawk-”

“You explain neither the presence or purpose of this Nord, justiciar. I will allow you one further chance. Do not waste your breath, or my time.”

He clearly would, though. Wyrenna could see it in his face. Just as he opened his mouth to stammer again, Wyrenna spoke quietly as the primers on etiquette had taught her to. “Sir, if it would be appropriate, I would very much prefer to explain myself.”

Valamand bit his tongue, quite sallow. “Would that be acceptable, Your Excellency?”

Only the thinnest quiver of Elenwen’s lip betrayed her disdain. “Very well. I expect your ineptitude may now speak for itself.”

Valamand’s attention slipped from his superior back to Wyrenna, and coalesced in the first real, overt nonverbal communication he had ever made to her. In his eyes and face, quite clearly, ‘don’t foul this up.’

She cleared her throat.

“Thank you very much. I… I have been told that this Justiciar Valamand was put on a mission, months ago. With some other agents or soldiers, Your Excellency. Is that right?”

“He, as well as one other, were assigned support to Agent Sanyon,” said Elenwen offhandedly, already bored. "They are dead.”

“Yes. Yes, I was there, Your Excellency,” said Wyrenna. “I was at the shrine of Talos with the worshippers when they attacked.”

Wyrenna sweat in her boots, suddenly aware that she may have said entirely the wrong thing. Elenwen’s unflinching stare did nothing to disprove this.

“I… Well,” she continued, “I wasn’t there at the shrine praying! It was a landmark on my way back to Cyrodiil. Anyway, bandits attacked at the very same time. I was the only other survivor. Except for Valamand.”
“Mind your manners,” Elenwen snapped. “You are not his peer.”

Wyrenna closed her eyes and felt like a fool. So much preparation to meet the High Kinlord and now this… middle-mer scared her. She pushed the reality of being locked up out of her mind and tried again.

“I apologize. Things haven’t been… the smoothest between us,” she said. “To continue, uh, Justiciar Valamand removed me from the scene and kept me as his witness. We marched north as directly as possible until we were, uh, thwarted.”

“This is that business with the alleged attack,” Elenwen said, muttering far more darkly than before. Her eyes gleamed. “Very well, Nord. You have no investment in muddling the matter. Recount this event.”

Wyrenna could see Valamand shake in panic. Why would Elenwen believe he’d been lying? Or that she would betray him and not confirm his story? And furthermore, why would Valamand actually…

She realized that at this moment, she could easily doom the mer. She could frame him a fraud and a traitor, a deserter. The temptation was there: the memory of cold nights spent on bare rock. The sneering eyes of this Thalmor only meters away in even more frigid judgement.

That may even have been what Elenwen wanted, the only reason she might place the fate of an elf in a mere human’s hands.

“This is the truth,” she said, and began with deep breaths before every phrase, metering herself. “North of Labyrinthian, a band of mercenaries met us on the road. Their leader was Altmer. They claimed to have been sent by the Thalmor, and they passed whatever inspection Lord Valamand did. I don’t remember the pass-phrase, but he should still have the documentation.”

The mer jumped, suddenly remembering what was in his inner pockets. He dove into them until he pulled out a slim scroll of vellum, once-sealed with iridescent gold wax. “Please, forgive my inattention. I have been keeping this secure from damage until now.” He presented it to Elenwen, who ignored it. The First Emissary was fixed on Wyrenna, boring deep into her words.

“Continue, Nord,” she commanded.

“Lord Valamand saw everything in order. They claimed to escort him to Morthal, to await relief. They split, and two marched me off in the opposite direction. But I was suspicious, and, uh, I clocked one on the head and ran,” Wyrenna said. “Good thing, too— the rest of them had already tried to murder Lord Valamand. Between us, it looked like they were waiting for Thalmor to pass in Hjaalmarch. It was disturbing to run into that sort of trap, and Lord Valamand prudently got off the roads. We made for Morthal and he immediately sent a series of letters there to you here, asking for information and assistance.”

“I received none,” said Elenwen.

“We soon realized this, Your Excellency,” said Wyrenna, “But we made the mistake of hoping the mail was slow, or that the trouble would pass. It didn’t. We made for Solitude after a month of silence, where you were contacted.”

“Poorly,” said Elenwen, only for her subordinate to shrink. Yet, before he had been staring at her. Bewildered. Wyrenna bit her lip and straightened her own back.

“As well as he was able to,” she said. “It was then he received a new assignment. I encountered him by chance, and after he took initiative in recovering stolen Thalmor cargo, it was he who discovered
the High Kinlord Silabaene had arrived in Skyrim. That news was so important, I'm not surprised
certain details were lost when he contacted you about it.”

“Like your unfortunate identity,” Elenwen pointed out.

“Absolutely,” Wyrenna said, refusing to be insulted. To Elenwen, she probably looked dense. But
she persevered. “Still, he received your orders and humbly obeyed them, and while I'm very
inconvenient, he did the best he could under the circumstances. His talents in Illusion magic are
really very amazing. The High Kinlord, even if he is a great wizard in his own right, didn’t recognize
me as a Nord at all.”

Elenwen seemed unconvinced, or veiling her astonishment. Or offense. Wyrenna doggedly avoided
that conclusion.

“Or if he did, he didn’t say so,” she added somewhat weakly. “Moving on, um, we interpreted
together that the purpose of your detail was to discern what the High Kinlord was doing here in
Skyrim so secretly. But because he is of course not a fool, it was wasn’t reasonable to expect that
information would just be let slip. Instead, it was obtained by alternate means.”

Elenwen raised one scandalized eyebrow. “I hope you are not implying what you seem to be
implying, Nord.”

“I’m not implying anything,” Wyrenna said. “Here it is.”

She slid the copy of the folio across Elenwen’s desk. Valamand looked as if he was about to faint as
the First Emissary thumbed through it with idle interest.

“How did you get this,” she asked.

“It was obtained,” said Wyrenna.

“How then, was it obtained?”

“By alternate means.”

“By what alternate means, girl?”

Wyrenna took a deep breath and folded her hands neatly behind her. “On my honor, I promise you
that absolutely nothing was removed or stolen to obtain this intelligence,” she said firmly. “Nor did
obtaining it involve any trespassing into Thalmor buildings or exclusive property. It is an
independently-reproduced copy of partial shipping records carried by an East Empire Company fleet,
under commission of High Kinlord Silabaene.”

Elenwen squinted at Wyrenna. It was like a hook, twisting to the bone. Yet there was a small, mean
sort of smile to her face. “Your pet does hide its thimbleful of competence,” she said. “Justiciar, is
this Nord truthful?”

“Yes,” he said, and his mouth rounded the word as if it was a rare and brilliant gem, unexpected in
its setting. “She is.”

“Actually, it would not have been possible without Lord Valamand watching the docks and the
patterns of the fleet guards, or without his notes,” said Wyrenna. “And without his, um, guidance, it
would not have been possible to occupy the High Kinlord long enough to succeed.”

Like a smug cat Elenwen asked, “And what did you think of the revered High Kinlord Silabaene?”
Wyrenna was sure this was a trap. Beyond even a breath of debate. “It's not for me to judge one so beyond my world,” she said respectfully.

And, if Elenwen had finally captured Wyrenna at error, no one would know. A terrible whooshing sound came from overhead the solar, followed by a guttural bellow, yelling, faint curses and screams. Elenwen glanced at the eaves, suspicious at the sudden pause.

“What in all creation,” she said impeccably, “was that?”

Wyrenna looked up at Valamand in dread, only to find him already looking down at her with the same sentiment.

A horrified-looking guard burst into the room in a terribly un-Aldmeri fashion, speaking almost too quickly to understand, “Most honored Madame First Emissary, it would be advisable to seek shelter presently, for there is a—”

A gristly roar and crunching sound cut off the end of his sentence as something outside came to an unfortunate end. Someone shrieked, “Dragon!”

Elenwen rose so quickly Wyrenna had trouble following the flurry of orders she issued. “Don’t just stand there! Rally the barracks! Move noncombatant staff into the cellar! Form up archers! Get to it, boy!”

The guard was banished in an instant, and nearly as quickly Elenwen seized Valamand with her voice as well. “Justiciar! Do as I command. Assist outside.”

“Yes, Madame,” said Valamand. His voice was dutiful and sure. Glad to get a concrete directive. But there was no hiding it now, not from Wyrenna who had bent her survival around his various whims. He was a little too stiff, a little too entrenched in script. So tight as if he’d come undone at any time. He swept away into the hall and down to the courtyard. Wyrenna was alone with Elenwen. Orders given, her haste to command slowed. She walked calmly to the door.

“Exit with me. You are not permitted to wander my premises alone,” she demanded. But the womer did not hurry. Even when Wyrenna wanted to run— but how then would she follow?

Follow?

There was a terrible sound overhead, the crack of slate shingles. Something with claws gripped the pitched roof of the solar, crunching the timbers heavily. The house-frame creaked.

Follow?

A white dread built in her throat, congealed of the sounds she was hearing. She ought to not have had sympathy. Her skin itched. Her hands itched. Wyrenna found herself walking faster, despite Elenwen’s long legged stride.

“And where are you going, girl?” the womer snapped.

“I don’t know,” she said, almost choking on her words. “But I… I can’t just stay here while…”

“Don’t be ridiculous. What pathetic hope would you have against a dragon?” Elenwen said. “Use what little sense you possess. I have an entire host of Alinor stationed at my command. A mere flying lizard is nothing but inconvenience.”

Something smashed against the wall directly to Wyrenna’s right, so strongly it knocked the plaster
loose inside.

“Some inconvenience,” she muttered. Elenwen was not pleased.

Valamand was out there, she thought.

Good, a part of her spat. Let him be eaten for all the grief he’s caused.

But another part remembered how he had looked, the last time one of the beasts had appeared. The sun-rimmed terror in his eyes. Ten men? Nothing. A Vampire lord? Nothing to him. And yet, despite his power…

“Get back here this instant!”

Wyrenna turned on her steel-plated heel and dropped into her very best curtsey.

“Respectfully, no.” she said. And then she ran down the hall, shoving aside a frenzied scout, dodging a porter already dragging the injured indoors. The yells after her were muted, compared to the racket outside. She reached the door. She cast it open, chill hitting her cheeks.

A whipcrack struck through the thick wood as if it was a glaze of frost, a huge and heavy chain propelled with such force it left divots in the stone wall. After her flinch was complete, Wyrenna saw it arc up gracefully, riveted to the neck of an enormous black beast. Not black, she realized. That was only it against the sun. Pale. Pale and thorned as the distant mountains.

It’s effortless glide on leathery wings brought it wheeling around again for another pass. Wyrenna drew her sword, but kept close to the wall.

The archers reformed into ranks. They poised. They drew. The dragon approached, and a storm of glass arrows arched to their target. But with horror, Wyrenna saw the creature’s thick scales repel the volley. Only those that pierced the wings did anything but sail harmlessly over the wall or clink off hard armor. And the Dragon was used to so many fly-bites. The wizards advanced as the dragon drew closer. First their attacks were coordinated, enough black cloaks whipping at once for Wyrenna to lose any one individual. Which was Valamand?

But their volley of fire-bolts and even what had to be a curse of burden failed before the dragon’s great strength. Like an eagle’s, the talons raked the ground. They plucked away the center of the group and flung them over the wall, screaming down the cliffs below.

The wizards scattered. Discipline broken, they used their own individual tactics. Wyrenna gaped as she watched the nets of thunder and whirlwinds tear after the dragon: elaborate spellwork and even a beam of pure light. Yet, their target was quick on the wing and rode their storm as it would ride any other.

Then, she saw something truly incredible.

Flush against the grey sky, something glowed into existence on the dragon’s body. At a distance, it seemed tiny. But as the creature doubled back, she realized what had happened. How was it possible, she wondered, to place a magic circle on a dragon’s distant wing?

“Yes!”

That was a familiar voice.

Isolated in the middle of the courtyard, with his hood blown back to the elements and hair loose-
Valamand. In both hands, he wove some invocation of inferno that frightened Wyrenna even before he released it. She could feel the heat when it flew free, like being in the wake of a wildfire’s breath. Dozens of shooting stars erupted from his hands, lighting the stone manse in gold and white. Like an actor, Valamand spread his arms, laughing—and the bolts spread, too. They curled and curved in, chasing the dragon in flight.

Valamand drew them in close, clenched his fists as the missiles struck directly over the embassy.

They detonated the fire rune he’d set upon the dragon’s own skin.

Wyrenna did not, would not, and would never describe the sound. Of the explosion, of the dragon, of the ground as the thing slammed to the earth in a blood-streaked crater. Its wing was not merely broken, or burned. It was gone.

Valamand was the only mer who cheered. It was cut short when the dragon proved itself very much alive, snapping at everything within reach. It rediscovered its legs. It could still walk. The barracks of footsoldiers sprung now, confident that the beast was grounded. And yet, Wyrenna could almost imagine the awful thing to grin. Its mouth opened wide, revealing its gullet.

“FO KRAH DIIN!”

It breathed, cursed out frost, a rolling scourge of evil winters. The bitter rime glazed over the foot troops, sticking them to the spot and ruining any hope of assault. Attack from the other side ended in a powerful lash from a ivory-spiked tail, the beating hurricane of the remaining wing. Wyrenna faltered. Elenwen was right, she thought. She was right.

The Dragon’s head moved from side to side, snaking and belching the cold death. The pile of solid ice that resulted alighted on the solar roof, cracking it. A wide hole fell through, punctured by the great weight. And yet, that wasn’t what the dragon was after. It was doing what the other had done, Wyrenna realized, months ago. Sniffing. Tracking.

“Sahlag fahliil! Zu’u diin hin qeth!”

And whatever that meant, with its giant throat, it had caught Valamand’s scent. Limping on one wing, it lurched bodily towards the mer, who stood fast and firm. He reached for another spell, even as the Thalmor soldiers regrouped.

“IIZ DEYTO HI! FO KRAH DIIN!”

The air almost seemed to thicken with the power of this creature’s cry, the jet of ice and snow beyond anything Wyrenna ever had imagined the sky to ever conjure. It engulfed Valamand as a serpent might engulf a mouse. Dagger-sharp spines sheeted off the edges of Valamand’s lonely ward. The other wizards, soldiers, avoided the blast in dread, watching as he toiled with two hands against the terrible force. Then onto one knee. Then, high like a wineglass breaking overhead, his ward shattered into magicka and ash. The dark form visible in the maelstrom crumpled.

Wyrenna was running. She was running and she had not given her legs permission to, but they were. She was running at the dragon, heart screaming in her throat, possessed. She realized, she too was screaming. Her own voice was on the air. The dragon grew, and grew as each stride drew her closer.

She was afraid, but there was no doubt in her mind as she plunged into the frozen storm. There was an eerie sense of calm, of disaster, of worry and anger and retribution and overall sureness of what she had to do. She felt like one of Valamand’s fireballs, propelled by a great force. Wyrenna lifted her shield, felt the lash of frost against it. She hid in its wake, carrying a furnace in her gut and fury in
her clenched sword-fist. Step by step she grew closer, the ring on her right hand hot as an ember and buzzing with effort. Her steps did not ice over, her armor did not freeze shut.

When the dagger teeth were finally in reach, Wyrenna struck forth. She lashed her shield right on its snout. Instantly her mind criticized, what would that accomplish?

But the assault stopped. The dragon shrieked, recoiled. Wyrenna felt the coldest part of her face were two streaks of iced tears. Somewhere in the ancient past there must have been lore about this. But she discovered it just now, at this most dire situation. Dragons, immortal and invulnerable beyond all other living creatures, had sensitive noses.

“Duraal bron!”

“Shut your mouth!” Wyrenna screamed, both in panic as her sword crashed on its hard scales, and that it was able to talk. Even if she could not understand what it was roaring, the obvious words rattled her bones. The Thalmor regrouped and had regained morale, their warriors now descending on the grounded Dragon with glass blades, arrows, harsh magics. The beast bellowed out, lashing on the ground but unable to guard its exposed side, the gushing wound where its wing had once been. Ten strong mer took a hold of the chain and iron collar encircling its striking neck, pulled and attempted to haul it onto its belly. That was it’s final nerve, its instant of true panic. Wyrenna stumbled backwards as the dragon reared onto two legs. It bit the chain and threw the line skyward. There was a horrible second as she realized where her leg was, and where the links were, and she too was propelled into the air. Her shield bounced off the embassy roof. Suddenly above the dragon, its bleeding throat yawned wide under her.

“Zu'u diivon hin pahlok!”

For a moment, Wyrenna felt as if she floated on the air. Then the jaws of the beast shot up to meet her. In a vain hope to protect herself, Wyrenna thrust her sword down with both hands, kicking out with her steel-shod boots. She did not expect to plant herself inside the dragon’s jaws, for her shaking wrists to feel a ponderous lack of resistance. Her blade sunk into the dragon’s open mouth, the soft upper palate and throat as if it was only a side of pig. Jagged teeth crowned around her. It could not bite down as it gagged: on its own bile, and soon Wyrenna realized its brains. She bore down more strongly, twisting her single thorn among sloe.

The dragon fell like any other creature would. Wyrenna felt the hard ground as she rode its slumping head down, down, into the dirty snow. She lay there for a second, reflecting on all that had just happened. Remembering who she was. And what this thing with huge teeth nearly swallowing her was. And why she was entangled with it. And why she had done this, she had done this, this was not a thing that had happened to her. Wyrenna had done this. She yanked her sword out of the dead thing’s still-quivering throat and crawled.

Wyrenna realized that her armor now had several brand-new dents, some teeth even embedded in it. And she felt more than one bruise blooming up her side. Still, it didn’t hurt to breathe, and nothing truly felt broken or ruptured, at least. She coughed and felt her bones ache, felt a few unfortunate icicles fall off her eyebrows. She had to get up. First to her knees. Then with her sword thrust into the ground she pushed up and felt her back creak. Wyrenna stood, stumbled, and blinked in the clearing sunlight.

Several elves were staring at her. Not stoic, but in horror. She looked down at herself, covered in dark blood and ichor. But they seemed more appalled than that she was merely filthy. Wyrenna shrugged at them. “Well, now that that’s done,” she croaked, trying to sound brave or reassuring. Then she remembered Valamand, and turned around to look for him, hoping he hadn’t been
trampled in the confusion.

He had not been. And what was more: the mer was alive, huddled into a frozen ball and shivering on the ground. He half-heartedly attempted to separate his robes from the glassy-slick wake of destruction. Wyrenna hobbled over to him and saw him struggle in fear. She wondered why. Then she remembered she was looming above him, as if out of Oblivion, holding a drawn sword. She reversed her grip and began chipping away at the solid mass with its pommel. “Should I get an ice-pick?” she asked. Her voice was hoarse.

“Please stop,” he pleaded. “This is highly embarrassing.”

“Would you rather be highly frozen to death?” Wyrenna asked. “That was a good trick, though. With the fire, and all. Can’t you melt this ice?”

“Of course I can. I merely… have expended all my magicka,” he admitted lamely. “And your flattery is un-asked for. Especially in this company.”

“Eh?”

Wyrenna looked up, to see a straight line from Valamand’s icy prison to the solar door where Elenwen stood.

“I’ll save it for later,” Wyrenna said. Then she cringed to see Elenwen’s judgement. “Er, this is a big mess.”

“Indeed,” the womer said, unreadable. “Do not explain. I saw everything.”

Chapter End Notes

Here ends the first share of Wyrenna’s tale. For this very start to her adventure is a time of uncertainty, of definitive anxiety, and of desperate ground. The consequences of which would come to bear only later, as would any true element of “opposition” beyond the threat of a cruel death. Or, at its heart, a loss of control.

Here is also where the intersection of the bard's scrutiny and the scholar's scrutiny lies. For in this historical fiction, Wyrenna has yet to manifest any such elements that make her either a fabled champion, or that changed the stage of Skyrim's history. A far shot from the dauntless, pitiless existence of a paragon. But far beyond a rousing ballad of deeds or a college lecture, I believe the foundation of her adventures is paved with that most mortal experience: fear. And the lengths that one fallen down into darkness might go to forestall it. Be it the lighting of a candle, or to ignite oneself entirely and exchange life for light.
"Knock knock," said Wyrenna.

"For Aetherius' sake, why are you doing that?"

"I can't easily knock on a door made of curtains, archmage," Wyrenna said. "I'm not about to barge into a quarantine."

There was not really an infirmary at the Thalmor embassy. This was only some store-room hastily cleaned and outfitted with extra beds and cots, sectioned off with screens for privacy. It was more than Wyrenna would have expected from an organization positively teeming with magic, but there were enough grievously wounded to be beyond the help of immediate Restoration. Or that the healers were proficient with entirely different business than a dragon's wrath.

"Enter if you must."

Valamand was not among those who had been badly maimed, but there were patches on his arms where frostbite had penetrated deeply. Valamand had been confined to bed rest to avoid straining the new, delicate skin, and feeling in his extremities was slow to return but steadily improving.

Wyrenna had been released with only treatment for bruises and superficial frost rash. The healer had said something unflattering about the resilience of Nords and cockroaches and Wyrenna had chosen to ignore it. She put the thin lacquered tray down on the crate repurposed as a night table and sat crook-legged on the nearby stool. She began pouring the tea.

"I am surprised that you were permitted to... visit me," Valamand said skeptically, watching her technique. He was dressed in a thin silken robe, pilled slightly along the sleeves. The quilted covers were pulled up to his lap. He was one of the few in the room who could sit up.

"It’s not exactly a visit, but I'll wait for them to kick me out," Wyrenna said. "They were eager to treat me like a serving girl, though. Which is good enough for me, if it gets me in."

The tea steeped a deep amber-red in glass cups. Wyrenna revealed a plate of bread, cheese, ham, and even a few sweets. Valamand confiscated the candied chestnuts and wrapped them in the white napkin for later.

"I also brought you a book. I read it already. Hope you don't mind The Real Barenziah and the awful things people do to her."

"I trust your visit has a purpose beyond inappropriate familiarity."

"Divine punishment?" Wyrenna teased. She drank her tea. It was better with milk and honey. "No, I just think we need to talk."

"Not this again," groaned Valamand. "Every time you utter those words, things become progressively worse. You obviously do not want only talk, or if you do, your talk is by nature a hazard to be avoided."

"There's no one else to talk to around here," Wyrenna said, "and I've told my ideas to the wall at least fifty times by now."

Valamand accepted the teacup and cradled it in both hands before taking a sip. “Insofar as your ideas
mean anything,” he mumbled. “Still. It is… company. At the very least.”

“You’ll be enduring a lot more of it, I fear,” she said, pulling a tightly wound scroll of bleached vellum from her hip pocket. It was quite small and wound perfectly on an ash-wood spool. The message was sealed with pale wax, though carefully broken: preserving the signet pressed into it. “This is my copy. I think you should read it.”

Valamand had to set his teacup down to accept the document. He unrolled it with his slender fingers only a little at a time. Wyrenna watched as his eyes danced quickly over the contents. Squinted. Frowned. Then he sighed.

“These are letters of commission,” Valamand said, almost in disbelief. “You signed a contract with the Aldmeri Dominion.”

“Very lucky for me, the First Emissary had a job that I could help with,” she said simply. “She assigned me to you. She thinks you have me on a leash.”

“I did, once,” Valamand said.

“And look where you’ve ended up.”

He grimaced. “I take your point,” he said. “Still. Why?”

“Think about it.” Wyrenna’s next words were whispers. “Do you really think she’d let me walk free after…?”

Valamand did consider this. He chewed his lower lip somewhat nervously. “I suppose not,” he said. “So you put forth your usefulness, rather than let your threat speak for itself. You did pick up how this all works, after all.”

“I didn’t spend my time with Canonreeve Goodmanners to forget it all,” she said.

Valamand rolled up the scroll with a glum set to his mouth. He gave it back to Wyrenna, as if he wanted nothing more to do with it. He ate a candied chestnut silently.

“It won’t be so bad,” Wyrenna said, trying her best to smile. “There’ll be no one so important as your High Kinlord to impress.”

“Only Ulfric Stormcloak!” Valamand retorted. “Not that he is important beyond immediate politics.”

“You won’t be the one impressing him. I will be,” said Wyrenna. “You may not have to speak to him at all. You’re only there to watch me and make sure I do everything the Aldmeri Dominion wants.”

“And this does not disturb you?” Valamand said. “To be traitor to your kin?”

“You have to be on someone’s side first, for it to be betrayal,” Wyrenna said. “As much as I’d like them on my side, the Stormcloaks are on no one’s side but their own.”

At his troublesome silence, Wyrenna rolled the scroll up tightly and stuffed it into her hip pocket. “I’m not on your side, either,” she said. “But there’s no getting out of this place alive as an enemy.”

"And yet you seem unreasonably chipper."

"I've been imagining not getting out of here at all for months. And the dragon, that's dead and done with. And you haven't killed me yet. I could get used to all of these fears ending up all right in the
"You may wish to put that judgement aside, and see if it holds true in the future," Valamand said flatly. Then he clarified, "for example, that surely was not the only dragon in the world."

"Why, do you want to go fight another one?"

"Absolutely not!"

Wyrenna chewed her share of ham-on-toast thoughtfully. "You know, that bothers me, actually."

"That I have no taste for the traditional Nordic pass-time of dragon-sticking?"

"No. Don't be a pest."

She finished her tea, then topped the cup off with just milk.

"You said something about my leash before, but do you figure that the dragon that appeared... it was leashed, too. And I don't think it would wear that sort of thing by choice. You may make fun of dragon-hunting, but I think that is exactly what happened. Only, the trapper didn't make the kill. The prey got away."

"And then attacked the embassy." Valamand's curiosity bloomed, he looked down incredulously at Wyrenna, who was drinking her milk. "Chose to target the embassy."

"That's the other half-answer to your 'why,'" said Wyrenna

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Despite the relative luxury, Wyrenna was happy to leave the Embassy as soon as Valamand was well enough. It had only been a few days, she thought, but the way that everything looked at her stretched the time out into a horrible slow drip. Perhaps the elves there had a different sense of the passing hours. But whatever it was, combined with the petulant gaze and the sensation that she was a slave underneath it, it was a scourge.

Even the offices in Solitude, while still Thalmor territory, were more welcome. At least there, there was only Valamand to judge her. Though, she thought, today was a strange reversal of fortune.

She dug through the sack of secondhand clothing and cast-offs. “Try this,” she said, and threw a pair of breeches over the cloth screen at Valamand. She heard the satisfying thwap over his lofty head. A linen shirt followed. “This, too.”


“We’ll do that in Windhelm,” Wyrenna said. “You just trust me.”

Valamand’s shadow struggled with some laces. “I find that difficult without logic behind your demands,” he said. “If one is to buy new clothes again in a few days, why bother with assembling these scraps?”

“If we bought brand-new clothes in Solitude, we’d look like we had just bought brand-new clothes in Solitude,” Wyrenna said. “And we’d have no reason to want to buy new clothes in Windhelm without seeming strange.”

“Who would notice such a meticulous detail, in a Nord city?”
“The tailor would. You know, the one we’d be buying clothes from,” said Wyrenna.

Valamand’s grumbles of protest were cut short by an actual complaint. “Give me a shirt that fits.”

Wyrenna dug through the bag again. She tried again with another shirt and a leather vest. “That’ll be a bit wide. But wear the other thing on top and no one’ll be able to tell.”

After wrestling with the clothing awhile, Valamand emerged from behind the screen in his hand-me-down array, grimacing miserably. Wyrenna thought he looked refreshingly normal, for once. “That works,” she said, actually somewhat impressed that he’d filled it out properly. “Pull your hair back. No—not with a comb. Just with your fingers.”

Valamand did as she asked, unsure of her purpose.

“Sit down. Stop pouting. I won’t pull.”

Wyrenna took his yellow hair and braided the front portion back out of his eyes. It almost didn’t hold, it was so fine and slippery.

“Is this your strategy? To make me look as terrible as possible?”

“Yes, sort of,” Wyrenna said. “Just, that what you think is terrible actually is normal.”

The mer had no argument. After some unhappy modeling in the mirror, Wyrenna threw a mix of wool and furs at him, including a preposterous knit hat with a tassel at one end. Eastmarch, or much of it, was cold, even colder than Solitude. She remembered many letters from her mother that mentioned Windhelm and the chill that funneled down from the Sea of Ghosts.

“Maybe this is a surprise? But it’s normal to look bad, sometimes,” Wyrenna said. “And people are happy to believe that somebody who looks poorly isn’t very interesting.”

“Or is a criminal,” Valamand countered.

“It has to be the right kind of poorly,” answered Wyrenna. But then her face fell. She sighed. “But I’m not going to lie to you. People are going to assume all sorts of things about you while you are there. And you won’t be in control of it.”

“Such as?” Valamand scoffed. “That I am Thalmor?”

“It doesn’t matter if in this case they are right,” Wyrenna said. “I’m just telling you to be careful. And to be ready to bite your tongue and suffer more than just that hat.”

She straightened his shirt where it had fallen crooked. Valamand wasn’t pleased with the contact but said nothing of it.

“You really aren’t going to be prepared,” she said. “When I was around the Stormcloaks… they told me to imagine elves as my enemies, that every practice strike I made was against an elf. Not even a Thalmor soldier, or Imperial legionnaire. Just an elf. If Windhelm is anything like that, they won’t just be assuming you’re a criminal, or that you are just a spy. They’ll be assuming that they can kill you whenever they want.”

“If it’s that dangerous, I ought to simply glamour myself as a Nord.”

“This isn’t one evening, and we won’t be fooling just two people,” Wyrenna said. “Also, you’d never pull it off, no offense. Your magic may be good, but I don’t think you’d make a very good
“And why not? You made a half-passable Altmer,” Valamand said, though pursed his lips as though he’d rather not say what he had said. “In a very rough and odd sense.”

“That’s why you’d never make it as a Nord.” Wyrenna shoved laughter back down her throat. “You say what you mean, but then you take it back. But thank you.”

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The series of rides across Skyrim’s wide roads passed unexpectedly quickly, though they had taken a ferry to Dawnstar and started off from there in a chartered carriage. It was not speedy in the literal sense, that it was actually a swift mode of transportation. Wyrenna felt she’d fallen asleep for much of it or had otherwise scrubbed the long miles from her memory. Valamand kept the time, at somewhat less than a full week. There had been some discussion of *The Real Barenziah*, and the involvement of Tiber Septim. And for once, stone-throat agreement.

When conversation dwindled, Wyrenna occupied herself with voice practice. It was much easier to try at affecting some variant of Skyrim accent and way of speaking than to imitate Valamand. She had been around the tongue in Bruma to some extent, even if most of the Nords had fled in the past decade. Only, mimicking that dialect beyond a simple impression hadn’t ever been in her priorities.

“I went to the temple at noon,” Wyrenna muttered, feeling the corners of her lips tense. “That was where I went to school.”

If the driver noticed, he’d said nothing almost the entire journey. Valamand watched the surroundings, mostly. The land fell, rose, and fell again. The snow deepened in a way that it did not around Haafingar. Sleet crept down and blanketed even the lowlands in a thick mat. The sky was grey always, fading into the distance and the mouth of the White River to the east.

“The pretty flowers. Pretty. The flowers. The pretty flowers in her hair.”

Windhelm itself appeared over the final hill, shrouded in white. The snow fell steadily, but not heavily: enough to settle on their fur hoods and become bothersome. Valamand shook himself off, dumping it over the side of the carriage.

“Windhelm in winter is a silvery sight,” said Wyrenna.

“That commentary?” Valamand said, burying his gloved hands in his heap of furs. Wyrenna wasn’t sure if passers-by could tell she traveled with an elf, or only could assume her company was a shambling lump of rugs. He’d provided little insight into her efforts thus far. Yet, even as he feigned inattention Wyrenna could almost feel his listening ear upon her.

“Could be,” Wyrenna said, stubbornly sticking to northern dialect. There would be no more of this feeling rudely transplanted from below the border. Now, lack of personal history aside, she felt at least able to bluff she’d been here all along. No more need to compare, other than to perfect her own craft. To master her tongue.

That was a power over something she had never expected. It was like Volgag and his advice on standing with blade ready. A person can think they are an expert in all the simple things they take for granted, until those things lay before scrutiny. Like being still or moving, Wyrenna concluded her voice was something that could be commanded with purpose.

The horse picked its feet up at the sight of home.
“There's going to be rules now,” said Wyrenna. “You’re going to have to listen to me. For your own safety, Valamand.”

“Safety! A promise in vain.”

“This is a job. I take that seriously.” Wyrenna said firmly. It pulled him away from ennui, at least. “First, give me the money.”

“Why?”

Wyrenna looked over her shoulder. The driver wasn’t listening. She leaned forward and lowered her voice to a whisper. “Because you shouldn’t be my supervisor. It needs to be the other way around,” she said. “And who holds the money, who is allowed to buy anything, those are rights the master holds, not a servant.”

Valamand dug out the heavy pouch of funds and his fingers lingered on it as it dropped into Wyrenna’s waiting palm. He stooped close to whisper back at her. “That is my role in this? To be your trained goblin?”

“That’s what the Nords of this city will believe, I think,” Wyrenna said. “If your pride can’t take a few wounds in the line of duty, what good is it?”

“Very well. But do nothing beyond the needs and scope of your commission,” Valamand warned. “What else ought I know, Nord?”

“Well, as of right now, your name is Vilmundr. That’s Nordish enough not to attract attention. We don’t want any Stormcloaks checking their spies’ records and finding anything about you. And you’re not a mage. You don’t even know magic unless I say so. You’re just my porter to hire out as I see fit.”

“So you seek to degrade me.”

“All work is noble,” Wyrenna said. “You’re only degraded if you think we common folk are degrading.”

Valamand did not say anything to that. Probably because he could not find a way to word yes that was exactly how he thought, that could be well-reasoned or moral.

“You’re not going to speak to anyone if not spoken to, at least not without more caution than you’ve ever taken in your life. No matter what anyone says to you, no fighting, no acting… awful and Aldmeri-like. You’re going to be a simple Mer who doesn’t want trouble. You don’t have to play stupid. But you should act as though you think less than I know you do.”

“How will you demand I address you?”

Almost immediately after establishing his rank, he demanded to know her own. If she hadn’t read about the custom he was now invoking, it would seem jealous. It still did in a way, but not in a personal sense. “You’re smart. You should be able to follow my lead,” she said. “If I treat you like I ought to be My Lady, I’m My Lady. If I treat you like I ought to be a friend, I'll be your friend.”

“For the sake of an act,” Valamand muttered. “But do not think my behavior is anything but.”

Wyrenna laughed at him and he wrinkled his nose, as if he was distasteful of why. Finally, after days on the road and in uncomfortable camp, the carriage came to a stop at the Windhelm stables. It was midday, but time to amble onto a warm bed and stay there until daybreak. “Fine,” Wyrenna said,
then counted out coins. She pressed them into Valamand’s gloved hands. “Go, tip the driver. Your turn to practice, now.”

But she was listening as she received her luggage from the porter, feigned to pet the brown horse’s cold nose.

“Thank’ye kindly,” said the driver, who at once tossed a coin to the guard that had walked wearily alongside the entire ride. Valamand paid curtly, but acceptably.

“That’s good of you,” commented another voice on the other side of the carriage. “Many are content these days to just get off and go on their way. War’s not much for charity, really.”

Wyrenna peeked over the horse’s rump. Valamand had been cornered into conversation by another Altmer, surprisingly. Bright-eyed, shorter.

“I suppose it wouldn’t be,” Valamand replied carefully.

“Still it’s good to see another mer visiting Windhelm. It’s been a bit difficult these days,” replied the stabler. Valamand fidgeted like he’d have preferred to saw his own arm off to escape.

“I imagine it would be difficult,” said Valamand. “Forced to toil beneath the Nords in a stable, of all places.”

“Forced to? Ah, no, my friend— horses are my life! No more gentle creatures than horses.” There was a pause as the other elf took a gracious pat of a nearby pony’s flank. “And between you and me, the Nords might be harsh at times but at least I have my wife and my freedom.”

“And what exactly do you mean by that?”

“If you’re this far north of the Abecean sea, I think you ought to know.”

Valamand knew. Wyrenna could see it in his posture.

“Thank Auri-El for small blessings, then,” he said stiffly.

“It’s good to hear that in Skyrim, you know. I hope we get to know each other better, maybe. But you take care in Windhelm, sir.”

Wyrenna hid her expression behind her plate gauntlets and fur cloak as Valamand fled the social trap. Wyrenna handed him one item of their luggage, and he took it. When he did not reach for the other, she loaded him with it herself. He grumbled, but did not protest. If any of the blue-tabard guards saw Valamand’s race, they saw his servitude first and did not linger upon him.

“I think you did all right,” Wyrenna said. “You’ll have to master civil conversation by the end of this, at least.”

“I should have that pathetic excuse for Altmeri heritage returned to Alinor in chains,” Valamand grumbled.

Wyrenna looked at him seriously, and did not see him sour so much as troubled. “Somehow, I don’t think he’d be happy to suffer that at the hands of his new friend Vilmundr,” Wyrenna said. “But that’s the other thing you’ll have to master.”

“What is?”

Wyrenna made very sure there were no Stormcloaks in earshot, as the frigid wind battered the
bridge.

“How to not be Thalmor.”
Evening Star

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

We will have to be Valamand on a few instances, all close together to each other in time. Not so much out of necessity, but because it would be a little dull to be Wyrenna. Or at least not quite as interesting.

To be a Nord in Windhelm, especially a Nord that had visited Windhelm before, is easier than most things. And, such a tale is not in the spirit of what Wyrenna would want to be told. So it is in our interest to recount where Valamand experienced the city instead.

Following the Nord girl like a pet was a weight on the mer’s dignity, yes. But not as heavy as the alternative, Valamand realized. If he fell under adequate supervision, other Nords saw him as merely the help. But where he lingered too long there were toxic questions. What is your purpose? Why are you here? Being Wyrenna’s shadow was the least degrading answer he could present. But it wasn’t practical. Wyrenna instead arranged for him to blend in with the low-born and the foreign workers. To appear *useful* was the way to plead mercy from Windhelm.

There were other elves in and around the city. But they too were “owned” by something. The Dunmer, their Grey Quarter. The stabler, his stables. It would not do to be caught without.

It startled him how familiar that line of thinking was. That most of the time, he accepted the Thalmor’s claim over him. It was ordinary for the Thalmor to be his interpreter of self. Only here was that true master not acceptable to serve in public.

At the end of the long afternoon, Candlehearth Hall was warm by a great furnace and the heat of bodies. The thick windows fogged from the inside. It was louder than any tavern, winehouse, or club Valamand had ever attended. If a Nord laughed, his companion had to laugh louder. It was a wonder that the entire city had not somehow blown itself to bits in a racket of sound. Still, their stale breath kept the air moving even as Valamand did his best not to withdraw. Fifty years was time to develop some small methods of resistance. He could feel their eyes as he lowered his hood.

He did not look back at any of them. It would be too dangerous. Even if he had to fight the urge to hide his ears. He turned to Wyrenna instead.

She was doing something rather interesting, so quickly he almost did not catch it. Her eyes did not chase his own, but she looked back to him, then scanned the crowd. How her attention could focus in quick succession was beyond him. But, like water spilling downhill, a smile flooded her face.

Wyrenna pulled out a fistful of septims and wielded a shocking northern tongue. “Miss! Miss! Two for us! And something real strong for Vilmundr, here!”

If an elf in their domain was not normal, a drinker *was*. Some of the pressure lifted. Valamand swore to take notes sometime later. There had to be a practical application of this principle, he thought.

Instead, he watched Wyrenna prod a sleeping man (and *how* did one sleep in a room like this one?) on his stool at the bar. The sot fell off, startled and too sossed to do much about it. His friend rolled him somewhere down the hall to bed. Conveniently, these were the seats Wyrenna claimed as their own. He sat as if he did not fit into the portrait of this place.[1]
“Not so bad, then?” Wyrenna said, voice carrying well in the crowded hall. “Almost reminds me of home.”

Valamand ached to speak of home— its peace and quiet and undisturbed teatimes. But he doubted that would be well-received. Instead, he waited for the drink soon pressed into his hand. Oh stars. He read the label.

It was a patently awful idea to imbibe something in a Nordic mead hall entitled ‘Dragon’s Breath: Select Proof.’

Just awful.

He considered if it was possible to turn the liquor inside to water. No, that required his notes on trans-humor Alteration. Which were inconveniently somewhere in a locked chest on Auridon at the moment. Perhaps he could send himself into an altered state of consciousness where he could not taste or be affected by alcohol? Entirely doable. With several hours of study and modest experimentation that he did not have.

“Well? Better drink that before someone wrestles it from you.”

Valamand would have let them. But, with a sigh he poured the contents of the dreadful bottle into a pewter flagon and resisted the urge to pinch his nose. “Toast,” he said. “To what will inevitably kill us.”

“To death!” Wyrenna said, and clanked her own flagon with his. Then she drank. And he drank.

Interesting. Vile, but interesting. Somewhat sweet, down the gullet like burning pitch. Some woody notes, perhaps. And spice? Surely, not cloves? And a hint of apple…

Valamand examined the contemptible nadir that was his recent life choices. He had fallen to coping with this by pretending he was under a pavilion, on a stately lawn somewhere near Sunhold at an official autumn wine tasting. The back of his throat burned with a distinct aftertaste, liquor smouldering in the pit of his stomach. Disconcertingly, Wyrenna smiled just as she had while demonstrating the most delicate of etiquette.

“Good, yeah?”


“Well, brace yourself as I get us some dinner,” the woman replied. She leaned over alarmingly far to the innkeeper for any semblance of private conversation. Valamand was left alone with his drink, which was not as much a blunt force on the second sip. Rather, it had the peculiar effect of making one aware of their fingertips. Valamand stopped fidgeting, he had been tapping his foot against the stool with nerves when—

Aedra blind him, no. He’d made eye contact with the man on the stool next to him. Valamand quickly looked back down at his mead for another blistering drink.

“What, you elf? Do you have something to say to me?”

Valamand glanced in panic for Wyrenna, only to find her gone and her pack keeping space on her stool. He choked, a little.

“Don’t ignore me, elf!”
A meaty fist thrust up his collar and yanked until Valamand teetered where he sat, trying to brace with one arm. He dropped the flagon, unable to avoid the Nord’s flying spittle. The innkeeper said and did nothing to stop this. She merely put away her breakables. It was uncomfortable as the room quieted, just a little. Watching what would happen next.

“I have nothing to say to you,” Valamand insisted. “Sir,” he added as an afterthought, unsure if even the lowest Nord would demand his subordination.

“Damn it you don’t! You listening in on me, piss-faced bastard?” He shook Valamand by the neck. “You want to lose those ears?”

“Not— not particularly.” Valamand’s throat dried to oatgrit. “I don’t have any quarrel with you. Now, if you’d—”

Valamand felt the old oak floor hit his left cheek. But it took a moment before his mind caught that it had not risen up, but that he had been thrown down. Mead soaked through his breeches, he spat out his hair in disgust. That Nord was laughing, the nerve! he could send this entire nightmare up in a blaze at any moment and this brute had the nerve to...

Nords apparently did not have any qualms about kicking while a mer was down. Valamand yelped, scrambling backwards onto his feet. Technically, he supposed there had been basic training in unarmed combat. But he had never been much good at it, and really why bother? The answer had been twenty years too late.

The Nord was not appeased by Valamand’s hesitation and moved in closer for fisticuffs. That was when, with an astonishing speed, there was a steel-clad arm between him and the foe. Valamand only stared as the rest of Wyrenna followed through in step and jabbed two knuckles under the foe’s ribs.

He coughed, spitting out the contents of his last drink.

“That’s my elf you’re roughing up,” she said. There was an edge of sureness in it that stunned Valamand as he began to slip away to one of the closed doors. Some other Nord seized the back of his shirt. He swatted at the hand, though too captivated to look away.

“So I hope this is a misunderstanding,” she continued.

The Nord (Rolff, as Valamand heard some patron behind him call) caught his breath, gagging for a few moments. His hand inched along the bar, steadying himself. “So! An elf-lover!” he yelled, grabbing a full glass bottle. It was not a question so much as punctuation to his wild strike.

“Fight!”

“Fight!”

“Ten on Rolff!”

“Fifteen on the girl in steel!”

Valamand watched, voice defeated. Wyrenna evaded the bottle’s path. It collided with the stairs, causing a few bystanders to duck. Shards of glass and wasted mead showered him.

“Not inside!”

That was the inn-keeper. But not even the soldiers off-duty seemed keen to break up the fight.
Physically, Rolff was taller than Wyrenna. But he could not seem to hit her even though she moved little. There was a marked difference, an improvement to her footwork since she had dared on her own against a well-blooded pirate. But what in creation had she been doing? What had driven her to these lengths?

Himself, Valamand realized in dread. Without his interference, Wyrenna would have remained as wretched as he had found her.

This change in her, he thought, should not have had any appeal.

“I’m going to make this very clear,” she said, betraying that despite the commotion she was not winded. “Vilmundr is my elf. And as he’s mine, he’s worthy of respect.”

Valamand winced as her fist connected. There was a painful-sounding rattle, afterward.

“But don’t you imagine even for a second that he owns me. I own him,” Wyrenna continued, unleashing a venom in her voice. “Every damn inch of him from his pointy ears to his yellow backside belongs to me. And you will not disrespect my property!”

All at once, Valamand managed to reach the door. He threw it open, hoping to escape. Wyrenna kicked and savagely broke Rolff’s nose. Rolff went sailing out into the snow, tiny drops of red blood trailing across the floor.

“Don’t let the chill in, now.”

Valamand closed the door.

“Good elf,” Wyrenna said. She combed her hair back with her fingers, and then addressed the bar still staring at her. “Are there any other milk-drinkers stupid enough to touch my things?”

Valamand had to admit, he had a hard time reconciling that hardened Nords—Stormcloak soldiers—wisely stood down in the face of her.

“Take the food, Vilmundr,” Wyrenna commanded. He was now thankful to use the cloak of servitude in her act. “I don’t have the patience for any more beef-headed fools tonight.”

She ordered him into her rented room, and locked the door behind them. Then, she secured the bolt as well. A relief, somewhat. The world stopped focusing so narrowly. The walls were not quite as plaster-hushed as the Winking Skeever’s, but they were solid oak.

She sighed and collapsed onto the bed, pack and all. It was an act, of course it was an act. Stupid Nord—how did she hope to keep this up for days, or weeks? He remembered he bore the meal. He put it down on the one small chest at the end of the wide fur-heaped bed.

“What reversal of fortune,” Valamand grumbled, breaking the bread. “Now I’ll sleep on the floor, I expect.”

“Of course not. You’ll sleep on the bed,” said Wyrenna, falling back into her own tongue. By far more pleasant on his ears.

“And then what are your arrangements?”

“The bed,” she said, looking at him as if he was an idiot.

“Surely not!”
Wyrenna cut him off. “This is an inn in the old style. You’re lucky I was able to reserve a private room at all. The rest of the patrons all sleep in one room, often four to one large bed at once. Regardless of gender or relation.”

“I suppose fleas, too, deserve a habitat,” Valamand said. He scowled at the furs. They seemed clean enough, on a bleached wool mattress. But who knew what it was stuffed with?

“Don’t be a fuss,” Wyrenna said. “It’s warmer this way.”

They ate in comparative peace. The Nord seemed somewhat worn, or at the least troubled. Not that it was important, he felt sure. But how disheartening to see threadbare-ness revealed under her valor. He would condescend to call it that.

Still, he was thankful for her interference. Part of him even found it to be valiant, and her fierce claim unto him… arousing despite its offense. A temporary, insignificant, easily-weeded-out part, he vowed. A part doubtless due to the bitter, glowing spirits still settling in his stomach.

“You have refrained from detailing to me your approach,” Valamand said. “I expect transparency.”

“That’s because there’s nothing to approach,” Wyrenna said stiffly. “The answers your master wants are easy. Her watchers in Windhelm haven’t reported? Well, there were mercenaries on the road between here and Solitude waiting for Thalmor. It’s pretty clear what happened.”

“You are a Nord,” Valamand said. “So I am not surprised that you think petty guesswork is anywhere near good enough. The First Emissary seeks proof, and seeks detail into what their latest news might have been.”

“I know, I know.” Wyrenna sighed. “I know I need to get in with the Stormcloaks, see why the war’s not going the way she wants. For all that she knows how things ought to be.”

“Their numbers are growing at unprecedented speed. In defiance of all prior projections,” said Valamand. “But, I wouldn’t know the particulars.”

“I’m never walking away from this, am I? Valamand?”

No. She would not be.

But Wyrenna could not know what he knew. She could not comprehend her current context, that was beyond her. But Valamand had heard Wyrenna voice these unrelated anxieties before. She would fantasize that her petty life was over. She was mistaken, for some reason, that her competence meant nothing. Wyrenna's fearful world, to her, belonged far away from anything important or meaningful. Or worse; that it ought to be sacrificed for the sake of those she deemed more worthwhile than herself. Had she not made peace with her fate at the hands of the Dominion? By the stars, had navigated a commission from Skyrim’s highest Thalmor office itself.

Humans were needlessly indecisive and weak-willed. It was offensive. Highly so, when he had witnessed better from this one in particular. Like a well-mannered hound reverting to some unattractive instinct.

Valamand was duly mortified at his own voice when it too decided to disobey, run feral and soften his words. "You ought not worry about walking away, Wyrenna. You are walking toward your goal."

The sound of her name in his mouth did not quite resuscitate her, but she did look up from her worries, startled. Valamand cursed the inappropriate familiarity dropping from his lips. He banished
the name, but its tenderness, preciousness lingered. Too late. It had made a home of his throat.

Her smile was of those confounded ones that was almost real.

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In departure from our established norm, we will continue to be Valamand.

While Wyrenna so-carefully begged the Palace of Kings for an audience, Valamand bent his back for a steady income. Why this was important when they had access to all the funds the Thalmor could provide, he at first had to wonder. Then he realized that this too was part of an act, to make Wyrenna seem legitimate. How suspicious, if travelers arrived and had a full coinpurse. To disguise a sponsor, hide the stipend.

It was the days spent in Morthal reversed. Now Valamand toiled, shoveling the endless snow. And instead of idle, Wyrenna was hardly to be seen in their inn-room. When she arrived, she would melt in exhaustion and nerves, and would not speak much of what she had to ford in the day.

By mid-afternoon, his hired labor was complete and duty given to some other, fresher digger. Initially, he had assumed his term as interim-dockworker-sub-surveillance would have prepared him for the effort. Alas, the endless heave and pitch with an iron shovel wore the strength out of entirely different parts of him. His wage at the end of each day was only a spare handful of septims. At least the other workers were mer. Dunmer, but mer.

They, too, would hardly speak to him.

Valamand had not ever before believed he'd miss Wyrenna’s bright chats. But Windhelm hung like a fog overhead, greying over everything. Valamand quickly learned to look twice over every corner in a way he’d never been compelled to do. The silence and the submission, though, was an unwelcome shadow on his heels. From here to Auridon.

Wyrenna’s only words were painful and false in optimism. Only a few days more, she would promise. Not long until I get an audience. Perhaps tomorrow. Or the day after. Valamand silently bid the foolish Empire come burn this city down. The constant talk of Talos hurt his ears.

It came to two weeks.

Two weeks, four days, and fourteen hours.

Valamand sat on the steps below Candlehearth Hall. He rubbed a fortnight of blisters on his palms. These gloves were new, they’d been bought from the local tailor only the last tirdas. They had near-worn patches in the palms and thumb already. His limbs shook less, but this pain did not fade with calluses. Restoration was little help with this sort of minor-repetitive injury. He fought the urge to rip the gloves off and bury his raw work-burns in snow.

“Mister? Mister!”

Valamand looked up. There was a girl, a Nord child. At first, astonishment that anyone would want to speak to him. Then, private offense that this creature in front of him was probably less than 10 years old. By all rights it shouldn’t have been let out of its keeper’s sight, much less left to bother him.

“Do you want to buy some flowers?”

Much less left to sell her own wares! Nord children ran wild in the street!
“They bring good luck! Give some to your family!”

“That would be forbiddingly difficult,” said Valamand. “But, it wouldn’t hurt to see what you have.”

How sad this was, how starved he was for attention and for conversation. Things were never this way in Morthal. Nor before, certainly. The possibility reigned in the pit of his mind that this appetite for contact had always existed. He failed his fast.

Doubtlessly excited she had a customer, the girl crowded up to him and sat down with her basket on the cold stone steps. “I have all the pretty colors,” she said. “I have these red ones… some orange-and-yellow ones, lots of little blue ones, these sort-of-blue-sort-of-not ones, and different purple ones. Like this pinwheel one, and these pretty ones here.”

“Hm,” Valamand mumbled, inspecting one of the orange blooms. “I have never seen this before,” he said.

“Oh, that one grows everywhere around these parts,” the girl said. “But I like it, too.”

“Native to Skyrim, then,” he said. Then, with a troubled frown, he picked two other flowers from the basket. “Child, these are poisonous. You should not play with them.”

“Really?”

“This one,” Valamand began, plucking one of the pinwheel-shaped plants, “is nightshade. I’m amazed it grows so far north at all. Its most common cultivar is native to the deserts near the Abecean sea.”

“Well, it only grows where it’s warm. Like near the big steam vents, and near where they dump the coals.”

“Interesting,” said Valamand. He then held up a deep-violet cup in his long fingers. “This is deathbell, I believe. Though I have mostly seen it dried. If I am not mistaken, its roots and petals may be used to concoct one of the most potent poisons on Nirn.”

The girl cooed. “Oh, that’s kind of scary,” she said. “Mister, how do you know so much about flowers?”

“I know very little about flowers,” Valamand confessed. “I know only what I have studied in books.”

“So, will you buy some?”

Valamand was taken aback. “I have just told you that these are lethal. They are of no value to you. No one will buy them for “good luck,” much less as a gift, except perhaps as a threat.”

“But they’re still pretty,” said the girl. “Just because they can be used to do bad things, doesn’t mean they’re not worth anything.”

“I’ll take eight,” said Valamand.

Human she may have been, there was really nothing like the glee of a young child. Valamand watched her twist together eight of her best deathbell specimens. When she finally offered them to him he realized it was a wreath of the toxic flowers. He paid her, but it seemed the proper thing to do to wear the flowers. If just for a moment, for the pitiful child. Valamand pulled off his preposterous knit cap and kinged himself, for the chain was too small to go over his head.
“You’re an elf!” she said, and Valamand was disappointed to see her face fall. Then twist in confusion. “You’re not all sooty like the ones in the grey quarter, though.”

“Indeed, I am not,” Valamand said, stuffing the tasseled hat into his pocket. “Is this a problem?”

“No… but…”

“Then that is the end of the matter,” said Valamand.

“Well, I guess you’re not bad. I kind of like your ears. They’re nice.”

“I, hm, well,” Valamand mumbled, not particularly sure if this was a compliment. “Thank you.”

On the topic of ears, a familiar and unpleasant sound entered Valamand’s. An unwelcome voice, down the town yard before the gates. His jaw ached in memory. Rolff, however, had been long patched-up and now was free to accost a Dunmer womer. Valamand saw her clutch her basket of groceries close to her chest and endure, walk faster, until Rolff was joined by another Nord with a limp.

“You eat our food! You pollute our city with your stink! And you refuse to help the Stormcloaks!”

Cornered, the womer could not help but yelp out a reply. “We haven’t taken a side because it’s not our fight.”

Predictably the guards did nothing. The child just watched. As if nothing was wrong.

“Hey, maybe the reason these gray-skins don’t help in the war is because they’re Imperial spies!”

A beggar had little business accusing anyone of anything, Valamand thought. But there was an unspoken language at play, one perhaps Wyrenna would have deciphered. Whatever changed in the confrontation, the Dunmer understood, flushed dark with fear and outrage. “You can’t be serious!”

“Go, play,” Valamand said to the child. “This is no place for you.”

“But-!”

“I will not tell you again,” said Valamand. “Run along.”

His stiff muscles protested, and his backside had gone numb, but Valamand rose. He strode over to the altercation. They were of course unworthy, corrupt, daedra-worshipping affronts to the memory of Aldmeris, but Dunmer were still mer, after all.

They did not hear, or notice Valamand’s approach. If they had, perhaps Rolff would not have spoken further. “Maybe we’ll pay you a visit tonight, little spy.”

Valamand’s flesh slithered.

“I beg your pardon,” Valamand said, feeling his well of loathing leak after so long holding it watertight. “But I don’t care for your attitude.”

Rolff’s hideous laughter cut off at the throat. He lifted his chin to find Valamand half-a-head above him. “Well, isn’t that good for you? This is our city! You think you can just walk all over it like you own the place?”

“I think you’ll find that you continue to own the place,” Valamand said. “What with your Nord lords on the throne, consigning mer to the gutter.”
The Nord beggar spat on Valamand’s vest. “Bah! I’d be lucky if the High King ever promised me a home!”

“You see here, I am not about to take the horse-shit of some witch-elf in a damned poncey flower crown, you hear me?” Rolf yelled after, seizing Valamand by the shirt and dragging him down to his eye level. “Wait, I know you…”

Valamand’s mind flew to an appropriate illusion. Perhaps to make the man forget him, or to mistake him for a friend, or even to wrongly recognize him as someone too terrifying to confront. Oh, he could do better, he knew. He could have this weak-willed commoner singing the praises of the Aldmeri Dominion in an instant. Or throwing himself into the river in bewitched shame. But, in full sight of the admittedly-neglectful guards? With witnesses? Would they even understand what he had done?

He himself would of course understand, though. And perhaps foolishly he found himself imagining Wyrenna’s utter disgust for such magics. Disgust for the one who would use them, as well.

Rolf struck him across the eye. Valamand’s hesitation came not from thinking too slowly or too little, but from thinking far too quickly about too many things. Too many strange and budding guilts. Valamand stumbled to his feet and ran. This had been a terrible idea. What had he been expecting would happen? Had he forgotten that in this wretched Oblivion-like torment of a city, he was of no importance? He turned a corner around a wall and almost stumbled on the uneven stones. The guard saw him and immediately he was watched. The two men behind him, screaming obscenities? Not as much.

It was between craning over his shoulder and gulping down frozen breaths that Valamand collided with someone else in the street. Even an alley. Windhelm’s narrow ways and looming terraces all seemed alike to him. Valamand’s ears rung as he looked forward again, and then somewhat down to the bald head of a Nord. What hair ought to have been there was displaced to his voluminous beard. Despite his obvious age he stood as straight and muscled as any of the soldiers in the city. Valamand had no idea where to put his hands that did not seem like a threat or a mistake. Instead, he adjusted his wreath of deathbell. “Excuse me, I-”

“Rolff Stone-Fist!” the Nord exclaimed, pushing past Valamand, who had gone quite still. “What’s this today? You’re drunk again?”

The beggar turned on his heel and sprinted in the opposite direction. Rolff was not daunted, though. “You stay out of this, Free-Winter! This is the second time this prissy elf’s crossed me!”

“If you want to run ‘round the countryside waving your fists like a barbarian, join the Stormcloaks and be done with it!”

“If you want to run ‘round the countryside waving your fists like a barbarian, join the Stormcloaks and be done with it!”

“I don’t understand why my brother even tolerates the likes of you at the court. You’re nothing but an elf-lover.”

“And you’re nothing but a milk-drinker! Your brother leads the entire Stormcloak army, it would be easy for you to gut all the elves you’d want! But no, you lay about the city pickled in mead! What stops you, then?”

Rolff said nothing, but spat on this Free-Winter’s boots. The fist across the jaw in reply wasn’t so superficial. Rolff cursed, backstepped until finally he turned and fumed out of sight. “Yes, slink away,” said Free-Winter. “What a skeever you are.”

Valamand considered slipping away as well. However, the only thing faster than the old man’s fist
was his grin, how quick he was to offer it. “You’re not hurt then? That scum blacked your eye, looks like.”

“I am unharmed,” Valamand said. Then, he realized his aches and throbbing, swollen face. “Mostly.”

“Good. I’d hate to see Rolff make another mess of things,” said Free-Winter. “Though… you… You’re from the Summerset Isles, aren’t you?”

“I am,” said Valamand, panic lancing up his spine.

“You picked a bad time to come to Skyrim,” said Free-Winter. “Come, let’s get you cleaned up. I’ll show you where to get a real drink in this city.”

And by now, Valamand knew better to refuse Nords when they had the whimsy to show hospitality.

Chapter End Notes

1) And these were things that Valamand had never much cared about before. Others accommodated his sense of the familiar, not the other way around.
Evening Star

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

We have not quite stopped being Valamand yet. We’ve only broken briefly to allow Valamand to dust himself off. In that time, the serendipitous Brunwulf Free-Winter found a dingy little seat in the New Gnosis Cornerclub. The Dunmer inside had some sort of accord and did not pay him much mind. The old man tipped well, and bothered no other patrons. Free-Winter ordered three drinks: two bottles of shien, and one cold mead. He insisted the elf put the mead bottle on the boxed eye. Valamand could have used magic, but humoring the Nord was worth the minor inconvenience.

Shien, Valamand learned, was comberry wine. More bitter than grapes, and surprising that the Nord favored it. But it had, Valamand admitted, a smooth and nuanced flavor that he could appreciate. Especially in this land of sweet spirits harsh enough to strip paint off a shield.

“You didn’t tell me your name,” said Free-Winter, filling his own glass again. He’d not spoken until they’d both drained one cup. It was something he now recognized as a mark of Nordic custom. Wyrenna, too, followed such a rule when it suited her.

“Vilmundr,” said Valamand.

“Not with good Niranye, then,” Brunwulf said. “I saw her come from the Isles as well, but she goes by an elfish name. I won’t pry into your business.”

“That is much-appreciated,” Valamand admitted. “I am surprised you recognize such origins.”

Free-Winter knocked back a long drink. “To speak truly, I didn’t expect to hear voices like yours this far north, in this city. The last time that was on my ears, I was fighting south in the Great War.”

Aedra, preserve me.

“I’m… shocked that you do not despise Mer,” Valamand said. He thought on the extent of his long training. “For what you must have faced.”

“I didn’t go to war against elves. I was sent to war against the Aldmeri Dominion,” said Free-Winter. “The Empire’s not going to war against Nords, in Skyrim, either. To say all the Nords in Skyrim are the same as the Stormcloaks, you might as well say Ulfric’s already won.”

Valamand unclenched his fist where he hadn’t been aware it had seized up. “I do not think this is an entirely fair comparison,” he said. “It would be accurate to say all Mer remaining in the Isles are loyal to the Aldmeri Dominion. The Dominion would not— does not— tolerate dissidents in their lands. Sedition is punishable by death.”

“Well, it’s a good thing that you are here in Skyrim, and not down there!”

Valamand had to parse the implications of that. Free-Winter knew nothing of these thoughts, and only recapped his draining bottle for emphasis.

“And you think that is not exactly how Ulfric would behave, if he had claim to all of Skyrim?” said Brunwulf. “How much do you know about the Markarth Incident, boy?”

“I take offense to that. I could very well be older than you.”
“Age isn’t a count of years,” said Free-Winter. “It’s the pass of spring. And I see plain as your face, the blood of your youth.”

Valamand grumbled in quiet concession. Free-Winter spoke again as Valamand drained his cup.

“They make noise about how Markarth was promised in return for free worship, but all’s ever quiet on what Ulfric actually did there. After he shouted the Forsworn from the walls, he put to death what government the natives had created. Even any Nords who had bowed. Ulfric himself decided who lived and who died. There were no trials. No fair moots or judgement of prisoners of war or even innocents living under Forsworn rule. And only after his reaping was done in the name of the Empire, did Ulfric demand Talos as his price. Ulfric Stormcloak once ruled Markarth as tyrant. He would do the same to all of Skyrim, and cull her as a herd of sheep. He would cull her until only who he considers the heirs of Ysgramor are left, make no mistake.”

“I assume he will bend his efforts to regaining the Reach, for the sake of pride. He did lose his hold upon it spectacularly,” said Valamand. “I would not be surprised to find a Thalmor office there, if it would dissuade him.”

“Dissuade him? Ha! If there were Thalmor in Markarth, it would only taunt him to attack. He hates the Thalmor more than anything else alive.”

“And you do not see his reasoning, having fought the Dominion yourself?”

Free-Winter poured again. Valamand felt pleasant finishing his third glass.

“Nah. Ulfric Stormcloak went to war as a Jarl’s son. No matter what he may say, Ulfric was only ever a commander, never a soldier. Whatever he suffered during that time, you couldn’t see it from where I was standing. They call me a war-hero, you know. But all I ever did was cut down young elves all day and into the night. Countries go to war, their people only ever kill each other.”

Valamand let him trail off into silence.

“There is worth in duty, is there not?” Valamand said, trying to control the volume of his own voice.

“Vilmundr, you’ve got a good and noble heart,” said Brunwulf Free-Winter. “But soldiers, they are only tools. They are used, and they are honored only so long as they are useful. As long as they obey. Blunt tools are scorned, lost tools are forgotten. Never forget this.”

This was not true, much of Valamand wanted to argue. But the why stuck in the murk of his mind. He could not find it. Perhaps it had never even existed. He pressed the warming bottle of mead to his eye again to hide his consternation.

Valamand heard the door behind him open, and the cold poured into the room in excess of the ordinary draft. He realized he ought to have picked a seat that faced the entrance. Instead he owl-necked as best he could. Peripheral to him: a familiar head of dark hair, familiar dented steel armor. Why Wyrenna wore it even in the city now, he didn’t know. Maybe to impress other Nords. Still, he waved out, “Here.” Wyrenna turned her head. Valamand repeated, “Over here.”

“I’ve been looking all around, this was the last place I-” Wyrenna saw Valamand’s face. “Vilmundr! What happened?”

“This is your friend, then?” said Free-Winter.

“Oh!” Wyrenna said, and Valamand watched her demeanor shift somewhat. “I didn’t expect to see you outside of court, Brunwulf. Thank-you for finding Vilmundr. I hope he didn’t cause too much
“As if I would be the one to cause trouble,” said Valamand, noticing somewhat more the warmth in his cheeks and long ears. Life felt weightless, and yes, he was drunk. “You two know each other, somehow?”

Wyrenna pulled up a chair. Valamand put down his by-now warm bottle of mead and begun quietly casting a somewhat wobbling healing spell for his eye. Brunwulf didn’t seem to mind. Wyrenna took the drink he’d forsaken and began pouring for herself. “Yes, I’ve met him in court. Brunwulf’s told me many helpful things about getting an audience with Ulfric Stormcloak.”

“For all the good talking to the man has done me,” said Free-Winter. “I’ve petitioned him dozens of times, and nothing has changed. Not about his war effort, not about the Grey Quarter or the Assemblage by the docks.”

“In speaking of the docks,” said Wyrenna, “I’m interested in the East Empire Company. Is there anyone you’d know to speak to about them?”

“Suvaris, maybe,” said Free-Winter. “I’ll let her know you’d like to talk.”

“That’s good news. And here’s more good news,” said Wyrenna. “I’ve got the audience, finally. It took until the end of some campaign planning and Saturalia festivities on Ulfric’s part. But we’re set to speak with him tomorrow in the morning.”

“We?”

“I’ll need to borrow you for it, I’m sorry,” said Wyrenna. Then she turned to Brunwulf. “He’ll be safe, won’t he?”

“In Ulfric’s court? So long as he grovels, probably,” said Free-Winter. “But I said before to Vilmundr, your business is your own, and I’ll respect it.”

“Whatever you said to my friend here, that’s fine,” said Wyrenna. “But… Vilmundr? What are you wearing on your head?”

Valamand didn’t know what she was talking about until he reached up and touched the wreath he had entirely forgotten. He removed it, looked at it. It had become somewhat mashed, but overall it was still good. “Oh, this, then? A beggar child sold the thing to me, but I don’t much suit it.”

Wyrenna took it from him, pushed her hair behind her pierced ears, and placed the crown of deathbell on her own brow. At that moment, and in the way she looked at him, Valamand saw a queen.

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It’s prudent to end our interlude as Valamand, as it would be a few hours before he’d sober up. But, later that evening and after a well-deserved meal, Wyrenna led Valamand to a disused complex on the east side of the city. Inside was muggy with steam and the slight odor of sweat.

“Above us, I think that’s where the arena used to be held,” said Wyrenna. “Now, only the bathhouse beneath is still running. And it’s spare.”

She watched as Valamand realized the full extent of this. Many of the patrons, however, were Dunmer. “I am not surprised that bathing is out of style among Nords.”
“Well, it’s thanks to elves, a bit,” said Wyrenna. She paid an attendant who escorted them along a narrow corridor. It wound off the side and away from the public bathing pools. “Elves are sometimes called vain, and no one wants to be an elf. Or like the Empire, building baths in every city.”

Valamand seemed to acknowledge the truth in her words, or at the least did not argue them. The attendant opened an old, slate door into a fire-lit bathing room. They stuffed some cotton cloths into Valamand’s awkward arms and marched back the way they’d came. Asking no questions, seeking no answers. Wyrenna appreciated the discretion but wished for a better attitude about these sorts of things. She closed and locked the door behind her with the key on the inside. The heated pool cut into the bedrock, but cold air settled by the stone floor. Many thin vents needled into the ceiling above, all far too small to see through. But the air was fresh enough.

“This is supposed to be a pretty old place,” Wyrenna said. “Maybe you can sit where Ysgramor once sat and washed his own behind.”

Valamand dropped the cloths with an indescribable noise of disgust. Then he seemed to realize the full implications of this. “There is no other room,” he said.

“Yes,” said Wyrenna, undoing the buckles on her armor and carefully removing each piece.

“You are expecting me to,” Valamand said, and he choked on his words for a second, “bathe in the same water, at the same time as you.”

“That’s how it’s done here.”

“Absolutely not. I refuse.”

“Look,” said Wyrenna. “I understand you have your own customs, but there’s no place that’s more private than this place. And as much as I’d want to reserve the expensive private bath twice, we can’t afford that. Not in time, and not in gold.”

Valamand hesitated, she could see him hesitate. Wyrenna felt a little guilty. This was obviously uncomfortable for him and she was pressuring him into intimate quarters.

“And both of us have to be clean tomorrow, for that audience with Ulfvic Stormcloak. I don’t want to give him the leeway to call us rabble or whatever nobles like to say,” Wyrenna said. “And I do have to tell you my plan, and this is the most secure place in Windhelm to talk.”

“Very well then,” Valamand said, surprising with his swift decision. “My back will be turned.”

And so she did as well, as she began to strip off her padded shirt and plain clothing. She could hear Valamand undo his belt and let trousers fall to the floor. It was a production to both back into the hot bathing pool. More like an odd and awkward dance.

“Here,” Wyrenna said, passing one of the cakes of fine soap from her satchel behind her. Valamand touched her shoulder by accident before he found where she was handing it to him.

“You stole this from the embassy.”

“I didn’t steal it. Nobody said I wasn’t allowed to take it.”

“I was under the impression you were through with impersonating one of us.”

“This may be hard to believe, but once the shock wore off it wasn’t so bad,” Wyrenna said. “I sort of liked feeling all fancy.”
Valamand laughed, quiet and urbane. It was such a rare sound that Wyrenna forgave that the joke was her fanciness. In it she was shocked to hear sympathy. She tentatively looked around, to see if he was somehow still drunk.

No, he was concerned only with scrubbing Windhelm from his skin. There was some trick of the dull light. His bare back gleamed golden and lithe before her. No matter his misgivings, he’d been pleasantly nourished in the past weeks. Before she could stop herself, Wyrenna was lingering on the cut of his broadened shoulders, down the lines of his back to his sinewy waist, over the swell of his well-formed—

Wyrenna turned away and cut her oaths to Dibella for picking now, in this mer to manifest. She dipped her head under the warm, mineral water and began on her hair. There was the memory of his black glove, sharp knuckles on her skin. Wyrenna held onto it, but it almost felt to have happened to someone else, by someone else.

Surely, this Valamand would not do that? Her friend, he would not go so far?

The indignity, betrayal burst in her chest that he’d magic such thoughts into her head again. But, even before she opened her mouth, she remembered he still faced away from her. He had done nothing, not moved or spoken or made any show of intent. There was no vagueness fallen over her. The trick had become real. The real far surpassed the trick. Was more powerful than the trick.

Before we move on, it should be known and be made clear that Wyrenna had taken many into her bed before, of several genders. She was able to fathom a pretty monster, a handsome jailor, a beautiful cur. She had run afoul of that kind of trouble before. Valamand’s change in appeal meant nothing, and did not change her opinion of him. But in matters of heart, Wyrenna commonly felt little. Not even with her lovers.[1]

This delusion that he was a friend had taken hold. Which itself had to be a mistake. She only wanted him to be so trusted, to be so true and dear such that her own situation would not seem hopeless. That she would not be alone. Men, or Mer, they didn’t change to suit another’s comfort. She knew her experience. There was no such thing as a subjugator that transformed into an intimate. Power and the urge to use it was branded black upon such a soul.

It was a problem. And, as she had in the past, Wyrenna approached this problem as a thing to be solved. Fears could be confronted. Life marched on and reality did not pause on account of her troubles. Pragmatism remained open to her. “I need to warn you. Tomorrow, that audience won’t be much fun. You’ll likely be humiliated.”

“Fair warning taken,” Valamand mumbled, in a way that he had expected nothing less. “But you still have not yet told me of your plans.”

“Brunwulf was right before,” said Wyrenna. She rubbed soap through her hair and under her arms. “Ulfric Stormcloak hates the Thalmor. There’s nothing he’d want more than news of Thalmor activity. Especially someone so mighty as High Kinlord Silabaene.”

“You cannot simply…” Valamand may have had difficulty conjuring the words appropriate. “It is beyond your clearance to give such information to this land’s most prominent heretic leader.”

“I think you’re looking at this the wrong way,” said Wyrenna. “Technically, you weren’t told of Silabaene until you stumbled on him by chance. Elenwen wasn’t told either. It’s clear the Thalmor aren’t all on the same side. My commission is to find out what happened to Elenwen’s contacts here. And I couldn’t find them anywhere. But Ulfric has many more resources than we do, to go on a wild Thalmor-hunt in Eastmarch.”
“An abnormal amount of resources,” Valamand relented.

“Which is the other reason I need to look good to the man. Those agents Elenwen lost were watching Ulfric and the Stormcloak army. They’ve gone missing, after seeing what they saw. I want to see his ledger, and to do that I need to get his favor.”

She dunked her halo of suds and rested there under the water for a moment. Perhaps she couldn’t breathe underwater (a talent she was highly envious of her gods-sister over) but it still was warm and peaceful. She blew a few petulant bubbles with her nose. She scrubbed her face until it felt smooth and then surfaced with an obnoxious gasp.

Finally clean, she stepped out of the bath and wrapped herself in one of the thick-woven cotton cloths, wiped her hair dry. Then, from out of her satchel she removed a bottle of milk and a small clay crue of honey.

“What are you doing with that?” Valamand said, across the room on a stone seat. He had, thankfully, wrapped his nethers securely. Still, Wyrenna didn’t stare, for the sake of his modesty.

“A trick,” she said as she mixed the milk and the honey into a somewhat-runny concoction. She could feel Valamand watching, though she assumed it was of her mysterious methods rather than her own state of undress. Wyrenna poured the sweet-smelling mixture on her hair and rubbed it in, finally wrapping it in another cloth and letting it sit.

Valamand, when she looked up again, was doing something elaborate with a silver comb and a flask of oil. But it was not so elaborate as to distract him. “That will attract insects.”

“Any bold, nordish insects still alive in winter deserve my respect,” said Wyrenna.

She thought for a long while, sitting on that wooden bench, how to explain what came next. She stood and rinsed her hair out again. As she wrung it dry, Wyrenna did what she hoped was her best.

“Valamand, I have to go to any lengths to convince Ulfric that what I have to say is real. I’ll need your acting to help me, and you won’t like your part.”

Valamand was combing clean water through his long hair now. He looked only mildly irritated and scandalized. “I do not serve the Thalmor as a choice of leisure,” he said.

“It’ll be uncomfortable and degrading. I’ll do everything I can for your safety but it may even be dangerous.”

“So, then any other assignment I have ever been on.”

“No, I don’t think it will be.”

Chapter End Notes

1) I believe that in the language of prominent scholars of social attraction, an academic might consider Wyrenna to be a “pan-sexual” and a “demi-romantic.” One who may find beings of all genders sexually appealing, yet only bloom in tender fondness for those beings of utmost closeness to them. It is also possible that Wyrenna was aromantic, and never felt romantic attraction of any degree in any circumstance. A precedent for both exists. But in any case: she was not one for any silly amulet-of-Mara
business.
Morning Star

The wide steps before the Palace of Kings had been worn shallow by armies of feet and the ice of eras. Wyrenna did not, could not stop walking. This was just another threshold, she thought. Another new land. If she could face the Thalmor, this was nothing to her. Nothing but Nord faces, and hers was their match well enough. Even if she was of short stature, even if her eyes were brown as Colovian soil. She had braided her long, dark hair as neatly as she had before her father’s burial.

Valamand trailed close behind. His fear was not the same as when he had his own Altmeri problems to attend to. If he was afraid, it was not fear as a subordinate. Maybe, Wyrenna thought, it was the fear as a prey species. And she was only one wolf against the pack.

“Remember,” she muttered. “I own you.”

He nodded, somewhere just before her blind spot. Two Stormcloak soldiers stood watch by the vast door. Their helms were rimmed with frost. Wyrenna held up her hand, and Valamand, true to his part, obeyed and stopped on a sharp wire. “Let me pass,” said Wyrenna as authoritatively as she could. “I have an audience with King Ulfric Stormcloak.”

The guards stood back and opened the great ebon-steel door only as wide as her shoulders. They closed ranks before Valamand could follow. “The elf is mine,” said Wyrenna. “He’ll testify for me today.”

Valamand was only let through after being subjected to search. Meanwhile, Wyrenna stood by armed. Of course, he carried nothing of note, not even papers of identification or a single coin. The doors shut behind them. While the hall was warm and welcome enough Wyrenna could not shake that she had willingly entered a great beast’s lair.

“I trust you know what you are doing,” Valamand whispered as they waited to the side for their audience.

“I wish I could fulfill that trust,” said Wyrenna. “Every order I give you, you follow. But not everything I say may be exactly true. You need to follow my lead, and be what Ulfric wants to see.”

“And when did you achieve such court-mastery?”

“Just now,” said Wyrenna. “Because I have to.”

That was their final reprieve before introduction. “Entreating audience of Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak, Jarl of Windhelm, I present Wyrenna, of… just Wyrenna, it seems,” said the steward with some bemusement. “And, her vassal, Vilmundr. You may bow and announce your purpose.”

Wyrenna pushed Valamand to his knees before the throne. Then she bowed low, contemplated her boots. After a deep breath she put her weeks of work into the northern tongue to test. “Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak of Windhelm, rightful High King of Skyrim, I come before you with news of the Thalmor. Dissent in their ranks, a change in their movements. I thought only that your ears would be the best to hear it.”

It was no mystery that Ulfric Stormcloak fancied the title of High King. Getting on his good side meant treating him as if it was already his.

“Rise and speak, Wyrenna,” said the Jarl, thunderous in voice even when subdued in tone. “But tell me why you have brought this elf with you.”
“He belongs to me,” Wyrenna said. “I don’t let him far out of my sight.”

“Very well. The elf may also rise, so long as he minds himself.”

Wyrenna hoisted Valamand up by the back of his collar, and Valamand remembered to yelp convincingly. There were at least a few sniggers off to the side, from other members of the court. Wyrenna could not mentally apologize enough. This was an illusion just as surely as Valamand’s were, and an evil one.

“I don’t know your face, and I do not remember hearing of your name,” said Ulfric Stormcloak. “How did you come by word of the Thalmor? Their movements are crafty and secretive. Too many good men have been swept away in the night by their witchcraft.”

“Too many to be sure,” said Wyrenna. “I was swept away myself, twice.”

“Oh?”

Wyrenna took a deep breath and began the latest version of her tale. “I returned to Skyrim, seeking my mother. Yet, when I arrived, I found she had already been killed in battle with the Imperials. But the Thalmor, they do not have mercy even for a Nord to grieve. They leapt on the shrine I mourned at. They murdered everyone but me. They marched me north, hoping to interrogate me in some horrible place.”

“Strange that they would not have spared a noble priest, and instead chose a girl.”

“You have more sense than they have,” said Wyrenna. “More courage. At that time, I was not as I am now. I couldn’t have fought back. They prey on the weak when they cannot break the strong.”

Wyrenna could notice Valamand cringe next to her. He was a good actor when he had to be pathetic, at least.

“I swore to dedicate my life to destroying them. I planned to escape. My chance came eventually—the first odd piece of news I have for you. My Thalmor captors were attacked on the road, deceived by spies pretending to have new orders for them. But I don’t think they were yours, or acting for the Stormcloaks.”

“And why would you think this?”

“Because they were elves,” said Wyrenna. “Elves hunting elves, using the same signs and sorts of passwords the Thalmor used. They may even have been other Thalmor, or paid by Thalmor to hunt Thalmor.”

“But why would that be?” said another man who spoke with gravel in his throat. “The witch-elves have enough to wrap their gloves around, if this war means anything to them.”

“It may not, my friend,” said Ulfric. “They pretend to be above concerns of honest men. I am not surprised that they may get their puppet-strings tangled up over the Empire, or their own arrogance.”

Wyrenna waited patiently until Ulfric bid her continue.

“This happened somewhere in Hjaalmarch. I ran, and eventually encountered the Stormcloaks. They helped me, taught me how to fight back. I have a lot to thank Brynjolf Bone-Breaker for,” she said. “They were able to hide me for almost a month, and I even prepared to enlist.”

The other man, presumably Ulfric’s war-captain or housecarl, spoke again. “That’s a name I never
thought to hear again, save in prayer. He was a fine soldier, one of the best. He died weeks ago.”

“He taught me a lot,” said Wyrenna. “And I only hope I was not his downfall. But after he died in battle, the Thalmor found me again. Or maybe they had known where I was, and had sent Imperials to fight for them. Who can say? But I found myself a prisoner again.”

“You were of such high value to them?”

“I don’t think it was about value,” said Wyrenna. “The Thalmor, they have never let prisoners go without a fight. They don’t want us to do what I am doing now. It makes them look weak. They’d go to any lengths to cut or control a loose end.”

“A truth I know too well,” said Ulfric. Wyrenna pondered the significance of this.

“I wish I could say my second time as a prisoner came to an easier close,” said Wyrenna. “But it took a dragon.”

Ulfric laughed, a deep and bitter sound that confused Wyrenna. She wondered if she had said something wrong. “What a coincidence,” he said. “Tell me, girl. Was it a black dragon?”

“It was a white dragon,” said Wyrenna. “And it’s dead. I killed it.”

She reached into her pouch and extracted one long dragon tooth, that she’d kept as a trophy. Wyrenna slid it into the deep dent in her armor she’d pulled it from. It slid in, dagger-like and perfectly sheathed in its puncture. No one could deny what she said.

“And how,” Ulfric said, not exactly delicately, but with a certain caution, “were you able to slay this dragon?”

Wyrenna set her stare and looked him directly in the eye. “It did something that angered me very much.”

A moment passed before she broke this contact of wills, and Ulfric’s acceptance proved that was exactly the right thing for her to have said.

“This brings me to the core of actual news I offer you,” Wyrenna said. “With the cooperation of my elf here, I was able to investigate what I had heard in captivity. A great Thalmor power is here, in Skyrim. As he has been for months, in secret.”

“Your elf is a spy?”

“My elf could not deceive anyone with half a share of sense,” said Wyrenna. “He is a traitor, a coward that I have bound to me. His knowledge of their ways, though, is useful.”

Wyrenna grabbed Valamand’s hair, pulling his head back. On his neck, displayed for the court was her own amulet of Talos, shining silver. “Honor the rightful King, Vilmundr.”

“Y-you are the highest authority in these lands,” Valamand said. “The Thalmor are unworthy of your mercy.”

“Good,” Wyrenna said. “Now, tell him what you saw.”

“I—”

“On your belly if you have to,” Wyrenna said, shoving him down. She yanked his scalp with hard steel fingers. “Speak!”
“High Kinlord Silabaene! Of Firsthold, one of— one of the chiefest authorities in the Aldmeri Dominion,” Valamand said, gasping out his tenor. “He is here! In Skyrim!”

“I have not heard of this elf,” said Ulfric Stormcloak with unveiled disgust.

“It is true! His station dwarfs that of even their First Emissary Elenwen. His arrival… it can only mean an end to diplomacy!”

Ulfric considered this grimly, sourly. “When did you see this, elf?”

“One month ago,” wavered Valamand. “But such a mer doesn’t arrive lightly, or spend only a little time abroad. He is here on extended tour, very likely.”

“Thank you, Vilmundr. That’s enough,” said Wyrenna. “As you can see, Vilmundr is harmless, gutless. I have broken him, as I vowed to do with all Thalmor eventually.”

Ulfric’s liegeman looked meanly pleased by her proclamation. “I think we should interrogate him to be sure. See what else he knows, the scum.”

“Oh, I’ve gone ahead past that,” said Wyrenna. “These Thalmor, they do not fear pain. They disbelieve Talos because they believe themselves to be the only heirs to the gods. Sending him to meet them would only be his salvation.”

Wyrenna smiled, and it was fake, because she felt like doing anything but smiling.

“No, Vilmundr will spend the rest of his life under my boot. And when I pass to Sovngarde, he will belong to my heirs. There is nothing more you could take from him that I do not already own.”

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“I’m sorry,” said Wyrenna as soon as the inn-room door closed in their cramped Candlehearth room. “I hoped they wouldn’t bring so many things up. I-”

“Be silent.”

Valamand had said nothing out the Palace of Kings. He had said nothing but followed her hollowly through the streets. It felt like days had passed, despite only midday crowning overhead. Now his words scathed cold.

He was casting some sort of spell. It had to be complex, Wyrenna thought, for it required more than the flick of a wrist or a minor whim. When his efforts were complete, the inn’s noise dulled. She could not hear the other patrons. Their room could have been leagues underground.

“I’m sorry,” she tried again. “I said very terrible things. It makes me sick.”

“You did what you deemed necessary for the sake of your mission,” Valamand said. “The content is irrelevant.”

“You’re wrong,” said Wyrenna. “Another person is never irrelevant.”

Valamand hesitated. “Be that as it may, I have long been prepared to endure whatever I must for the sake of the Dominion. It was laughable for you to suggest that you could have ever ‘broken’ me.”

“Well, I wasn’t laughing,” said Wyrenna.

“I am a trained professional. You are an amateur. It is… rare that you had the nerve for such a ploy
in the first place. Much less the presence of character,” Valamand said. “Perhaps I have been shamed, degraded. But I have seen the foremost heretic in Skyrim with my own eyes, and lived to tell the tale. That is all, perhaps more, than I could have demanded of you.”

He paused. “But do not get any ideas about this ‘owning’ me business. The actual arrangement is rather the reverse.”

“I don’t think you own me, either,” said Wyrenna offhandedly. “Not anymore.”

She hoped he was not acting again, for he did not argue. There was a sad darkness in him that she could not parse exactly. It should not have been there.

“So what did you do?” Wyrenna said, trying to undo this mood. “You made the room nicer.”

“I made it secure. No more whispering in the bathhouse,” said Valamand, eager to move away from the prior talk. “I have spent quite some time on this illusion, a two-way muffling spell. It silences sound outside this room. In turn, it mutes anything said within to passers-by. It fools the mortal mind to discard noise selectively, or to fail to pay attention to this particular area. As the senses are not interrupted, there is no suspicious silence. Nor holes in the memory.”

“It doesn’t harm anyone?”

“No, not in any way I know of,” said Valamand. “Not unless one was crying for help at the doorknob and we did not hear.”

“Then it’s a good spell,” said Wyrenna. “I wish I knew more about magic. The most I’ve got of it is this ring I found. And it’s not much use.”

“What?” Valamand said. “And you haven’t mentioned this until now? I must see that ring.”

Wyrenna jumped at his sudden insistence, the way his hands clenched, the knit of his brow. “It’s just a piece of junk,” she said. “It’s ugly and all it ever does is make you feel warmer.”

“What it looks like has no bearing on what it does,” said Valamand. “And change in heat dispersal is a common effect of poorly-enchanted trinkets. Would you care for your hand to explode?”

With a little yanking, Wyrenna pulled the over-wide ring from her right gauntlet and held up the beaten silver in the candlelight. She placed it in Valamand’s open palm, watched as he examined it from all angles and squinted down at its scratched surface. Finally, he took it between thumb and index finger and mumbled something, concentrating intently. A flickering web of magicka appeared over the item’s surface, at first glimmering a pale blue, then a bright and deep gold color.

“As I suspected,” Valamand said. “You had little idea what you found.”

“What is it? What did you do to it?”

“I’ve done nothing to it,” said Valamand. “I merely unearthed its true properties. This is an interesting piece. Crude, but interesting. It is as you assumed—a ring that resists frost and holds fast the wearer’s body heat. But that is not all it is.”

“I didn’t know you could stack magic on top of itself,” said Wyrenna. “I thought it cancelled out. My Da was always sold scrap silver that used to be enchanted. It was cheaper than regular silver from the Reach.”

Valamand noted this. “Yes, that would make sense. It would no longer be able to hold magicka, or
receive power from a soul gem or other reservoir. At least not without treatment, or a profoundly
long time, depending on the half-life of the magical infusion. Suitable for spoons, perhaps, but not
much else,” he said. “But a skilled enchanter can place two enchantments on a single item. Though
each would be weaker.”

“So what is the other spell on the ring?”

“Teleportation,” said Valamand, “Which is astonishing to find on a ring at all, for the power it takes.
More often one would inscribe a single-use scroll, or create a permanent waypoint.”

“Do you mean I could use this ring and just… vanish myself back to Cyrodiil?” Wyrenna said.

Valamand shrugged. “If you were outside, possibly. But I do not think so. The frost-resistant
enchantment is minor, affording the secondary effect maximum available power… but even if the
range does extend so far, this ring has a very interesting feature to limit its overuse.”

“You can do that?”

“Of course one can,” Valamand said, “Such measures make many enchanted items safe to use. You
would not want to set off a fireball just by wearing your jewelry. No, this ring will only work once
per user, until it is recharged and the enchantment refreshed. Then it will have no memory of who
used it before.”


“I can’t judge the mind of another mage. To them, it may have served a specific utility,” said
Valamand. “It seems designed to prevent overuse, or misfire. The resist-frost enchantment takes
precedent, such that unless one was able to learn of its other powers it would be impossible to
accidentally teleport anywhere.”

Wyrenna had to admit that made a lot of sense. “I can see why not many rings can vanish people
places,” she said. “If you could vanish yourself by mistake when you didn’t mean to.”

“Teleportation requires a significant amount of energy. I doubt this ring could be used more than
twice before it would require service.”

“Well, I ought to put it someplace safe,” said Wyrenna. “If I can have it back. Don’t worry, I won’t
whisk myself away and leave you here. That would just be a waste.”

She didn’t expect Valamand to relinquish the ring, but he seemed to respect that it was her property.
He folded it in a napkin and handed it to her, and she placed it carefully in her bag on the floor.

“Though, it is theoretically possible to use a resistance enchantment as a focus for lightning, or heat
energy… it may be feasible to construct an enchantment that recharges itself, if such energy can be
converted into the same type it was enchanted with…”

Gods, he even was smiling. It was good to see him smile, after what she put him through that
morning. Valamand could remind her of her gods-sister, a little, when he became excited. There was
that same glee to them that came from exploring something new.

It hadn’t been worth anything before. His sharp eyes were no longer cold-blooded in their intensity,
at least. Elves had eerie tendencies to sublime proportions and in the way they fit together, as if
assembled by an artist. Valamand was among such masterpieces. But a sneer ruined his lips. They
were much better as they were now.

Beauty, Wyrenna thought, depended a lot on how one thought of a person, and less on the person
themself. Maybe, she thought, Valamand’s illusions worked that way.

“Show me how to do some magic,” said Wyrenna.

“What for? I did not think you aspired to be a mage.”

“I don’t,” admitted Wyrenna. “But I’d like to at least learn to patch myself up a little. I can’t expect you’ve been too happy coming to my rescue.”

Valamand pursed his lips in thought. “Point taken. But it will not be easy. Certainly not as easy as picking up a sword and fancying yourself a warrior.”

“If it was easy, I wouldn’t need to ask you about it,” said Wyrenna. “But so long as it’s not impossible, I’m willing to try.”

“There is nothing so shallow as a mere attempt in magic,” said Valamand where he sat next to her on the shared bed, acceptably a leg-distance apart. “Magic demands devotion. You perform it properly, not at all, or you pay the consequences of it going wrong.”

“So like dropping your sword on your foot,” said Wyrenna.

“Significantly worse, but I’ll not linger on details,” said Valamand. “The first step would be to attempt to access your resource of magicka in the first place. Which is so basic, I can provide little instruction to assist.”

“Not even some sort of hint?” said Wyrenna.

“I do not recall any time in my life before I could master such a task. Mages or not, most Altmer learn this simple skill in early childhood,” Valamand said. He did not even make the slightest hint of effort to manifest a summer candle at his fingertips. “I am surprised you received no lesson on magical safety, even as a precaution or public service.”

Wyrenna watched Valamand’s small light, trying to figure out how it worked. “There’s no mages in Bruma, to teach anyone. There hasn’t been for over a hundred years.” She paused, trying to remember the old story. “I think there was an accident, an explosion.”

“Well, you hardly have to fear such a misfire. I would not be surprised if it takes you many days to do even just this. Nords are not so naturally attuned to Aetherius.”

“Well, there was that one famous Nord. What was he called? Named with an S?”

“Enough. Focus.”

That was the sign that Wyrenna was right. If only she had been able to find that book on magic, weeks ago! Wyrenna forgot Valamand’s dismissal and instead did as he advised. But what could she look for? There was no part of her that was obviously “the magic” to pick up and use. What would magic even look like, to herself? Was it like fire? Well, there wasn’t anything burning in her body. Was it like strength in arms? But how to exert it?

“Stop that.”

Wyrenna stopped sticking her tongue out. It was a strange sort of strain to try and use muscles you couldn’t find, on a limb you couldn’t even feel. What had Valamand said? Something about magic coming from Aetherius? The southern islands were supposed to be plenty sunny. If that was what the magic from the sky felt like, then what did it feel like to be a star all on her own?
“Okay, I’m going to do it,” said Wyrenna. And she told herself, you are a star. You are a shiny star in the sky, and you shine down on things, and you don’t need wax or a wick to burn because a star’s light comes from itself. Not an imaginary star. A real star…

It was a few minutes of intense effort, staring at her hands thinking star, star, star, star before she felt something… move. Displaced, it sluggishly traveled down her fingers, from the core of her chest. Wyrenna almost lost grip of it in surprise, how her hands pricked with something she could not force past the skin. Maybe it needed a push. Maybe it was just hesitating, too afraid to come out. She thought louder, harder. Star! Star! She thought as if she was yelling, forcing with all her might. Star!

An intensely bright light erupted from her palms, so stark it washed out the room, made her close her eyes in sudden agony. “Less! Wyrenna, less!”

Wyrenna couldn’t let go of what was spilling out of her, so she grasped tighter, held it back and squeezed how much could escape down to a trickle. When the spots in her vision faded, Wyrenna felt some hybrid of holding up a heavy weight and the sensation of holding a musical note. She had no idea how long she could continue, but there at the tips of her fingers was a small white light. She did not want to look directly into it. It was like the sun in winter: distant, but brilliant.

“I stand corrected,” Valamand said, and Wyrenna saw that he had leaped up in alarm. His hair was askew, and she had no idea what magic he cancelled. “Nords wield everything as they wield a battle-ax.”

He carefully sat down again, and soon his candle was back, too. “So that’s magic, then,” Wyrenna said.

“Hardly. Magic follows rules, rules you must learn if you wish to do more than manifest raw-magicka tealights. Casting even the simplest of spells depends on practice and discipline, and understanding of the dynamics of the arcane.”

Wyrenna’s efforts snuffed out, spent. Valamand’s continued on with ease. She felt drained, like she needed to catch her breath for something that did not require lungs. After a moment, Wyrenna tried again. The fleeting light was even smaller, wobbling. It flickered dark.

“Do not overstrain yourself. But you will repeat this exercise as many times as you are safely able, every night.” Valamand said. “If you are serious. Even an elementary spell requires more magicka than you currently can call forth. The sole way to increase one’s ability to retain magicka is to expend it.”

Wyrenna collapsed unto the bed. She loathed that she was going to have to change her clothes to sleep, because she did not want to move. It was still only early afternoon. She felt as though she had run ten miles: in her inner self, in her interpersonal self, and from Ulfric Stormcloak. Valamand seemed to understand, incredibly. He left her to take up his shift shoveling the stone quarter. But he also left her a pot of tea, and the strangest feeling that for a little while he had been truly happy, even after all she had said about him that morning.
As a serious and formidable anti-Thalmor dissident, Wyrenna was able to freely wander the Palace of Kings. There was a shocking lack of security within the Palace itself, especially compared to Castle Dour in Solitude. There, they restricted halls by rank, specific business, and level of military disclosure. Under Ulfric’s roof, though, there was none of that. If they were able to slip between guard shifts, anyone off the street could wander right up to the Jarl’s bedroom.

Which, after meeting the man, was one of the last places on Nirn that Wyrenna wanted to visit. Maybe it was the knowledge that at any moment he could open his mouth and blow her away. Something about him wore on her nerves and scared her as much as Valamand once had.

But something was no longer with with Valamand. Ulfric still held it. It was about how a man or mer wielded their power. Valamand felt to have somehow relinquished his, weeks ago, in exchange for her cooperation. One handful at a time. Though he could at any time go back to being what he once was, holding what he once held over her.

But Ulfric would never let go of what the mer had set aside.

I digress. Wyrenna had been careful, so careful, to present herself in a way that might be welcomed by Stormcloaks. Yet, also to never swear an oath or march on any campaign. The Palace of Kings, though, mocked her efforts for even if she had said nothing and been no one there wasn’t a soul to stop her from approaching the castle treasury. There were other things that bothered her, of course. That Ulfric’s war council and high court contained no women. That for all shield-maidens that marched no women were officials in the Stormcloak army. That there were no members of Ulfric’s counsel that weren’t Nords. Perhaps it was that she was a Nord that she was let to wander. If she had not been, Wyrenna fancied she’d have been skimmed right out like milkfat.

Valamand had been stopped several times despite obviously being her guest. Wyrenna was growing tired of bullying people off of him.

“I don’t see the point of my presence here,” Valamand said in irritation, shooting a sour look back at the third porter to point him to the exit. “Other than to annoy the staff.”

“Trust me,” Wyrenna said. “You can get me where I need to be.”

“Of course I can,” Valamand whispered, careful of his volume and any listening ears. “I could have any of these fools let you through the back door to their mother’s hovel. Within the hour I could easily be commanding the entire Stormcloak army, or ordering the arrest of this endless stream of buffoons.”

“That sounds fun,” said Wyrenna, “but I won’t need you to use magic, for this illusion.”

Wyrenna hushed Valamand before there could be any more chatter. She turned him around the corner, to see the one tired-looking footman guarding the tower vault. Immediately, she put on a very serious face and marched Valamand straight up to the man. Who, predictably, stared at the elf rather than her.

“I need your help,” Wyrenna said. “I need you to watch this elf.”

The footman blinked. “What for?”

“Listen, I don’t have time for this,” Wyrenna said. “I have urgent business with the treasury records.
He can’t go up there. But I don’t trust him to wander around on his own.”

Valamand looked appropriately lost, because he was.

“I— but— why—”

“Give me the key,” Wyrenna insisted. “Not going to leave you alone with the elf and the keys both, you know.”

And the footman saw the sense in this and handed Wyrenna his keys. She fit them into the lock and turned it, and swung the door open.

“It’s very important that you don’t let anyone in after me. The elf will try to follow or run off. Don’t let him out of your sight,” Wyrenna said. “And if he does any of that… elfy stuff, magic, you yell loud. But you mustn’t let him get away, you understand?”

“Yes, right,” said the stunned footman, who now was shaking despite his full kit of armor.

“Good man. I’ll only be a moment,” Wyrenna said. “And you! Elf! Don’t get any bright ideas.”

“Please. How you resent a candle in the dark,” retorted Valamand. That was enough to leave him on, and the last she saw of him he was tapping his foot. Wyrenna vanished up the stairs, pleased with his cooperation.

The tower itself wasn’t much of a tower, and Wyrenna guessed that from the outside it didn’t look like anything more than an appendage of the keep. But floor after utilitarian floor stacked high with the wealth of Windhelm: the pay of every soldier, the city’s fat and what it lived on in winter. At the top there was the vast file of ledgers. It was easy to select which volumes were newest. The problem lay in that there were so many of them. Nothing made coin change hands more quickly than war.

Wyrenna opened the most recent volume. She paged back to several months ago and a little further. If the missing agents had been watching the activity of the Stormcloaks, this file would have seen what they had had seen. Nothing Ulfric did was free. Reading the ledger was like reading a diary.

For all that Windhelm styled itself a city against Imperial values it still used the same shorthand, the same moneylending, and the same notation as her father’s shop did, that she’d kept. It still ran on the septim, and so Wyrenna still spoke its language.

There was a lot of noise, as every military movement had its expenses. Yet after some wading through the dense pages, Wyrenna could begin to see patterns of what everyday life looked like. What seemed to be “normal” punctuated by battles.

Then, somewhere back six months in the past Wyrenna discovered something out-of-the-ordinary.

201 24 Midyear. Payable: X, donation. Received: Seven tons steel (ingots), forty bales arrows, fifty yards linen (bleached), fifty-two thousand septims.

Under the party payable’s entry, there was an illegible scrawl that did not match the careful lettering of surrounding entries. Wyrenna soon realized this was the moneycounter’s notation for an anonymous contribution. There were several others like that, but few so large. She focused on those.

The next similar entry was for nearly fifteen tons of steel, another forty bales of arrows, and twenty crates of pitch. This came with a staggering hundred and fifty thousand septims. Wyrenna had never had to imagine so much money in her life, or who could drop such a sum and remain anonymous. Yet on the 27th of Frostfall, there it was.
Only recently, at the middle of this most recent month, a third donation had been made following the same pattern. Though it was much smaller. Fifty yards of linen, eight casks of wine, a cart of charcoal, and twenty-five thousand septims. Still it was worth noting. Wyrenna closed the small folio she had bought in the market and tucked her coal-pen behind her ear. Then she descended the stairs again.

Valamand and the footman were having a staring contest. The elf, with his arms folded stubbornly before him. The footman with a tight grip on his weapon. Wyrenna would have liked to stay and watch, but she already knew who would win this game. “That’s all. These belong to you. Tip for your time,” she said, and offered the footman two septims from her own purse with the keys. “No trouble from the elf?”

“Moved once or twice. Didn’t try anything, though,” said the footman, happy to have some coin warming his pocket. “Your business is done?”


She snapped her fingers as if he was a dog. Valamand didn’t look pleased, but followed her commands and crowded close to her as they made their way back.

“Not a bad illusion,” Valamand said, “invoking a sense of importance in the target, presenting a false foe as the focus of said fixation. A distraction substituted to mask your true agenda. But no sure thing that he would permit you access.”

“I’m sure you had other ideas, if it had gone wrong,” said Wyrenna. “That’s the other reason why I needed you, not just any elf walking around.”

Valamand grumbled. “As a prop, if nothing else.”

“Don’t grumble, you did very well,” said Wyrenna. “I didn’t come downstairs to find that man a toad, at least.”

“A shame,” Valamand said. “But you did find something of use, if you are inclined to be so jocund.”

“I’ll show you somewhere else,” said Wyrenna. “But first, I have some more work to do— and after that, a letter to send.”

And Wyrenna did show him, after the errands she described. Now knowing what to look for, she was able to go to the armory and the undercroft. There, she located remnants of the exact goods the unknown benefactor had contributed. With them, the original receipts and inventory. They were signed with a peculiar symbol: a closed circle with alternating wavy and straight lines radiating out as wheel spokes, yet not meeting in the middle.

Valamand did not know the origin, or the significance of the rune in the piece’s center. It was not a part of any daedric alphabet, any Altmeri symbology he knew of, or any arcana he had ever encountered. Wyrenna, later, copied it for use in her own forgery. It was hideously ugly, remarkably so. She couldn’t recall anything that made her so sick to look at even after only a few minutes.

It only took a trifle to draft a letter in the style of the inventory broadsheets. It was convenient (or suspicious, Wyrenna thought) but the original correspondence was written on the same sort of paper common in Windhelm itself. Soon, she had Valamand pen a final copy in his beautiful letters, careful to match the ink’s color and the sort of pen the original had been scribed with. It wasn’t perfect, but Wyrenna doubted that Ulfric Stormcloak was so scrupulous in matters of stationary. After signing it
with the odd mark, Wyrenna folded it as the letters she had found, sealed it as the letters she’d found: in pure black wax. No stamp. Then, she addressed it to the Palace of Kings and placed it in the courier’s box outside the city.

There was no way to flush out an anonymous donor than to make the recipient ask questions. And Wyrenna doubted that any party, no matter how mysterious, could stay hidden if Ulfric Stormcloak threatened to find and blow down their doorstep. Her letter made the mysterious party out to be seeking a meeting and alliance, but Wyrenna wasn’t going to pretend she could predict the Jarl of Windhelm. One way or another, he’d find who Wyrenna was impersonating.

Of course, there was the possibility that this wasn’t a real lead, that she was just bothering a major political figure for no reason.

The next day, after she bid Valamand good-bye as he grudgingly headed out to shovel, Wyrenna began on the next phase of her investigation.

(and she hoped she was doing this ‘intelligencer’ thing correctly, that investigations had phases or at least several steps that had a correct order of importance.)

With luck, Brunwulf Free-Winter had told the clerk at the East Empire Company down by the docks that she would be arriving. If not, Wyrenna supposed she’d have to think of another way to introduce herself and not seem to be prying. She passed the small fish market outside the east gate, already crowded early in the morning. She descended the long steps, each curved as a bowl under ages of tired feet. Wyrenna wondered if she ought to have come in disguise. She was sorely misplaced at the docks between the sailors and the Argonians unloading their ships.

Wyrenna had never seen so many Argonians gathered in one place before. Then, she realized that there were not actually very many, not compared to the other inhabitants of Windhelm. Only that they were all confined to this one place. Some part of her shrank, ashamed. Another part grew in fury. They deserved more.

Wyrenna heard her own name.

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Imagine at this moment that you are someone else. Not Valamand this time, an entirely different person.

It was not easy, to hear your skin-sister announce her departure. But, you understood why she needed to. The Hist, so far south, called in its own way. Wyrenna had to find her calling, and it was a voice that came from her mother and the north wind, that homeland past the Jerall Mountains.

You erected the spine of parting, hoping that this would not be the last time, that downriver you both would meet again. At least, she might write.

And you waited for that letter that never came. You waited for so long, to hear your skin-sister was safe.

But there was only so much anyone can wait. You love your mother and father, but you only had to know. What if Wyrenna was in trouble? Who could save her from what rapids hid around the bend? You followed her, as best as you were able.

You found only death where you could track her. The trail was months-cold. But in Falkreath, only death. At Darkwater Crossing, only death. Death and the silence of Sithis and no sign of your skin-sister.
Now, you are in Windhelm. You prepare to move south again, to return home empty-handed. You
even prepare to say that Wyrenna is dead, to say that you could not find her, and to see your mother
mourn. Father wouldn’t want to hear it. He would fold his crest in sadness but he would say nothing.

You gather supplies for the journey and you can’t think how to tell them, because Wyrenna was
always much better at that sort of thing than you were. And you try to wonder what she would say, if
she were there and could speak to you.

And now you must imagine that just as you deemed it hopeless or impossible, she washes up. You
almost do not recognize her, and she does not see you. But you know her, you have known her for
much of your life and you call to her.

“Wyrenna! Skin-Sister!”

You embrace her in your arms, and you do not ever want to let her go, that she might float away
again.

That is what you would do and feel if you were Ilyas-Tei, child of Zaas-tei and Venava, skin-sister to
Wyrenna, who might call you gods-sister as is her way.

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The only reason Wyrenna did not choke and panic, draw her sword, was that she knew the voice that
called her name. She knew the arms that appeared around her, she knew the feeling of rough scales
as someone very dear to her buried their nose into the warm crook of her neck.

And in her mind she almost asked if it was real, or if she’d made some sort of mistake? If it was
someone else, mistaking her for someone they knew. But it couldn’t be. It wasn’t.

It was Ilyas-Tei, gods bless her, it was really Ilyas-Tei.

Wyrenna cried out. Somehow the Argonian was in front of her now, and she embraced her back
with all her love and strength. She lifted her sister and spun her around, crying. Ilyas-Tei hit someone
with her tail, but no one interrupted. Neither of them spoke for a good, long minute. Wyrenna bent
down and touched her sister’s forehead with her own.

“I almost gave up on finding you,” said the Argonian. “You’re a real greased eel.”

“Maybe, but you never gave up on anything before,” said Wyrenna. “You don’t know how glad I
am to see you.”

“Probably not,” said Ilyas-Tei.

And then reality ensued. Wyrenna remembered what she was doing on the docks, why she was in
Windhelm, everything that had happened in the past few months. She bit her tongue on the urge to
tell Ilyas-Tei to run, to flee back south over the border and stay safe and away from her. To stay
away from the Thalmor, the Stormcloaks, and the new life she had been pushed into making.

Wyrenna just sighed, pressed herself closer. “I’ve never been so scared,” she said honestly. “I’m
sorry for worrying you.”

“Worried? I wasn’t worried,” said Ilyas-Tei. “I only came to see what I was missing, you know. And
xuth! I did miss a lot!”

“What do you mean?”
Argonians did not express excitement the same way a human or an elf would. But Wyrenna knew her sister well enough to see how her crest of feathers rose, the change in voice. “You got huge! Did you join the army?”

It took a moment to figure out what Ilyas-Tei meant. “Oh, the armor? No, I’m not a soldier. But things are dangerous in Skyrim now, you know.”

“Yeah, and I’m a silk purse,” said Ilyas-Tei. “No, silly, you’re built like a stone wall. Since when can you lift me right off the ground?”

Wyrenna was stunned by this. When she had left Bruma Ilyas-Tei by far had been the more formidable. She couldn’t remember her sister seeming so slender, so light.

Then again, plate armor had also become quite light-feeling to her.

“So, where did you and your mother end up? I haven’t seen her in seasons and seasons.”

“She’s dead.”

It was like saying that there had been a storm, or that more snow had fallen. If such news could bring a lump up her throat.

“What? When? How?”

And Wyrenna told her, briefly, what she had found at Darkwater Crossing.

“Then we must see her,” said Ilyas-Tei. “You mean to tell me that your mother passed down the river, and you have not been back to mourn her since?”

“Well, I’ve… been caught up,” said Wyrenna. “With everything that’s happened.”

“Then we’ll go now,” said Ilyas-Tei. “I’ve been hunting to make the ends meet and I think I can make another trip. On the way you can explain to me everything. We can pay our respects, after.”

“I can’t,” said Wyrenna. “There’s too much here I have to do in the city. And I have to tell someone where I’m going.”

Ilyas-Tei guffawed. “So we’ll come back. It’s not like you to ask permission before you do anything,” she said. “It’ll only be a few days, we can cover ground on horseback. I found a stray mare, a big old thing.”

Wyrenna looked at the city, down at the East Empire Warehouses. Then she thought of how much she needed help, how much she had felt alone even when Valamand was around. How often her sister had set her right, before.

“Let’s go,” she said.
Wyrenna finally had the time, the occasion, and the audience to tell her story. By now, we have heard many versions of it. But as they rode south among the steam flats and volcanic crags, Wyrenna’s true and honest tale closely resembled the one you are reading. Excluded being those occasions when we have been someone else, of course.

Her sister asked endless questions. That was just who her sister was. But she knew not to pry at the more scary bits.

It was almost two full days of quiet discussion, a stiff saddle, and camps by warm vents before Wyrenna finally finished. So I will not detail all that here. Only that the string of shot rabbits had grown long dangling over the horse’s rump: Ilyas-Tei’s good bowmanship whenever she saw quarry.

High above them, the bright sky sheeted green and blue. The northern Aetheric Lights lit their way.

“You really should go back,” Wyrenna said. “When we get to Darkwater Crossing, you should keep going. I don’t want you to get mixed up in this.”

“Well, you should know by now that you don’t always get your way,” said Ilyas-Tei. “I’m not leaving, you can’t expect me to.”

“I’ve been hurt, and I’m going to get hurt again. I already know it,” said Wyrenna. “I… look. You know me. I like to think I can handle things. But I can’t. I don’t know what I’m doing, I’m only pretending I am who I say I am, in Windhelm. It’ll come back to me. I don’t want it to come back to you.”

“It sounds like to me that it’s done that many times. But, you’re still here,” said Ilyas-Tei. “You’ve been tossed into the rapids again and again, and each time you’ve crawled out having shed your skin.”

She paused.

“But it’s not a triumph that you’ve grown armor to replace it,” she added.

“Mm,” Wyrenna agreed. They passed a faint geyser, a hissing plume of steam. The horse shied a little. To the north and west, the faint drone of harsh water drowned much else out.

“I always thought you’d make a neat warrior,” said Ilyas-Tei. “But I was surprised to see that you actually did it.”

Wyrenna laughed. “Oh, is that because I pushed you over when we met? What was I, a tiny child?” she said. “I’m not really a warrior. I just learned how to be like one.”

“Then what are you?”

Wyrenna wasn’t sure how to answer her sister. “Just myself, I think.”

“That’s not how it works. You say you learned how to be like a warrior, but what is the difference
between that and being one? And you say you learned how to be like a spy, so why is that not the same as being a spy? And you say that your elf, despite all he did, is like a friend. Why is he not a friend?”

Ilyas-Tei spoke again, when Wyrenna had no real reply. “You are not faking who you are, just because it is different than who you were. You are not an imposter,” she said. “I did not meet someone who was like my sister, but different. You are my skin-sister. And to the people who know you for being a warrior, you are a warrior. And to the people who you have spied on, you are a spy. You are real, you know.”

“And you still get away with being so wise,” Wyrenna said, with only a little sisterly vinegar. “I should have just brought you along in the first place.”

“Maybe you should have,” said Ilyas-Tei, “but I don't know who you'd be then.”

That was it about Ilyas-Tei. Valamand liked to style himself as unfailingly correct. But Ilyas-Tei, she actually was right about things most of the time. Only the Gods knew how, but she was. That was just her way.

“It still feels strange,” said Wyrenna, “To… just give myself everything I have done. I don’t know how you can believe it, just hearing a story. I was actually there, actually did it— and I still don’t believe it, or that it was really me.”

Her sister only laughed. “I’m serious!” Wyrenna continued. “When you’re there in the moment, you don’t think much on it. You don’t even think you’re a real person doing these things. And you do them, and you look back and can’t remember if it was you doing them. Gods, I still remember forgetting to bank the fires at home, losing my mittens. And I’m supposed to believe I killed a vampire? A dragon? Fooled Ulfric Stormcloak? Really?”

“Is it so hard to believe that you are a great hero?”

“Real people aren’t heroes.”

Ilyas-Tei did not say much of anything to that for a while, until she seemed to think on it. Then, in her left ear, Wyrenna heard the Argonian’s voice again. “It is the same as how I said before. You are a hero to the people who have seen your heroism. They do not see that one time you got bit by a rat, or when you dropped your soup. But both things, how brave you have been, and that you are only one leaf on the river, they are both true.”

“Thank you,” Wyrenna said.

“Oh, don’t be such a soft-egg,” said Ilyas-Tei. “Besides, I heard even Ulfric Stormcloak got captured. Making mistakes is only a little thing.”

“Really? Where? When?”

“Darkwater Crossing,” Ilyas-Tei said, then gasped with a hiss. “About five months ago.”

Wyrenna looked back at her sister. Her sister craned her reptilian neck forward.

They set off south at a faster pace.

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It was early into Rain’s Hand, and Valamand was home in Luxurene. Finally home. He could not
say if everything was as he left it, but the season was pleasant enough. The evening was excellent and the wine was old and superb.

A fine assortment of figures from across the Summerset Isles graciously attended, and Valamand was glad to host them at his ancestral estate. Of course, it was his official debut as Lord of Luxurene and heir to his grand bloodline. It would be a scandal to refuse without at least begging his favor or proposing alternate tribute. And so the Kinlords filed in, their advisers, all dressed quite smartly and appropriately for his presence.

And of course, many were here for more honest, less political purposes. To hear news of his achievements in Skyrim, to bid him well for his safe return. Some sought referral for his next dissertation on applied psychoarcana. Stars knew, even to have a good time.

It would have been enough to hear the warm ocean, the rustle of sea breezes through distant palms and banana trees.

But a little praise never hurt any mer, did it?

Valamand had just finished speaking on the delicate attunement process in dynamic foci-based Illusion when the night’s entertainment began. The musicians began to play. Of course, all the gentlemen then had to check their dance cards and politely asked him continue later in the evening. Valamand obliged them.

In truth, his honored mother had been austere before she passed to Aetherius. Luckily no one missed her, or lamented that she could not present him to society. Valamand of course was highly educated in polite dance and could present himself. It was rarely done, however. Nevertheless his own dance card was filled with lovely womer, all which likely sought his eye. It was his debut, after all. He was on the market, as it might be crude to say.

He did enjoy the dancing despite his hesitance about it. He was of course good at it. He was good at exactly what he needed to be good at. But a debut is a time when one is appraised, accepted or deemed dull, marked notable or common. Seen well-conformed or eccentric. Valamand was concerned with being more charming than he had in his entire life prior. The setting forbade he make distinctions where each lady began and ended, only that he did please each.

That is, until the last one on his card. Her beauty was striking. In fact, he faintly wondered why the rest of the room was not smitten with her, or how he could not have noticed her at the party before. She was dressed in red, flush against her pale skin, dramatic below her dark hair. Instantly as he took her hand to dance he could feel her firm grasp, the confidence in her steps. Not a lamb to be led about, then. He would have to earn her respect, this tempestuous spirit.

Very well, then.

They danced longer than was entirely proper. And yet his partner never relented, indifferent to his lead. Her smile heated his blood more richly than any wine. Undaunted, he redoubled his efforts and did not stare her in the eye. He followed her freckles down where they settled on her cheeks, to her elegant neck encircled with ice-diamonds. But even as she left him, he could not feel her satisfaction. Or even her approval, as all the other guests had so freely given.

Valamand did not want to part with her. When the dancing ended, he sought her ardently, unafraid if other guests found this rude. He had to know, he simply had to know. What more could he give up? What more did she need from him to see that he of course was worthy, was brilliant, was of exceptional breeding, was the paragon of excellence in so many ways?
It struck him that he could not “make” her believe so. Valamand was surprisingly at peace with that. In fact, it was more exciting that he could fail. She could be of such perfect quality that even he was not enough. But if only he could just touch that star…

He found her on the balcony above the main foyer, alone. He hesitated to confront her there, worried that it would seem uncouth, or that she might not feel safe without an escort. Still, he could not give up this opportunity and approached as graciously as he could.

“Please, excuse my intrusion,” he said. “I enjoyed our dance. Thank you.”

She said nothing, merely gazed out to the north into the cold breeze that lifted the hem of her dress. She did not smile now. She did not pay him heed. Her dark eyes were fixed to the sea, or on something beyond it.

“I only would know what you find lacking,” Valamand said.

But no reply came.

"Is it my presence? Am I a stranger?" he now begged for confirmation. "My... eccentricity[1]?

“You’re a tool,” Wyrenna said.

Valamand froze right down to his core.

"Without the Thalmor, you aren’t anybody at all.”

We now can be Valamand, as he woke with a groggy peeling into the world. Not a jump, but an awareness of the furs over him. We could not have been him before, as even Valamand wasn’t really himself in his dreams. He did not normally have the tendency to remember them anymore.

The bed was empty, besides himself. It was colder, just as Wyrenna had warned him it would be. Valamand pinched his eyes shut. This couldn’t go on. This was where he drew a line in the sand, he told himself. Where he ought to finally uproot these lowborn thoughts.

But, a corner of his mind enshrined his family history. Even among Altmer, his was not up to interpretation. How could lingering on her be some evidence of impurity, as he was taught?

Valamand stamped this voice out with all of his discipline, every ounce of his sorcerous focus. No, he was overrun. Infested. The traitorous ideas were forming alliances to eat away at him. They were maturing, multiplying, deepening in complexity and ambition. They moved under his skin. He sat up in bed.

He considered… that was always a possibility. It would be difficult to perform Illusion magics on himself, but it could be done. He could, with some audacity, wipe these fixations away completely.

He even began trying to figure out how to do it, to arrange magicka such that he might forget he ever cast it on himself, as to not break the immersion. How to focus on the state of mind that he sought, repattern himself to it.

But Valamand remembered that empty party. He crushed his face into his hands, feeling a coal settle in his stomach. That horrible Nord, she was right. He was already doing his masters’ work when they were not around to pick him up. Ready to exterminate his only comforts in their will, ready to discard as trash his only friend...

She was? She was that? There were none among the Thalmor he valued this way? Yet the thirst he
felt for such an idea...

Valamand knew well the principles that guided mental manipulation. So many illusions depended on them. The illusions that people held, that they needed to hold. That at any given time, one is safe, that those around mean no harm. That one is accepted and approved of, part of a comfortable system or collective...

It was lowborn to doubt his place this way. But he no longer could mark his thoughts by which were safe, and which betrayed the Aldmeri Dominion. His mind spun, bucking free of all training. None of this was an epiphany. All of this was months old, now. Simply not all at once. Simply distracted. Simply held at arms’ length.

Valamand rose out of bed. It was long into the night. The coal-pan had gone cold. This growing discontent was too much. Something had to be done. And if he was not... if he did not have the will to do it...

He put on his boots and his warm furs, gathered what small allowance he was permitted to use. He locked the inn room behind him. Valamand exited Candlehearth Hall, looked-after only by the sleepy bar-keep. Windhelm’s night was truly frozen. He felt tiny icicles form inside his nose, wrapped the fur around his face and pretended to abide the smell. His boots crunched on the dry, stale snow. And with total humiliation, Valamand entered the Temple of Talos.

There was no one there but one watchful priestess. Only one heretic. Valamand could endure her, for the moment. This was the temple of a false god, but it was the only temple around and if any of the actual Aedra were listening, they probably would listen here. Perhaps they even granted the shallow pleas of the Nords, and the simpletons merely attributed the blessings to their butcher-idol. Anything was possible.

Valamand remembered Wyrenna’s caution and pulled out her silver bauble of Talos that he still carried. Now that he studied it, it was unusually distinctive. A piece of art in poor taste. It wasn’t a real token of the false god. It could, he supposed, be a prop.

He sat at the front bench. The priestess did not question him, an elf, as he began to pray with the emblem clenched in two fists in front of him. But Valamand did not address the evil judgement of the human god-king above him. He instead focused intently on the wyrm beneath the Man’s feet. Surely, this was Auri-El, trod under wicked boots and conquest.

Auri-El, greatest and most magnificent of all Aedra I beseech you. I am a pure and loyal descendent, and I require your grace, or your intervention. Give me the strength to be wiped clean of the Nord called Wyrenna.

All was as silent as stone, broken only by the slow crackle of embers.

And, Valamand thought, if that is not your will, I beg of you, beg of you, let the Nord be undone. Let these months be as nothing. Revise what you have witnessed, let it be not even be memory.

Valamand prayed this, but the greatest evidence of Auri-El's apathy was that the onslaught of thought mounted. He relived the past more fully. His shameful ember burned down his guts as he remembered what it felt like to strike that young woman. As he remembered—Stars!— that he did not even know her name for weeks. As he remembered what it felt like to try and re-arrange her mind to extract a confession. How easy it had been to cast a spell of Fear onto her and know he was the greatest terror she had ever known. He fit into that illusion so well.

Auri-el, undo it. Undo it all. Undo everything, even. Make it as if I had never found her. Had never
known her. And that she had never known me, or known anything at my hands.

It was embarrassing. Beyond embarrassing. That he could not help asking this, knowing he could not be forgiven. And knowing he had only moments before pled to steel his ugly-tender heart.

This was the wrath of the Aedra, Valamand thought. But he was torn on the crime. Was this weakness of will a punishment for his lax discipline? Or penance for mistreating Wyrenna, who by all rights Auri-El ought to have considered a lesser being?

Or was it some wider, grander offense? After all, if he so regretted his conduct to one child of Man, how could he justify…

Valamand leered into the stone gaze of Talos. Take your miserable, wretched daughter back. How dare you? How dare you?

And that idol was even more silent and stoic than the one it subdued under sword. He turned back to the wyrm, feeling like he ought to grovel rather than pray.

Auri-El, please see reason. Have I not been a good disciple? Do you seriously want me entangled with this human? I do not think that is something that would please you. Give me a sign, perhaps. Anything, I will take practically anything at this point.

So far as Wyrenna was concerned, no signs appeared. But the longer Valamand prayed, the more his mind slid back to Illusions and their nature. Was that what he was praying for? For Auri-El to make what illusion he desired, true? That he might return to feeling comfort and security, with no Wyrenna around to crumble the facade?

With not even this single friend to witness his greatness?

Valamand thought back into the dream, and how Wyrenna had appeared in it. His instant excitement to prove to her that he was adored and powerful, that she ought to have been a part of that illusion. That she might join in his glory.

Auri-El, please. Men do not belong in this world. Do not condone this mockery of the Thalmor.

Perhaps there was no Thalmor, to Auri-El. He did not understand what Valamand was asking for, maybe. Or maybe He had done His work, and it did not appear obvious in a way that Valamand understood. Nothing felt to have changed. Did a proper Aedra simply not hear very well in this farce of a temple?

Maybe Wyrenna would never return. Maybe she would have forgotten about him, as he had wished. Or, a more worrisome part of his mind began, she could have been beset by savages or daedra or who-knew-what-else. A panic settled in his throat. He hadn’t been praying for that. Or what if she was captured at the hands of other Thalmor? Would they see her commission, or would they detain and torture her on the spot?

Valamand did not even know where she was. No, no— he controlled himself. No, you are a grown mer and a mage. There is no need to fret like a lost schoolboy. You came here to forget her. Forget her.

To his shame, he finally admitted he did not want to. The worry twisted his guts, though he did his best to assure himself that he could find her, easily.

You cannot, his panic taunted. You cannot be clairvoyant to some being that you do not have a frame of reference for. You can show yourself a door, or a hidden object with ease. But you cannot
find a single person without first having a beginning of their trail.

But his brilliance was prepared. You do have a frame of reference. You are holding it, you incredible fool.

Valamand inspected the silver amulet he was holding. Wyrenna had worn it for months under her clothes, he knew, to hide it. He had not previously considered it more than evidence, but it was an object that had surely absorbed a great deal of her ambient magicka. He knew standard clairvoyance spells which could lead one to a place or a known target. But to do more than make the way known required a little bit of artful spellwork.

Invoking the principles of clairvoyant pathing as a focus for a remote viewing spell was a superb cheat. Making it silent and still was all in practice, of course. To the priestess on duty (and was she dozing?) Valamand seemed deep in prayer. But he was travelling sightlessly along a path of magicka that Wyrenna had scattered. Valamand skipped the Palace of Kings, errands the days previous, and found himself outside the city. The docks? Water held magicka differently than stone or earth. Then, around the outside of the city walls. The trail grew faint as he found the stables. Travelling by horse at speed would mean that the ground had less time to retain her imprint. Valamand hurried after her south, south…

There was the end of the line. Where she was now. It was a bright puddle to his senses, intense and lush with her presence. A veritable beacon to attach his sight to. Inside his mind, he opened his inner eye.

Wyrenna was safe, and alive. Awake, as well. Kneeling on the ground, with a lantern nearby. She was pious, perhaps? To what?

Then Valamand noticed the grave. A small cairn of stones, piled at Wyrenna’s knees. Overhead, the Throat of the World loomed darkly. She was honoring her own ancestors. A recent one. Valamand tried to remember, that he had paid attention… her mother had died, yes. South of Windhelm, at the far border of the steam-marsh. Darkwater Crossing.

Yes, that was notable. Her death undoubtedly came in the skirmish leading to Ulfric Stormcloak’s capture and near-execution. That battle he had only learned of long after it had happened, in Morthal from that blabbermouth and poor excuse for a “bard.” Valamand doubted there was any real Stormcloak connection to the girl’s family. But he had learned not to dismiss fine details, especially concerning Wyrenna.

Valamand watched her grieve. It was probably inappropriate, he thought. But he had, in his way, prevented her from mourning. He was not sure how his sympathies had been stimulated, but an ache welled up within him nonetheless. His own mother had passed away while he was in Thalmor training, and he had hardly been able to attend her cremation. But in the present context Valamand felt unwelcome at this long-due wake.

Then, after some amount of time, Valamand saw Wyrenna lift her head, crawl closer to the pile of stones. She focused intently on her hands, grimacing in effort. Then, she called forth a small witch-light. Just as he had shown her how to do. The burning magicka was strong to him[^2], latched onto her aetherial footprint. What a lovely source she actually was, how pleasant an indulgence.

Wyrenna’s nascent pool of magicka sustained the witch-light for only a few moments. That she had remembered when he was not around, that she truly was serious about the commitment put him at ease in a way throwing himself on Auri-El’s mercy had not. It was not forgetting, the opposite.

He watched her try again. A few seconds longer, that time. Strange, that his pride gorged on such
fledgeling efforts.

But he was abruptly shaken out of his vision. The priestess. Oh, she was there. He blinked, disoriented. Back in his own body. In the dim temple. Holding this heretic symbol.

“‘You fell asleep,’” the priestess said.

Valamand yawned. “Ah. So I did.”

“If it is not too much to pry,” the priestess asked, “What brings you to Talos at this late hour?”

“Nothing,” Valamand said. “It’s somewhat personal.”

“I understand,” said the priestess. “Still, Windhelm has many elves, but I hardly see them here. It’s good to see you come to Talos, not like those awful Thalmor.”

Chapter End Notes

1) A reader aware of common neurological variance would readily identify Valamand as autistic, else upon the range of autistic emergence and expression. However, such identification was not common in Alinor where the model of physical and mental acceptability follows conformation as a horse or dog might be appraised. To such a society (for what we know of it), ”poor conformation” of the body or ”eccentricity” of the mind were considered defects and to be hidden or else expunged especially among the upper classes where homogeneity remained the ideal. Doubtless this backward and oft-boycotted practice among the high nobility inspired comments in propagandic literature such as early editions of The Pocket Guide to the Empire, items authored by known Alessianist revisionist Brother Mikhael Karkuxor, et cetera.

2) For, if the audience is unaware, Altmer are highly attuned to the flow of magicka in themselves and in the environment, and can often even distinguish different sources of magicka by ‘feel’ alone. Where less apt peoples might know nothing of this delicate palate without specific training, Altmer are keen. Smitten with perfumes as they are, magic first and foremost is their most enticing sense.
Wyrenna slept into the next morning. Ilyas-Tei had left her alone to grieve, and instead fetched fresh flowers. The two sisters stayed together at Darkwater Crossing until midafternoon. After their horse rested, they saddled up and cut back north.

Wyrenna did not linger. However she felt, her mother was not waiting under that cairn. But, she hoped that at least symbolically her mother was with her now, or smiled down from Sovngarde.

She’d told the stones about Valamand. Wyrenna hardly had known her mother outside of letters after early childhood. What she would think about elves was a mystery.

The journey back was more jovial than the one setting out. Wyrenna’s story done, Ilyas-Tei began her own tales. Or, at least her ramblings. New designs for a bow that should be 2% faster than her last one. Her fascination with crossbows but her frustrations with their slowness and weight. If a miniature one was practical. How she had finally traded for some fine glass and now had three new crystal lenses for her next project, the merits of gut-string versus hemp-string versus other materials.

Wyrenna couldn’t make sense of half of it, but she let Ilyas-Tei talk on, happy to hear her voice and happy to try her best. The most practical invention yet, Wyrenna thought, was a wool-lined oilskin garment for an Argonian’s tail, made watertight with pitch. While it was important to stay moist, Ilyas-Tei said, freezing northern waters could be deadly at long exposure. The amount of warm blood in an Argonian’s tail, and that most Argonians did not cover their tails, posed a problem. While Ilyas-Tei had never had much trouble in Bruma, the dockworkers in Windhelm fell sick constantly.

How, Wyrenna asked, would one supply the Argonians with these new garments? The answer was: at cost. But, Ilyas-Tei was optimistic that such an important cause would be fair charity.

It was night again soon enough, dark skies and bright moons. Wyrenna resolved to practice the candle trick before she would sleep. She had expected Valamand to be wary when she asked to encroach on his domain of magic. His unexpected enthusiasm was welcome, but odd and new. Before, he had also been glad of his own greatness or the sovereignty of the Aldmeri Dominion. Those were the gladness of pride and probably what someone had told him he ought to be glad about. They weren’t the surreptitious glee of a child only now realizing he could steal sweets from a jar. That he was not watched.

“And what’s Ulfric Stormcloak like?” Ilyas-Tei said. “I shake with envy… you have met so many important people!”

“He isn’t really the best example of an important person I’ve met,” said Wyrenna. “Vittoria Vici was much nicer. Much closer to ordinary people, I think.”

“I do not see why that makes Ulfric a worse example,” said Ilyas-Tei. “Explain?”

“Well,” Wyrenna said, “important people… you’d think they are just normal people except important. Or that they are from another world completely and nothing about them might be normal. But neither of these are true. Important people are important because of the place they are at. You know, where they are in the world.”

“So Ulfric Stormcloak, he is not important because he is Ulfric Stormcloak,” said Ilyas-Tei. “He is important because he rules Windhelm?”

“Yes, sort of,” said Wyrenna. “He controls this place and inside it, that’s his little world. But without
it, he would not be the same person I think.”

“So what makes Vici better?”

“Her place is sort of the ordinary world, one that you and me can walk around in, talk to her,” said Wyrenna. “Ulfric Stormcloak, you can’t enter his world unless you are the kind of person he chooses.”

“You do not like him much.”

“I have to lie about who I am around him,” said Wyrenna. “So no, I don’t.”

“Your honor hurts?”

“A lot,” Wyrenna said.

“If you didn’t lie, people would come to harm?”

“Yes?”

“If you’d stand between a bear and these people wielding nothing but your words,” said Ilyas-Tei, “I think your Nord honor is clear as a spring.”

But, before Wyrenna could reply, Ilyas-Tei slid off the horse. “What?”

“Put out the light,” said Ilyas-Tei. “I smell something, and it’s bad.”

Wyrenna knew that an Argonian’s sense of smell was not limited to the scent of things, but a sort of tasting of heat and shocks. They could easily tell when a storm was coming, the approach of some creatures, and other talents Wyrenna had long envied. She did as her sister asked, and also slung herself off the horse’s back, let it graze on the sparse scrub.

“Look, there,” said Ilyas-Tei softly. “Something is moving against the stars.”

Wyrenna looked up. At first, she saw nothing unusual. Then, an odd patch of black. It passed before the pale rim of Secunda.

“It’s a dragon,” said Wyrenna. “They’re really infesting Skyrim these days.”

“How big is this dragon?” Ilyas-Tei said. “To still be so large against that moon?”

Wyrenna thought. And then she thought of the dragon she had seen up close. And how enormous it was. And how even at great distance, that wyrm in the sky still seemed the size of a septim coin.

“Gigantic,” Wyrenna said, feeling her heart fall into her boots. Then, she looked down again to see Ilyas-Tei creep over the moss and curdled rocks. “Where are you going?”

Wyrenna gathered up the horse and carried after her sister, who lurked at the crest of a hill. She tied the nervous animal to a bush, feeling her muscles quiver as she crouched to hide as well. “Ilyas-Tei, we should go,” she said. “You’ve hunted many beasts, but I think a dragon is too much for us alone.”

“I want to watch what it’s doing,” said Ilyas-Tei. “There’s nothing around big enough to feed it. What is it looking for?”

The monster spoke. It spoke such that even from afar Wyrenna knew it to be a Voice. She did not
understand its tongue, or know over such a distance its intent, but each word rattled her bones and rendered her blood to stone. A terrible, terrible throat greater than all the horns of war, louder than all the cries of the wounded the world ever had known. And her soul knew that voice. Perhaps from a child’s-rhyme her mother had once whispered to her tiny babe, else from a lurking and dark Nordic subconscious.

“Alduin,” Wyrenna whispered.

And He called forth, and the stars dimmed, the ground burst asunder.

“What is ‘Alduin?’”

“The god of destruction,” Wyrenna stammered, for even she knew a little folklore. “Born to swallow the world.”

Under the red glow of Masser, a wyrm rose from the earth to answer its master’s summons. Skeletal wings beat against the air until they were enrobed in flesh, and it took flight over the barren wastes. The beasts’ roars and shrieks echoed against the mountains, and everything else in creation fell silent in reverence.

But this vision, Wyrenna watched it go wrong. The thunder came before the lightning, an ear-murder that could only have been something sundering. Ilyas-Tei flinched. A flash, warmthless and stark under the moons. Alduin bellowed out, flying swiftly away. His reborn servant crumbled, skin burning like paper, bone by bone falling to the grave once more. Alduin wheeled around, spat a molten ball of flame at some unknown foe. Then the oblivionish noise split the air again.

Unlike the lesser wyrm, Alduin did not stay for what came after. He instead ascended into the sky, into the dark between the stars.

It was some short while before Ilyas-Tei could loosen her tongue. “What did we see, just now?”

And Wyrenna had to put this incident right next to the rest of everything that had happened in the past few months, line it up and straighten it out, somehow.

“Something bad, I think,” Wyrenna said.

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It was, of course. But we’ll get to the particulars of that another time. There were a great many other badnesses at work, as there always are. We’ll begin with the next one Wyrenna found, and start from there.

First and foremost, Ilyas-Tei was forbidden from entering the city, just like the rest of the Argonians. Thankfully, she understood. But Wyrenna wasn’t fond of parting so soon, or leaving someone as good and valuable as her gods-sister behind alone.

Still, there was more to do and Wyrenna had wasted precious time on personal business. She set off to find Valamand and tell him the news. Hopefully, she thought, he’d have learned to listen and had been doing his job as an actual Thalmor spy while she’d been gone.

This was the second badness, for Valamand could not be found. She searched the inn, and found only a summons to Ulfric’s court. She searched the Gray Quarter, and no one had seen the elf. She even asked Brunwulf Free-Winter if he’d heard so much as a condescending whisper about her “friend.” With some worry, she checked the final place she ought to check: the jail.
“It’s always the last place you look,” she muttered as she followed the guard down the dingy stairs. Windhelm’s barracks were orderly, but any sense of duty seemed to end where the army ended. Wyrenna resisted the urge to wipe her hand through the dust on the wall. Instead, she focused on the back of the jail warden’s helm and followed him down into the bare-dirt prison.

Valamand’s cell was the last one on the left. Inside, the mer was pacing around in the tiny space, barely one step of his long legs in each direction. He moved like a stirred wasp banging around inside a jar.

“At last,” he said, equal measures relief and exasperation. “Get me out of this preposterous cell.”

“What is his fee?” Wyrenna asked, pretending to ignore Valamand.

“Fifteen septims, lass.”

“Fiftee—” Valamand gripped the bars. “I have not committed any crime. You are a thief, a common brigand! Wyrenna, you cannot possibly—”

“Fifteen it is,” Wyrenna said and opened her purse. She let fall fifteen golden coins into the warden’s hands. An extra five joined them. “I’ll show myself out.”

And the warden did not argue. “Get back,” he demanded, pushing Valamand through the bars. There was no place for Valamand to brace himself in the tiny cell, and he fell to the ground with an undignified grunt. The warden fit his iron keys into the lock, let the door swing, and began counting his spoils even before he turned to walk back up to the barracks.

Wyrenna offered him her hand in getting up. At first, he reached to take it without hesitation, then faltered. Instead, he turned her palm over and chastely kissed her steel-gauntlet knuckles.

“I complain overmuch,” he said slowly. “It is good to see you, current setting aside.”

And Wyrenna did not know what to feel. Beside herself. Vaguely charmed. Wary, even repulsed in spite of that. There was a deep rift between what she wanted the case to be and what she knew the case was. Much of her wanted, so wanted this mer to be her good friend finally treating her how his manners demanded a lady of respect to be treated. Realism suggested, though, that the affection of a Thalmor was an ugly thing. To be well-regarded by one who considered your kind as so much kindling.

Then she remembered that Valamand’s act was that of a fawning bootlicker and he obviously was playing his role within the bounds of the Palace of Kings.

She drew her hand swiftly away, hardened her voice, and returned with her own role. “You could not last even a week without getting yourself in trouble, elf,” she said, hauling him up by his collar and marching him into the prison room. His crushed look of submission was uncomfortably genuine. “What did you do this time?”

“Nothing,” replied Valamand, voice even and face sturdily set. “You paid a bounty that did not exist. You have been extorted.”

“I know that,” Wyrenna said, close to Valamand’s ear. “But I’m not about to argue with the guard when I don’t want them to ask questions.”

His mask softened somewhat, as he heard her more sincere words. Valamand was just no good at keeping this sort of thing up, Wyrenna concluded.
“But seriously now,” she whispered, as they walked up the stairs, “what happened?”

“You received an official summons from the court of Ulfric Stormcloak,” Valamand said. “I was found, in your stead. They had been told that I was not to walk free without your custody, and as you were nowhere within the city limits…”

“Bastards,” Wyrenna spat. “They shouldn’t have any right to do that. You’ve done nothing wrong, I think. You didn’t harm anyone?”

“I was highly tempted,” Valamand grumbled.

“Well, thank-you for being good.”

“I am a grown mer,” Valamand snapped. “I likely have dedicated more time to discipline alone than you have spent in your entire life.”

He didn’t look back as Wyrenna led him out of the palace and into the city streets, and did not dwell on her lack of an answer in any way that Wyrenna noticed.

“You were summoned to appear immediately,” he said. “Where are you going?”

“To the docks,” said Wyrenna. “Ulfric can wait a little longer. He likely can’t see me right away, no matter what the guards said.”

She paused, waited until they were out of earshot of anybody important.

“I’d rather not see him for as long as I can help it,” she said.

“I take your point.” Valamand looked uncomfortable himself, at that prospect. “I trust your return from Darkwater Crossing was uneventful?”

“No, it wasn’t,” said Wyrenna. Then she blinked. “Wait. How did you know…”

“I know many things,” Valamand said.

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She did recount to him what she had seen on the Eastmarch flats. With some extra as well. Valamand knew nothing of Alduin, the Nordic dragon-god, and demanded context for Wyrenna’s dread of the beast. Wyrenna herself was no bard. She knew nothing beyond the being’s name, its role in folklore, and the utter sureness that she had seen it with her own eyes.

The whole concept of Alduin, Valamand said, was ridiculous. Yet another false God. For even Imperials knew of Auri-El's benevolence, to an extent. And He had nothing to do with world-eating in the least. On the contrary, His light and providence was the only thing that elevated Mer to transcend Mundus. Valamand refused to consider that the greatest of Aldmeri ancestors was more closely related to Alduin in his menace than he was to the Aldmer themselves.

Wyrenna had no answer to that, other than that there must be some other explanation. Much of his words made her feel cold at her core, but she agreed at least that Alduin was no Akatosh. Everybody knew Akatosh had descended upon the world, somehow, to fight Mehrunes Dagon centuries ago. It would be silly for a god who loved the world, who saved the world, to then want to devour the world and unmake it.

(Of course Valamand did not like her reasoning, for it was the Thalmor who had ended the Oblivion
And there was no way Alduin was a God in the same sense that Akatosh was, she also pointed out, if his work could somehow be interrupted or ruined. Valamand listened most closely to her description of what she had seen, what was likely to have been some magic at hand. But he had no answers, to his frustration. It did not sound like any art he knew of. In effect, in sheer scale and might. Powerful magic existed, he said, but the amount of magicka required to simply undo an entire dragon was unheard-of. No mage alive, he was very sure, had the ability to retain so much for such an awesome and impossible effect.

Except they could, and someone had. Wyrenna had seen it. She and Valamand, she said, just didn’t know how it worked. Or if that was what was happening at all. To her, even just making light at her fingertips had seemed impossible before she’d learned to do it. Just because Valamand was apparently (apparently!) a magical prodigy, didn’t mean he knew every trick there was.

This discussion brought them to the east gate of the city, and the docks, and the next trouble in Wyrenna’s long succession.

And it was not introducing her sister to Valamand, or introducing Valamand to her sister. Valamand regarded Ilyas-Tei as if Wyrenna was introducing him to a dead fish. Ilyas-Tei wasn’t exactly rude, but cleaned her skinning tools through the entire courtesy. She even showed off a new contraption, a knife that sprang loose on pressing a tiny button. It was a sinister-looking piece, with a wicked saw-blade like the teeth of a sturgeon. Valamand seemed indifferent. Yet, uncomfortably pale at the sight of it, when Ilyas-Tei snapped it shut in one smooth flick of her wrist.

The trouble was, inevitably, bureaucracy.

Somehow, despite that the East Empire Company had seen brighter seasons in Windhelm, even with the helpful word-in from Suvaris Atheron, there was trouble in seeing the shipping records from more than one month backward in time. First, there was the question of disclosure and need-to-know. Then the tracking-down of who had the proper authority to access said archive itself. Then questions if said archive was even stored in Windhelm, or in Windhelm storage that was easy to access.

This entire process involved waiting. Waiting, on a miserable cold bench inside the warehouse frontroom amid worthless or unclaimed cargo, while some quill-biter wrung their hands upstairs. Just sitting there killed Wyrenna, even the idea of them sitting there wasting time, killed her. Instead of loafing about idle in her armor next to a plain-clothes wizard and a purple Argonian, Wyrenna drew her sword and practiced her drills she had been repeating since Morthal. Then, when she was through with them, she did them again. And then she began to go through the drills she had seen the Imperial Legion perform, back in Solitude. And then she continued on with the drills she had seen the Thalmor perform, while she was stuck at the Embassy. And then Wyrenna moved into the drills learned as she’d seen the Stormcloak Army train for war.

But there came to a point where even she, with the well of fortitude she had slowly been cultivating, could not lift her sword anymore. A pity. It was much harder to be angry at being made to wait when she could just pretend she was bringing her blade down upon the problem.

So she collapsed, sweaty and sore, on the bench again. There, Valamand had her small book of paper, and a coal-pen. He was drawing. Ilyas-Tei was watching, nosily arching over his shoulder.

He was drawing part of the pulley-cranes across the room that were used to lift pallets of cargo on and off sledges and carts. Their ropes draped in a sublime way, Wyrenna realized, that she hadn’t noticed with her own eyes. They crissed and crossed in beautiful arches, at least in Valamand’s
sketch. Somehow, with his eye for detail, his drawing was even better than the real thing.

“You should draw the rest of it,” said Ilyas-Tei. “It won’t work without the rest of it.”

“It is only a picture. It wouldn’t ‘work’ to begin with,” Valamand said. “It does not need to perform any function.”

“But it’s better if it does,” said Ilyas-Tei.

And Valamand did take that as a challenge, somehow, for he illustrated the rest of the crane with tiny strokes of the coal. He smudged the marks to create form. Wyrenna was amazed at the accuracy, the reflections in the steel of the machine, the twists in the hemp mooring line.

“Enough of that drudgery,” he muttered, and turned the page. There was another drawing on there, one he flipped past. But, and Wyrenna wanted to look at it for longer, it was an image of her.

Had he done that, while she was not around?

“I’ve been practicing the candle trick,” said Wyrenna. “I can do it for a whole five minutes, now.”

Valamand looked up. “Not terrible progress. Certainly at least average, perhaps above,” he said. “Sustained, or at intervals?”

“Five minutes straight through, six if you count flickering,” Wyrenna said. “Ilyas-Tei timed it.”

“With what hourglass?”

“With this,” said Ilyas-Tei, pulling out a flat clasp of metal. It opened like a clam to an open face of springs and small cogs. “You wind it like this… and it counts down for ten minutes.”

She demonstrated. Valamand’s eyes did flit over the components, the tiny needle and dial. He scowled when doubtlessly he saw there was no magic to it at all.

“It may be possible to begin study of the most basic spells,” Valamand said. “Though I doubt you could cast one for longer than a few seconds.”

“Okay,” said Wyrenna, “How do I do that?”

“What, now?”

“How busy are we?” Wyrenna said, maybe too loudly, maybe at risk of someone upstairs hearing.

“One cannot simply… magic is particular, and complex, and it has rules. You can’t sit down and just learn one spell. You must understand how each works— and all schools of magic operate on highly diverse principles.”

“All right. So what are those principles?”

Valamand was a little less than blase, a little more than nonplussed. “I cannot just tell you all the principles. That would take weeks, years of beginner study on your part.”

“So tell me a few of the principles to start,” said Wyrenna, not sure why this mer was so determined not to explain anything, or make her life so difficult.

“Which would you like to learn?”
“I don’t know,” said Wyrenna. “I don’t know what they are yet.”

Valamand struck his face with the palm of his hand, exiling some evil spirits or a headache. “You mentioned something about your purpose, I recall,” he said. “To learn at least rudimentary Restoration. I will begin with that.”

And even though Ilyas-Tei was not the one learning any magic, she too listened intently.

“Restoration is the enforcement of natural states. It does not change any thing or energy into any other, nor does it alter the laws mass and forces are constrained by. Restoration knows the true shape of living beings and the world they touch.”

Wyrenna looked at Valamand. He seemed hopeful. Then when his eyes met her own uncomprehending stare, he bit his lip.

“I very much avoided the possibility of teaching novices,” he said grimly.

“Restoration doesn’t change any rules, and it doesn’t turn anything into anything else,” Wyrenna said, doing her best to decipher. “It just makes things more like they ought to be.”

Valamand seemed appeased by this, a tired light returning to his eyes. “Close enough,” he said. “For now. A skilled mage may do far more than simply heal wounds, with Restoration. But yes, returning things to how they ‘ought to be,’ is one application.”

“So what am I supposed to do?”

“You must first learn to sense and grasp the vessel of magicka in your subject. Your first subject, as with all neophytes of Restoration, is limited to yourself. Empty or filled, your entire self is suffused with the capacity for magicka, and that space reflects your true shape.”

Wyrenna scrunched her nose. “How could I be any shape other than my own?”

“You could have a great big hole in you,” suggested Ilyas-Tei.

“Quiet,” Valamand said.

Wyrenna looked at her gauntleted hands and began to make sense of this. She sort of understood what Valamand was attempting to explain, halfway. Or at least she thought so. Her armor contained her, after all. So naturally, it had to be shaped like her. So if her body contained magicka, maybe it was the same sort of thing.

But she still couldn’t feel it, did not know how to look. Wyrenna made the magicka move, as it could be moved to her fingers for the candle trick. But that told her nothing. There was no sense of touch in magic; she could not feel around that way.

“Well, I don’t know about magic,” said Ilyas-Tei, “But the Hist is easy to feel, easy as floating downstream.”

“I don’t have anything like that,” said Wyrenna.

Valamand shrugged. “The savage and raw complexities of the Hist, the Khajiit fetish for the moons, they are of little use to me. Proper, safely-formed magic even among the most inclined of mer is a discipline, a science and an art. Not instinct, save perhaps in the most base and desperate sense. I expect among Men it is unintuitive, a great endeavor, and that it is natural to take far longer than any elf to achieve even basic competence.”
Both Ilyas-Tei and Wyrenna had begun to hum halfway through his explanation. Valamand was shouldered on either side by extreme displeasure.

“I’ve said something offensive to your sensibilities, haven’t I?” he mumbled.

“So this is what you meant,” said Ilyas-Tei, “When you said he was… what did you say? An insensitive, thoughtless, racist stick-in-your-ass?”

“Stick up his ass, more like,” Wyrenna said “I don’t understand why you can’t… I don’t know, show me how to do it? With magic?”

“I’m not inclined to show you anything, now,” Valamand grumbled. Then, despite the cold draft and the blood in his cheeks he seemed to flush even more deeply. On his skin, he looked a little like an overripe fruit. “Besides, you do not know what you are asking.”

Ilyas-Tei’s snicker hissed out loudly, she had to cover her nose to contain herself. Argonians did not smile as some other peoples might, but Ilyas-Tei had learned to, and the result was toothy and crocodilian.

“It is...considered intimate, to make magickal contact in such a way,” said Valamand. “At least, in a civilized part of the world, it would be.”

“Well, I don’t care,” said Wyrenna. “Being magicked isn’t special or close. It can’t be any worse than you casting Fear onto me.”

Valamand’s knuckles cracked audibly where he clenched his fists. “It is not the same as ordering an illusion to entrap the mind. That is impersonal, that requires no actual contact, that is,” his voice lost some of its force, Wyrenna could feel the nerve draining out of it. “That is unconscionable, in the current context.”

“Listen, if it’s something you won’t do, that’s fine. I don’t want to make you do anything you don’t want to do,” said Wyrenna. “I just didn’t know if it was possible. If Ilyas-Tei says she has help, if you could help me.”

Her sister shrugged.

“If it truly means nothing to you,” said Valamand, “then I suppose I can oblige your request. I only ask that you mind your own manners, Nord, and pay attention. I will not do this twice.”

Valamand’s attempt at composure was respectable, even heroic as he took Wyrenna’s hand in his own. In face, he could even seem bored. The only betrayal of his self-consciousness was that his long ears nearly glowed red. Wyrenna was not sure what he was doing until she felt an odd touch over her palms, despite that he was wearing gloves and she was wearing gauntlets. Valamand looked at her impatiently. The sensation came again, a kind of question of if she was going to let him proceed.

Her best guess was to sort of let him “in,” now that he had been invited. She did her best to pull her magicka away from her hands, the opposite of the candle trick, but not in a meek way. A firm way, like a lord allowing some foreign envoy into their castle. Maybe that was what Valamand meant, that this was sort of personal. He would not ask her to take off her physical armor, for any reason.

The sensation of his presence, his magicka drawing up to her own was beyond strange. Still, he hesitated to approach closer than the edge of her. Wyrenna did see what he had been attempting to explain. He illuminated what he was witness to like a beam of sunlight, exposed the form of her
magicka within. It was not so difficult to mimic him, to learn to look and see how her self was given form. It suddenly made a lot of sense, how the healer back in Solitude could mend her arm, yet not erase her freckles. In a way, this inner shape of herself had freckles as well. Magic could only return her to this state. If she had been born with a crooked back or bad eyes, magic wouldn’t be able to fix those, either.

Now that she had sort of grasped how to look, Wyrenna could not restrain her curiosity. Quietly, she turned her inner gaze on Valamand. He pushed her away. It wasn’t polite, she realized, to try and peep on him. Instead, she imagined his boundaries as a door and— and she was not sure how she conceptualized this— knocked.

And she waited. Valamand left her presence, and she felt him debating what he would do. Wyrenna didn’t really expect him to humor her, but after a short pause he did cautiously abandon his defenses. Wyrenna crept closer to him with all the reserve of a guest.

She almost had to leave. Valamand was massive— not in form, but in sheer concentration, brightness, vastness of magickal reserves. It was like staring into the sun, so much more enormous than her own tiny star. It was the crux of his spellwork. Ordered so precisely, moving with constant and meticulous direction. Yet, maybe she had more insight to him now than before. It reminded Wyrenna of the sketching he had done only a few minutes ago. Not cold. But full of aspiration, the need to perfect and most of all full of vision. This was his passion, Wyrenna realized. Even the smallest, most minute sense of his magic and presence, he put the utmost effort into it. To make it flawless.

Next to that, Wyrenna was not sure how she was supposed to feel. She must have seemed trivial to him.

Ilyas-Tei was laughing. “What? What is it?” Wyrenna said.

“That’s the worst face,” she said. “You’re making me glad I don’t have human lips.”

“She does make rude expressions when she attempts magic,” Valamand confirmed.

And Wyrenna looked back at Valamand, rumpled and red-nosed from chill but still so smug. “Only those times? Better than you.”

Valamand opened his mouth to defend his dignity when Ilyas-Tei interrupted him. “Relax, let it wash over you.”

Wyrenna sighed, leaned back against the crate behind her. “You just say that because it’s usually you I get.”

“You should save your wit for Ulfric Stormcloak,” Ilyas-Tei said.

And then Wyrenna remembered. And Valamand remembered. And they leaped up at the same time. “How long have we been here?” Wyrenna asked.

“Four hours,” said Valamand, “and possibly also twenty-five minutes.”

Wyrenna did make a very rude face.
Wyrenna hurried through Windhelm’s streets as quickly as time and good sense could allow. Valamand’s anxiousness and utter repulsion led him to lag behind, then stride ahead on his long legs, then recede behind her as they passed each palace guard’s scrutiny. Wyrenna set her shoulders and leaned into her steps, determined not to look overly-bothered.

But as she neared the Palace of Kings the doors swung wide and Ulfric Stormcloak walked right out, flanked by Galmar Stone-Fist and a retinue of his finest men. Wyrenna threw out several different scenarios she had been rehearsing in her head, everything she’d hoped to appease the Jarl with.

Before she could improvise, Ulfric spoke. “Good, there you are. You are leaving with me at once.”

This was not a question. This was a command. “Yes, of course, my Jarl,” she said, careful to use the correct dialect. “I’m late. I’m sorry for that.”

“I trust it was important,” said Ulfric firmly, suggestive that anything less was unacceptable.

Wyrenna fell in step, Valamand staggering to keep pace behind her and out of Ulfric Stormcloak’s direct line of sight.

“Only disciplining my elf, sir,” she said.

“You said before he hardly left your side,” Ulfric said.

Wyrenna thought for a moment. “An elf has no place where my mother is buried,” she said. “I’ve only just returned.”

And if Ulfric Stormcloak accepted this explanation, he did not let Wyrenna know so.

“Where do we travel, sir?” Wyrenna asked as carefully as she could. “I’m coming into this a little overdue.”

“I have received an interesting correspondence, from a patriot and a sponsor of my campaign,” said Ulfric. “Only a powerful ally could amass and contribute such wealth in secret. My response garnered a reply.”

Wyrenna dreaded what on Nirn Ulfric had said. As the entourage passed into the Stone Quarter, Galmar Stone-Fist passed a thick folded parchment to Wyrenna. Plain black wax, no seal. Wyrenna smelled it before reading it. Musty. But not discolored. It was as the original receipts and inventory she’d found were. Genuine.

She picked through its contents and made a show of reading each line.

“That’s very strange,” she said, knowing the contents weren’t strange. “This says that they never made contact with you, or asked for an alliance at all.”

“It was the cause of some confusion,” said Ulfric, as Wyrenna handed the letter back. “I’m sure that someone else sent that original missive. A spy.”


“One can only wonder. I would not know the workings of such a mind,” Ulfric said. “Nevertheless, I must hammer it out on neutral ground. I will not lose such a loyal supporter over some scoundrel’s
prank. You are coming with me.”

Wyrenna did not want to point out that Ulfric had not answered her original question at all. “What neutral ground, sir?”

“Does it matter? What do you need to know of it?” said Ulfric as the parade passed before Candlehearth Hall.

Wyrenna bit her lip. Galmar did not jump in, nor did any of the rest of the men accompanying.

“Nothing, My Jarl.”

They were soon out of the city gates and onto the bridge over the White River. Wyrenna grit her teeth, thinking on her bag, magic ring, bedroll, bandages stuck in her inn-room. It would be difficult now to ask about the length of the journey, or to get leave to prepare her own supplies. Even if just for Valamand.

“Is my elf allowed to come?”

Ulfric Stormcloak considered, visibly. He looked at Galmar, who shrugged, glared at Valamand. Wyrenna had to drag the mer along to stop him from falling behind and out of sight.

“Very well,” said Ulfric Stormcloak. “But he is not permitted at the negotiations.”

“To tell the truth, and I don’t doubt your wisdom, I’m not sure why you deem me worthy to attend,” said Wyrenna, cautiously testing the limits of what Ulfric would answer. “I’m good for two things: attracting Thalmor and destroying Thalmor. I’m not much of a diplomat.”

“I do not summon you to be one, girl,” Ulfric replied as the entourage neared the stables, a fine carriage already prepared. “Or for a rain of tedious questions to fall upon my brow.”

Wyrenna curbed her tongue, having run to the end of Jarl Stormcloak’s patience. As the caravan parade set off, Wyrenna retreated back into her own head, surveyed and answered what she could for herself. North and east along the road, their destination seemed to be in that direction. And it was not a somber trip, for Galmar and Ulfric discussed loudly through it, at such length that Wyrenna feared her ears would drop off.

Valamand faced her in the carriage, sitting on his hands and puffing in the cold. He did not speak, as Wyrenna had told him not to. But he did look at her. Not straight-on, but with a downward-cast plea. If Ulfric Stormcloak himself were not sitting two-men-down on her side, she might hold the elf’s glove and tell him she’d work something out.

The snow blew over them, up from the Sea of Ghosts.

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Unfortunately, this leaves Ilyas-Tei behind, waiting in an East Empire Company office for a bureaucrat’s time of day. According to some this is comparable to a torment of Oblivion in of itself, and it’s rumored that Molag Bal, daedric lord of domination and torture, keeps several such offices entirely for his own use and the suffering of whomever he pleases to fill them with.

To Ilyas-Tei, who we’ll be for a short while, it was merely boring. There was only so many times one could fiddle with the tension on a hand-crossbow. There were only so many times one could wind and re-wind a key-timer. And to do much work on anything required a clean space and useful tools and materials.
There was no-one to talk to, and she’d been forbidden from touching any of the machinery in the frontroom. Of course, she’d touched it all anyway, and taken a peek inside every crate and pallet with a loose enough lid. But bushels of apples and bales of paper and bundles of linen rags weren’t to her interest.

After an hour, Ilyas-Tei got up, gathered her things, and walked right upstairs.

There were few employees remaining. Now that she thought of it, it was suppertime. They may have been eating elsewhere, or they had left for the evening and forgotten her there. But Ilyas-Tei did think poorly of them, that they’d forget to lock up the door downstairs and leave her alone only with the tired notaries.

But while she was here, Ilyas-Tei did her best to find whatever Wyrenna was looking for. No apprentices stopped her, or thought to challenge her presence. The books and records, though—they didn’t feel like they ended. Each desk had a thick stack of volumes on top of it, to go with their still-warm coalpans and their clay inkwells. Ilyas-Tei hoped they’d gotten close to what they were looking for, and just looked at the first labels in each pile.

Wyrenna probably would have found the task easy to swim through, Ilyas-Tei thought, but after limiting herself to one book at a time, the shipping records for the past six months appeared. They were, together, two rough-hide-bound volumes and their spread sheets of inventory looked like so much frog guts to her.

She read what she could understand, which much of the time was only numbers. There were some dates that her skin-sister was worried about, that something had come in on those days and she did not know who from.

The records from Midyear were incomprehensible. Someone had spilled soup on them, or smudged them, or else they were such a knot of words and sums that Ilyas-Tei felt her mind blank while reading them. She tried again in Frostfall.

That was a little better. On the 27th of Frostfall, just as Wyrenna had told her, there had been a shipment of steel and arrows and pitch. A shipment so massive, it had been brought among six ships that had pulled into port. Their names: *Abecean Fist, Stormlark, Alessia’s Blessing, Pikehead, Aquilon,* and the *Icerunner.*

Ilyas-Tei shut the book and put it back right where she found it. Then, she found the upstairs door and jiggled the lock open from the inside. It let her out, unsurprisingly, into one of Windhelm’s lesser rows of houses and tradesmans’ shopfronts. Which made sense. Ilyas-Tei hardly ever saw any of the East Empire Company’s employees actually enter via the docks, or walk past the Assemblage to their work. They had an unmarked back door that let out some place polite and most-of-all not full of Argonians.

But Ilyas-Tei discarded that bitterness and trotted through the alleys, and finally among the shadowed corners of more-populous streets of the Stone Quarter. If caught within the walls, she’d be tossed out again. With a minor beating or two, Ilyas-Tei added, spines folding close to her head.

But the problem remained that Wyrenna had gone to Valunstrad, to the Palace. And guards or no guards, that was where Ilyas-Tei had to go too.

And she did. And, it was strange. There was no one at the door. Or was it ordinary? For the supper hour? Ilyas-Tei had no way to know, and did not care, and ran up to the ancient doors before anyone
could turn the corner behind her and stop her. It took all of her strength to open even one, and she slipped inside with what she hoped was quiet and purpose.

There were guards, though, waiting within just on either side of the hall. As soon as so much as her snout crossed the threshold they yelled, reached to seize her. Ilyas-Tei ducked and dove under them, looking around for Wyrenna. She was not here, no, how could she not be? This was where she said she’d be!

“Wyrenna! Where’s Wyrenna?” she said, too-loud in the hall. The guards began yelling themselves, and Ilyas-Tei could barely understand them, so she yelled louder. “I need to see Wyrenna!”

She was by then halfway down the long hall, and in full view of all the thanes and court members present. One of them, an older nord, stepped forward. “Argonian! What is the meaning of this? How have you come here?”

But Ilyas-Tei had no time for that kind of question. “I need to talk to Wyrenna! Now!” she said, “It’s important! The Thalmor, they—”

And a voice stood on its own sound in the hall, so thankfully comprehensible that Ilyas-Tei could have wept.

“She has gone to the northeast, Yngol Barrow,” said another member of the court, who had a very large beard and very good eyes. “She travels with Ulfric Stormcloak himself.”

“Brunwulf! What is the meaning of this?”

“Seize it!”

“Someone get these boots out of here!”

The guards dove. Ilyas-Tei leapt aside, erecting the spine of thanks. If the helpful man saw, or understood, she did not know. But she rolled over onto the well-laden table that stretched the hall’s length. On this road she ran, knocking wine and fine food aside until she came to the end. She jumped forth, flying through the air at the still-open door and its wave of chill. The guards rushed to close it. Ilyas-Tei made the gap, snapping jaw almost nipping the tip of her tail.

Ilyas-Tei felt the hard stone under her claws, within her boots as she tore past the city and sprinted to the Grey Quarter. The Dunmer there stared, sneered, pulled aside in her path. But they did not betray her. They understood what life was like. The guards enjoyed no such safe passage.

Ilyas-Tei was a font of energy on most days. But now, she understood what she had to do. And on such occasions, she focused her thought, her every will to accomplishing that task. There was no lingering on legality, or what others thought, or if she would be forgiven. This was most important. This now.

She turned into an alley, and looked with her sharp eyes. Easier than climbing mountain cliffs, there were handholds everywhere. She dug her claws in and scaled first crates, then wooden walls, and then stone onto patch-bare roofs. It was a trick to balance, but she strode forth again with her tail sweeping back, wagging. She reached the wall at last.

There were guards upon it, too.

Ilyas-Tei did not stop running. She had only a moment to decide whether or not to draw her knife. She gripped her bow instead and whacked the watchman over the head with its steel shank. The helm deflected most of it, but he was stunned. It was enough to streak past him and over the outward
spurs of the city, out onto the thinnest and most distant looming buttress.

She took a soaring leap over the docks and between the ships in port and splashed into the slate waters below.

The rivers this far north were beautiful, were cruel, were life-giving and the veins of the land. Ilyastei wished she could swim for longer than a few minutes at a time, their chewing cold was so hungry. But she emerged on the opposite bank, and the air stung her more savagely than even the boreal ice. The heat and exertion sustained her and soon she’d claimed her horse again from the stables. And soon, she was glad that she carried with her all she owned. That her gear was of her own design and safe from water’s punishment. And soon she’d kicked her mare to a run and clattering down the northeast road after her skin-sister in chase.

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Windhelm shrank, but did not vanish across the White River when the carriage turned off the highway. No, the granite city was still there. It had bright pinpoints for eyes: watch fires that pierced the distance. The bent firs and sedge labored under these far-afeld snowdrifts, and when the cart wheels could go no further two men were left to keep it. Ulfric Stormcloak, Galmar Stone-Fist, two more soldiers, Wyrenna, and Valamand-known-as-Vilmundr proceeded on foot down into the river’s dredge.

Wyrenna was by now suspicious that she’d been told nothing further. She assumed that they guessed her sabotage of their interesting and wealthy donor. Or else suspected her of treachery. Hopefully, she thought, that would be fine. She didn’t need their trust. What she needed: to learn what she needed to know and be able to walk away, complete the terms of her contract and be rid of the Thalmor at last. If that was possible.

She could not be honest with the Stormcloaks, but Wyrenna resolved to be honest with herself.

The moons had only just appeared over the Velothi mountains when the party came to a stand of ruins at the mouth of the White River, yawning into the sea. They were older stones than any Wyrenna had seen before, older even than the Palace of Kings. Once, this place must have been ornate and well-carved. The deepest cuts still remained, the rest rubbed smooth by ice and wind. How had the snow been swept from the barrow’s stoop? No one could live in such a place. The offhand assumption that someone merely had made it welcoming for a royal meeting didn’t satisfy her.

“I find it strange that one so wealthy would host in a crypt,” Valamand said, not a question.

“No one cares about your opinion,” Wyrenna snapped, wishing she could say anything else. “If I wanted to know, I’d ask.”

Valamand bowed his head, retreated further under his woolen hat and hood. “Of course, My Lady. I will mind myself with more care.”

“See that he does,” commanded Ulfric Stormcloak of his two most loyal guards, both veterans among his forces. “He will not set foot inside Yngol Barrow. I will not profane this place by inviting elvenkind inside.”

“As in, the Yngol?” Wyrenna said, now fighting the urge to more closely inspect the tumbled arches. “Son of Ysgramor?”

“The very same,” said Ulfric. “So it befits you, girl, that you proceed with respect.”

She was made to carry the whale-oil lantern, proceeding first into the tomb. Quietly, Wyrenna had
wished she could have spoken to Valamand. But how was impossible. And what she would have said was a mystery. Behind, Ulfric followed, then Galmar. Even without looking Wyrenna knew their eyes were sticking to her back. It made her feel even younger and more foolish than any time Valamand had looked down his nose at her. The elf’s actual chronology aside, Wyrenna had come to understand that his mind, body, and soul were similar to her own. Being an elf and having a different scale for things. These two men, with beaten creases in their faces and weight upon their shoulders were easily old enough to have been her father.

Wyrenna could have wished for her da’s presence, if only to place as a wedge between them and her.

“I don’t mean to pester you, My Jarl. But I do have one question,” Wyrenna ventured. The twisting corridor of ice narrowed sound, narrowed her voice in echo, made it high and weak even in her affected northern speech. “After that I’ll ask no more.”

“Speak it.”

“I learned you were at Darkwater Crossing months ago,” she said. “And that you survived ambush there.”

Whatever Ulfric Stormcloak was expecting she would ask, that was not it. He grumbled, remained quiet for several paces, and Galmar spoke in his stead.

“Why do you need to know?” he said sharply. “You’d best not be sticking your nose where you don’t belong.”

“I buried my mother there, not far from where she died,” Wyrenna said, measuring her sharpness, her offense, even her sadness. Despite that insult burned in her chest, how he’d dare assume her business there was anything but personal. “I’m very sure now that she was murdered in that battle. I only want to know how she died. Who killed her.”

“She was a soldier?” Ulfric asked, at last. He seemed more solemn, and Wyrenna did not know what lurked in his tone.

“No. She worked caravanning to the mine,” said Wyrenna. “I found her under the wreck of her cart, with an axe cut between the shoulders.”

“Then I would not know,” said Ulfric Stormcloak. “I was concerned with other things at the time. Who else the Empire slaughtered in its greed for my neck, I did not see them fall.”

Wyrenna resisted the urge to look back. To lash him across the jaw, to split his mouth with her fist. To scream until her throat was raw, and cry until she was beyond speaking. You are powerful, a great hero. And you could not save the least of your subjects. The best of your subjects. The only one of your subjects that I could have cared about. That you ought to have been responsible for. Where had he been? Ulfric Stormcloak had been near in her mother’s time of peril and he had not spared a single thought?

She had to stop herself from shaking. She couldn’t do this, or think this. Not here.

“It must have been a hard time,” she said. “Thank you, anyway.”

“You are not satisfied,” said Ulfric. “I understand loss. But loss is a reality of war. Not everyone who dies, should have. In the season unending, some lives fall as snow.”

Wyrenna bit her tongue. He shouldn’t have had to explain to her his ‘realities’ of war. The
inevitability, the ambiguous neutrality of an endless season, when he had been the one to begin it. Wars did not start because of a change in the wind, or because dark clouds gathered overhead. Wars started with men, the choices of men. And they ended with little stone cairns by the side of a river, under the Throat of the World.

Wyrenna’s lantern broke its yellow light into a wider room, a hall of sorts. There was a mechanism within, broken with age and time. The gate beyond sighed open deeper into the ruin. But, presumably that was of no importance, for there was a man waiting there for them. He dressed in ermine and sable, with a thick cloak against the cold. A braiser had been brought in, new-beaten and full of coals. Around it, seats. Utilitarian, but if Ulfric Stormcloak minded he did not voice his opinions.

“Welcome, Jarl of Windhelm. I trust this is sufficient? I do not expect this meeting will take long,” said the man. Wyrenna felt her fingers itch, put the light down and rested her hand on the pommel of her sword. That had been a very Nibenean voice, overt where she hid her own tongue. What it meant, though, she had no idea. The donor was foreign? Or did he only choose this as his voice, as she’d chosen her own?

“It won’t,” said Ulfric tersely. “I would have your name before I sit with you, in this place that is not yours.”

“I am only a representative,” said the man. “My name doesn’t mean much. I’m called Junus. I’m here in my master’s stead.”

Ulfric Stormcloak did not move. Wyrenna followed his lead, and saw herself recede in importance. Galmar was still watching her. Perhaps for recognition, if she knew this man. But he was a stranger to Wyrenna as much as he was to Ulfric himself.

“I had intended to affirm our relationship in an honest way,” said Ulfric Stormcloak. “Not to find masks between us.”

Junus seemed content to stand on the other side of the firepit. The deeper gullet of the ruin haloed his windburned head.

“My master prefers anonymity at this time. You may know by my speech, I am not from Skyrim. But there are many within Cyrodiil that would support your reign as High King. It is not appropriate yet for his open revelation. If there is a mask, you are not the reason he hides his face.”

Worry snaked up the back of Wyrenna’s neck. If she had been wrong, if what she had found had not been strange, if her foolery had disrupted a genuine movement in the war effort, from a legitimate and highly important donor…

“I have only thanks for such notable contributions,” said Ulfric Stormcloak. “You may tell your master he has bandaged many soldiers.”

“I will tell him so,” Junus said. “The possibility that his operations have been infiltrated is still worrying. One should not even know to be his impostor. I would like to see the missive you received. It may tell more to me than to you, the character of our fox.”

Wyrenna watched the folded note change hands, the well-spoken Imperial peruse it. She imagined herself as an icicle.

“Well, whoever the knave is, they are subtle. The forgery is impressive,” said Junus. “Down to the choice of ink and shape of characters. But it is not perfect. This was written, I think, by an elven
“Strange that your master too writes in elven letters,” said Wyrenna. Galmar began to snap something, but Junus cut him off quickly. “It is less strange in the Imperial City where such penmanship is common, if not essential, for official decrees. But it is more strange to appear in Eastmarch. For this letter could not have been sent from further abroad than your own city.”

A sickly explanation, from a man to less-than-man.

“Thus, it is less likely we have a wayward scribe on our hands, and more likely our culprit is an elf.”

“Or an ally of elves,” Ulfric grunted.

Wyrenna ignored him. “So your master, he is in Skyrim?”

Junus froze. He looked at her with mouth clenched.

“You said, that the letter could not have been sent from Cyrodiil. Not that it wasn’t. That it couldn’t have been,” she continued. “What makes you so sure that anyone imitating your master could only have been close-by?”

“Sharp, isn’t she?” Junus said. “I don’t recall ever hearing of this girl, Jarl Stormcloak.”

“You would not have,” said Ulfric. “She is a spy.”

And as he placed his heavy hand on her shoulder, Wyrenna resisted the urge to scream.

“I have had her looking into this matter,” Ulfric continued.

Which was a lie.

It was a lie, and he knew she was aware of it. He may have known everything. His squeeze of her arm, it may have looked steadfast or trusting. But Wyrenna felt only a claw, and knew he had her head between his jaws.

“She will speak on what she has learned.”

Wyrenna had only seconds to think, compose herself. She swallowed a dry lump in her throat. And, after a moment took a deep breath to begin.

“Wyrenna! Wyrenna, please be in here!”

Wyrenna thanked Akatosh for her gods-sister’s timing, cursed Akatosh for her gods-sister’s timing. It was all she could do to leap between Galmar Stone-Fist and the door Ilyas-Tei was about to barge through.

“What’s this,” and Galmar’s next words spat in fury, “lizard doing here?”

Wyrenna spread her arms out wide. If Galmar was going to attack Ilyas-Tei, he’d have to break her body first. “She’s here for me. It’s me you’ll need, not her. Please forgive her intrusion.”

“Galmar! Remove them both,” Ulfric commanded. “I will not tolerate further interruptions. The girl will report to me another time.”
If it wasn’t wise to leave Ulfric alone with the representative, Wyrenna wasn’t about to point it out. She was more concerned with where Galmar Stone-Fist shoved her, and her gods-sister, out of the ruin hall and down the icy corridor.

Ilyas-Tei was furiously trying to tell her something. Tripping over her words, holding too many in her mouth at once. Her crest of feathers fanned upward in alarm, each quill sticking straight out from her head. “Slow down,” Wyrenna said, wishing she could stop or slow down herself. “Is there something wrong?”

Ilyas-Tei snapped her mouth shut, nodded.

“Is someone in danger?”

Another nod.

“Is it me?”

“Worse than that. You’re all in very deep water, here. You need to leave right away,” Ilyas-Tei said. “The Icerunner, and the Thalmor… it’s—”

They met one of the two guards that had been posted outside halfway through the passage. He looked to have been chasing Ilyas-Tei, and seized up on the spot when Galmar came into view.

“Back outside!” the man ordered. Then uncomfortably close to Wyrenna’s ear, “and you! Ulfric knows there’s something off about you already, and now this!”

Stumbling out and onto the stone-and-dirt and into the wind, Wyrenna threw Galmar’s grip off of her. “Ilyas-Tei isn’t a ‘this.’ She’s the most trusted person I have to me right now, and you will respect her. She was left behind in Windhelm looking into what I told her to.”

“So you admit it. Ulfric was to expose you, but you admit it. You are a spy.”

“Of course I am a spy!” Wyrenna yelled. Crows scattered in the night, scared from their perches. “I am spying on the Thalmor!”

Valamand was nearby, sitting on a block of stone. He looked up, somewhere between tense and spooked. Wyrenna turned on her heel. “Valamand, get over here, now.”

“That’s not—” Galmar drew his axe. “Who is your elf, girl?”

“Oh, for Talos’ sake, put that down,” she said. “Valamand is exactly who I said he was, only now his cover has been ruined. Did you really think I could just walk off with a traitor to the Thalmor and not have them notice an elf with the same name appears in Windhelm? The city they’d like to wipe from Nirn the most of all?”

“Wyrenna, I—”

“Valamand, not now,” Wyrenna said. “Galmar Stone-Fist, I don’t know what your Jarl is planning. But I’m not about to be treated like a criminal when I’ve been investigating your enemies. Good gods, I practically told you both before, in court, and this still happens.”

And, Wyrenna was terrified it wouldn’t work, that her seaming-together of suspicion and truth would tear asunder, but Galmar Stone-Fist put his battleaxe away. He stared down at her as if she had revealed herself as some sort of clawed daedra, much more perilous than he had previously anticipated.
“Ulfric knows you’ve been snooping around, that you visited the treasury. Then the forged letter arrived,” said Galmar. “It was only right for him to be suspicious.”

“He was right,” said Wyrenna. “I sent the letter. I only wanted to learn who this donor is. My last lead on the Thalmor is that many of their spies vanished from Windhelm, months ago. They vanished, probably, because they learned something and someone killed them for it. The only things that happened at about that time were donations to the Stormcloak Army. Bigger than any others before them.”

“That’s the trouble,” said Ilyas-Tei. “I found the ships that delivered in Frostfall. One of them was the Icerunner.”

Wyrenna immediately felt nauseous. She looked up at Valamand, only to find him looking already down at her in complete dread.


And then she realized. Why there had been no records on-board of where those six ships had stopped. Or what had been unloaded from them before the important cargo arrived in Haafingar. Or why so many crafts had been required for only one curiously heavy crate to a ship, if the others were like the Icerunner.

“Ulfric Stormcloak’s in mortal danger.”

Distantly, Wyrenna was aware of people’s voices behind her, Galmar’s heavy, lurching sprint, her sister’s swifter footfalls. Valamand’s long strides. But she was more sure-footed, somehow, even in her steel. Hugging corners, frost sheared under her boots as she tore past the frozen rubble, down the ice-floe and back into the lit gallery. Her shield was off her back before her sword was in her hand.

“Junus! If that’s even your real name,” she called out. “You’re through. Put your weapons where I can see them!”

Ulfric Stormcloak stood. He stood, and he snarled and it broke his face, and Wyrenna was genuinely afraid of him. But Junus spoke first.

“Well, you heard her,” he said.

A tall figure in dark robes wicked into view by the Imperial’s elbow. Anger at her forgotten, Ulfric Stormcloak abandoned Wyrenna and leaped to his feet, drew his axe. A second Thalmor appeared on the Imperial’s other side with a firebolt ready-to-throw. Wyrenna flung herself, her shield in its path. It wasn’t like Valamand’s fire, it was an amorphous white and it crashed on her guard in a shower of ugly sparks. Voices down the hall grew in volume—the first of those chasing her appeared and joined the fray. It was one of Ulfric’s men, but Wyrenna could hear her sister and others not far behind.

She could not decide if it was better to guard the door, or to guard Ulfric Stormcloak from the mess she’d made.

One of the Thalmor understood the danger in attacking Ulfric Stormcloak a little too late. Her lacquered-leather robes did little to stop his axe and she fell bleeding to the ground. The other backed away, preparing something more elaborate than a firebolt. Reinforcements, their torches glowed down deeper in the ruin. Wyrenna wasn’t about to let more magic go off, she sprang.

Ulfric shoved her aside with one gnarled glove. She staggered to the ground, footing lost. Faintly, her mind hissed with what he could possibly be doing. He… inhaled?
“Fus Ro Dah!”

Vibrations of sound hit her like a warhammer, so close to the epicenter of his Voice. But it was worse for the Thalmor, for Junus. Both were repulsed with such terrifying force their bodies left divots. Buzzing remained in Wyrenna’s bones, she scrambled to ground herself. Someone was yelling, still? It was a murk, and the loudest thing was her desperate heartbeat.

But she felt a lurch far beneath her.

“Don’t mo—”

The ground gave way, shock from the Voice prying apart faults in the ancient stone as a wave might savage a beach. Wyrenna dropped her sword, fallen down into black ruins somewhere she couldn’t see. For a short while, she didn’t see anything at all.
So, instead, we will be Valamand. He heard only the echo of that sound. His chafing shoes fell in step only just too-late. We'll be coughing in the wave of dust shaken loose. Wyrenna vanished into the stomach of the earth, and all that mer could do was to hold the Argonian back from leaping in after her. The blood raced up his throat from his clenching chest. First! First, he ought to cast light within the pit, then a simple feather spell, and levitation could be used—

More elves appeared in the far doorway, drawn up from the ruin depths by the commotion. He hesitated. Ought he announce he was one of them? No, that wasn’t wise, by how Galmar charged and with a wild leap over the gap assaulted the Thalmor. Ought he attack? What was the penalty for destroying other assets? An official inquest at least, in the gentlest case.

An arrow materialized from at least one Thalmor neck. Valamand shuddered, for he had not heard anything from the small Argonian, or felt her slip free from where he’d caught her. There’d been no hesitation in her actions, for all that he’d thought her simple in mind before. She held two arrows in her hand, fit another to the bowstring and smoothly struck another mark. The last shot she held ready before nimbly clearing the perilous drop.

Of course, he was not about to hop over such a deep hole. But, a quick glance at the irritating slab of oxmeat that was Galmar Stone-Fist changed his mind.

“Keep up, ass-ears!”

Magic was out of the question, then. Valamand took a step backwards, then jumped forth with his long legs. He landed safely, of course. But for a moment at the height of his effort he wished he too could drop like a stone into the abyss.

Where Wyrenna was, his mind was too-cheerful to remind him.

“There must be another way,” Ilyas-Tei said. “I have rope… but not enough to carry another person up.”

“Ulfric can take care of himself. A little tumble like that’s nothing,” said Galmar. “Nord tombs always come out in a circle, anyway.”

“I hope he is as good at taking care of others, as much as himself,” Ilyas-Tei croaked. That was the end of that discussion.

Galmar instead began a new one. “All right. Both of you, listen up. As far as I’m concerned, this isn’t some diplomatic tea-party anymore. I don’t trust either of you. Not you, ears, no matter how your woman claims you’re safe. And not you, Argonian.”

“What about me, sir?”

Valamand looked over Galmar’s other side.

“You’re fine, Svaleif,” Galmar said, somewhat off-tracked. But he did not forget his irritation. “You two— your woman’s what got us into this mess. But I am not about to stand by while elves run free around Yngol’s barrow!”
This, Valamand could relate to. The very idea of an army of Nords cavorting around Tanzelwil, or even entering the limits of Alinor itself… funny, he did not feel his gorge rise as much as he was expecting it to. But still, it was highly disrespectful, uncalled-for, and flatly unacceptable. At least he, in some unfortunate sense was chaperoned in this place.

But, this begged the question; what were Thalmor doing within, to begin with? And why would they choose such ditch-holes to parlay with Ulfric Stormcloak? And why parlay at all? And if the Argonian’s news was true, what was Summerset gold doing in Windhelm?

“Elf? Valamand? Are you lost?” asked the Argonian quietly next to him. Galmar and his man Svaleif had begun on ahead, descending dark-iced steps down into the ruin. The Argonian was hovering somewhere around his arm, not quite touching him.

“Yes,” said Valamand. Then, “No,” he corrected.

“Just keep quiet and let that man ford the river,” said the Argonian. “If he thinks he deserves to lead, don’t fight him.”

“I didn’t intend to,” Valamand muttered. “At least for the time being.”

The Argonian pulled what Valamand could describe as a globe from a back-belt hook, just before her tail. She opened one side of it up, reached a claw delicately inside, and turned some small mechanism. It was a lamp, enclosed by translucent shell rather than paper or glass. Its light was softer than a torch’s might have been and did not sting his eyes, or else black out what his sight had adjusted to. He followed it down into the barrow’s depths, and thought little of his trespassing.

“This bothers you?”

The Argonian’s question took a moment to parse.

“No,” said Valamand. “But I think they will see us coming.”

“No, silly,” the Argonian replied. “You are one of the high and mighty, normally? But I have only ever seen you follow. Does this bother you?”

Valamand thought. He could see how this being was Wyrenna’s ‘sister,’ and had informed somewhat her manner of speech and focus of interest.

“My preferences are insignificant,” Valamand uttered, such that Galmar up ahead could not hear. “I strive to do what duty requires of me. I would prefer another situation. But this is the one that presents itself.”

Sharp voices up ahead sullied his resolve. And the nag that he had utterly failed this vow before.

“It would be helpful, though,” he said candidly, “to know exactly what is required of me.”

Valamand was very skilled at stepping over bodies. But these corpses certainly were not in his permissions to have created. And the fear: that his power over dead eyes was waning.

“I thought you were through with this kind of thing.”

The cloth dipped in old spirits stung. Wyrenna sat still and bit her lip on the tall stool while her da cleaned her up. She could feel her eye swelling already. Her feet jittered with nerves. Wyrenna
crossed her scabbed knees to stop them.

“I’m sorry, da,” she said. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“I’m sure you were, though,” said her da. He wiped the dirt off onto an old rag. “What did they do?” Wyrenna looked at her folded hands.

“Come on, now. You wouldn’t have laid Ivar and Hans down for no reason. What did they do?”

“They said I wasn’t a real Nord,” Wyrenna mumbled. “Because of you.”

Her da stood back, pushed his salt-and-pepper hair off of his face. He still smelled like flux and pickle. “Well, your mother’s real. I’m sure of that.”

“And I told them that!” Wyrenna said. “But they still didn’t believe me. And she’s not around to prove it…”

“Dear heart, you proved it as well as any Nord can,” replied her da. “Made a mess of yourself, though.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know. And thank you, for defending your mother’s honor. But that won’t do much as an excuse for the guard. Dragging you back here kicking and screaming! I thought he was about to get a fistful himself.”

“But they wouldn’t stop,” said Wyrenna. “I don’t… “

“Wyrenna, have you considered that they don’t want to believe you?”

Wyrenna looked up at her da, only to get a blot of spirits on her rough scrape again. Her skinned cheek smarted terribly. “I don’t get it. I’m a Nord, that’s true, isn’t it?”

“It is. But you’ll meet people who don’t care. They already decide what they want to be the truth. You could come over the mountains with your mother, with the ax of Ysgramor, whatever you wanted, and they still would only want to make you fight.”

“I can understand that,” said Wyrenna. “I wish I knew what their problem was.”

“You can’t know,” said her da. “I know you, you want to figure it out. But it doesn’t matter. You were born a Nord, but you weren’t born to beat them for saying you’re not. What you choose to do says more about who you are, than things you never could control.”

“I didn’t… pick to do anything. I didn’t say, ‘do I want to black Ivar’s eye or not?’ ”

“Even if you aren’t aware of it, you’re still choosing. Every person is. You get to choose what will be true, about yourself. I just want you to make a good choice.”

A pebble fell upon Wyrenna’s face. It stung, but in a real way. She wasn’t really with her da, she came to realize. And she definitely was not so young as she was remembering herself being. But the reality was less comfortable. She wished for nothing more than to remain there on that stool, with Da tut-tutting down at her. Before he’d gone white too-early, gone weak, had disease wring the sense from his words.

The breed of darkness surrounding her scorned color, could not even be called black. Dust and frost
were equal parts to air. Her side ached. Wyrenna at first stayed very still, until she was sure nothing had been broken or torn. Her armor and its padding had taken much of the fall’s impact; she felt a few new dents. But now was no time to imagine she needed to pay a smith about it.

Wyrenna moaned because it made her feel a little better and sat up in the unknowable place. She brushed something warm off of her face. Embers?

She remembered what had happened, the assault of sound, and the scattering of the braiser that had been above. Wyrenna looked up. The hole looked about the size of her fist, from where she sat. It was the only thing that was actually visible.

Wyrenna braced herself to get up and inadvertently put her hand on something soft.

“Argh!”

Bad idea. She kept her hands to herself. If she could only see what was around, maybe this wouldn’t have been such a problem. But, and she cursed— she hadn’t brought a candle, or a torch, or a lantern, or even a flint…

In the dark, she could imagine Valamand’s unimpressed stare.

“Oh, right,” she mumbled, and concentrated with all her might on the candle trick. It was only a small light, but it threw the chamber around into stark view with carved shadows.

First, she was filthy, surrounded by wreckage. Only a little off her side was Ulfric Stormcloak, supine but definitely alive. He’d landed on a patch of sand, at least. Cooling coals scattered around them, poking the permafrost with ashy stains.

Only inches away, the cast iron braiser crushed the one Stormcloak guard that had interfered. Wyrenna looked away. She didn’t even know the man’s name.

Ulfric’s back cracked audibly next to her as he first rolled onto his side, groaning. Then, he began inching to the wall and pulled himself up. He would not have appreciated ordinary sorts of questions, Wyrenna thought. There was no asking the Jarl of Windhelm if he was “all right” after he blew a hole in the ground and fell into some crumbling ruin of the earth. Instead, she rummaged around in the debris and managed to find both her sword and shield, as well as Ulfric’s ax. He took that from her without comment.

“Leave him,” Ulfric commanded as Wyrenna began to pile stones on the fallen soldier. “We don’t have time for that.”

Wyrenna did not point out that he couldn’t know what they did and didn’t have time for, considering neither of them knew where they were. The room itself, though obscured by remains of the hall above, seemed to be a burial chamber. Some of the inlets in the walls hid ancient skeletons, caked with lime and melting into their hollows. There was one arch sealed with wood so old and dry that it crumbled into rot at Wyrenna’s touch.

“You mentioned nothing of your knowledge of magic,” Ulfric said sourly. “Among other things, I expect.”

“There’s not much to mention,” Wyrenna said. “This is all I know.”

And at that moment, it extinguished.

“You didn’t have to put it out.”
“I didn’t. I’m out of magicka.” Wyrenna said. “I’m no good at it.”

Ulfric’s grunt wasn’t affirmative, but it at least was unhostile. “You have a lot to answer for,” he said.

“You can arrest me later,” said Wyrenna. “I did what I did looking for the Thalmor, and I found the Thalmor, and it turned out less well than I hoped.”

She felt around for the remnants of the door, rubbed her own bruised side, and then kicked out. Must bloomed around her, but it caved in to a rough-hewn passage. She tested it with her foot, it was iced over. But it felt like a new floe. As if water had been dripping in from above, freezing in nubbly stalagmites. Thawing in the middle of winter.

“You first,” Ulfric demanded. “Lead on.”

Wyrenna didn’t think she’d be leading much of anything. More like he didn’t want her at his back.

“Yes, my Jarl,” she said. And she did lead over the slippery halls. Between Ulfric’s heavy boots and her own armor plates, she almost wished she was here an ordinary person, not a warrior. It would have been easier to listen for whatever awaited her ahead. Their proceedings were slow, dim. There were torches around the corner, a shadowed doorframe.

Soon it was clear enough who resided in this ruin. Elfish yells and battle were crisp to the ear even through cracked stone. Somewhat above, but hasty feet echoed nearby as other Thalmor rushed to join the fray. Even the obscured sight of them enraged Ulfric. It was all Wyrenna could do to hold fast and block passage.

“Ssh!” she said. “We can’t attack them now!”

“You’re no one to tell me what I can and can’t do, girl.” Ulfric spat. “Damn you, stand aside.”

“I hate them too! But that’s meaningless if we get ourselves killed down here.” She tried to whisper in a way that was audible to the man behind her, but unnoticeable to the Thalmor running past the mouth of the passage. Unsuccessful. One looked directly at where they were hidden in shadows. Ulfric’s fuss couldn’t have helped. “Stendarr, please, they’ve seen us.”

Ulfric made to shove her aside. Wyrenna waved her hand in his face and managed to clip his indignant nose. Then she concentrated. If this was going to work, it had to be perfect.

She opened her mouth, and in the flawlessly Alinoran voice of Renalia said, “All is clear here! Move upstairs at once, engage the intruders! I repeat, all is clear!”

The Thalmor obeyed without an instant’s hesitation.

Only when Wyrenna was sure the hall had been cleared of Thalmor did she emerge. This was some workroom. Baskets of dirt, picks and crates of alchemical fire stacked the walls higher than the eroded fonts did. Mummified bodies laid nearly in lines on long tables, interspersed with modern tools. Draugr, like the ones that had been in that ancient Nordic hole-in-the-ground back in Whiterun Hold. But their dark leathery hide stretched paper-thin.

Wyrenna was well into rummaging for something to explain all this, when she noticed that Ulfric had not moved from the dark cross-hall. His eyes pinned upon her, watching.

“I didn’t think you’d be one to be confused, if someone opens their mouth and a trick comes out,” she said carefully, switching to her affected Nordic tongue again. Then she snorted and took just one
more moment in Summerset dialect. “Oh, look at me, I eat exotic fruit and I know everything. I’m the worst.”

Ulfric Stormcloak did not find this exactly hilarious but he did stifle a choke of derision. “Some trick,” he grumbled. “I doubt you knew it would work.”

“Elves think they’re smart, but they’re not. They think they’re the only ones who can use what they have and assume it could never be stolen,” Wyrenna said. She pocketed some interesting-looking items. Among them: etched soul gems. Maybe Valamand would know about them. Quietly, she was thankful her pockets hadn’t been mashed, though her satchel still was sitting in an inn-room far away.

Wyrenna pocketed an ancient claw device, what looked important and valuable. “So they’re easily fooled,” she finished.

“Lofty tactics,” Ulfric said. “But worry about your own hide, before slipping inside an elven skin.”

It may or may not have been a threat, but Wyrenna chose to ignore it. “Of course, My Jarl.”

It was then she came to the very end of the row of tables, closest to the door. There, one body sat. Unlike the others, it was not ancient, but fairly fresh. Well, Wyrenna couldn’t tell. It had been preserved. It smelled like cured meat, looked like a patchwork of cuts. At this point a skilled physician could have discerned its race, perhaps its more secondary physiology or recognized its features. But as it had been skinned and every limb hacked off in some way, identification was impossible.

Someone had been dissecting this being, whatever or whoever it had been. Their notes were abandoned, nearby. Wyrenna seized them, too, rolled them stiffly and stuffed them into the back of her hip-pocket. It was a lumpy fit. She could sort her morbid curiosity out later. Ulfric would not delay any longer, and he soon urged her up the stairs once he was sure no Thalmor remained behind them.

By then Wyrenna could manage a little more of the candle trick and Ulfric did not make further comment on it. Unfortunately, they soon happened on others who might have. The deep shaft had a circular gallery chamber, the walls a carved relief of some ancient history. The Thalmor had pushed their bunks up against it, and a few still were slow to join the ruckus upstairs.

There was no avoiding it this time. Wyrenna drew her sword and ran bellowing in to fight. That was what was expected of her, that was what she had to do. Ulfric did what came naturally to him.

But as soon as the first elfish blade came down upon her shield, everything changed. She wasn’t playing a role anymore. She wasn’t some double-triple-quadruple agent against the Thalmor, against the Stormcloaks, against the Thalmor again. The fear came flooding back to her, of what could await her in a prison, of long marches and cold words and the threat of an elf executing her with no recourse.

She saw Valamand, the thing Valamand was. And she hated it. She feared, hated, would destroy it before it killed her.

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We cannot be Ulfric Stormcloak, for he would absolutely forbid that. But as it’s necessary to this tale, we might imagine what he saw when he looked at the girl Wyrenna. What mad wrath he was witness to that would inform all future actions regarding her. What preternatural strength possessed
her at that moment, and the death she dealt.

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We almost cannot be Wyrenna, either. Wyrenna was beyond herself. Her sword bit flesh again and again. Her shield crashed on armor, crunched bone. Wyrenna was no longer sure of where she was, but it was atop and running over and cutting elves into the ground. She felt where Valamand had shoved her, each time. She heard screaming, but it may have been herself.

The last elf staggered before her, cowed. Wyrenna could feel her face contort, snarl of a sabrecat and a fury in her arm like nothing she had ever experienced before. The resistance against her blade was negligible. A momentary hard *snap* as she took the mer’s head clean off. She stood here for a moment, huffing. There was no pleasure, not like her victory in the vampire’s lair. She felt a hot glove at her neck. It hadn’t gone away. She’d just forgotten about it.

“Well struck!” Ulfric said, from somewhere behind her. Wyrenna turned around. He was significantly less bloodied than her, save for his cruel ax. “I was… skeptical. But you do carry your reputation after all, Foe-Tongue.”

For a moment, Wyrenna had no idea what Ulfric was talking about. Did not understand where her mind ended. Her? Was he referring to her?

“Perhaps I should not have been so quick to judge. You are young. If I had encountered my self of your years, I might not have trusted them either,” Ulfric said, in such a way that broke Wyrenna out of her dread of bloody murder and instilled instead a dread of a long speech. “Keep this as a lesson. What you may claim has no meaning until it is proven in strength of arms. But I can see now, that a dragon may have been unlucky to,”

Wyrenna interrupted him as she saw an the elf from the ground rise. One had only been playing dead! “Sir! Behind you!”

But it was by then too late. The elf got a spell off. Ulfric crumpled to the ground like a bushel of Kvatch onions. The battlemage selected another spell, probably something less subtle to deal with Wyrenna. There was no hope of crossing the floor quickly enough to get at him before he could throw the magic. Wyrenna dropped her sword and took up Ulfric’s ax where it had fallen at her feet. She threw it. Wyrenna had never thrown an ax before, but she hoped it was as easy as she assumed.

A *clop* of split flesh later, the ax buried into the elf’s chest. They fell for real, and Wyrenna knew it hadn’t been skill to make things land blade-up, only luck. She paced heavily over to retrieve the weapon, and finish the elf. He begged something, and Wyrenna almost heard it. But she sent him to Aetherius and saw how he looked at her, her hideousness.

Then she ran to Ulfric. The man was alive, thank Arkay— only somehow completely locked into place, including his jaw. His eyes were wide and furious. As magic went, it was an effective way to restrain Ulfric Stormcloak. But Wyrenna picked up her sword, slung her shield upon her back, and then groaned at the sudden extreme inconvenience.

She wanted nothing more than to be done with Ulfric Stormcloak, good riddance, and leave him there. But he was too important. If she were responsible for his death…

“Sorry, excuse me,” Wyrenna said, and hoisted the paralyzed Ulfric over her hip, then over her shoulder. She staggered under the weight, the weight of his mail, the weight of her own arms and armor. Something forboding ground against something else, in her right side. She’d sort that out later. With one arm dragging Ulfric Stormcloak, the other arm wearily lifting her blade, and her creaking
knees clearing step after step up the stairs, Wyrenna forged onward and out of Yngol’s tomb.

Chapter End Notes

1) This curious property is well-known among all scholars that study Nordic antiquity. The main passages of Ancient Nordic burial architecture are built in such a way that upon passing inside, one merely navigates forward and often will not have to backtrack to exit. This sort of traffic flow is peculiar for many reasons, the most obvious of which: why would a tomb be built for convenience of navigation when only the dead reside within? A popular theory, first postulated by Bernadette Bantien in her later works, is that Nordic barrows were constructed and then filled sequentially from the most deep (and often important/grand) crypt out to what we assume is the front entrance. Meaning, after the dead were interred inside, one would not have to walk back out past all of them to exit and finally seal the tomb— or that the tombs were sealed as they were filled and only when completely full were sealed and a barrow constructed overhead. Truly, a fascinating innovation if it is true, preventing having to traverse dozens of hostile draugr to bury one's dead. However, this would mean that as trespassers, we actually navigate tombs backwards rather than forwards and in what cases the tomb is not perfectly circular what we perceive as the front door or obvious path forward is actually the rear door or builders' exit.

2) To Wyrenna, most fruits apart from Colovian apples and certain berries were an imported luxury. However, such a notion would be ridiculous to any Elsweyrian readers or readers living in proximity to the Abecean Sea, or to any readers from Hammerfell or residing upon the Gold Coast, or even in High Rock. At her time in and to the north of the Jerall Mountains, oranges, bananas, pine-apple, figs, dates, and many other fruits were exotic imports and oft associated with Elves and Elven sensibilities. Incorrect on her part, and admittedly bordering on insulting to Bosmer that adhere to the Green Pact.
Morning Star

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

We should at least check in on Valamand. By this time in Wyrenna’s progress, he had ventured deeply into the tomb. Somewhat behind Galmar, the lesser soldier Svaleif, and even Wyrenna’s Argonian relation. Everything would be much easier, of course, had he taken point and razed the enemy’s offense with magic. But, between Galmar’s suspicion and Valamand’s own hesitance that possibility was closed. He watched instead and wished he was anywhere in the world but here.

(Possibly where Wyrenna was, an invasive voice suggested.)

But such invasive voices were nothing next to the tomb’s other inconveniences.

“Confound it, what are these things?” Valamand mumbled as he whisked away yet another faint ball of magicka. Whether soul or mere construct, they flocked like starlings and had mistaken him for a tree, ignoring the other company. Valamand felt like a walking Saturalia display.

He stepped over the cooling body of a researcher. The Thalmor here were less soldiers, more scholars. Precious few of them could have made it into the Justiciars proper. Yet, it was unlike any operation to proceed without proper defense or security. The true force of arms must have been elsewhere—an unpleasant thought. Valamand shoo’d away another wisp trying to ride him down into the ruin and caught up with the rest of the party.

Ilyas-Tei had not said another word since they had spoken before, at least not with her tongue. Her arrows told another story. There were hardly any targets left by the time Galmar and his oaf closed the distance, to sate their axes. The Argonian struck with the nerve of a seasoned adventurer. She aimed to kill, Valamand supposed, because those around her would kill if she did not. Certainly when the alternative was Stone-Fist, she was a gentle end.

Valamand simmered his envy.

“You don’t think this place is haunted, sir?” asked Svaleif, not with much fear.

“Of course not. You think any of Ysgramor’s men would stay here, away from Sovngarde?” Galmar said. “Whatever the witch-lights are about, they’re the elf’s problem. Not mine.”

Valamand was not so fond either of this being referred-to as if he were barely present. The wisps were graspable, if one filmed magicka unto their hands. He pitched one back up the stairs, only to see it creep back down in his direction. It made a tiny noise, like a sandglass rolling over stones.

“Search the room,” Galmar ordered. “I want to know what these piss-bastards are doing in here. That’s an order for you, too, lizard. Elf, stay where I can see you.”

This suited Valamand perfectly well, as he was visible just where he was. Nearby, hewn-board benches bore a wide variety of enchanting and thaumaturgic work. Galmar instead rifled through the fallen researchers, his own man began checking whatever was stowed away in their belongings. Ilyas-Tei was hesitant to help at all. She made a show of inspecting where the tomb had been disturbed, the evidence of digging and melting of the permafrost and encroaching ice.

Valamand picked up a black soul gem. It was easily the largest sample he’d ever seen in person. On its surface, minute runes crawled in geometric patterns. A valuable piece.
But, just holding it, he felt a certain dread. It was full. Which had its own implications. But what writhed inside was not human. Or elf. Or any other sort of people found upon Tamriel. Too large to be a near-person like a giant or a centaur, or a mammoth. But not a daedra, it was somehow hungrier. The hunger was what was most appalling. Valamand put it down, and instead took up the notes of the one who had fashioned the filthy thing.

The notes were a challenge. Which was surprising. Nothing, no academic literature, had been *challenging* for Valamand in over twenty years. He decided to make use of his unfortunate state and grasped a wisp, held it up to read by its light.

Some of the text was old. Hundreds of years old, old enough to have faded and a later scribe to have darkened the letters by hand. It was not an enchanting text, but one on Mysticism. Rare, damnedly precious in this northern land that spurned such delicate arts. Later scholars augmented the work, expanding on the principles. Some in red ink. The newest in a dark ochre penmanship, flecked with gold flake.

But the *subject*, oh, the *subject*…

It was on the *creation* of black soul gems, how two or more gems might be combined into one larger specimen, how their capacity could be expanded to fit the size of a more bounteous mortal soul. Or, as later notes added, applications considerably more vast. Valamand almost expected to find such instruction practical, or thought he ought to have deemed it so. Strong enchantments were a valuable resource. But not even the Valamand of the past would have accepted such rituals. The Valamand of the present felt the marrow in his bones curdle at the thought.

Valamand searched for an name, to incriminate whatever cell leader had found this acceptable study within the Thalmor. The only author he found had penned the original thesis, and that author was Mannimarco, King of Worms.

Valamand experienced the distinct, urgent need to wash his hands.

The annotation, then. The newer notes regarded the etching unto the soul gems, but Valamand sorely needed a cross-reference to decipher it. But, he cleared his throat, anyway. “I may have something over here.”

“You have something to say, elf?”

“The Thalmor here have been deep in study. What they’ve found may point to their goal in being here,” he said. He said this slowly, head bowed. He imagined he was like the goblins, when he’d been served by them in his childhood. How they submitted, lest his mother swat them on their way with her oakwand.

“Then speak!”

“It seems that the process to create Draugr, as the ancient Nords did, is unique. Those Men… they did much work on the anatomy of the soul, or so it’s written here. All that is the self, the ghost, may be split away to join the afterlife. Leaving only the husk of vitality to ever-serve and protect the honored dead. Many were even entombed still-alive.”

Galmar’s guttural snort of spite sent a cloud of breath into the chill air. “Not likely they’d find any bonewalkers ambling about here these days. A pity, they’d deserve the axe between the eyes for their trouble.”

“Which is precisely why they may have picked it,” Valamand said, feigning patience. “These Draugr
are likely the oldest in Skyrim, whether they still are able to walk or if they merely are mummified remains. They predate the latter dragon cults, Cyrod incursion, battles with the Chimer, et cetera. Their creation is the purest, most direct art descended from whatever was practiced in Atmora, I imagine. There is no point studying corruptions of a perfected technique.”

“Ha! And what would witch-elves care about Atmora? Or any Nords?” Galmar’s words were sulfurous. “I wouldn't be surprised if the Thalmor come for Ysgramor, once they think they’re done with Talos.”

Valamand paused, read a bit more.

“They do not care about your history,” Valamand said. “But, it seems they seek to perfect a new art in the soul trap. To fashion a soul gem capable of containing larger, more potent souls.”

“Like the souls of Dragons?”

That question had come from the Argonian Ilyas-Tei. It hit like a thunderclap of interest. Of fascination, of horror.

“Why, yes,” he said. “That might be possible.”

Valamand could not read Galmar’s expression. Galmar Stone-Fist was just about as subtle as his name might suggest, so Valamand did not think this boded well. “Just great,” he growled. “Exactly what we need. Thalmor able to turn dragons against the sons of Skyrim.”

Then, he gave an order. Not to Svaleif, but to Ilyas-Tei. “You, Argonian. I want you to scout ahead. Secure the exit, if you find it. We’re going back for Ulfric.”

And Ilyas-Tei did not argue, or say anything in the affirmative. She just left, quiet on her feet. And Valamand watched Galmar, Svaleif wait until she was gone. He quietly folded the notes, placed them inside his inner pockets. And he waited, too.

“I assume that is a limited ‘we,” Valamand said.

And Galmar laughed, and it was not a good laugh.

“You know an awful lot, elf. Play dumb as you want. I know you’re one of them. Your mistress may say you’re her pet. She may even believe it. But I don’t.”

Valamand hesitated, but did not give the Nords the pleasure of viewing it. He detested it, but he had long practiced the skill of looking others in the eye. Now was the time to use such measures. It was the best way he knew to distract another, while he prepared magic secretly. “What more must I do to prove myself, Stone-Fist? I reveal to you the Thalmor’s workings, decipher their magic texts for you. I’ve given to you the movements of a High Kinlord. Will you not be pleased?”

“I don’t give a damn what you’ve let loose,” Galmar said, and he raised his battleax. “No, I care about what you aren’t telling us.”

As even as the sky, Valamand faced the two Stormcloaks. “So, it's not about trust, then,” he said. “No matter what I say, you have decided what the truth will be.”

“Enough! I won’t be condescended-to by an elf!” Galmar said. His outburst shook dust off the ceiling, and Valamand wondered if Ilyas-Tei would return.

“You know, I think I’ve heard about you. Some trouble you were, unto my brother…”
Valamand had now all the time he needed. And he did not waste words. A battleaxe was slow, a battlemage was faster. Galmar toppled, easily unconscious in an instant. Sleep spells were easy on the suggestible, the zealous, the dependent. Even threatening Valamand would seem only so much a bad dream, in the morning.

Svaleif’s blade came down, Svaleif’s battlecry rang out.

Valamand stopped them. The man’s arm would not follow through. The man’s throat did not believe it could hold breath. And while Svaleif shook like a leaf, Valamand felt his face contort a smile. It felt more like a daedra’s curl of lip than ever before, stretched over his skull.

“What did you believe, Nord?” he asked, voice escaping from his ego. “Did you believe I was bowed beneath your boot?”

Svaleif’s blade trembled. His arm inched closer, higher.

“Did you believe you were strong, or that your warlord could carry you? What did you see yourself having, human? Victory?”

Svaleif choked on his own bile as he was made to turn his blade over.

“Futile. I was never the vassal, the slave,” Valamand spat. “I am a Kinlord within the Aldmeri Dominion. I am the master of your future.”

He clenched his fist on the illusion’s focus.

“It is a very short future.”

And Svaleif, dominated by Valamand’s magic, cut his own throat.

Valamand closed his eyes, tried to intake his own handiwork. It had been long since he was able to take pleasure in his duties. He put himself back where he was, perhaps a year ago. He’d fantasized performing such a dramatic piece of magic. Every day, in the academy. He’d practiced, on traitors and prisoners. On certain other students, even— when his instructors permitted it.

Something in his stomach threatened to come up.

“Valamand! Stone-Fist, there’s no way forward! It’s sealed!”

Ilyas-Tei chose that time to return, and she saw exactly what Valamand would rather her not have seen.

“I’m not sure what happened here,” she said carefully, “But I hope it’s not what I think it is.”

Valamand set his face, as he was accustomed to. “There was an altercation. I managed to subdue Stone-Fist safely, so that he would not be harmed. But the other is dead. Tragic.”

“Scale-drying,” Ilyas-Tei said, as if she was not surprised at all. She instead took up one corner of the insensate Galmar. “Help me, he’s too heavy,” she said.

“Where are we taking him?” Valamand grumbled, taking his own sweaty share of Nord commander. He smelled rank, possibly because he modeled dead bear as a point of fashion.

“As far as I found,” Ilyas-Tei said. “But a stone seal blocks the way.”

Bearing Galmar Stone-Fist between them, Valamand and Ilyas-Tei passed into the Hall of Stories.
The irritating wisps were back, clinging now that Valamand’s hands were full and he could not fend
them off. By their uncalled-for light, Valamand could make out the relief upon the walls. Worn
nearly flat, but there were images of human gods here. Animals. Valamand wondered what would
cause Nords to revere mere beasts more than their own ancestors, or if they believed they had been
born merely out of frost and air.

But the way was blocked by more than only a door, or a stone set of bricks. There instead was a
sheet of solid granite into which rotating panels were interlocked. The mechanism was obvious, but
there was no answer as to how to open it. But by his logic, a door had a purpose: to keep others out,
and to keep one’s belongings in. If there was any exit to this glorified Nordic pothole, it had to be on
the other side.

Light and sound, voice and feet were behind them now. “Stand clear,” Valamand said, and dropped
Galmar Stone-Fist to the dusty floor. Then, he grabbed a hold of a fistful of magicka and battered the
door with an explosion. The walls shook, pebbles rained down. Nothing! Perhaps, he needed to set it
inside the wall itself. His next gout of Destruction struck at faults, flaws in the stone. Some hideous
cracking noise could be heard above, but the door held.

“Do not do that again!” Ilyas-Tei said, grabbing at Valamand’s wrist. “You’re going to bring the
stones down on top of us!”

“We are limited in options,” Valamand said harshly, throwing her off. “Unless you have a
scintillating idea, then—”

“You think on it, smart-egg!” snapped Ilyas-Tei. Then she drew her bow. “And hurry!”

Valamand turned to the circular panels, their depicted carvings of creatures crude to his eye. Perhaps
there was some sort of code, a combination. With only three items, and three each to a set, there were
only twenty-seven possible answers. Valamand turned the stone panels systematically, and ignored
the sound of Ilyas-Tei pulling her bowstring taut behind him.

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There was a kind of rhythm to it, after enough practice. Walk-drag-swing-walk. With Ulfric
Stormcloak’s weight on one shoulder, Wyrenna was not in any place to fight. But as long as she
could appear behind the enemy and get one good hit in, they went down without a struggle, even if
they did not die. They were not looking behind.

But, mostly Wyrenna found someone else’s leftovers. Ilyas-Tei’s arrows, thank the Gods. As far as
Wyrenna could discern, she was still alive. She quickened her pace where she could all the same.
Climbing the stairs with this dead weight had taken longer than she’d liked. There were real soldiers
now closing in. Ulfric himself weighed several stone, his armor weighed more atop that.

One dead Stormcloak, deep in the ruin. Wyrenna did not linger, but she knew it had been Valamand,
somehow. There was no sign of a struggle. And only the man’s own sword was bloody. She
doubted there was anything alive that could slice throats and leave not a trace, or be struck and bleed
nowhere but the enemy’s blade. Only magic could explain it.

There was an elf ahead of her in line, down the wide hall further on. A troublesome wizard was
between her and Ilyas-Tei, and she could see Valamand’s back by the end of the corridor. Ilyas-Tei
was having some issue with the wizard’s ward, and his unfortunate habit of catching arrows. He
turned around too late when he heard her shuffle behind him, and he soon found her pommel lashed
savagely over his temple. He joined two others laying by the carved walls. Wyrenna lurched on.
Walk-drag-walk.
“Skin-sister! Are you hurt? That fall, I could not see the bottom!”

“I’m fine,” Wyrenna said, wincing as something ached in her side. “Ulfric’s also fine. Mostly. He’s stuck magicked in-place.”

“It’s impossible!”

_That_ was Valamand. The elf was busy with something on the wall, furiously sliding icons back and forth, trying to depress tiny grooves in the stone. “Utterly impossible! I’ve tried every combination, and this door… _refuses_ to open! What is the purpose of this lock, with no solution?”

The door itself was massive, set with familiar animal motifs[1]. Below, though, was what she at first mistook for a handprint. A handprint for something with three fingers, pointed digits, a slender and paw-like palm.

She put her sword away dirty and winced at what she’d have to clean later. Then, inching Ulfric up a bit more, she reached into satchel to pull out one of the objects she’d found. The claw device, carved out of orange coral so old it had begun to bleach. “Valamand, move,” she said, dragging Ulfric over to the door. When Valamand did not, she pushed him bodily aside. It was easy, when she bore the extra weight.

Wyrenna turned the claw device over in her hands. It had icons listing a proper order, she now realized. “Snake, wolf, bee,” she said as she juggled the claw, Ulfric, and moving the tiles.

“That’s a moth,” Valamand corrected.

“You hush.” Finally, she fit the claw to where its print was, jiggled the sharpened nails into the points of contact. The steps behind her were getting closer. Wyrenna pressed the claw more tightly and jogged it, like it was a rusty lock.

Something moved below. One massive tumbler slid down. Then, another. The tiles unwound, whatever ancient wires or springs holding them releasing. The stone slid upon stone, eventually falling slowly into the floor.

“Don’t worry, Wyrenna. Our big smelly man’s asleep, too,” Ilyas-Tei said. She put her bow away and took one arm on Galmar. “Valamand, help!”

Wyrenna had never seen Valamand look so unhappy, save when forced to confront the High Kinlord Silabaene. But the elf did bear up Galmar Stone-Fist, and together they were a shambling parade deeper into the tomb.

“Ulfric isn’t actually asleep,” Wyrenna said. “So you should probably not say things like that.”

“Well, being large is not always bad. And if smelly was evil, then these Thalmor would not use so much perfume…”

Wyrenna looked back at her sister. “Hole. You. Digging it _very_ deep.”

The room they had entered was simple, but wide and undisturbed. In the middle, a great throne rose: back to the door. Wyrenna had no interest in treasure-hunting. The barrows of ancient Nords, even if they were not likely to be her ancestor, just were not something to be disturbed. If one was forced to fight for their life against highwaymen or brigands, perhaps it was a waste to let gold, food, valuables lay in the road. Animals and passers-by would scatter everything. But the honored dead were not criminals. They deserved respect.
Valamand used his sort-of-free arm to brush one of the baubles of light that clung to him out of his face. Wyrenna curiously prodded one, only to feel nothing.

“Aetherphile wisps,” Valamand said. “They respond and cling to magicka.”

“Sea ghosts,” Wyrenna said. “Ghosts of sea ghosts? Ysgramor killed something like… a dozen dozen of them.”

They passed before the throne. A bare skeleton sat there, glowing white by the light of Valamand’s involuntary assemblage. Webs of ancient sinew and fused tendon bound the bones together upright. Wyrenna did her best to sort of flop Ulfric’s head up, so he could see. “I guess that’s Yngol himself,” she said. “The sea ghosts got him, so Ysgramor got them back.”

“Something he made a habit of, it seems,” Valamand said. “A hundred and forty-four seems somewhat excessive.”

“Be respectful,” Wyrenna said. “Yngol’s story’s is a good story. Even if you never win glory, if someone cares enough to fight for you, you died with honor.”

It was a nice platitude. It did nothing to forestall the several things that happened at that very moment. The Thalmor caught up, lightning and fire crashing on the other side of Yngol’s burial throne. Ilyas-Tei forced the lock on the old gate behind them. The weight of Ulfric and Galmar made everything too slow.

“Do something!” Wyrenna said, heaving through the door. “Valamand!”

He’d lightened an ironheavy crate before. But his hands were already full. Valamand’s eyes rimmed wide, panicking. He hiked Galmar up, took hold of one of his unwanted passengers with his marginally-free hand. Then, he pelted the small orb of light at Yngol’s ancient skeleton.

It bounced off lightly, harmlessly. Until a horrible screech split the room, deepening to a roar of indignity. Wyrenna caught the sight of Yngol’s furious ghost bursting forth before she pulled up the curl of creaking, rickety stairs. “I told you to be respectful!”

“Your Yngol never made land, to slay elves with bloody Ysgramor,” Valamand said, groaning. “Now he has elves to pass the time with!”

Wyrenna hefted Ulfric Stormcloak up the stairs and decided to leave anything further for later. From the terrified irony in the elf’s voice, it didn’t sound like he’d meant to summon a vengeful shade. More like merely cast his vote of frustration. Wyrenna cast herself at the rotted wooden door at the top of the stairs, feeling the hateful bruise in her side shudder in agony. She battered it again, Ilyas-Tei set her shoulder and her tail into it. Even Valamand leant what little of his back he could spare. A shear of ice and the collapse of a snowdrift welcomed them back into fresh air and dark night. Valamand’s hangers-on abandoned him for the heavens, joyful to reunite with the moons above.

They had come out downriver, almost by the mouth of the sea. Not far from the entrance, on an outcrop. A deep pile of snow sat fresh below them: collapsed from the door’s hidden alcove.

“Fearsome as Nord zeal may be, I doubt even your son of Ysgramor will hold them long,” Valamand said. “He’s only a ghost, after all.”

“What do we do?” Ilyas-Tei said, so quietly it was barely heard over the river’s rush.

No one answered. Wyrenna finally raised her head to them, those two who had followed her here. They were looking at her. She then stared at the earth. But there was no one there who could help.
Nor up in the sky, to guide her.

“This is all mostly my fault,” she said. And then, tired of her northern voice, she spoke in true honesty. “I learned what I needed to learn, but in return I led everything into terrible danger.”

Wyrenna looked across the water and gathered Ulfric Stormcloak up like so much baggage, unafraid of what he thought of her now.

“But I’m not about to let my mistakes ruin something important,” she said. “Silabaene can’t have Ulfric. Or his second-in-command.”

“If you’re sure we can’t leave Galmar?” Ilyas-Tei said.

“It’s the principle of the thing,” Wyrenna said.

She did her best to sound brave, honorable, everything she wished she was at that moment. Faintly, she wondered if everyone who really was those things also wasn’t faking it somehow. It felt like hours before they rounded the bend in the riverbank, began dragging their burden up into the brush. The wind howled down from the highlands, pushing clouds out to sea.

Their peace and good fortune lasted only as long as their slog to the road. Reinforcements had arrived. Thalmor, in numbers utterly unheard-of for Eastmarch.

Wyrenna had not been sure if she could run, carrying Ulfric Stormcloak. But she ran then. The cart still was curbed by the road. A preliminary firebolt shattered a cedar close by, as she threw Jarl Stormcloak in the back of the payload. His two liegemen were nowhere to be found. Another violent explosion cut too-close, barely deflected by Valamand’s hasty ward. The horse shied.

Galmar had hardly settled in the carriage, snoring like a child, before Ilyas-Tei cut the line. Valamand grabbed the back of the cart, skipping before he could be dragged, and jumped onto the wooden seats. Wyrenna found herself taking the driving reins. There was little more to do than let the terrified beast bolt down the causeway. Ilyas-Tei perched by her side, loaded her hand-crossbow.

“Windhelm isn’t far,” Wyrenna yelled, over the hiss of the wind. She ducked as something bright-orange passed overhead. “They’re not stupid enough to attack the city!”

Ilyas-Tei’s eyes were peeled wide-open, gleaming by the carriage’s bright lantern. “Maybe we can leave them behind!”

“I wouldn’t gamble on it,” Valamand said, and that was all he said, and Wyrenna did not like that. She hadn’t noticed horses, but she could hear sounds of chase behind them. And something was fast-approaching. Wyrenna looked over her shoulder. There were a dozen or more skating on steam. Far away, their movements danced like embers.

“Atronachs inbound. Mind the horse!”

The balls of molten gas that showered them were not like any mortal mage’s. They were caustic and single-minded. Valamand faced them, repelling each with wards, returning fire in his own way. He was a wizard. He knew how Daedra worked. All Wyrenna had to worry about, she thought to herself, was to keep the cart on the road.

White runes appeared before her galloping flight. Wyrenna strangled her own scream as she reined hard left, then right. She could feel the cast steel axles bang against the carriage frame. Flames licked her right ear as molten claws reached out to roast her where she sat.
Something went snap behind her head, and the atronach staggered and crashed into the side of the cart. The wood was branded black, but the husk was chewed under the wheels and their beaten steel. Wyrenna turned to see Ilyas-Tei feral-shocked reaching for another bolt. The hand-crossbow worked after all. And it was just as slow to wind as Ilyas-Tei had said. But still she labored on, claws flying over the crank, aiming, and from a dreadful power in such a small missile one of the fire atronachs would collapse: utterly shot out of step.

But even worse, they exploded when they died. If they died. It was possible they never died. They erupted with a flash and then dissolved back to wherever they’d been conjured from.

Magefire joined the atronachs. Wyrenna was shocked to see that the Thalmor didn’t need horses. They were vanishing themselves ahead, waiting for the cart to pass, firing, then reforming ranks and a fresh mage would cast a portal and repeat. The result: a never-ending gauntlet of Oblivion and torment. Windhelm seemed far, suddenly. Too far, even for the short miles. Perhaps they’d run low on magicka. But Valamand was holding strong, and he was only one Thalmor battlemage against their assault. The idea of facing thirty of him was simply impossible.

They weren’t going to make it.

No, they had to make it, Wyrenna resolved. At the very least, Ulfric Stormcloak had to make it.

She approached it as she had approached many things before. As a problem, to which there was a solution. One only had to have the wit, the will, and the courage to see it.

“Valamand, take Ulfric’s cloak,” she said.

“What? Why?”

“Do as I say!” she said. “Ilyas-Tei, I need you to listen to me. You must drive this cart to Windhelm. You can’t stop, and you can’t go back. Not for anything. Do you understand?”

“I do, skin-sister,” said Ilyas-Tei. “You have a plan?”

“Yes,” said Wyrenna. “But once you get to Windhelm, you have to promise me something! If you break this promise, I may never forgive you.”

“What is it?”

“After Ulfric is inside the gates, go home. Go south. Never return to Skyrim,” Wyrenna said. “Be safe.”

Ilyas-Tei did not delay long. But she laid a claw on Wyrenna’s cold face. “Good luck. May you not tread in the deep for long.”

“You were always much more adventurous. Go with honor, my sister,” she said. Then she took the lantern from its hook and handed the reins to Ilyas-Tei. “Valamand! Do you have that on?”

The elf looked ridiculous, clad in furs, workers’ woolen tunic, and the bear-and-broadcloath mantle of Ulfric Stormcloak. He made a fine lord from behind. “I am not wearing this any longer than I have to,” he said sourly.

“We can mail it back once we’re done,” Wyrenna dismissed. “We’re going to jump.”

Wyrenna began counting. They passed the next rank of Thalmor. The next volley of fire and curses followed. Valamand’s shielding spell foiled them, they passed close by and receded as the cart
thundered past. One second. Two seconds. Just before they winked out of sight,

“Now!”

Wyrenna grabbed Valamand and rolled off the side of the speeding cart. Her battered body was in shock, she cried out for her wounds. Valamand’s groans were not much better. But they had the lantern, and it was still bright. And from behind, if he stooped a bit, Valamand was as good a decoy for Ulfric Stormcloak as any.

“It’s Ulfric they want most,” Wyrenna said. “They saw ‘him’ jump, the cart… it means nothing to them without him on board.”

She pulled herself up, and began to limp into the sparse woods and dirty snow, holding the lantern aloft.

“This is not in compliance with your assignment,” Valamand said. “Your only orders were to retrieve intelligence. You’re sacrificing yourself so that your Nord leader may live. That is not in your commission.”

“I have you with me, don’t I?” Wyrenna said. “You’re a powerful wizard… we can lead them astray. We can fool them. We’ll win.”

“There is no ‘we,’ Wyrenna,” Valamand said.

The way he said it intertwined two agonies. The agony of his voice as it was, months ago: cold, joyless. The agony of her name on his tongue, that she stood out to him so preciously.

She turned back to him. His eyes were dull.

“You are a human. There is no place for you in the Aldmeri Dominion, and it does not expect you to make one,” he said. “The Thalmor do not toil for a world of Men.”

“I don’t understand,” Wyrenna said. “What are you trying to say?”

“It’s there. Your termination, coded within your commission,” Valamand said. “You could not have known it. It was in print, for my eyes. The First Emissary’s orders. If I do not act now, I must act later. Or return you, and explain why I did not obey. There, you would be eliminated in custody.”

Wyrenna drew her sword. She drew it and her heart clenched, ran hot. “I see,” she said, raw-throated. “Now you have no more use for me.”

Valamand did not answer. He did not even look at her, only pulled forth magic from the air. He blurred, through her tears. She sprang to meet him and brought her sword with her. Her throat ached with betrayal, her merciless battle cry. She’d strike first. She did not even dodge his spell. It was nothing now.

But there was no resistance, no fire-bolt against her breastplate. No sensation, whatever he’d cast. No visibility. Wyrenna stopped, fury hiccuping. She was see-through.

“What… what have you done?” she said, choking out.

“I have killed you,” Valamand said. “You are dead to the Thalmor, to Elenwen, and any who may ask me in the future. Go now.”

Wyrenna dropped her lantern, lingered there. She tried to understand the scope of what Valamand
was trying to do. He stood in Ulfric Stormcloak’s dirtied mantle and under the moons his face was set in dignity.

She struck him across the jaw and knocked him flat to the snow. “You… wretch!” she yelled. “Do you really think that you can give me my life back, just like that?”

The lamp smoldered as she stood over him. But she did offer her hand. “What would I do? Spend the rest of my days, knowing you are out there? That if you spare me now, one day you may find yourself coming back for me? Your mercy means nothing! You will be an executioner of all humans.”

The invisibility failed, his will in its weaving broken. Yet, he did reach out to take her hand.

“Come away with me,” she said. “If you have learned how to not be Thalmor.”

And Valamand opened his mouth to answer her, he really and truly did. But only inarticulate sounds came out: magic-bewitched. Wyrenna looked up to see shapes moving in the dark clearing beyond, advancing on her position. But it was too late for Valamand—he attempted to gather a spell, but his craft would not obey. Thalmor knew how to Silence one of their own.

Wyrenna stood over him, sword grasped in two hands. She struggled to keep her form, her battered muscles ached so. But as the Thalmor drew near she fiercely held her ground.

“Raaah!” She struck. But it was parried. The bladesmer were deft and there were too many. If only she could move more quickly! Wyrenna lunged, hoping to catch one off guard, to make the others hesitate.

But there is a truth in battle. Wyrenna learned it, that night. An ice spike pierced right through the chain-links where her plackart tied fast below the backplate of her armor. She could feel it stab up through her flesh, the warm blood begin to run out of her. The Thalmor closed in now. Yet, they did not finish her. Wyrenna staggered on. Then to her knees. But she was repelled easily. They laughed and toyed with her.

She learned this reality well.

That no matter your fortune in battle, your skill and experience, it took only one arrow. One unlucky strike. One too many foes to face. Only for you to be wounded, or weaker. Only poor circumstance. Only one encounter with a superior killer.

Wyrenna felt her strength running down her legs into the snow. She could no longer stand. Her cold hands gripped her sword, she would not let it go. If she could get up, she could stop them. She could trick them. She could win. She’d thought she could win.

But soon she could not even look at them. She could see only Valamand over her, feel him lift her face, twine his fingers through her hair. Despite everything, he still smelled of lavender.

But he too was taken from her. She lay there among the frost with her dark braids a-tatters staring up at the stars, stars, stars.

Chapter End Notes

1) While Nordic art and architecture has changed over thousands of years as any
culture's has, the oral tradition of the Nords leaves physical items as some of the only markers of true history and historical context as bardic tales are about embellishment and political comment as much as they might be about documentation of history. As such, many traditional Nordic motifs and styles of art remain preserved without alteration as tradition demands despite that the culture and civilization that once championed them has evolved significantly, and the tales surrounding historical events altered according to attitudes of contemporary Jarls and kings. Among other effects, this leads to the curious lack of "fashion" or "trends" among Nordic societies, where in more southern societies styles of dress and subjects of art may be ephemeral. Return to the top.

2) This was astonishing at this point in history. Anything more than theory of portal-based transport had been lost prior to and during the Oblivion Crisis. After the collapse of the Mage's Guild, the fall of major Telvanni power in a disrupted Morrowind, Alinor remains the last possible bastion for once-ubiquitous arcane arts. The secrets of which are known to have been disclosed only to the highest ranking Mage-generals and Sapiarchs. In truth, many atrocities described in the Great War around 4e 174 are only possible with access to at-the-time poorly-understood magical techniques. This begs the question: what actual political structure within the Thalmor provided and withheld access to magical knowledge, and on what corrupt hierarchical basis were said arts truly bestowed? Return to the top.

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Here ends the second share of Wyrenna's tale. Here also ends one concrete resource (official Stormcloak correspondence and conviction of one Wyrenna Foe-Tongue for High Treason against the prospective High King Ulfric Stormcloak) on Wyrenna's movements in 4e 201, though I interpret it to have lasted into 202 for at least one month. I consider it unlikely for things to have all wrapped up by Saturalia as the original source suggested. In truth, this resource purposefully obfuscates the connection between Wyrenna's actions and Ulfric's decision to press on with open warfare against the Empire only weeks later. In historical Stormcloak accounts, Wyrenna's presence is omitted entirely from 202, and this "missing Morning Star" is quite a stark mystery in regards to the whereabouts and decisions of Ulfric Stormcloak.

The account ends with Wyrenna's disappearance and likely death. However, informed and canny readers might question the likelihood of such a great Thalmor army operating unseen in the midst of Eastmarch hold. In truth, I have no answers for that as only one source, the well-known writings of the dissident Leilvicar of Firsthold only twenty years prior to this event, addresses the possibility: that the High Kinlord Silabaene presiding had left with a vast detachment on a tour of absolution of the world, visiting first an occupied Imperial City, then on to the ruins of Morrowind, and then taking whatever from there west and into his own designs.

The picture painted is not one of unlikely foes, but of long-vested interest and ideological/political cross-cutting that so sundered the Thalmor at that time. For if all forces were rallied to take the Imperial City by 174, and that army then was defeated at massive cost at the Battle of Red Ring, where have Alinor's military forces gone since then? Amassed elsewhere, or sundered between dozens of different highborn interests? With these accounts of disjointed and seemingly independent power-plays, I argue the military threat of the Thalmor had by then passed into the hands of oligarchs grown disenchanted with conventional warfare, turned to curiosities and individual efforts to undermine Imperial humanity. Each, possibly, vying for the prestige and grandeur to be the one to do it, each misinterpreted by Imperial scholars to be part of some unified
conspiracy.
Valamand was taken up the coast, to a cove on the far stretch of bay bordering Morrowind. There a Thalmor vessel waited between the rocks. The march had turned his mind to survival. He reasoned with them. This was a misunderstanding. He of course had not intended to interrupt another operation. His orders to investigate came from the First Emissary Elenwen, and she had no quarrel with any other Thalmor powers.

But Valamand’s captors were less than receptive to his bargaining. They were older elves, more capable elves. Steeled and more dutiful than he. Soon he did not bargain, but pleaded. Then begged. But they did not hear him. And after he accepted that, he spoke no more.

Valamand found himself loaded onto the ship, where he waited for two days before it set to sea. There were other prisoners. But there was not a time when he was not watched, and they didn’t dare conjure a single word either. The silence unsettled his stomach even more than the seasickness. Four days at sea, and eight hours into morning. Twenty more minutes before he saw the sky.

The air was colder than anywhere else, when he and the other prisoners were finally unloaded. The line of chains before him stretched out of the ship’s hull and into the bitter light. He came out on the deck at what had to be noon, and still the sun did not bless him with even a lick of heat.

This was not how Valamand had ever planned to come again to Northwatch Keep.

It did not resemble itself, either. In ten years, the one ruined tower had been rebuilt, fortified with a proper slate roof. A new parapet had been raised, and it kept a watch-light even in the daytime. What wooden fortifications he remembered were replaced by tall walls of molded stone and gravel-glass mortar. There were real gates now: thick Valenwood oak.

Valamand was separated from other prisoners. He watched them defeatedly file out in the cold for inspection. Those who were not sufficiently defeated were beaten.

They took Valamand inside, out of the wind—or what passed for shelter. The other Altmer did not seem bothered, or if they were they hid it with dignity. Else an abundance of wine, stacked in crates left shockingly in sight. Valamand did not hope for anything, that was out of the question. But that he was not processed with the heretics and the rebels seemed promising.

As much as anything could be promising. The other Thalmor stripped him, searched him, gave him the same rags as he presumed other prisoners received. They washed him, magically de-loused him (as if he would bear lice!) and threw him into a cell deep in the prison. His new manacles turned his stomach. Valamand, of course, knew how they worked. He had even been trained in their use. Two stiff cuffs of a pale alloy of steel, ebony, and rare metals known as cold iron. It sapped his magicka away, dissipated it into the aether almost as soon as his body could retain it. To an Altmer, it was depressing. To Valamand, it was strangulation. But it was one of the most effective ways of containing a mage of any power for an extended period of time.

Yet, he mourned most that his skin had been scrubbed of any trace, that he could not feel hair through his fingers anymore.

Valamand sat in his cell and waited. It was not a bad cell, as cells went. There was a pile of straw, a chamber-pot, a woolen blanket and a mat. It was warm enough. Only two others were locked in around him. On his immediate right, some Breton woman who did not make a sound. Across from him, a Nord who sneered as he’d been thrown in.
“You're lost, elf!” the Nord said. “Your suite is upstairs!”

Valamand could not find his voice. The Nord gripped the bars and laughed in his face until the guards came and beat him down for making noise. Valamand did not know if it was a few hours or a day, but the Thalmor returned for that Nord. He was not seen again.

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Valamand was fed, at least. Better than gruel, but only slightly. Salted pork, stale rolls, thin soup. If he had not been Thalmor, he’d have been thankful. But there was nothing thoughtlessly done in the Aldmeri Dominion.

Valamand chewed his bread. There was nothing else to do, after all. By his best count without the sun or his magecraft it was two more days, more or less. But eventually they came for him.

A captain stood outside his cell, with tight-rolled orders in hand. She did not unlock the door, and her personal guard did not move.

“Justiciar Valamand of Luxurene, stand at attention.”

Valamand bit again into the stale crust, lost in thought.

“At once!”

That tone levitated him off his arse. He could have been back at the academy, for how it burned into his mind. Valamand did not feel like standing straight, but reflex was too strong.

“Good,” the Thalmor captain said. “You keep your form at least. Discipline, though-- atrocious. You had better be worth that feed. Justiciar, you are to be rebriefed.”

Rebriefed?

Valamand swallowed the sour bread.

“Justiciar Valamand. You were before assigned at the behest of First Emissary Elenwen. Her command over you is hereby terminated. Henceforth, you are under patronage of His Eminence, High Kinlord Silabaene-born-Rilis of Firsthold, Sapiarch of Animadynamics, Grand Aedriudex of the Dominion. Auri-El’s providence mark his days.”

Valamand blinked at her, resenting that it was not done to ask why.

“Upon review, your prior assignment has been deemed counter to appropriate interests of the Thalmor. Your rank has summarily been revoked, and until further notice will undergo significant revision. Speak now, if you have anything to comment.”

“Nothing,” Valamand said. “I have no comment.”

“Very good. Which brings us to your personal misdemeanors. You were found in company of a Nord, having attacked and destroyed significant assets of His Eminence. Your rank has summarily been revoked, and until further notice will undergo significant revision. Speak now, if you have anything to comment.”

“Nothing,” Valamand said. “I have no comment.”

“Very good. Which brings us to your personal misdemeanors. You were found in company of a Nord, having attacked and destroyed significant assets of His Eminence. In addition, you were instrumental in the disastrous escape of known heretic Ulfric Stormcloak. Aiding and abetting a criminal of such high profile… would in most cases be punishable by death, without right to trial.”

Valamand easily saw himself wishing for such a fate.

“But, the Thalmor are… sympathetic to your particular case. As the last heir of Luxurene’s estate and said bloodline of antiquity, you are a resource of heritage to be conserved. It is unlikely that you will
see work as a battlemage or a field agent again. But the mercy of the Thalmor may return you to Alinor. With your good behavior.”

She shuffled her pages with a wry banality. If she enjoyed her job, it was impossible to tell. She may have enjoyed his submission.

“Tomorrow, you will be collected and your reindoctrination will begin. I suggest you prepare.”

Some still-standing part of him crackled with embers. There was nothing here for him to prepare with. He had little idea what to prepare for, nor could he do much of anything but… wait.

“Yes, Madam,” Valamand muttered. “Of course.”

He had meant it to be an affirmative from his own days in training, but he would not muster more than a croak. He saluted firmly, though she may not have seen. She was gone and away down the hall before he could even look up. For all she spoke of mercy, she was not there to give him any.

The hay pile was not comfortable. But it was somewhere to collapse.

He wanted to go home. Go home and forget everything, that was what his ego wanted where it did not understand the limits of reality or possibility. And, just that had been promised. He could go home, never have to return again to Skyrim. Never have to think again about the cold north, and what had happened here.

But…

Weeds had sprung up in the cracks of such reasoning.

There would be no esteem for his magic, high rank, or great conquest. He would be going back barely-a-mer, likely condemned to a life within his manse. To marry likely who some blood-match designated as a fortuitous mate. Carry on Luxurene as his mother would have wanted. Die someday as a minor peer hardly of-note. Ancient Luxurene absorbed by more powerful kinships of the modern age. His blood invigorating their descendants.

If only they knew him beyond genealogy, they would hesitate.

So long as they did not, he leapt at that hope now that he sat here in chains. He resolved to do it, to finally muster the strength that he’d lacked these long months. Focus on realities.

He would do it for his future. Valamand resolved this. For there was no future anymore, he thought, in Skyrim. His hands were clean now, so bone-scrubbed clean that his yellow palms smarted red. Yet, he could still imagine them tangled in black hair, snowflakes scattered within like stars.

There had never been a future here, he reminded himself. He had been a fool to fantasize.
Valamand had of course been an interrogator before, but he had never been inside such a rough inquisition chamber. At Anvil, things were far neater: well-swept, demonstrative. Nothing was so clean at Northwatch Keep without express purpose. Valamand did stare, though. Many of the tools laid nearly on the table across the room were not standard-issue. He would even have called the selection superfluous, with what was possible with magic alone.

“Admiring the toys?”

The proctor seemed over-fond of them.

“No, sir,” Valamand said.

“A pity. They are a collection,” the proctor said. “But you are not here for the sake of distraction. Unless you wish for a working sample, I suggest you keep your eyes forward.”

Valamand closed his world, willed the edges to fade away until he could forget his manacles, his rags, his crimes, the ratty braids still tied into his hair. He was not in a torture chamber. He had been sent back to the Academy. A setback, he thought. Nothing more.

“Repeat the lesson,” the proctor commanded.

And despite everything, Valamand still knew the lesson by heart.

“I pledge myself to the Thalmor, to Alinor, and the legacy of true-blooded mer,” Valamand began, as he had begun in repletion. He spoke with sure purpose, careful to trace where each syllable had been etched onto his soul.

“I am the pride, proof of perseverance of my ancestors. My purpose is their purpose. My being is their being.”

And where the etching had worn smooth, he sought to carve it more deeply.

“The true Aedra behind me, I reject false human gods. I take up arms against Lorkhan in all of His guises, the tyranny of Man, the barbarism of Man, the Empires whelped by Man over-times: each bloodier than the last.

“Each in their grief to be undone, Man to be undone and in this way undo grief itself.”

Valamand bit the inside of his lip, tasted fresh blood.

“For grief is the most lasting establishment of Man, to be erased century by century.”

“Continue,” the proctor commanded, as Valamand lingered too long.

“And Crystal-Like-Law, I submit myself to the Aldmeri Dominion. I submit to the superiority of Mer as it suffuses my own being. I submit to the Thalmor and the guidance of their Order against Daedra, against Man, against all who would turn traitor to their will.

“Within my heart, I carry all that is Aldmeri, all else to be shunned, and in time forgotten.”

His mouth said this. His mind took to chisel it anew in spite of vandalism, other words that he could not carve away. A good and noble heart, that was what the Nord Free-Winter had said. Valamand
stumbled, unsure if such a concept was Aldmeri, or if he was comfortable forgetting it. Or if he could, so deep did it feel burrowed into him.

Valamand skipped ahead, reciting to himself the rest of the oath very quickly and doubling backward. But nowhere in it could he assure himself that such a virtue could be preserved.

The proctor coughed expectantly.

“I offer my self and my own to the Thalmor, the judgement of the Thalmor. To be its essential hand. To be its undeniable will. To be the vessel of its inevitable victory, to be the incarnation of its grace in sacrifice. All this I swear, under Auri-El as my witness, to be upheld until I pass into His light.”

That was the end of it. The first tract to be memorized, the first oath sworn by those to become Thalmor. Valamand had studied this one writ for over a year, repeated it until his tongue was sore and his dreams went forgotten save for his own voice. He still remembered it all, decades later. He would remember it all centuries later. He was sworn to.

“Acceptable. But not enough,” said the proctor. “Again.”

“I pledge myself to the Thalmor, to Alinor, and the legacy of true-blooded mer…”

Valamand recited it again. And again. Until the proctor changed with a new one, until mounting thoughts were beaten down by the drudgery. Until his voice grew hoarse and then he began to experience a confidence in saying it, a naturalness that continued speaking the oath in his head long after his time was up. He walked back to his cell.

The smallest grain of tentative, tired hope did not even mark as they locked him in again. He almost smiled, now reciting under his breath in relief that he did not have to think of anything else. Did not have to think of the pressures of goodness or nobleness, or have to define his own virtue.

That was when the screaming began.

It was muffled. Down the hall, down below, under the prison. Perhaps even from the very chamber he had just occupied. Valamand could not tell what throat gave the cry. It wavered, begged for mercy. Then shrieked again, and again, and for what felt like hours. Then fell silent.

Valamand’s mind felt blank.

“I pledge myself to the Aldmeri Dominion, to Alinor…” he whispered, trying to center again on that thought. They’d brought a new one in downstairs in by that time, though. And the noise resumed.

Valamand bore down on his recitations to drown out the sound. It continued in defiance, the music of the oath. And after days of this, Valamand could feel a scream within himself as well.

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"Poor wretch. How's his progress?"

Valamand did not open his eyes, but listened.

"Not good. Re-education's too slow to take."

"Aedra know why mainland stock cling to self-hatred. But he is still young, and may hold promise."

So they weren't talking about him, but the newest tenant across the hall. No more than a mer child. They separated parents and young. This one would not speak. Bosmer? Altmer? Valamand felt a
daze, had to banish spare oath-sworn lines (I pledge myself... day and night, it never relented) before his ears keened up again.

The guards, spoke before prisoners only rarely, paused. It sounded like wine down their throats.

"Promise is a strong word, Edras. Not for a wretch like this. Won't eat, won't speak. Dull as an anvil."

Didn't the child want to live?

Valamand listened to the false-pity. He had heard it before.

"Let him have his way. If he learns, then he proves himself in marginal intelligence. If not, well—that's nature's way."

Good stars, child. Humor them and survive! Perhaps he thought that someone was still coming. That a parent would return or be returned to collect him, or that a rescuer advanced to their aid.

Poor fool child! No one was coming. One did what they had to, to beg mercy of the world.

And sometimes it simply took and there was nothing to be done to forestall it. That was the way of it.

No.

Valamand opened his eyes, but could not bring himself to look at the guards. He saw the dirty canes of the straw pile. That no surprised him. Wasn't that the way of it?

"Ah, my shift's over."

"Sellaste will tan you for chatter."

It wasn't an absolute truth. That was only what this place very much wanted one to think. Its illusion, that Northwatch Keep was a force of nature and not some Kinlord's pet fortress.

"Sellaste can eat my delicates. And I once thought Morrowind was a dull post upon this unfathomable road."

The guards left after a time. And, where the boy across the hall did not speak, he did cry.

Against all better judgement, Valamand whispered. "You are no wretch."

It was like letting out a stale breath. It would not last forever, and he had to inhale sawdust in the end.

"You hold a secret beyond me," admitted Valamand. "How is it that you are not afraid to die?"

The child did not answer. And after a day they took the child down the hall, and he did not return.

Valamand instead tried to bury himself in the oath, in the exercises they demanded of him. He did his best to follow them to the letter, and to let no one see any difficulty at all.

--

They gave him the scrap parchment. The end of the roll with the raw edge. The pieces with a hole in them. One or two had a wart, or stubborn hairs. Interspersed with discolored paper, water-warped or snowflaked by salt. The charcoal was thin, too.
Valamand had been told to copy and recopy later verses from the Thalmor Articles of Adherence. They did not supervise him for this activity now. After the first volume, they assumed him simple. As for Valamand, it was direct instruction and a trivial task.

He could feel it bashing on his brains. Each word formed so crushingly loud as to liquify and drown him out. Still. If it was not complete by his next meal, he would have a beating. He hadn’t had one yet, but he’d seen them and nobody made a condition without a consequence.

His penmanship was not so good, today. His hands wobbled, chilled. He blew on them and smudged his nose black with the dust. Some line in his mind had snapped, flapping ragged in the draft. Unbidden urges to deface or retort the Articles, to sneer at every coupling phrase. There was nothing now assuring that he liked this.

Shame. That he would yearn to become the jailer here. Shame, that he could not be anything other than the jailer here. The fancies that he was suddenly far away and all was behind him! As he read the articles, he knew they formed him and to deny ownership as if he was not weaned on them would be idiocy.

All that had changed was that he hated the words, and the Aurbis cared little for his opinion.

He hadn’t remembered half of these lines. Or he hadn’t remembered how they had seemed. His rhetoric appetite had vanished, leaving the articles chalky and rotten.

Valamand wondered if he would like his own dissertations anymore.

He flipped to the bottom of the stack of papers, found the most yellowed scrap. He squinted around in the indirect light to see what was around to draw. Nothing, really. He could make the most mundane subject seem lovely, he’d practiced that a long time. But between the pile of bedding, the cracked board he was balancing his work on, there was hardly anything.

He considered drawing something he couldn’t see again. From memory, or imagination. Oh, that brought back memories. His mother snatching his notes-leaves, demanding he study felioheraldry properly. Tossing the pages full of outlandish creatures, great wizards, and magic diagrams in the fire. Oh, what had he been? Twelve? He was a grown mer, Stars’ grief.

Yet if they were so content to treat him as a child…

Valamand drew a small mer. It wasn’t very good. Nothing he drew without a subject was. He added another, somewhat taller one with a few lines, a few dots, and a thin smile. These seemed lonely on the scrap, so he added a third one, this one short. He supposed it ought to be a Bosmer.

He drew a few more groups this way. Some of them were Men, too. He considered drawing some people he knew, perhaps his mother or one of his old teachers. But he could not easily recall their faces, or capture them on the page. Valamand drew some more small people, until the groups filled in and began to join up to become a crowd. He pressed some coal-dust into a few of them. Those ought to have dark skin.

Most of them were smiling at him, though it was too simple to bother. The faces made Valamand feel better, but guilty. How ruined he was. To be making up fake people who liked him. And of course knew nothing of the Thalmor. Who thought like him, might talk with him, though he had little idea of what they’d say. How easy it was to become obsessed with this.

If a person had only a few things to themself, was it appropriate to call them obsessions?

He had reached the very bottom corner of the page when he finished off a small and feathered
Argonian. And that one ought to have had a friend, so logically there had to be a Nord there, with a wide smile and many freckles. And he pressed down with the charcoal to make her pure black hair, color in her eyes that turned down a little bit in the outer corners—

A hard tap-tap of bootsoles came down the hallway.

He crumpled that scrap of paper and ate it. Then he copied later passages from the Articles of Adherence in worse handwriting than ever before.
Mid Sun's Dawn

The spare rewards of good behavior came in food, in limited furnishing of his cell. A rickety stuffed-straw bed. Better rations, even a glass of cheap wine from time to time. Never any cutlery, though.

But he could hardly get through his meals as the days dragged on without distinction from one another, without the sun to greet him. Valamand forced the food down, knowing it would keep him alive and healthy, and did not permit it to come up again. Not when he heard something unpleasant, not when something in his re-indoctrination threatened to make him sick. He dared not sketch anymore. When his limbs cramped he cleared the straw in his cell away and forced himself through exercises he remembered from basic training. And when he exhausted himself pushing the ground away, he would sleep until he forgot where he was.

There were times when he almost could let go. He wanted to so very desperately, and his act in behaving so was good enough to make it seem like he had. But something greedy hung on, dug its nails into him and troubled him with unrest he could barely remember.

His earned bed became a liminal space.

It was in this torchlight between mundus and Oblivion that he imagined someone pounding on the bars of his cell. He cracked open his eye, dim and barely to focus. What he fancied there, though, was impossible. Wyrenna was shut in with him, hammering with both fists against the iron door. She shook it, cast herself against it, beat upon it like a wild creature in a trap.

A terror filled Valamand to the brim, that he too was trapped. But as his eyes grew more keen, his mind left whatever dream he had been enthralled to. Wyrenna vanished. It had only been the struggle of the woman next to him, the Breton.

“No! No!” she cried, as two guards pulled her out of her cell and dragged her at swordpoint down the hall, to vanish into the heart of the dungeon. Valamand watched her matted head disappear down the stairs. His skin itched, he had to sit lest his pulse burst straight out his throat. Only the latest victim of those to die around him. Around him, around him, and never him.

He looked at the space where he had imagined Wyrenna to be and for some reason could not shake the delusion that she was still there, or that he had seen some sort of ghost. Or saint.

Valamand wished he could have appreciated it when she had been alive. But it occurred to him that Wyrenna had not once given in to the demands of anyone. Every step from Falkreath to Morthal she had bitterly fought him in some way, even managing to wrench some aspects of freedom from his grasp. She had never taken a bribe, submitted, or settled for refuge in any dictated terms. She instead rebelled to assert her own. Not even in the face of Elenwen, of Silabaene, of Ulfric Stormcloak did she relent. Not in bindings, not in armor, not in any circumstance.

Valamand had never truly considered himself a coward. His caution had always seemed reasonable. But in a cell everything was too close. It chafed. He envied such bravery now.

If only he could just touch that star.

And yet, why not? What is stopping you? It was a dangerous question. The bars, that was one answer. Another, the Thalmor, the possibility of a comfortable-but-unfulfilling survival.

That someone might come to take him home at last.
But no one was coming. Not in the way he now pitifully lived for.

And Wyrenna had been wise, months ago, when she had scorned him for being nothing if not Thalmor for Valamand felt that Nothing very keenly now. But there was a certain possibility within a Nothing, a space that existed to be filled.

He wished he could thank her, somehow.

Valamand instead sat on his bed-between-worlds and prayed. First for himself, Auri-El have mercy upon him now. Then for the Breton. For he did not know what awaited her and he dreaded to imagine. But then he sat those lesser concerns aside and held the heavens firmly in his mind.

This is not terribly Aldmeri, ancestors, Valamand began, but I have a favor to ask…

First, he prayed to Xarxes for his trouble, in apology for having to account for his own misadventures and disappointments. But then, he suggested, consider this human Wyrenna for her contribution to his story. On one hand, perhaps he would not be in this mess. On the other hand… he certainly would not have had learned so much on his own.

Then, he prayed to Mara and her love and patience. Had he not benefited from undeserved protection, from one who had no reason to give such things? Perhaps consider the human Wyrenna, for her excellent example.

Valamand was not accustomed to praying to Trinimac for anything but vows in battle, nor were many Altmer in modern ages. But he asked carefully all the same after Wyrenna’s audacity. Did this human resemble the cowardly Men that bore away Lorkhan’s corpse? When she aligned against her kin at every movement? Consider her, then.

His prayer to Y’ffre… well, he mostly apologized for bothering them. Y’ffre really wasn’t much help in this case.

It was exceedingly simple to boast of Wyrenna’s efforts and willingness to learn of magic to Magnus and Syrabane. To the point where he wondered-or-feared if those two gods found him tiresome. Her attempts were not impressive feats, of course. But they were notable, somehow! Valamand swore it.

It was most obvious that a more perfect follower of Stendarr had hardly existed. Valamand could barely articulate. To guide his actions upon her away from evil and then later to stand between him and almost certain disgrace. Certainly she was of the highest value, a rare paragon, and it would be a shame to let her slip away to a lamentably Nordic fate.

And, all of these citations in mind, Valamand finally appealed to Auri-El. To Anui-El, even. To not permit Lorkhan snatch this ill-fated being from Aetherius, to not stand idly by while the trickster god robbed the eternal fold of such a bright light.

But as all prayers do, his fell silent and selfish on the ear of the heavens. The Gods would not re-arrange the Wheel for his sake, no matter how disgracefully he begged. Valamand laid back on his poorly-earned bed and dissolved again into the edge of the universe, that he might catch her there. It did not work, nor had it ever worked. But Wyrenna continued to lash against the bars of his cell, all day and all night. She beat at his confinement while he was trained and re-trained. Valamand found himself awake.
Still Sun's Dawn?

Valamand had been doing well by his own guesswork when the High Kinlord Silabaene called at his cell. The hour was unknown, as it always was, but it was long after his meal and into the dirge of boredom that came with awaiting the next one. His first thoughts were confusion. If this was the next proof-of-loyalty they sought to knead into him.

Then he became aware, so dreadfully aware of where he was, who he was, and what he must have seemed like. How far he must have fallen to a mer of such station. Valamand felt as ugly as a Sload. If he had even the smallest iota of magicka retained in his body he would have used it to vanish right out of the world then and there.

“I permit you to raise your eyes to me, kinsmer Valamand,” the High Kinlord said. “I do not require the flattery of your deference.”

Even the concept of meeting his gaze was like willing himself to reach into a fire.

“Rephrased: I command your attention,” said the High Kinlord. “And I suggest you not waste such fortuity as my regard.”

Valamand obeyed. The High Kinlord was much the same as he had seemed when they had met before. If not for Valamand’s own state, it could have been the very same day. The mer’s placid violet eyes were the same, with that same look wielded as a knife that was impolite to mention.

“Please,” Valamand begged before he could stop himself. “I swear to you, I had no wish to interfere, Your Eminence. I am sworn to the Thalmor. Betrayal was never my intent.”

“I am sure it must be a fascinating story, then. How you came to be found east of Windhelm, wearing the mantle of Ulfric Stormcloak, in the company of a sub-elven inferior,” said the High Kinlord Silabaene. “But I have no desire to hear it.”

Valamand closed his mouth and felt his knees lock into place.

“Your fortunes may interest me,” Silabaene continued. “It has not been so long, since we last spoke. Though I could be misremembering. You were not much for conversation at your quaint gathering.”

That was correct, Valamand lamented. But perhaps not such a bad thing, in this current context. He was not sure if he could have stood eating the words he’d never said.

“For example, I was unaware of your particular placement at The Academy of Aldmeri Excellence. The youngest to make Battlemage with greater-than-perfect marks since the Academy’s re-founding. Over a decade in Anvil. Successful, save for an... explosive departure from tenure.” Silabaene paused. He did not seem impressed or even interested as he spoke, but his remark was not mocking. It merely was. “If your dissertation is reflective of your character, I find it surprising that you would come to be here.”

“With the utmost respect, Your Eminence, what do you want with me? I will answer any question, do anything you say, if only I knew your will.”

The High Kinlord raised one perfectly-arched eyebrow.

“What would I want from a prisoner in my cells? You have nothing to offer me,” he said. “Instead consider what I might offer to you.”
He did not have to explain what he meant. Power and its balance was the flowing tide and heart-of-commerce among Altmer and their nobility. High Kinlord Silabaene did not only bathe in it. He was its crux elemental. Any games therein were his to stage, set, and reshape. With only a word Valamand could hold any high office in Alinor. So too could he be slain on the spot. Whatever small value Valamand held, it was insignificant to such a mer. He could order ten such advantages by waving his hand.

“I do not presume I could imagine the extent of your charity,” Valamand said.

“I suspect you try,” said Silabaene. “But I will permit it. Hope, I have been told, is a charming little thing to feel in your position.”

And then as if he had not just made Valamand's situation absolutely clear, Silabaene inquired, “What news of Elenwen?”

He stripped her naked name of all respectable propriety.

“The First Emissary is well, last I saw her,” Valamand said.

“At your expense, or so it would seem,” said the High Kinlord. “One wonders if all operations under her guidance end in treason. If she cannot keep watch upon her subordinates, one might question her usefulness to Alinor at all.”

Valamand gazed down to his boots. Elenwen had not demonstrated knowledge of Silabaene’s presence near Windhelm. But he was hesitant to accept that as incompetence. He was not her equal, after all, and she wouldn’t be obligated to tell him anything. She had sent him before into an impossible confrontation with the High Kinlord. Though with Wyrenna’s serendipitous assistance, the limits of possibility had been pushed back in their favor. But it was plausible regardless, that the First Emissary might act again the same way in another attempt and maneuver him as a disposable—

“I did not suggest you contemplate the floor. Chin up.”

Valamand was surprised to see the High Kinlord smile at him. He did not know what it meant, if it was of the same character as an ordinary being’s. There were no bared teeth, so it was not an animal smile. But neither was there joy that Valamand could discern. Only purpose, an inexorable intent.

“Elenwen, too, has little to offer me.” Silabaene said. “Her delusions of might among this land of slaves and rabble once brought with them their own conveniences. But no longer. She is an impediment. Useless.”

All this, said with that smile that did not reach his eyes.

“But that is where you differ from her,” Silabaene said. “Your individual value is low. But there is a potential in you. That is, if the example you have made thus far is demonstrative.”

There were layers of meaning in his words, a veritable labyrinth of Altmeri suggestion. All depending on what example was intended. The example of his treason? The example of his supposed reindoctrination? Possibly referring to that of all Elenwen’s intelligencers, few had come so close to his operations as Wyrenna had?

(And, it crashed down upon Valamand that the High Kinlord Silabaene was completely unaware that she, not he, had been the leading investigator in question)

“Command me,” Valamand said. “How will I be of use to the Aldmeri Dominion?”
“You will be purified,” the High Kinlord said. “And we shall see what remains.”
Valamand rubbed his sores, from where his reindoctrination had been accelerated. They had brought him work to do, leaves of paper and complex arcane figures to complete. And they tightened his bonds, as if he might use the stimulation to somehow summon magicka and escape. He had almost become used to the weariness, the paralysis in some shade of his being. The study, though, consumed him. It was a chance to prove his worth. Yet each day (was it a day?) they would collect his computations and give him new ones.

He knew what they were for. He recognized the elements required, and did his best not to think of the authorship of ancient Mannimarco.

And now, they were always watching him. The screaming echoed down the hall they did not even seem to notice. Nor when the inmates began to cry. His slightest movement though. They saw. If he dared utter under his breath, they heard. And if that happened to be the slightest complaint, comfort to any other prisoner, or deviation from his lessons? Well, they exercised him now: forced parade past the guards on-duty in the freezing cold. Long ago, he would have wilted under the eyes of their disgust. But he ate their meat and asked for more, and in his pith their judgement had waned in importance.

He had been doing all he could to survive, he convinced himself. It was how he reconciled it, anyway. He need not embrace anything, so long as he obeyed. And he had to ignore the rattle of argument, from time to time. The urge to cast himself against the bars of his cage. Or else claw out of his skin, if his hands were loose to scratch free.

The Thalmor were always watching him, and would not stand for that.

In weeks, he came to the end of what Valamand hoped was his limited course in loyal service. He was washed as laundry might be washed. His hair was soda-stiff, hardly an improvement to the mats and the grease. Whatever tangled ghost of a braid Wyrenna had set into it was gone, though. His skin smarted: tightened by soap. The grim attendants dressed him as they were dressed. And his manacles unhooked. But not removed. His shoulders ached from the sudden range of movement.

He was sent in for his final test.

Though two proctors flanked him, Valamand intended to look the part. He was the tallest of them if he rolled his shoulders back. To lift his head he thought of his bloodline and what little private affirmations of his worth he still could treasure. He was surely the greatest mage within Northwatch Keep. If only he could just taste a sliver of Magic, he would prove it.

The prisoner was already laid out for him, chained up and neck collared so she could not look down. She was a priestess of Talos, a heretic that deserved no mercy but that of an interrogation before execution. That was what the Thalmor had briefed him with. Valamand’s own senses spoke of other details. She was a Nord. They had cut her braids. She already suffered a broken nose, her unfocused eyes seemed partially blind.

When Valamand’s party entered, she immediately flinched. “No! You can’t make me!”

“How long has it been?”

“Whatever delusions you have, of what you will face,” Valamand said, and he had never hated his own voice more, “they will be multiplied if you do not submit.”

He touched another person for the first time in what had to be months. He yanked her face up to him
by the hair. The sensation of being a stranger in his own body grew stronger, a summoned atronach controlled by an outside force. “You will identify your cell,” he demanded. “Your leader of worship.”

“I’d die sooner! You will get nothing!”

“You may die,” said Valamand. “But it is not only you who will be punished.”

He tried to draw power from the hatred in her eyes, and could find only a cast-off shell a cicada could not crawl back into.

“How many Nords will it take, I wonder, to make you regret your decision? How many more must perish such that you will wish you had spoken now?” Valamand said. “We will find them eventually. But it is your decision, who shall be spared.”

“Monsters! Beasts! You’d slaughter every Nord in Skyrim, whether or not I speak!”

This was not going to work, Valamand thought. Perhaps another could have beguiled her tongue but Valamand was not that mer. And he could not conjure any memory of Wyrenna willing to help him now.

(With every word, he was forsaken. She turned further away from him.)

“Oh, but you will have helped,” Valamand said.

“Curse your black heart! Cowards!”

That was when Valamand’s proctor pressed into his hands a short and wicked switch. It was fashioned of a slim ebony rod, bound into thornwood and wrapped in horse hair. Serrated barbs protruded down the length, unto the end which was hard-capped.

Valamand technically knew what to do with it.

“I do not think this will be effective,” Valamand said. “She is fixed in her mind. Pain will only polarize her further from confession.”

“Humans break,” said the proctor. “I agree that caning is perhaps unsophisticated. But it will have to sate your palate. I’ll not have you using my other toys.”

“Magic would be far more effective. I have extensive service records in persuasive entrancement of suspects,” Valamand argued. “A simple illusion would...”

“You are not fit for that ease, or that privilege,” the proctor warned. “Beat her.”

Valamand took a tighter grip on the rod and imagined the place to strike. Across the chest, perhaps. Over the face, if she would be disfigured. Which might be best, for in this poor light she resembled the priestess from Windhelm. Who had been so pleased, he recalled, to see one so unlike the Thalmor.

“Beat her! She does not deserve hesitation. You have no weakness for the enemy.”

But it did not feel like weakness, what suffused Valamand.

“I am no dremora,” he said evenly. “I’ll not torture for the sake of... of your vanity.”

Valamand could hear the prisoner choke as the switch was ripped out of his own grasp. False-calm
eyes burned wild. He cried out and struck forth to strangle his proctor with the silver chain of his manacles. Fruitless, the other guard instantly labored him with a spell of Burden so he could not move. He was driven to his knees, feral and clawing for air.

“Worthless traitor! You’ve been doing quite well, too,” the proctor said. “But I see you still are corrupted. Behold the fruits of your pity for these native barbarians.”

Valamand was made to watch by a hard-leather hand. The proctor caned the woman himself. He could easily have used magic to extract a quick confession. But oh, how she was screaming, and how she bled. Both were meaningless—ought to have been meaningless. They were nothing to the proctors. Valamand could feel his heart escaping through his eyes, the hoarseness of his own begging throat and the pleas to the woman that he was sorry, so sorry.

What little confession gleaned seemed inconsequential when the woman finally died. She could not be anything but dead. The proctors pulled the soul from her fading body and sealed it within a clouded gem.
Valamand lay in his rags and starved for the first time since he’d been locked up. Hunger waxed in Skyrim, land of starvation. And while such grimness as Northwatch Keep had quieted it, Valamand knew this was the taste of his defiance. Sucking on skinned knuckles.

He clung by his fingernails to the edge of a cliff. Only cruelty awaited him on the lip, but down was a long way to fall. Safe ground mocked him. Penalty and reward. Like a child. Or a dog. He was neither, was better, and his soul grew impatient with appeasement and grovelling. Those things had in the end done nothing to ingratiate him. He'd been a wretched dupe.

Valamand could tumble into the abyss of his own chewing stomach.

He had not slept. He laid out on his rough bed, but felt only a granite slab in the crematorium. He laid out until exhaustion glazed his throat and powdered his eyes, and they burned from being cracked-open. Until he felt himself simulate the dead.

Somewhere far above, rain or snow infiltrated the keep. It came to rest as an icy puddle in his cell. The drips counted out time he no longer could keep for himself.

And around him, in a way he had never experienced, the inmates began to whisper.

“The Dragon!”

“The Dragon!”

“The Dragon, he is eaten!”

“No, the Dragon eats!”

Valamand was not sure if he was exactly alive, or if the people around him were. This sort of babble was common nightly, but never in so many voices. And only now did he listen.

“What is there to say about the Dragon?” he rasped.

“The Dragon repeats, is the Wheel and is at the center of the Wheel,” replied a voice on the right side of him, one who had uttered not a sound before that day. He had never even thought the cell was inhabited.

Valamand realized that this was not an answer to his spite, but something else entirely. “Speak sense,” he demanded.

“It’s true,” said another voice, an Imperial shut into the cell across from Valamand’s own. “It’s written-down. So it must be true.”

“What daedra cursed your tongues?” Valamand asked, and no knowledge of Illusion could bear insight into such unprecedented oracular paradox. His stomach snarled, twisted.

“It’s always the same thing. The Lord, you always see the Lord,” the Imperial said. “You see the Lord, and everything after.”

“The one who’s everything,” corrected another voice on Valamand’s left.

“What are you talking about?” Valamand said, sitting up where he’d wallowed in dread. If the
guards cared to watch, he was his cell now; he was its straw, its dirt and stone, and they would see nothing to him through the steel gate.

That was when Valamand for once saw an affliction for what it was. Unlike the last time the Imperial had been at his cell door, this night his eyes milked-out to blindness. Worse than the priestess’ had been. It was not easy to escape slogging the long reaches of his own mind, but Valamand found himself pulled away. And that he’d noticed similar detail before. And yet they never came for him for whatever torment had this effect.

They fetched for prisoners once, twice. First they would return, and their eyes would be dark. Then they were taken again, and never return. So many around him gone and he would remain.

“What have they done unto you?” Valamand asked, standing finally. He grasped the bars before him, squinting in the dark.

“You are just as much the Lord,” said the Imperial, “I’ve seen you before, seen them all before!”

“Praise Talos!” someone screamed, far down the hall. Sounds of guards moving hushed the chatter, sounds of a beating, and then silence.

Bandaged feet slapped over the quiet, moldy slabs. Valamand could not fit his head through the bars but crooked as best he could to see down the hall. A prisoner was alone, running deeper into the prison. Perhaps they were blind, too, and could not discern which way was out.

Valamand considered what it might be like to run. If he had been only a little quicker in his past life, damn him. The thought was like facing away from the sun. “The other way!” he said. “Up the stairs!”

It was unreasonable to hope, but he had inherited a small candle of it. If one could be free, then all might be free. But stars take the prisoner! She hobbled to his cell, rather than turning around. As he suspected, her eyes were unblinking, unseeing. She’d been drawn to his sound.

“I know your voice,” said the woman. She was no woman he’d met. “I saw you in fury. I saw you crowned by fire.”

In her trembling fingers, she held an iron key. She dropped it at his feet. When Valamand rose from picking it up, he knew the guards had come for the woman. Valamand stumbled back from the bars as lightning coursed through them, shot from a mage’s hand.

“Don’t!”

The woman died in terrible convulsion. Valamand only had time to hide the key before the Thalmor came for the body at his cell’s blackened stoop.

They looked at him as if he was even more the criminal. Valamand had barely managed to scramble to his bed like a coward before one Burdened him. He felt crushed into the straw, hunger weakening his limbs further. His magic was leached away, his self was caged. And now even his body was bound.

Valamand lay on a lake of nails, and found the only thing of his still loose was his mind.

He could return to wading through the doom that would inevitably be upon him. He could dwell on the indecipherable enigma that was the goings-on at Northwatch Keep. He could turn the hidden key over in his hands, and contemplate hope.
He chose instead to use that freedom to visit happier times. If they had existed.
I wonder if the birds have returned.

“No, do not move him. I will handle the prisoner myself.”

Valamand’s dark sleep fell away as his arms rose from the wrists. His entire body lifted off the bed, dangling. And then yanked to his feet. Valamand’s first sight was the High Kinlord Silabaene releasing a grip of telekinesis. If his knees hadn’t locked, Valamand would have fallen limp.

“I don’t care for your eccentricity, boy. Look at me.”

And when Valamand did not want to, Silabaene seized the mer’s face with magic grip and turned it up to his own.

“Your performance is unimpressive,” he said calmly. “I find it disappointing that youth of your breeding would hide such weakness of character.”

And there was the unthinking, automatic urge to beg again, to supplicate. It was there as part of a machine, glass-cut gears chafing his mind. Wyrenna would have more to say. He could feel her there, how she laughed in this mer’s face and would soon explain right back to him exactly what manipulations were at work.

“I merely exercised my own judgement, Your Eminence,” said Valamand. “The method provided was ineffective, and therefore unacceptable. I was not permitted to deviate, or suggest an alternative.”

“You are not among the Thalmor to supply your own flawed judgement. You are here to—”

“Be a tool,” Valamand said.

Silabaene looked as if his prisoner had devolved into a slime-creeping creature.

“Succinctly, yes,” said Silabaene. “The mortal mind alone is weak without guidance, discipline, and leadership. As an ill-trained horse, it gets the crop.”

“You fancy yourself one to wear spurs? You are as mortal as I am, Your Eminence.”

The very suggestion seemed to sicken Silabaene.

“I would not tempt mortality, boy. Not within my house.”

Still, High Kinlord Silabaene composed himself and began again.

“It would be prudent to remember the example of your Grandmother, young lord of Luxurene,” said High Kinlord Silabaene. “And the grief she brought to your fallen line.”

Valamand knew of such example, and Silabaene was aware that Valamand knew. But the High Kinlord continued anyway, as the young mer could do nothing to stop him.

“I met her myself briefly, and I did not care for her. I believe she was an acquaintance of my own great-uncle: an ancient womer,” he said. “But I was not surprised to hear of her desertion of heritage. Her forfeit of loyalties and homeland.”

“I know of her crimes,” said Valamand.

“You know nothing of her crimes, if you repeat them,” said Silabaene. “Are you aware that she
abandoned your mother, nothing more than a babe, for glory in Cyrodiil? Where was she when Crystal-Like-Law fell? When her wretched firstborn, your uncle, staggered off drunkard and returned with a half-bred whore wife?

“Where were you when Luxurene fell into ruin? You, too, abandoned your mother in her time of need. You know of her death, but are you aware of her suicide?”

Valamand had not been.

“Why would you tell me this?” he said, and could not even his voice. “You have more effective punishments.”

But Silabaene smiled the smile of a mer who knew he did not. “I mean to offer you your options. Your behavior is disappointing, disturbing even, knowing your marks on all other tests and evaluation. There is still the possibility to make amends, such that you do not dishonor your mother further.”

“And how, exactly, would I honor her?” Valamand choked down a hot lump in his throat. “By suckling directly from The King of Worms?”

Valamand was high. He was caged, he was free.

“I very much preferred you spineless,” Silabaene said in distaste. “Your vain and misguided attempts against order are most unbecoming.”

Without a flick of a hand, Silabaene drew the cold-iron manacles close through the bars. Valamand crushed up against the flaking metal, felt his flesh squeeze and bruise.

“This banter bores me,” the High Kinlord said. “You lack the character to pull off the Windhelm operation on your own. It was obvious from the instant we met that you are crippled by eccentricities.”

He tightened his clutch and Valamand could feel the flakes of rust dig into his skin, the welts already forming. He held a tarnished token up to Valamand’s eye, a beaten-silver hammer-of-Talos claimed from Valamand’s own person. “Your handler, where is she?” Silabaene demanded. “Awaiting you in that brutish city? Or is she away, to Elenwen and a fool’s respite?”

“I have no handler,” Valamand choked. “I honestly… I don’t!”

“Nonsense. Of course you do. You made her introduction herself,” Silabaene said. “Relanya? Renelia? Obviously an alias, and you her straight-mer to play against my interests. Elenwen would send her finest agent to confront me, not some mis-inherited boy.”

And Valamand laughed. He laughed even as the breath and tears were wrung out of him. He laughed and it was madness where that familiar amulet filled his sight. “She is dead, you fool. She never left my side. She did lead the operation in Windhelm, though she was not my handler. The answer is obvious! But you are too swollen in pride to see it.”

His fox-yellow eyes seized unto Silabaene now, cast as a blow. And even where he was cut upon his prison Valamand grinned to the teeth and let go of himself entirely. His throat was hoarse, but his lips still could wrap around his chosen perversion.

“Her true name was Wyrenna, and I fashioned around her spell and illusion. And you believed you were dining among mer! Among the most subtle of mer! Simpleton!” Valamand hissed. “You strike at shadows, believing only mer may cast them so long unto your domain. I was the illusionist in
genius, and she the mastermind in her tongue—Wyrenna, a Nord!”

These were the only weapons Valamand had, and they fell upon an armor of gilt and marble. Valamand may have imagined the tremor in the High Kinlord’s grace. But better he face his end fancying he had caused some wound.

“Clearly, there has been an administrative error,” said the High Kinlord cooly. “This is no Altmeri lordling. This cell entertains only a common undesirable. As no such heir to Luxurene has been found, it shall have to be dissolved.”

“You cannot deny the heritage of Aldmeris!” Valamand snarled, gripping the rotten dirt and feeling the sand in it. “My bloodline is as ancient as Alinor and even into antiquity. All that you have is riches, comfortable shades and the world’s favor. But I am true wealth that even you cannot compare to.”

Silabaene clenched the tarnished amulet in a pale fist, chain twining under manicured nails. Heat and smoke baked the air. White-hot droplets leaked out between his fingers, spattering the stone floor in molten silver.

“Prepare him for salvage. Save for his delusions,” Silabaene said, off-hand to his guard. “They really are annoying.”

An iron key turned in his prison’s lock. Valamand watched as the bars swung open. A hand clad in elven-craft balled the rough cloth of his rags, dragged him forth with one fist. Two mer cast him down the hall, coming to blows where he stumbled. And Valamand knew every lash, tong, plier, and blade that finally had come for him.
it doesn't matter.

But, there was no knowing after that. No knowing if what he felt was real, or some aspect of Oblivion. Valamand could not be sure if what passed his lips was food or wax, water or blood. He only dubiously had a body. If it moved, screamed, eliminated, sweat, he was not in control of it. If there was sensation it could not be genuine, he could not have imagined it prior to that moment. It was summoned at a shrine to agony.

This was not interrogation. This was torture for the sake of torture and it belied sense. There was no concern for what might disturb him most, might coax a quick breaking. Breaking was not the objective. Breaking would be the point when Silabaene’s wrath would no longer be effective upon him. And they spared his face, and limbs and his loins: a dreadful choice. Valamand feared what use they could still have for him, once all was done.

Among those who took time with him, his proctors appeared as inquisitors. They were only too-eager to demonstrate to him all the ways he fell short of the Aldmeri.

But as they flayed his skin, left him in chains to recover, returned to their work, Valamand’s deep enclave of the mind lit. He could listen to their words in his ears— his corruption, his depravity, his feeblemindedness. The extent to what like a leper he was contaminated. But whatever stained him now felt pure against petty wickedness. Their lashes could not cleave into his substance. Only into flesh.

It did not please his tormentors to face this spirit of defiance. Alinor fashioned itself the most direct heir to ancient elvenkind, but there was a fierce element awoken that no conservative attention to order, mandate of tradition, or overuse of ritual could depict. It had carried mer from Old Aldmeris into an uncertain future, built sovereignty, weathered the violence of Men, been driven back out of importance and out of legend and into the corners of the world. But it had not been extinguished. It made a stand here, over his broken ground.

Despite this, all bodies reached a limit in time. All mortals have a threshold beyond which only into death they can pass. Trapped in himself, Valamand’s plane of no return drew nearer: lash by lash, hour by hour.

And slowly his vault-in-fire did smoulder and began to dim.
“It’s unfortunate, that I sense our time is coming to an end,” said the mer, in Valamand’s ear. “But not too soon. I won’t be the one to tell His Eminence that I ended his wrath.”

Of course, Valamand did not answer. There was no point to, not now. He did not waste energy even on begging when he was not compelled to. There was nothing to ask for, that might be made part of mercy or a bargain.

“Still, there’s not much left to take from you, is there? Perhaps it is time to pluck free one’s hair,” said the mer. “But then I shan’t be able to strangle you with it anymore. The face? I had been saving that for last. The final thing a mer may own is his good looks, isn’t it?”

The torturer laughed, presumably at his own joke. “Be he bereft of whole skin and fingernails, that is.”

He selected a scalpel. But he was less than pleased when Valamand did not even flinch, as it neared.

“Come now, there’s nothing in it without a squirm at least.” And he did try to slice down into Valamand’s cheek. Only to find the blade dull, only drawing minimal blood with resistance.

“Confound it. Don’t wander far, prisoner. It’s only a short walk to fetch a whetstone. I do adore this knife.”

At the beginning, such anticipation might have contributed to the torture. But there were many shades of waiting, and Valamand had learned this one well. The grey minutes passed. His shoulders too numb to ache fell limp against his twisted arms. He was shackled to the wall. There was breathing: his own, and that of the remaining guard who witnessed his torment. By this time there was little difference in sight and blindness. Dust and stone were the same as the fluorescent darkness behind an eyelid and the same as whatever phantasm constituted his rest.

There were no other screams this day, and the heaviness of the fortress bore down in sound. Footfalls above and away. The scrape of doors. The impact of metal. The jingle of mail, boot-nails on granite. Hard leather and its sway. The torturer had returned, Valamand could hear him inhale to speak again.

But there was no nordic mail in Northwatch Keep, so whatever had followed the mer to his cell was no Justiciar. Valamand mustered his strength, felt his neck ache as he lifted his head. A heavy gauntlet reached up to muffle the mer in the door. At last he was quiet. It was as surreal as anything else now to see a red blade protrude through the inquisitor’s chest.

The mer fell away to his knees and then to the floor, gurgling. And Valamand could only comprehend the presence revealed by the shades rising behind his eyes. A vengeance of white mail. A panic inlaid into him that torture could never have incited: a nightmare of Nedic incursion, of Alessian wars, of a beast that walked as-folk throughout history and into the ancient dread of much of merkind.

Valamand feared this being only as the Enemy.

He watched as it caught the watchmer’s blade, tossed it off as so much water. However long the Thalmor trained to check the sons of Man at any encounter, this foe spurned it. The Altmer was crushed, cried murder against the back wall. Elf-craft armor was supple, but no work in metal and moonstone was effective against such an assault. It was even quick. One thrust below the breastplate, a cut throat to match, and that was the end of another Aldmeri warrior.
The only way Valamand could avoid what was before him was to close his eyes. And while he waited for the inevitable, he could hear those boots approach, smell the metallic bloom of blood that was not his own. The presence of the Enemy was unbearable. Steel gently scraped stone, if it laid its weapon on the floor. Valamand flinched under how carefully its armored fingers lifted his face. He clenched his brow tighter.

Magic poured around him, from those hands. It was pale as the dawn, alighting on every wound, every cut and rent into him. The care, the meticulous attention was shocking. Wounds seamed over cleanly, and the pain in his muscles faded to only a memory. Most impossible, *sheerly impossible* was the familiar sense of it.

Valamand looked upon Wyrenna and sobbed.

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It should not come as a surprise to many readers that the Nord Wyrenna was alive. Those scholars among you doubtlessly know well of deeds and events attributed to Wyrenna subsequent to 4e 202, though the details are not undisputed. Others may have suspected that this story is not the sort of story where the female dies for the lament of the male. Be it by history, or by grace of the bard, Wyrenna did live. And now we will be her once again.

Wyrenna was at first disturbed to find Valamand this way, for the obvious reasons. If only she had been sooner, had investigated more swiftly, had spent fewer days recovering from her own wounds, she could have spared him this fate. His skin where it was still bare of welt and gash was sallow in yearning for the sun. And how Valamand must have suffered. She would have doubled, tripled the cuts into the one responsible for this.

More unsettling, though, was how faint his magicka felt. It was difficult to even get an impression of him for art of Restoration. Every day and every hour she had spent doggedly in study and practice came into question. The extent of the damage was great, almost greater than she had confidence to confront. But she spent her own reserves down to her last flicker finding every wretched hurt and undoing what she could.

Wyrenna was almost surprised to see major success. The superficial, she had other methods for. Valamand did not celebrate, though. He wept, then trailed off insensate. Wyrenna saw to his cuffs, leaned him on her shoulder while she dug out the flask of bottled-rust Ilyas-Tei had brewed. A line of drops on the fused seam, and the liquid ate through, shivering the metal clean away.

Valamand’s relief was almost instant. He gasped against her, falling limp. No good, she thought. He had to be on his feet. Bottled-rust went away; she instead pulled out three wooden pipes stoppered with cork. Her sister assured her they were stronger than any medicine one could buy: the same elixir that had saved her from the snow, a revitaliser that could wake a stone, and a magicka infusion that Ilyas-Tei had warned her to keep away from any source of flame. That last one smelled particularly hazardous as she opened its contents to air. Like ozone-ash, accelerant, and the sorts of herbs best kept in a locked box. Delirious, Valamand still had at least the presence not to choke as Wyrenna poured each vile liquid down his throat. He did not even cough or sputter, but leaked tears and twitched. His flesh shuddered as new skin knit firmly over it.

“Atruder! Intruder in mid-security!”

A bolt of fire crashed over her back, she could feel the tongue of heat as it rolled over her shield slung there. Lucky it had not landed only a little higher. Wyrenna let Valamand fall back off her, snatched her sword up and turned to fight. The reinforcements crowded into the room to meet her.
One, two—no time to count. Fight, just fight. Elbow up, into the neck. Don’t think, slip blade between those ribs. Throw him down, grab her wrists before the spell goes off. The angle gives her away. Break the arm. Simple to slit the throat. He will shoot. Stop him, down on his back. Then on to the next target, the next target, the next. Nothing more than that, don’t think they are more, you are alive and you will seize that life from their grip a thousand times, don’t think, don’t think—become.

Soon none more remained to hinder her, having been dispatched with ruthless long-studied efficiency and now littered Wyrenna’s feet. Valamand had by then vanished into the fortress.

“Damn it!”

She ran after where Valamand had inevitably gone. It wasn’t too late to continue with the plan, so long as he hadn’t wandered far. But if lockdown had begun it would be that much more difficult to escape to the open air. There, she might safely use the magic ring tucked into her pocket. Ilyas-Tei would be waiting for them, and it was impossible to communicate a change of plan so far away.

Wyrenna still felt the ache in her back where she’d smuggled herself in with the rest of the unforeseen-heavy cargo. Like the Solitude crate, and within: metal scrap. Heavier to replace than iron. But a few sore muscles were the least of her worries.

For example, she found an unlocked door. Which would not have normally been a problem, save that he could hear the scrape of cells and other doors being secured above. Someone had recently unlocked it. And been able to proceed back into the prison complex, right into the barracks and Thalmor forces.

The someone could only have been Valamand. Wyrenna ran faster, thinking of how to adjust the plan now.

“You… You’re free!”

“Why have you come here?”

Wyrenna felt her boot-heel catch as she stumbled to stop, realizing that on either side of her were jail blocks. Inside were prisoners, gripping the bars and praising the Divines that they were saved. Or else chattering in disbelief.

“Free me!”

“Don’t leave us!”

“Mercy!”

She looked forward to the hall ahead. Then at the cells. And stamped her foot.

“Oh… Oblivion take me!”

She pulled out the flask of bottled-rust again and quickly as she could began melting locks. The captives she pulled out were in various levels of health, some freshly-incarcerated, others so weak it took all left in them to walk. Several displayed a milkiness to their eyes and could not proceed without another prisoner to guide their way. A few babbled and cried incoherently, and Wyrenna dreaded that Valamand could have endured what these poor souls had been ruined by. The prisoners huddled together in the hall, fearful of either direction.

“You, what’s your name?” she asked of one of the more able-bodied men among the bunch, who showed no signs of blindness.
“Thorald. Grey-Mane,” he stammered, “But you, warrior… why are you here? You would risk your life for strangers?”

“I had someone else in mind. Maybe you saw him?” said Wyrenna. “But I’m not about to abandon anyone to such an awful place.”

“An elf? Ran down the hall, had a key. Looked like he was trouble,” said Thorald.

“You know where the armory is?” Wyrenna said. “Any weapons or supplies close by?”

“Yeah. I know the way.”

“You take these people there,” said Wyrenna. “Outfit them as well as you can, the ones who can fight. I’ll finish up here and begin clearing a path outside.”

Wyrenna took aside a second prisoner, a shivering Bosmer woman who seemed able. “If Thorald falls, you’re in charge. You pick your own second, just keep moving.”

“I understand,” the Bosmer said. “I’ll do it.”

Wyrenna moved on to the next rank, sent all who could move down after the rest of the prisoners. Soon, she entered the high security ward, closest to the barracks themselves. Only one prisoner was here, behind a cast-steel shutter and a lock so large it took the remainder of the bottled-rust to disengage. But at last she entered the lightless cell.

Something crunched under her boots as she passed inside. The floor was scattered with the husks of dead insects, fragile wings and hollow carapaces. A thin figure, a woman huddled on a straw pile away from the door. Her hair bleached with age, skin peeling. If she did not move at Wyrenna’s sound, she could have been embalmed.

“You, I have seen you before,” she said.

Which Wyrenna found impossible, firstly because she had never met such a person in her life. Second, because the woman’s eyes were completely blind. It wasn’t likely she could have seen at all.

“I’m Wyrenna,” said Wyrenna. “Can you stand?”

“I have not been able to stand for many years,” said the woman. “I sense your noble intentions. But I am old, and my life is at its end. Do not trouble your youth to carry me.”

“Is there anything I can do for you?” Wyrenna asked.

“Yes,” said the old woman. “Take this.”

She held forth a tightly-rolled piece of parchment, frayed at the edges. Wyrenna drew close to take it, feeling the time itch her nerves. Revealed in the hall’s light, the old prisoner wore robes of dirtied grey silk, and in her hair there was an unsettling shuffle. Caterpillars were living within, though the woman did not seem to mind.

“What is it?” Wyrenna asked, though she worried about the delay. “Who are you?”

“I am a Moth Priest,” said the old woman. “And that is my life’s work I give to you.”

“Why are you here?”

The Moth Priest, though blind, seemed to catch Wyrenna’s urgency and fear. She reached out with a
gummy hand and felt around to place it on Wyrenna’s gauntlet. “The elf-lord brought me here from
the Imperial City to interpret an Elder Scroll. I have studied the prophecy inside for decades, but he
was not satisfied with my insights.” She paused. “He continues with less enlightened readers now,
until he is sure.”

“Sure of what?”

“Sure the prophecy is about himself,” said the Moth Priest. “But I do not think it is so. The revelation
of the Elder Scrolls hardly concerns one temporary life. They are the pattern of the Aurbis.”

Wyrenna slid the slender, precious roll into her pocket, head reeling from the enormity of it all. She
firmly tamped her thoughts back down to earth. “What’s your real name?” she asked.

And the old woman laughed, delighted.

“Such a nice young lady. Sensible, too. Just what we need,” she said. “Iliana. I’m honored to give it
to you, Wyrenna.”

Wyrenna leaned forward, ignored the insects as best she could and gave the old woman a brief hug.
“It was good to meet you, Iliana. I have to go. I wish I could do more for you.”

“You’re already doing all you need to,” said the woman. “Go.”

And there was no sense disobeying her. Not when she could feel a rumble above her head, the
stones shake and buzz. Wyrenna said her goodbyes, gripped her sword, and made up for her delay.
The halls were oddly empty, the barracks cleared out and lockdown still sealing most side passages.
Still, there were a few Thalmor left in her way. The closest faced her, in step. One boot down, then
another. Wyrenna saw their form, the elven style of fighting meant to quickly out-finesse brute force.
She mirrored it. Confused, the elf stumbled, fell before her blade. And Wyrenna moved on to the
next one to meet her.

When she was through, she whistled down the hall. The prisoners hurried up to her position, some
carrying light-fashioned blades, what little more protective clothing they could scavenge.

A louder shaking rocked the fortress, faint yelling outside behind the heavy door worrying
Wyrenna’s ears.

“Listen,” she said. “You get out there, you run. Don’t bother trying to fight if you can help it. You
use these weapons as a last chance. Keep yourselves together. Anyone able, guide the blind and the
weak. But you run, and you run fast, and you don’t look back until you’re safe.”

“Where do we go? Find the Stormcloaks?” asked Thorald.

“If you’d like. I didn’t have much luck with them,” Wyrenna said. “But I don’t really know what
you should do. I’ll try what I can, but I’m only one person.”

She grasped the handle.

“You’re all ready?”

The response was as good as she was going to get. Wyrenna opened the door.

The spread of parties in that yard awaited her. The prisoners, clamoring around her to escape. The
Thalmor in ranks, facing the other door. They turned, only the sharp orders of their commander
betraying that something else might come out of the fortress. Wyrenna felt the night air on her lungs
and her grip on her shield.

She stood between fugitives and their jailers. That entire regiment would have fallen upon her if not for the keep’s well-mortared wall bursting forth in a spray of thunder. A shadow against fire, Valamand emerged from the dungeon’s belly, hands gripping claws around a nova of sorcery.

It seemed so real that he was the most monstrous, inexorable force in all the world. It was almost inconsequential that the ordinary discipline of the Thalmor dissolved. Trained soldiers turned on each other, fighting to escape or to subdue him or to flee from his menace. But they all passed as phantoms to Wyrenna, who stood in awe. For he’d tried this illusion on her before, and she was no longer willing to believe it. The Valamand of the past had been vain, not mighty. She knew better of his fey, pitiless eyes. This was only how he wanted to be seen.

He lashed out a fireball to send broken ranks to the sky. Wyrenna shook herself out of this place she’d fallen, parried a Thalmor’s frenzied strike. More closed in, threatening to breach her guard. An arrow bloomed out of a neck only a few feet before her own. Wyrenna looked up to see another long shot arc out of the dark, steel arrowhead glinting in fire and under moonlight.

“Sorry,” she apologized to her gods-sister, who perched on a cliff almost four-hundred yards away.

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Ilyas-Tei, however, had been expecting something like this to happen from the beginning. She knew Wyrenna too well to trust such close-fit plans. She fit another arrow to her bowstring, felt the resistance of the most powerful arm she’d ever designed. It made her back quake, but it was a smooth pull. She was still deciding on a name. ‘Bites-Like-Thunder-Number-Three’ was the working title, her third attempt at making such a potent weapon. Good for hunting mountain-lions. Good for piercing chain.

It even used those ground-glass lenses she had, finished with a glaze of glow-dust and clear resin. Within their sights, Ilyas-Tei could aim as well as if it were midday. She released her shots, watching the poor prisoners her skin-sister had saved flee into the mountains and down the beach. The Thalmor were too distracted to chase them.

What the elf could do, it stood out to every single one of Ilyas-Tei’s senses and she could smell the shape of his power. It was a shape of pain. For himself, for others around him.

She did her best to thin the numbers around her brave skin-sister. Only when she saw one of the prisoners pause did she take a moment to watch. Why would one turn back? When the freedom of open waters was there in front of them?

Ilyas-Tei reached out and adjusted the focus on her lens-scope, so that she might see.

The human was running, he was yelling at something or someone. He was looking up. He was throwing his axe. Ilyas-Tei moved her sights higher, almost missing the target. She finally settled on the window of the far tower. An elf stood and watched the carnage as if it was not even rain upon his back.

A glistening shard appeared in his hand. The elf-lord turned his attention below, to the one who had thrown the axe embedded in his balcony rail.

And Ilyas-Tei saw this elf-lord propel the shard with the force of a bolt down, down, and pierce the Nord prisoner through. So much closer now, there shrieked a familiar high-keened rending. The elf clenched his fist to draw the black gem back to him, grasped it where it was not slick with blood.
The prisoner, alive and almost well a moment before, poured forth upon the prison yard.

She aligned her sights on the pale elf, shaking with his evil intentions. She pulled the string, shot as good a mark as any she had ever made. And the arrow did not hit, instead orbited around him as the moons might have around Nirn and pierced another instead. She placed another, and another, in quick succession, and the last resulted in only a horrible jolt to her right thigh. The elf had not so much as looked at her.

And so Ilyas-Tei was not able to stop the elf-lord when he raised that black soul gem before him and released its power, dazzling the Argonian through her sights.

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The mer before her were annihilated. Wyrenna could remember screaming at Thorald to turn back, to escape. And the sight of that crystal ripping the soul right out from the man’s living body. And Silabaene on that balcony, unchanged over long months.

But that night he held an Elder Scroll in one hand, far tip resting on the floor of his stony tower.

And then— white fire. Silent fire. Beyond dragonfire, beyond the fury of the sky, a scourge of destruction that blew her over. Only scant meters away, foe and prisoner alike ceased to be. Wyrenna’s vision cleared enough for her to see there was not even ash left behind. There was a loud crumbling above her, while the dirt burned and she staggered to her feet.

“Valamand!” She yelled, for she could not see him anywhere. “Oh Gods!”

There he was. Battered in the wreckage but still standing in rags and in rage. His eyes shone like a pathway to the sun, he clenched his hands as if tearing into the air and heaved.

Wyrenna had no idea as to what he could be doing, until something cast a shadow overhead.

It was not a creature.

She saw the signal tower uproot. It rose up into the dark night. Valamand gripped the unknown tons of solid stone and brick in two aetherial fists.

He threw it with the force of a meteor at Silabaene’s high keep observatory.

Stone engulfed stone, fractures shuddering the stronghold as it collapsed in floor by floor. Sand, mortar, and great mason-blocks alike cast to the ground all around Wyrenna, who dove closer to relative shelter. Just as it seemed impossible that any being could have survived such an assault, Silabaene could be seen floating through the air against Masser. Not one fold of his clothes fell out of place, not one plait of his hair seemed disturbed. As if it was natural for him to simply leap free of all boundaries of this world. Valamand cried out, the most Wyrenna had ever heard from his throat at once. His revenge was not satisfied. He seized the great doors of the fortress, along with much of the gatehouse and flung it skyward.

Only for an instant, Wyrenna could see that Silabaene wielded not one, but a corona of black gems. Then he cast forth a shield, hardly a motion. And when the smouldering oak and half-molten stone hit it shattered everywhere: unable to breach Silabaene’s defense.

Valamand leaped forth over rock and flame to meet his foe, his efforts to destroy from afar spurned so coldly.

Wyrenna wished she could have told him not to. Silabaene took hold of the debris and whipped up a
firestorm. Valamand was thrown skyward like an ember. He began to fall, Silabaene moved to complete his killing blow.

Wyrenna pinched her eyes shut and thought it was impossible to fix anything now. This was the end, it had to be the end.

But she had not lived for her efforts to mean so little.

Wyrenna dropped her sword and shield, took the magic ring out of her pocket. She put it on and vanished.

--

Ilyas-Tei was surprised to see her skin-sister appear out of the air in front of her, but not so surprised. It had been the original plan, after all. She’d already put her bow away. Not as if it was much use against falling buildings or a lost cause.

“Ilyas-Tei, you’ll hate me for this,” Wyrenna said. “But you need to trust me.”

“What?”

Wyrenna took a hold of Ilyas-Tei’s shoulder, pointed into the deepest center of the blazing nova. There was a dark shape within. “I need you to vanish us there,” she said.

“What?”

“When I say so, you vanish us there with the ring,” Wyrenna said. She bodily lifted Ilyas-Tei over her back, grasping the Argonian’s hand. “Okay?”

“Okay, but—”

Wyrenna leaped off the steep cliffs south of Northwatch Keep, plummeting to the beach and sharp rocks below.

“Now!”

And Ilyas-Tei felt the ring slip onto her right claw.

--

Valamand had done many things in his life that he regretted. Many of them he had come to regret only recently. But this, this was not one of them. Silabaene knew now the destruction of his rage, everything he had scorned. No peasant, no mere heretic, nothing but a true son of Aldmeris could carry such fury. Pour the heavens out through his wounds.

He did regret that it was not effective.

For no matter the strength, the overwhelming might of his magicka, Silabaene was unmoved. Unscratched. He would not fear this, remember it, keep it with him in a year’s time. Let alone the rest of his life. This was the impact of his ancient bloodline? The minor inconvenience of a more powerful mer.

Valamand fell. He fell under the moons, with fire below him. And before him, he could see in that interval of slowed time a dark gem to be his prison. His soul, to be used. A tool, even in death.

He was glad, though, he had seen a friendly face.
The black soul gem traveled closer and he knew it was only gaining momentum. He stared it down, and presumed to know his fate.

That was when Wyrenna appeared only inches to his left, travelling with the speed of flight. Ilyastei clung to her with all limbs and her tail. And wrapping her arms around Valamand’s chest, Wyrenna plucked him from the path of demise. The black soul gem missed them by only a breath’s space.

He felt something cold shoved over his skinned knuckle.

“Think of someplace!” Wyrenna ordered in his ear.

They vanished south into the night.
Valamand at first thought he could not be Valamand.

Perhaps that is too succinct.

But the elf that woke was not sure if he had at all, whether this was a soft bed or delirium. A keen steel drew over whetstone across the room. Lovingly, each catch of grit ground his ears. It paused, and it would sing again. Right back where he had started, anticipation of the knife. For what it would cut from him next.

How futile it had been, what befouled pleasure, to find the ant’s peak at the bottom of his world. But passing. The molten gold in his veins had cooled, the pressure behind his eyes tapped dry.

As he became more aware of his limbs, there was no evidence of what Northwatch had done unto him. His breath did not taste like death, he did not feel a single welt or lash upon his skin. Not a cracked rib. His fingers twitched. No bound wrists, none of his knuckles were broken. Not even the blisters, sticky torment where the hot-irons had touched him remained. No pus. No aches, torn muscles.

And such sensation! Such magicka pressing so full upon his soul! The gradations around him, the world’s minute details had returned and never before had been so vibrant. He trembled before what it felt like, to be a mage of his flourishing power. Exhilarating!

So how could he be that same wretched mer? He would even go so far as to say he felt rested. But still, the knife sharpened on. Valamand cracked open a glance, gazed out through his eyelashes.

It was that violet Argonian. Not any Thalmor torturer. Her name: Ilyas-Tei. Such memories poured over him, recall washing away the fog. She set down the whetstone, wiped her pocket-knife clean. Then she peeled an apple in one long stroke. She held it delicately by the stem in her claw and popped the whole thing into her wide reptilian mouth. She chewed, seeds and all.

She didn’t talk with her mouth full before asking, “you awake?”

“Possibly. Yes,” Valamand said. The feel of his own words in his mouth, their sound on the air, their buzz in his throat realized him further. He took a deep breath, felt his chest rise.

“Drink that next to you,” the Argonian said. “Can’t be good to be so dry.”

Valamand looked to his right. A clear glass jug full of water sat on the night-table. He sat up, removed the stopper. There was no cup to pour into. But the more he looked at the water, the more thirsty he realized he was until there was no resisting lifting the entire thing to his lips.

“Xuth, don’t pour it all down your throat.”

The room now smelled like food. Valamand’s stomach pinched. He swallowed one last blessed gulp, set the remainder down on the side-table. Ilyas-Tei held a full plate for him, hovering over where he sat.

“One does not eat in bed,” Valamand said, but then was shocked by the obvious absurdity of it. He was starving, he required that food. “Or, never mind.”

If the Argonian replied, it was coded in the rising of her feathered crest, the exasperated blink of her
eyes. Still, Valamand was careful not to waste even a crumb on the bedspread. The stewed meat was
tough and gamey, but at that point Valamand would have eaten tack leather. The meal settled like a
stone in his guts. He even wiped up the gravy with his crust of bread, ate that too. He regretted
devouring it so, but he could feel strength returning to him as soon as he set the plate down.

“Sorry it’s bear,” Ilyas-Tei said. “Not the most tasty thing. But by the time we got here, all the larder
had spoiled. I had to hunt something and that’s what turned up.”

“I’m not in a position to turn it away,” Valamand said, restraining himself from asking for more. He
did wonder, though, “Where is ‘here?’”

“Thalmor Embassy. All abandoned though,” said Ilyas-Tei. “I thought you knew. You’re the one
who vanished us to the gate.”

“No, I,” Valamand began, then closed his mouth. He remembered his malformed and instant desire
to go home, far south to Luxurene. That ring! Wyrenna, what a keen ploy! “I suspect this is the
closest place within teleportation range that fit my criteria. The grounds of this Embassy are not
Skyrim, not technically.”

Ilyas-Tei shrugged. It was an exaggerated shrug, as if she wanted to make clear she didn’t know
anything about what he was saying. “Well, the Thalmor here are gone. Some of it’s sacked, but we
think that happened after they left. Maybe you know more about what could make such powerful
people clear out like this?”

He had to think.

“One hypothesis I may have is that it was me.”

“In prison?”

“Something I said, while imprisoned,” Valamand clarified, “may have prompted High Kinlord
Silabaene to action against the First Emissary.”

Another one of those exaggerated shrugs. The Argonian’s tail curled beneath her chair. She counted
on her claws. “Watered, fed... bathed is next. Wyrenna told me you’d probably want that. After what
happened.”

“That would be agreeable,” Valamand said. “And she’s...?”

Ilyas-Tei didn’t seem to understand what he was attempting to ask. Valamand looked at the bed he
lay on, felt the silk sheets and tossed them off. He swung his legs over the bedside one at a time, then
stood. The Argonian who had been hovering over him now was much more comfortably at his
shoulder.

“You hint that she is alive,” Valamand said. “If so, where is she?”

“The Blue Palace,” the Argonian replied. “Went there after the Thalmor came around the first time.
They didn’t catch us hiding though.”

Valamand swallowed.

“Nice basement here,” Ilyas-Tei added icily.

Valamand stared over her head, counted the nails on the wall across the room. “About that bath,” he
said.
“I’ll go heat it, if you want. You just stay here until it’s ready.”

“No, no. I’ll go with you,” Valamand said.

For Valamand’s sake, we’ll accompany him further. It was true that he did not wish to be alone, but it simply wasn’t practical to keep anyone close by while he washed. So instead, we’ll keep him company and serve that role.

He’d had plenty of time inside his own head. Among familiar strangers. But this ritual required seclusion. The hot water splashed back down into the glass-glazed bath, its sound sharp against the walls of stone. Scouring wind was a dull and omnipresent drone. Faint dapples passed over the wall: snow blotting the thick-paned window. He’d found a lamp to assist in the First Emissary’s former quarters.

Assuming she would not need them anymore, Valamand took from there every sea sponge, washing-brush, oil, and soap he could find. He locked himself in her bath-room, lit incense, and set to bathing. In this case, it was just as much a sanctification as it was to rid his skin of prison grime, his own dried blood.

Valamand vaguely remembered hard scrubbing, preparation to be a puppet. And yet, he had not been made clean. It hardly counted. He saw to every patch of skin with soap, with coarse-grit of salt, with fine-grit cloth and powdered walnut husk.

Eerie that not a mark remained upon him. He’d worked out the date, from his own sense of time and Ilyas-Tei’s ramblings. Two months locked away. His actual torture could not have persisted longer than a few short days of that, yet it spanned an era of his mind. Compared to many other prisoners, he was lucky. Fortunate that his suffering had been limited. All had vanished under healing arts and Valamand could not imagine the medicine that followed would have missed anything in its potency. If he hadn’t also been tended-to abed.

He expected this to be a comfort, that nothing persisted to remind him of what happened. But it wasn’t. It brought with it a sense of unreality. He could have imagined it, he thought. He was surely intelligent enough to invent a sophisticated torture. Valamand knew several spells to induce exactly such a delusion.

He scrubbed harder.

Instead, he could reconceptualize. His skin had not been wiped of evidence, but its perfect surface could be evidence. When he had last… left… Wyrenna she had barely been able to call forth raw magicka, grasp foundational principles for simple Restoration. That she had improved enough to lay on healing hands and so well demonstrated her diligence, her skill, even talent, a certain suitability.

A tremor ran through him. He did not follow that line of thought any further, and instead set to washing his hair and face. How unkempt he had been, how much a fright he must have looked. Yellow strands stuck to his chest two whole hand-lengths below where it had been familiar for over twenty years. He felt no desire to cut it. But with small shears he evened out where it had become ragged.

Valamand meant to look over his shoulder at the mirror (a full-length mirror, not of polished tin but real glass!) only for a moment to gauge his work was even, but startled himself in the process. Every lingering wonder of if he had woken as Valamand returned in the heartbeats he did not instantly recognize himself. There had been no mirrors available to him in Windhelm, not like this. And such a
luxury of a large one was ridiculous before. It hit like a cast stone, that the last time he had seen
himself this way was months ago in the loft bedroom of the sparse Headquarters in Solitude. He'd
worn a dress uniform and all had seemed in order, then. Maybe a few hems to be let out, some snug-
seamed tightness around the back. It hadn't previously been his to wear and he was tall even among
Altmer. He hadn't thought much on his... his flesh.

In the mirror, his reflection ran fingers up strange features. Pelvis lean, but girdled. Stomach firmed,
 genteel knots beginning to emerge. Ribs now invisible. Chest more generous. Every limb somewhat
thicker in strength. The sight called to how he had exited basic training years ago. But Valamand
could see how quickly he passed that landmark in his memory. He was no Nord, of course, but the
speed with which his body adapted to harsh time in this northern land made him nervous. How
subtle it had been, hardly noticed from his own point of view looking down at himself. Hard labor,
death marches, drills and drills and drills over months. He was even hungry already, developing
weight crying out in protest of starvation. Stark against the standard conformation desired in the Isles,
which in the time of his birth favored a slight, even gaunt frame. The frame of one with goblins,
 servants, and magic to perform any whim they might will to order.

The figure in the mirror might become something more classical, if Valamand continued to nurture it.
But that implied intent. Control.

More nervous was that until he had lost all graces, Northwatch intended to preserve his constitution,
not destroy it.

(What use? What use did they think to have for me?)

He had to dry himself and oil his maturing topography, smooth his stinging skin. And he treated his
hair, perfumed himself, groomed his face to find even that was no longer so sunken. He finished with
coal-pencil around the eyes, as he preferred.

Worst of all was when he had to dress. Despite that he was no longer certain of his standing or rank
within the Thalmor, to dress as the Justiciar he'd been was most practical within Imperial territories. It
took rummaging through what stock of uniform remained in his proper length to find something
broad enough in the shoulders. An evil comedy that he now filled the coat better than when he had
worn Thalmor black honestly. It was true. The last thing a mer owned was his good looks.

Voices echoed even through the locked door. Valamand fled downstairs from his reflection, from
something new now lurking within his eyes. Gliding down the banister, the feeling of his hands
inside uniform gloves almost overwhelmed him. But there was more evidence here that he was not
back where he began. The bareness of the private solar was more stark than it had ever been, the
vacancy of every surface of note.

“Nothing?”

“I already ate. There’s plenty of supper at the Blue Palace.”

Valamand recognized Wyrenna’s voice. Or, most of it. He almost hung in step, as if he could spook
the sound and it would deteriorate in his memory. Reality hung on a thread, until he found her in the
study.

She was sitting where Elenwen had once sat. Her hair was down, long and sable over silvered
armor. She bent over a pile of dossiers, some of which appeared damaged by fire. She copied the
contents in the thinnest ink.

Neither she or her sister spoke, or even moved. But Wyrenna’s pen stopped. She tapped it dry on the
well. And then she put it aside neatly, lifted her dark gaze to him. Valamand could feel himself pierced through.

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Wyrenna went through affirmations that had gotten her through the past season. The less ugly ones. That she’d been working for this, that now she had taken back what had been wrested from her, that everything ought to have turned out much worse than it had, all things considered. That she lived and to live was to face what was before her.

And her handwriting was never as neat as she pleased, besides.

When she’d found Valamand it had been difficult to look at him. It still was. For other reasons. Wyrenna could not decide if she was relieved to see, or detested what she saw now. She had to reach back to remember the last time he’d been in those coat-robies. He was very much the reflection of when they had met.

No. No, it was not the same, and he could not be the same. She had to tell herself this, point out his difference in posture, expression. Hair wasn’t the same, he’d never leave his hood down when he could have helped it. Uniform fit differently, no matter how she hated its association. How odd to see her friend’s face on the image of her enemy.

Her friend was scared. If she remembered what *that* look meant. But she could not bring herself to smile and supplicate to him as she had before.

“Well, now that you’re up, you wouldn’t mind helping me look through these?” she said.

Level ground. That was what she needed.

“You know, this probably would have been easier if you waited for him,” Ilyas-Tei said, tossing aside a file in disgust.

“No,” Valamand said. “If you are doing what I think you are doing, you want to finish as quickly as possible. They will be looking for these if they have not already tried.”

Wyrenna dipped her pen again, finished the line at last, then moved on. “They didn’t make a good effort. I’m sure Elenwen hid what I have here, tried to destroy some of it too.”

“In speaking of the first Emissary,” Valamand asked. “Where is she?”

“Gone,” Wyrenna said. “When you vanished us here the place was already a wreck. But the solar was all right, mostly. Whatever happened, someone was able to stash these records. So they probably saw it coming.”

Valamand said little on her speculation, pulled up the far chair and began going through the books with her.

“It’s good to have you back,” Wyrenna said. “How are you feeling?”

“Well enough. Whole,” Valamand said. “In spite of recent events.”

The pages fluttered.

“I’m sorry you suffered,” Wyrenna said. “I did promise I’d try to keep you safe, and all.”

“It’s nothing. I am alive. Which is more than I thought of you.”
He would have thought that. It was something she dreaded, upon waking up so many weeks ago. That she was alive, and if Valamand was too he wouldn’t know.

“You’d have been right, if I had done as Wyrenna asked,” Ilyas-Tei said.

“But when have you ever done what I’ve told you to?” replied Wyrenna. “I guess I forgive you, this time.”

Ilyas-Tei didn’t have much of a reply. After a pause, though, she waved a fairly fresh packet of envelopes and put them aside. “These look important,” she said.

There was still enough space on the page for shorthand, so Wyrenna took the letters up to copy their contents as well. She could feel Valamand’s eyes on her as she unfolded the crisp paper, peeled the melted smear of vermilion wax. Slightly singed, but the content was legible. The characters weren’t as sublime in geometry as Valamand’s, but carried a cosmopolitan voice that was easy to read. Much less squint-worthy than Elenwen’s tiny notes with their terse angles.

This Ondolemar seemed informed and in close contact with the First Emissary. Or more than Ancano in Winterhold had been. Prolific and speedy in sending word, as well: the most recent of the notes was a week old, not even opened. She slit it with her finger, tore the envelope.

There was some amount of flattery and waffling before the missive reached its purpose. Wyrenna had come to recognize this as subordinate action, though she couldn’t tease out if there was some cipher hidden within its decorum. But at length, Ondolemar asked for information on movements of other Thalmor within his jurisdiction. It was Wyrenna’s guess that if the womer had read the letter, she wouldn’t know or would not have said. For all other research and spywork reports she had read in the past hour involved such questions: which agents were hers, which were not. And if they moved against Elenwen herself.

“Show me that, please,” Valamand insisted. Wyrenna slid the envelope over the dark-wood table and finished her line in shorthand. Valamand read the correspondence while she dipped her pen.

He shuffled the thick paper. “So Silabaene has influence as far south as Markarth,” he said. “With luck, he will be obstructed. I know of Ondolemar’s command. He has forestalled Stormcloak sympathies for years.”

“You know him?” Wyrenna asked.

“By reputation,” said Valamand. “I have never served under him directly.”

Wyrenna, despite Valamand’s hesitance, seemed interested. “Gossip’s as good a thing as any. What’s he known for?”

“Patience. Perhaps unseemly patience.” Valamand folded the note up again crisply. “He is a powerful mer, well-deserving of his post and the responsibility of Markarth. But many might call him… moderate.”

“Which means?”

“There are some that maintain that the Thalmor are above local customs and law, but he is not one of them. That he deigns to play politics colors his reputation.”

“He’s a soft-egg,” Ilyas-Tei said. Valamand closed his mouth as if he was trying to contain a steady stream of marbles.
“Whether or not that’s true, that makes Markarth the next destination,” Wyrenna said. “If Ondolemar is the last ranking Thalmor left in Skyrim who’s got nothing to do with Silabaene and his goings-on.”

“Why?”

Wyrenna looked up again. She’d seen that look on Valamand before, outside Morthal. Why go willingly with him? Why? There was an anger in it now, though. Curbed words he had to rework into more pleasing forms.

“Why are you doing this? Are you even sure what you are doing, or to what end you work to?” Valamand said, voice beginning to rise. “Why did you extract me from Northwatch Keep? What designs for me do you have? Am I your tool, that you reclaim? And for how long have I been so?”

He stood, tall over where she sat. He quivered in the fire’s light. Ilyas-Tei leaped up to challenge him as he slammed palms down upon the desk.

“Damn you! You were dead! You easily could have remained that way. Do not assume I will watch you fall twice to the Thalmor, Wyrenna. They are crueler than you can imagine.”

Wyrenna blew over the ink. And when it was dry, she shut her small folio and folded her gauntleted hands on the desk in two tight fists. “Yes, I know,” she said. “And because I fear them, I’m here.”

She did not force him to look at her, but he was to begin with. She spoke to him with a raised chin, and did not stand. “I was too afraid to leave, before. I went with you to Solitude of my own will because I figured it was better to choose myself than to be dragged off in the night. And I made the mistake, after, of losing that fear. I thought that if I did all that you asked I might be free.”

“And you do not call this freedom?” said Valamand, with every ounce of acid that could be expected from one only recently locked in a jail.

“Is Ulfric free? I have papers right here that say that his escape was part of a plan. His war with the Empire is just another part of his prison,” said Wyrenna. “You tell me this, Valamand. Is the Empire really free, after the White-Gold Concordat? Or is the Aldmeri Dominion just waiting?”

And Valamand said nothing to that, could not even bring his voice to bear with words of reason.

“You aren’t free, either,” Wyrenna said. “You said to me long ago that comfort is only an illusion. Well, it’s been broken.”

Valamand lifted off the desk and straightened up to his full height. He visibly considered what she had to say; his eyes hit the floor, the ceiling, her own, and the closed file she pinned beneath her hands. Then he sunk back into his chair. If not exhausted, he seemed satisfied with her answer. “This still does not explain why you needed me if you’ve become some sort of dissident.”

“Why, do you want to have been left in jail?” Wyrenna said.

“She was pretty upset about what happened to you,” Ilyas-Tei suggested. “It’s some Nord thing, I don’t really understand it myself.”

“Pfaw! There’s nothing to understand!” Wyrenna said, standing. She playfully swatted her sister’s crest of feathers, as if shooing away a large bird. After capping the well of ink and setting her work straight, she crossed the room and back again and then prayed, prayed she was not misjudging herself. She bent down and wrapped her arms around the elf’s shoulders into a quick, tight hug. “It’s only good to see you again.”
Some things she did were well-planned and methodical, and on some other occasion this might have been one of them. But it was only an afterthought that she might gauge his reaction. For a moment, Wyrenna feared how at first he tensed. He had commonly evaded touch. Then she could feel the brittleness dissolve out of him. And she laughed! He did not quite know what to do with himself, if his arms were for her waist or her back or her shoulders or if he should rise from the chair or pull her closer. But his attempt was heartening enough.
Due to the wealth of information held in Elenwen's file, the Thalmor Embassy carried a wealth in gold hidden in its belly. What an imposing fist had come, septims were not the greed of its grip. But that coin bought a smith’s attentions, bandages, rations, all that could be needed for a trip down the Karth river road. Secondhand supplies, of course. Wyrenna could not imagine a more effective way to attract bandits than to flaunt brand-new goods upon brand-new saddles, conveyed by fresh horses.

They were thick-shouldered beasts with flared noses for tearing breath from the highland air, deep chests, and shield-plate hooves. Wyrenna and Ilyas-Tei rode two-to-one, a willful dun what the Argonian dubbed Greed-For-Ferns. The chestnut fell to Valamand: sedate and smooth in stride. This one was named Land-Chair. The elf’s long legs wrapped around its barrel as if it were merely a pony.

In this way, they made south towards Dragon Bridge.

“Tell me what transpired while I was,” Valamand said, “er, indisposed.”

“Surprising. You like being the font of explanation when you can help it,” said Ilyas-Tei.

“I cannot see how you can say that. You have known me for no more than three days,” said Valamand. “With a hiatus separating them.”

“See! There! You just now explain to me.”

“Please, I can only handle one awful know-it-all at a time,” Wyrenna said. “Ilyas-Tei’s right, though.”

Wyrenna smiled down at the mane of her horse, listened as Valamand cursed quietly for a few moments.

“Suffice it to say, that was then and now has come,” he replied at last. “You have me at a loss. The world’s moved out from under me.”

“If I told you everything, we’d be short tales to fill the trip. I’m not much of a bard,” Wyrenna said. “Instead, let me sum up the news.”

She ordered her thoughts, the sway of the saddle providing a pace for her.

“The end of Morning Star… Ulfric Stormcloak’s daring escape from Thalmor ambush became public. He considered it evidence of the Empire’s weakness. His war began in earnest. He’s won Fort Greymoor now, and Valtheim Towers. Maybe it was hasty planning on his part, though. He hasn’t been able to win Dragonsreach itself. Jarl Balgruuf’s weathered siege for over a month, with periods of relief from the Empire.”

“And where were you in all of this?”

Wyrenna blinked. It didn’t seem like something he ought to have asked.

“Winterhold. Ulfric’s not too happy with me, personally. But his men are too scared of the College to
get anywhere near it, even if it’s Stormcloak territory.”

“You gained entry to the College of Winterhold?”

“Surprised?”

“No, no,” Valamand said quickly. “It’s excellent.”

“Not really. They’d take anything breathing that can make fire, except a dragon.” Wyrenna paused, doubting if a dragon really would be turned away. “Anyway, on to Sun’s Dawn. War’s been sort of slow, with the dragons about. There was talk about a kind of truce until somebody decides what to do about them, but I don’t think it’ll happen. Heard something happened in Markarth, but we’ll find out when we get there. I think the Empire marched on the Pale and they’re winning there. Smart move.”

“Oh?”

“I think so.” Wyrenna bit her lip at how strange his interest felt. Or was she misremembering him? Valamand knew nothing of her skepticism, of course. “Why do you think so?”

“If Ulfric’s holding out in Whiterun, it’s smart to take the less important holds around him until he’s surrounded. And while he’s distracted with throwing resources at the siege, it’s the perfect time.”

“You forgot your birth-day,” Ilyas-Tei said. “That’s also in Sun’s Dawn.”

Wyrenna looked up from the reins. “Oh.” She mumbled, “that’s not really news.”

“It is.”

“No,” Wyrenna said. “Nobody cares about that.”

“Congratulations on twenty. I suppose.” Valamand’s face when he said it, or soon after, was unreadable to Wyrenna. She scanned him up and down, trying to confirm if she had really heard him utter such a thing. But his shrug at her scrutiny was worried. “Is that not the number? If you were born in 182?”

Wyrenna felt the blowing frost sting her wide eyes. “That’s right, yes,” she said, almost tripping over the words. “But how…”

“I remember,” Valamand said. His mouth lingered open, then wordlessly snapped shut. It was possible he was remembering a great many things. Whatever stuck in his throat, he dug heels into Land-Chair’s broad sides and lurched the beast ahead and south to Dragon Bridge.

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If nothing had moved or changed at all at the Four Shields Tavern, Wyrenna thought, then there would have been a layer of dust on the scarred tabletops. They ended up renting the same room, were tended-to by the very same host, and only bleach hid if those were or were not the same sheets she’d slept on months ago. She kept down a virtually identical rabbit stew and then had to remind herself of her present company.

“It sort of comes around to me that you don’t actually have to tag along,” she said. “Maybe this is embarrassing? But I only planned so far as getting you out of prison.”

“So you have no designs for me, after all,” Valamand said. “Then, why bother?”
“I thought I told you before. You got locked up because of me, now you’re free. My honor’s clear. But you can do what you like.”

"Only stones know what someone like you does just normally, though,” Ilyas-Tei added.

Valamand took a drink.

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” he said. “So I’ll keep your company.”

The beds creaked, but were supple enough. Wyrenna pulled-over her buckles, feeling each piece of her armor loosen and release. Her back thanked her. She peeled away the padding underneath, brushing the mottled hair off in vain. Yellow horse-sweat snowflaked the linen. Ilyas-Tei swept them across the room with her tail almost as soon as Wyrenna let them fall to the floor.

“That’s fine,” said Ilyas-Tei. “You’re welcome to stay, I’d say.”

“Why doesn’t it matter?”

“Wyrenna, don’t pry,” Ilyas-Tei said, looking up from where she counted her arrows. “Ask some other question.”

“No. No, I’ll speak,” Valamand said in a voice that demanded spirits to drown it. Wyrenna tapped the small cask of mead purchased and filled a cup for him to the top. Though he shed his gloves and outer robe, he could not shed some other burden of his even when he sat to rest. First he rubbed his saddle-sore thighs, then caught his head in both hands. It took him a few moments to notice the drink at his elbow. He looked at it, then took the flagon and drank.

And, dust washed down his throat, he began.

“You know me as Thalmor, a Justiciar and a battlemage,” Valamand said. “But that rank and role have been revoked by the highest of powers. I am nothing now, I am lower than common: a traitor to authority and to heritage.”

“So we’re finally on the same level,” Wyrenna said, and felt her voice unexpectedly cold on her tongue. But it was less satisfying than the fantasies of months ago to see him stripped of his pride as she’d wished him to be. He was not here having prospered, but having toiled in incarceration. There was a hollowness within his hale.

Hollowness too, in the faintest smile. “Almost,” he said. “You know, I once was heir to an ancient bloodline. If all had gone differently, I might sit as Kinlord of my ancestral island and its estate. Never, now.”

Valamand had many times boasted of his own gentility. And each time it had rasped her patience. That talk had always been his try at making her small beneath his prestige. Wyrenna wondered if he now paid in turnabout.

“One cannot be unhatched,” Ilyas-Tei said.

“No, you can be. Your worth can be made meaningless. Its importance can be minimized. And whatever value your birthright held, dissolved.”

“That’s a lie,” said Wyrenna.

Valamand did not seem to understand.
“Whoever made you believe it, they’re wrong,” she said. “Your home can be burned, your name can be forgotten. Your family can die, or leave you. But you’ll still exist. If anybody comes along and says that you’re no longer real, all they want is to beat you down.”

“And if that person has the power to make all they decree the truth?”

“No person has that power,” Wyrenna said. “Not even the Gods have that power. They can destroy everything around you, but short of killing you nobody but you can throw your honor away.”

In a heave of his shoulders, though, Valamand tipped the mead down his throat. Not a cough.

“Thank you,” he said at last. “But honor is not something that the Thalmor hold as a virtue.”

He set his pewter cup down empty, ran his hands through his hair with a sigh. “Perhaps one ought to.”

“So that’s all? You’ve been some kind of Thalmor prince this entire time?”

“No among the Thalmor, no. My island, Luxurene— it’s ancient. The legacy I am heir to predates even the first Aldmeri Dominion. Let alone the third.” As he spoke further, it seemed only the warmth of spirits kept him from stiffening up in disgust. “To be elevated amongst the Thalmor, though, is not half as grand a vision as I once imagined. If Silabaene himself is any example.”

Ilyas-Tei waved the last arrow she counted as if to punctuate her words. “Great! Fight the current, down with the man and that sort of thing.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I do not consider myself a traitor. Merely that from where I once stood, I could not see the Thalmor properly. It is taught that this world is a prison from which we may ascend.”

Valamand fidgeted. “It seems less so, once one has spent time chained within an actual cell.”

“Well, you’re not about to go back.”

“Stars! Of course not! Even so, the Dominion needs leadership. The Thalmor are the leadership present. But the question I now see presented is this. Where do mer such as Silabaene intend to lead the Thalmor, and with it the entirety of the Summerset Isles and beyond?”

“It sounds to me that you’ve already answered that question.”

“It’s not a pleasant answer,” Valamand admitted. “Nor are the Thalmor as they stand now a pleasant reality.”

There was some fire in his tone as he said this. It was a foreign passion, compared to his phlegm in Wyrenna’s memory. It transformed his voice. His whole demeanor. There had been days convincing herself that she toiled for more than a clammy puppet, or a mockingbird that spat only what it had been taught. Never leave, Wyrenna thought silently. Never, never. If only every word from him after could be as these.

“I believe it,” she said. “Where I found you.”

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A rock tumbled down the stony cliffside just behind them. When Wyrenna looked back at it, she saw that it was not even a very large rock. Barely the size to spook a horse, or make a noise that rose above a dignified sort of clatter. The sort that might be dislodged by the wind, or by a fox. But following its path up, she could see the glint of low sun on iron.
She dug her shins into Greed-For-Ferns and felt the beast bolt forward from the heel. “Go!”

Somewhere behind her, Valamand’s questions carried against clattering strides until the barbed arrows began whistling overhead. Then he caught up. Wyrenna knew how to poorly ride a horse, but even with her eye she could see Valamand was much more experienced. He did not lean over to speak to her, but instead had to raise his voice. “Witch-men!”

“We have to get off the road,” Wyrenna said.

“Impossible!” Ilyas-Tei’s arms clenched down upon Wyrenna’s breath so stiff she was in the saddle. Even her tail tried to grasp some hold to keep from being thrown off, she bounced on the poor horse’s back. “The cliffs are too close in around us!”

“Can you scare them off?”

“I cannot even sit! I’m going to fall!”

Wyrenna leaned forward on the balls of her feet, lifted out of the saddle and felt her knees take the weight. Ilyas-Tei turtle-backed over her sister, flat against the horse’s tossing gait. Ahead was a looming roadside fort, and Wyrenna could see ranks of Reach natives swarming its walls as well. The reins were tight in her hands as Wyrenna whipped her head over to her left. “Valamand! Collapse that tower!”

The world yanked from under her. An equine scream, and Wyrenna fell forward into space. Instinctively she lifted her arm up before the ground met her and she tumbled across it. The impact sheared her steel plate, sharp gravel across her cheek. Ilyas-Tei’s arrows scattered everywhere

Wyrenna willed herself to stir, choked back a sob of pain and heard the hobbled panic of the wounded horse behind her. Move! Move! She staggered to her feet against her sister’s weight only to shield her eyes from the flames that erupted around her. Valamand had not gone on to throw a fireball at the ambushers down the road, but— stupid! He had doubled back! Wyrenna watched Land-Chair shy and bounce as Valamand held out two hands to the sky, magic enveloping them. Shadows against the cloak of flame hesitated rather than braving Valamand’s wrath.

But that did not explain why the archers atop the bluff hesitated. The three of them were massively outnumbered, Wyrenna realized.

“Valamand.” She stood and helped Ilyas-Tei to wobbling feet, she wiped the blood and dirt from her own cheek. “Valamand, we can’t fight all of them.”

“I am not about to let death come at the hands of savages!” Valamand said, hard boots slamming to the ground. He tossed the reins over the animal’s sweating neck. “If I can break the cliff, then perhaps I can break their ranks…”

“No. They could have already shot us, easily.” Wyrenna said. “We’ll have to talk.”

He groaned as if those were the most unbearable words in the entire common tongue. But, she could see his arms slacken under his coat, the release of his fingers and the magic he held in place. And, heaving a sigh, Wyrenna gave the elf a gentle pat on the shoulder and strode forth to meet the Reachfolk that surrounded them.

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The Forsworn (as they called themselves) were largely unknown to Valamand. As we’re now Valamand, we must imagine this disadvantage to be our own. In a sense, the natives of the Reach
were everything that the elf had been told to envision of Man’s savagery. They dressed like barbarians. Their magicka felt to him like bile in his mouth. And the smell!

It was then perplexity that in their features he could see some residual merishness. A telltale Breton cast. And yet no meager graces of Aldmeris to them at all. Nevertheless, the numerous party brought them north and west along the Karth and down a fingering estuary. They conversed with their prisoners little during their day-and-a-half march. But Valamand could listen and hear for all the wildness of their captors, they spoke in as civilized a way as any Man might manage. They were not goblinish, Valamand conceded, but merely chose to affect a *primitive* aesthetic.

For all of that, it would not do to underestimate them. Wyrenna had been sure that she could talk her way out. Valamand counted soldiers and began formulating a secondary plan. One that could be enacted from within an iron cell, which was where they put him and Ilyas-Tei.

Caged. Again.

Valamand leaned up against the bars and watched Wyrenna approach the Forsworn’s court. She was humble before the King in Rags. Or, that was what some did call him. He did not dress in *rags* exactly, even if Valamand’s sense of taste found the epithet fitting. He sat on a throne of twisted vinewood, jackal-thin under furs and bone, vulture plumes. When he spoke, the throat might have belonged to a shady dealer or market fence. If not for *what* it spoke of.

“You are a strange one. I’ll give you that.” he said. If it was not so raucous it could have been for his private self. “A Nord warrior trespasses into my Reach, and they lay down arms willingly!”

Valamand gripped the iron, though, for Wyrenna had been stripped of her armor. And then again, leaving her only in smalls and her breastband, made to kneel on the dirty ground. At least they permitted her boots. Still, Wyrenna was fiercely composed.

From where the elf slouched, he could see an even whiter mark upon the snow of her back.

“Respectfully, Madanach King, I am only half-Nord.”

“And half what?”

“Of Cyrodiil,” Wyrenna said.

“Then you are the mongrel of two enemies,” he said. “Civil war would forget that your halves have ever been bedfellows! To fight the true masters of the Reach is the bile of your breed.”

“I don’t see a need to fight when we can talk,” said Wyrenna.

“Ha!”

The King in Rags leaned over his throne, spat upon Wyrenna. The metal under Valamand’s hands grew warm, then red-hot as he clenched down upon it. It was not a good enough vent for the firebrand between his lungs.

“We are long past talking, I’m afraid. No, if I say you ought to fight, then you shall.” At his motion, a grim-faced woman slid to his side: battle-masked and studded with fangs and bone. She held in two hands a wicked bludgeon of cut flint. It looked sharp as glass. Most grotesque was her bare breast. One. The other, torn off and in the nest of her ribs some hedge- witchery installed. “Kill her,” he ordered.

“I protest!” Valamand yelled. “This is savagery!”
“And you would have us all thusly die of civilization?” Madanach said.

“I have never seen something so perverse!” Valamand felt the bricks in his abdomen ignite, he gripped the iron with a new vigor. “How dare you inflict upon her your literal bloodlust?”

Ilyas-Tei reached through the bars of her own cage to slap his hand down that Valamand realized he had begun to cast… something. Something unpleasant. He was almost embarrassed at its spontaneity. “Stop that,” the Argonian said. “They’re going to notice.”

Yes. Yes, of course, Valamand thought. Oh, there were several more things he would have like to have said. They burned in his throat, in his magic— his blood smouldered anew. Valamand felt as if he had to tamp himself down into a tiny bottle, lest his scornful captors make to more thoroughly contain him as a mage. Perhaps they didn’t have the means to. More likely, they were watching the blood-sport.

In body, the fight was evenly matched. Wyrenna was the larger between them, but the Forsworn warrior moved with a relentless lack of pause that unsettled Valamand. The initial clash became a knot on the ground as they wrestled for control. Wyrenna would not let her foe open any distance to swing her weapon.

“She’s rather good,” Valamand said, at a loss of what else to do. He was not calm. But he could fake it. Ilyas-Tei seemed confident to leave it to her sister. He was more critical of the situation.

“She knows her weight,” the Argonian agreed. “She trained in arms day and night the whole time you were, hm, up the river.”

Valamand did not know her meaning. But he could infer it, somewhat. He saw the Forsworn’s jaw shatter under Wyrenna’s fist. “I admit, she has always been… reluctant in combat. As I have known her. I’m surprised.”

“Don’t be.” Ilyas-Tei made a sound. A sort of low-pitched growl, or rattle. It was not part of Valamand’s vocabulary. “She was furious, after what happened to you.”

“What?”

“It took two to hold her down, when she awoke. The Assemblage almost threw her out,” said Ilyas-Tei. “They thought she had been possessed.”

An alarming cry shook dirt from the roots poking through the cave roof. Wyrenna had seized the Forsworn’s flint-axe. She grasped it in two hands and snapped its wooden stem over her knee. Threw away the pieces, and then leaped back into the fray.

“I know her, though. She’ll be all right.” Ilyas-Tei said.

Valamand did not see how or why, until he watched the blows drag on and on, neither Wyrenna or her opponent tiring significantly. It was in the footwork, the form of her strikes… Wyrenna had many opportunities to kill her foe only narrowly averted. Crack their neck. Break their spine. She took none of them. It was not much for a battle to the death. If Wyrenna was hoping to outlast this thorn-cored warrior, she battled indomitable witchcraft.

It was not necessary that she fight alone.

Quickly, Valamand laid the parameters of a spell. It had to be silent, still, and could not emit light or sound of any kind. It had to be contained, without possibility of misfire or to strike the wrong target. It could not leave obvious wounds or influence the melee overtly. It would have to be acceptable to
Wyrenna’s ethos. Given these restrictions, he knew no such spell that could help him. Instead… he fashioned a new one.

There was actually an interesting little property among Illusion magic that Valamand knew as the Principle of Implicit Consent. Valamand shaped an illusion that could not miss. How could it, when it permeated the entire cave? It was fashioned for and concerned only Wyrenna, and only Wyrenna herself could consent to its terms. All else ignored it, so unwilling to entertain the content that did not even manifest to them as thought.

The terms themselves? Valamand faltered, sheepish even as he’d laid them down. That Wyrenna was strong and fierce, of course, and her foe was nothing. That Wyrenna was keen, and the enemy dull in finesse. That Wyrenna was brilliant and would prevail, because, well, obviously! Just a variation on common morale and rallying illusions, that’s all. Belief became action, simple and trite.

At that moment, Wyrenna was pinned by the warrior, clawing to break free. In the fray of grappling though, she cried out in triumph and kicked upwards with her boot into the Forsworn’s stomach. The impact sent her enemy toppling over-heels supine. Wyrenna wasted no time reversing their positions. Her enemy struggled like a beast against Wyrenna’s weight on her neck, knees straddling and cut on the ground. With her free hand, Wyrenna ripped into the open, festering cavity and knotted her fingers around whatever she found there, tore it free.

It slipped out of her hand. Valamand did not look closely at it, but it was not anything that ought to be an organ of a human’s body. What clotted over its surface congealed more like sap than scab. Still, Wyrenna sat there for a moment. One breath, two breaths. She pushed her hair back with her soiled hand.

“That is as good place to bow to me as any,” Madanach said. “Now! You are as brutish as your kind is wont to be.”

Valamand did not think this was fair for him to say. To him, Wyrenna’s kind and Madanach’s kind were more similar than they were different. And, he added, Wyrenna had defied her own kind as many times to an extent transcend it.

“I think I understand my place, now,” Wyrenna said as she stood, though she did not wipe herself clean. Valamand saw her use Restoration to fix herself up, though. She grasped her face as if she had a bloody nose, though in the end made it more bloody smearing herself. “But, forgive me, I don’t understand my purpose.”

“Your purpose? Why? You came here of your own will!”

“Your people allowed me to,” Wyrenna said. “I’m sorry if I’m off, but what do you need us for, to capture us?”

“I’m not fond of clever children,” Madanach said. “Your unexpected cooperation puts me at odds. I meant only for one of you to carry a message to Igmund, the Nord Jarl of Markarth.”

“Well, you’re very lucky I’m here,” said Wyrenna. “I happen to be a professional spy.”

Auri-El. She wouldn’t. Not standing there, covered in dirt and blood. No, there had to be something else she could do in her position...

“A professional…”

“Spy, sir.”
“You?”

“Of course,” said Wyrenna. “Ilyas-Tei is my assistant. And the Thalmor there is one of my satisfied clients.”

*Auri-El.* Valamand bit down on his tongue to prevent nervous laughter.

“Your performance just now suggests a more savage profession than spy.”

“Well, you know how it is. Someone catches on too close for comfort. You’ve got to do a little,” and she did not so much end her sentence as punctuate it with a bit of hand-wringing. Presumably standing in for wringing more than air. “But that’s gristy business. I’m also skilled at infiltrating, busybody-ing, footpad-ing, impersonation, identity fraud, all forms of bamboozlement, and accounting.”

If, of course, she was not almost entirely naked, Valamand would concede that was a very good selling-line.

“Restrictions?” Madanach asked, shockingly intrigued.

“I don’t do assassination, or murder in revenge. That’s for thugs. Petty or grand theft are negotiable, but not something I specialize in or would pride myself in doing. Kidnapping, only if one really deserves it. And I reserve the right to review any important terms, persons of interests involved, and collateral damage my actions may cause to happen,” Wyrenna said. “But if you really want a man punched, I might throw that in on the side.”

“Tempting. But I question whether you are trustworthy,” Madanach said, in only the tone a man forcing a woman to hold court in nothing but her scants might take. “Make a case for your value.”

Which was, to Valamand, completely unnecessary. The man ought to have known that there were few other options for Wyrenna. He was orchestrating it himself! What was her alternative, if he was to turn Wyrenna down? That she, and he, and the Argonian would walk out bemoaning an unsuccessful business deal? Unlikely!

Still, it was shocking how far Wyrenna would go. “Standing here in front of you, I admit I can’t prove much about my own word. You can ask the Thalmor Valamand there, he’s been one of my clients before. But I think it’s better if we talk instead about the value of your operation.”

This could have been potentially a very bad topic of conversation.

“The Reach belongs to us. That is a truth without value.”

“So, how many Nords would you say live in the Reach?”

Valamand had to fight his leaping impulse to deem it a foolish question. If from a less clever throat, then it would be folly to ask the natives of Skyrim to be counted. How many ants lived upon a log? Or fish, under the sea waves?

Madanach, cruel in mockery as he was, shared a subtleness. He considered Wyrenna’s question for a silent time, long enough for the girl herself to fold hands behind her back to keep from fiddling.

“Less than a quarter of the Reach, by my best reasoning,” said Madanach.

“That figure compared with how many of your people, who live in the Reach?”
“Easily twice that,” Madanach said.

“Are there any other sizeable groups of people?”

And again, Madanach had to think. “Orcs. There are a great many Orcs in the Reach, as well.”

“I don’t think it’s very fair,” said Wyrenna carefully. “that less than one-quarter of the people owns all the property, fills every chair in ruling, makes up the guard and the law and leaves the rest as serfs shushed under their boot. If things were otherwise then I might take the job on the house.”

Madanach laughed again, unchanged in its tired meanness. Even a man like *this* could hear the pure reason in her argument, the sense even in its sentiment. Only Wyrenna could turn a den of snarling barbarians into a moral and just cause. Ilyas-Tei next to him was massaging the sides of her head where a mer’s temples ought to have been.

“But instead, you’ll settle for your clothes and your tagalongs, Nord. Isn’t that right?”

Wyrenna rubbed her arms, prickled with gooseflesh.

Chapter End Notes

1) The full context of the Principle of Implicit Consent would take far too long to explain fully, but simplified: Illusions only remain effective while the subject might consent to them. One willing to believe there might be danger would believe the illusion of danger. Or one willing to believe that all is well would continue to believe that all might be well, should an illusion assure them of it. It is why, partially Illusions of insufficient strength fail on alert or willful targets, or why illusions revealed or repeatedly cast on an alert or willful target may be unsuccessful. One that has seen an illusion broken will not mentally consent to believe its terms a second time without coercion. Return to the top.
While doubtless it would be fascinating to be Wyrenna at this time, Valamand continues to concern us if only for the unique situation he found himself in.

True to their mad-king’s word, the Forsworn let them go. What that word was exactly, Valamand did not know. The ride to Markarth he worried over other, more subtle parties than the Forsworn. Whatever his character, Valamand doubted that even Wyrenna could manipulate the Thalmor commander Ondolemar. He conceded he did not know the size of creature he approached. Whether the mer would be an ally, or lying in wait at Silabaene’s order.

He rehearsed, though had to admit that he could not prepare for the actions of a mer he had so little knowledge of. But there were the basics. Petitioning a higher officer. Begging for their ear, if he had to. Pride was oft-wrung from the hopefuls at the Academy in this manner. Every drop squeezed for submission, stoking ambitions to one day be the one in control.

It remained to be seen if Ondolemar was the sort to pulp him out like a lemon or not.

And of course, all this was to proceed as if nothing had happened, as if all was normal with his rank and standing among the Thalmor. Ignoring the persistent memory of his once-flayed skin. Whether or not Ondolemar belonged to the High Kinlord already, the promise of reward in turning in a traitor was aetherial nectar. Valamand could not imagine what officer would resist.

Wyrenna bid Valamand to approach and enter the city one hour before herself. Entering together, she said, would draw attention. But a Nord plus Argonian as a pair could be excused as mercenaries or opportunists. But the eyes upon him as the gate drew shut! A couple by the marketplace stopped arguing to draw their child aside, shielded her from him with their bodies. As soon as he could round a corner out of view, Valamand made himself invisible. He kept concentration by focusing on how his nails dug into his leather uniform gloves.

With a little cleverness he could mitigate Invisibility’s drawbacks. If anyone collided with him, they’d believe they’d tripped over their own two feet. But Valamand did have to rely on the natural flow of bodies before him to clear his way. Doors or pedestrians being mysteriously moved called undue attention.

Ideally, Valamand had it in his mind to attend Understone Keep promptly, report to Ondolemar, and put to rest his doubts. Less than ideally, he found himself lingering in a shaded corner away from the gate, and an hour after he arrived Wyrenna and Ilyas-Tei followed him. They made for the tavern without even pause or discussion. Valamand hesitated there, outside the Silver-Blood Inn, before slipping inside himself in the wake of a large crowd.

No Nord hall was quiet, but the Frozen Hearth in Windhelm had kept more vigor to it. Here, the gap between fresh traders and spent workers was too great, and while the bard strummed by the fire the conversation never rose to more than a level din. He was able to lean against the wall by Wyrenna’s table, and only felt marginally like an unwanted spectre.

“You look dry, skin-sister. And that’s after a cup, even,” said the Argonian. “I worry for you.”

“Worry? Why?” Wyrenna took a long drink, long enough for him to see the spirits pass down her gullet. “I’m fine, Ilyas-Tei.”

“You weren’t even so low at the funeral,” Ilyas-Tei said. “The last time you were like this, you
swore off men.”

“That was for a good reason. You know…”

“Him. I know. But you do worry me. Please be serious,” said Ilyas-Tei. “You were the same with Filglis right after.”

Valamand admittedly was poor in deciphering conversations of others on the best of days, labored hard to achieve basic competency. Wyrenna and her Argonian sister were speaking of matters that he had no reference for.

“Filglis was good to me. She understood that it wasn’t going to be forever. Just some nights of happiness,” Wyrenna said. “There weren’t any hard feelings with Brelyna at the College, either.”

“Sex is not a balm you can spread on your wounds,” said Ilyas-Tei.

Valamand felt his skin burn at the thought. Ought he be listening?

“Easy for you to say. You’ve never cared for it.”

Yet, of course they would discuss sex. Valamand wasn’t here, that they could see. Unlike him, they had private selves. Valamand felt like a vacant wasps’ nest. Hollow paper, repulsive to touch.

“Please, Wyrenna. Don’t run away from me in this,” Ilyas-Tei said. “Your anger’s grown very sharp, and your violence with it. I fear for you, skin-sister. You’ve been unlike yourself.”

She amended quickly, “Or, like a frightening version of yourself.”

“You didn’t say anything before.”

“You were upset for a reason,” said Ilyas-Tei. “I brought you back from the roots of Death and you carried with you fury for the ones who’d send you there. But now you’ve fulfilled your revenge, rescued your friend. And that fury remains.”

Guilt was an interesting sensation. It was one that his mother had hardly educated him on, and one the Thalmor obviously in hindsight sought to eradicate. But Valamand had learned again how the soul could chew up one’s insides. And so now there were no gods to blame or plead mercy from. No petty spite to throw in response. Only to look upon the two sisters and know that in a way, he had made the misery of one and the sorrow of the other. The dragon of that knowledge roosted in his skull.

“Ilyas-Tei, I’m afraid. I’ve been afraid for so long now, that it’s become everything to me,” she said. “When I first picked up a sword, it was because it saved my life. Then it was to defend myself. Then to defend other people. But I have never been able to use it to escape. I hoped to learn how to fight to keep myself safe, but I fear I’ll never be safe again. I never had the choice to be.”

“You did choose what you did, though.”

“I know!” Wyrenna’s snarl rose over the other patrons, who hushed so slightly to listen in. They resumed when Wyrenna’s silence outweighed their patience. She spoke again, almost too soft for Valamand to hear from where he stood. “I know. I’m afraid I’ve started and… I can’t stop now.”

“You’re not anything different. You’re my skin-sister,” said Ilyas-Tei. “You don’t have to harden your heart, be so ruthless. Whether she holds a sword or not, in these days we need clever Wyrenna from Bruma. Who cared for her father until the end, the delight of women, who keeps her fists...
clenched for the egg-toothed foolish. Who always knows what to say, to make things right again.”

“I’ve gotten too good at killing men,” Wyrenna said dejectedly. “It hardly feels like anything anymore.”

“You sink under the weight of too many feelings, not too few,” said Ilyas-Tei. “Come! Why don’t we throw away our worries, for a night? Think of it as the Tap and Tack!”

Valamand noticed now a gradient to Wyrenna’s smile. First, familiar, then strange and full of comfort. Shocking, thinking on how many times this girl had faced him with a grin and to now know it had been merely to sate him.

Wyrenna stood, filled her flagon, and pulled her sister over to the bard in the corner. Valamand did not follow them, merely watched, so he did not overhear what they exchanged. First Wyrenna was tentative, then the bard surprised, then overjoyed as he began to play.

Ilyas-Tei thumped the ground with her tail, a dull smacking sound in time with the music. The patronage paid attention, began to clap along. And with the tempo set, the Argonian leaped upon the low table by the fire and began to dance. Wyrenna took a hand up and joined her, and with a deep breath joined the bard in song,

“Nine days I had to see the world
before I’m on my way
and I’d be sure to see it all,
in passion and in lace!”

In lascivious song.

“Nine maidens lay,
my lust to slake,
before the break of day!

first maiden fair, wheat in her hair
white dress I grasp, o’er gracious ass,

the next of snow, the winds that blow,
‘tween nipped peaks, her blushing cheeks!”

Valamand felt himself grow quite hot.

“Not least, I feast of spire and glen,
her hips to swell, I learned her well!

And she I’ll miss, syrup’d kiss,
limber lithe, so we writhe,

my pearl of seas, I covet thee
else I to yield, yearn from afield!”

Wyrenna mocked a blown kiss for her sister, who danced coyly for the delight of the patrons.

“Defiant she, make way for me,
your azure bed, far-won to wed,

beauty dusky cast, I hold at last,
eyes drunk in wine, in finery!

shy sylph in green, some shrewdly seen,
run wild to hunt, your aching cunt!”

The patrons roared in a most undignified way and Valamand felt the distinct need to clean out his own ears. But Ilyas-Tei took over the verse, singing in that parrot-keen voice,

“and to ~come~ upon virgin shores,
spread legs undone, the golden sun!”

Wyrenna’s great show of indignity came with a very real blush as she pushed her sister off the table, only for Ilyas Tei to teeter gracefully down and dance on the floor. Wyrenna doused her nerves with another shockingly long drink of mead. The patrons cheered for that almost as loud as they cheered for the rest of it all.

"nine maidens lay,
my lust to slake
o’er the break of day,

nine maids I leave,
my love to wean,
as I forge upon my way!”

Enough. Enough. The quiver in Valamand’s heel set his steps backward. Then to the door. Then through the door in flight. Only as he stood outside in the still-cool spring air did Valamand realize that as his sweating hands left the handle, he’d become visible. If the guards thought much of a Thalmor agent suddenly materializing in the middle of the street, they said nothing on it and did not stop him as he strode with purpose down the city’s low paths past forges and metalworks.

Fool! Idiot! Ignoramus! Unthinking mash-brained organism!

You know nothing of her beyond her name and the vaguest story told by a prisoner. What does she love? Who is she, really? How, bumbling boy, could you even imagine that she might be familiar to you if you cannot coax an authentic smile from her?

For she had smiled many times, and now they had all been unmasked as masks. No, pleas! That he would take pity and not destroy her utterly. And he had thought them born of joy! For him!

Valamand himself felt quite joyless. He wouldn’t know what to do with himself, if he was there to revel with Wyrenna in honesty. But what happiness she displayed in song and drink was not akin to any he’d ever known. Perhaps in studying magic. But that he’d shared with her already, and mistaken her interest for affection itself.

There was a windowpane between them. On one side, Wyrenna and her sister in warmth and laughter, able to shed their fears with merely wine. On this side, Valamand hunched in the cold and felt his cheek up against the glass. They knew nothing and would care nothing of his books, the grandeur of an island he no longer had claim to, or the finery of his spellcraft. Their own ways were plenty enough to sustain them.

So it stood in mockery of reason. Why would either choose to fetch him? Or then permit their agent of strife remain further, if he had not first chosen to stay by their side? (To a lesser extent, why would anyone choose to remain with him? A darker domain of thought too depressing to explore here in print.)
“You! You think I like staying out here overtime with your painted backside?”

Valamand winced at the tone of the voice, so sudden in the city night. Whatever guards patrolled turned their eyes away from the smelter down below. It was impressive that the words could carry, Valamand thought, over the waterfalls. But then, the voice seemed to belong to an orc.

One miner remained, smelting ore even so late at night. Curiosity drew Valamand closer, dark robes fairly unnoticed on stone steps.

“No, sir...”

“Work! You’re the reason we were two hours behind quota!”

The woman at the smelter shoveled faster, and even in the dim light Valamand could see the reachwoman’s back quake.

“Please! I have a wife waiting for me, and I—”

“You’re not bringing a coin away until you’ve made it up in your wages, lazy sack of dogmeat!” He slapped a hard-cane switch over one meaty hand. “Work!”

“I could not help but overhear your irritating noise,” Valamand said, approaching with sure-measured steps.

“This is a private matter, elf. Go back to your masters at the keep, or take it up with Thongvor Silver-Blood.”

Valamand’s words felt strangely slick in his mouth, “Your conduct offends me. If this is how your master sees fit for you to treat his vassals, he is a barbarian. And you his witless instrument.”

The Orc was not taller than him, but wider in breadth and circumference of muscle. He drew uncomfortably close, sour breath and spittle ugly upon Valamand’s face. “You don’t want to test me, piss-stain. There’s been many accidents by the smelter.”

“I’m sure,” said Valamand, who shot his arm out to grab the Orc’s collar. Only unblocked in that it had no force behind it. Until Valamand set the illusion that his hand was on fire. If the orc was a fistfighter, he feared magic and yelled, stumbled backward and tripped. It was only Valamand’s grip that kept the orc from falling straight into the smelter’s crucible—a new, untested strength in his limbs. Even if he strained, it was a pleasant surprise.

“Mercy! Thalmor, have mercy! I— That was foolish of me! I spoke out of turn!”

“I suppose you would frame that, too, as an accident by your smelter,” Valamand said with loathing. “Pay the woman for wasting her time.”

“Yes! Full wages!”

“Double wages,” Valamand said primly.

“From my own pocket! Don’t kill me!”

“That will suffice.” He dropped the orc against the coal pile, before the shaking reachwoman. “And so will your complete silence on this.”

There was a silence of the mind, too, as Valamand left these natives where they lay and proceeded up to Understone Keep.
Wyrenna for once in this long story had one night to enjoy herself, as herself. She enjoyed herself as she hadn’t in a long time, before her father’s death, before her mother’s death, before the events of this tale and what historians would mark as important history. But let it be known that, to Wyrenna who is not a historian or lore-master, the mundane of life and its joys were riches that great deeds or martial heroism were spare to replace.

But as all nights of pleasure, this night came to an end as the patrons filed home or to bed. Wyrenna purchased an inn-room and made to retire. While Ilyas-Tei freshened her Argonian self with the bath-basin downstairs, Wyrenna took her last bottle of mead in hand and made to ready the beds.

Though, upon opening the hard-brass door Wyrenna found considerably more than beds awaiting her.

She’d considered that this key was to the wrong room. But the innkeep had no spares on his hook. The men were not accidental. No, she thought. They were the sort of men that were there purposefully.

Wyrenna did not have to turn again to look at the four of them, to discern that purpose. She shifted her drink to the other hand. “Would any of you like to leave?”

No, only silence. Good. A sign that they were there to interrogate her? Not assassinate. Or, at least not as their first matter of priority. With that in mind, she fit the heavy bronze key back into its home. It turned, latched with a shudder of heavy tumblers. It’d be bad, she thought, if what was definitely about to happen were to escape the room and endanger other patrons.

“You know, Estormo was polite,” she said.

No recognition. Not Thalmor? Connected to the Forsworn? Local politics?

Ugh.

“He at least introduced himself before coming to my room at night,” Wyrenna said. Back still to them. Let them think they have her at their mercy.

“You’re unwelcome in Markarth, Wyrenna Foe-Tongue.”

Oh, that was easier.

“It’s nice to know Ulfric Stormcloak has a clique,” said Wyrenna. She could hear the shuffling of weapons behind her. Steel inching out of its sheath. A string pulling taut.

That was where she threw the bottle, half-warm mead spraying out in an arc ending in a shower of broken glass. The archer doubled over, arrow skittering against the ground. Wyrenna caught the first man’s ax on her scabbard where her sword was tied into it.

Her pommel jutted up into the man’s jaw, stunning him, causing his colleague to collide. A blade passed uncomfortably close to Wyrenna’s face, new scratches in her armor. Still, the impact felt like getting whalloped by a hammer. Something sprained. But the man went down just as well when Wyrenna lobbed him across the temple with her sword’s metal crossguard.

“Wyrenna?” Ilyas-Tei was pounding at the door. “Are you in there?”

“Just a minute!” Wyrenna yelled. The third man’s mace mashed her hand. “Ouch!” She repaid him
with a swift kick up into the nethers, which levitated him backward up onto the stone bed. Fumbling for the keyring, she felt a grip on her shoulder. Wyrenna lashed him flat with keys between each knuckle, gouging a deep divot into the merc’s trembling face.

“Just a little roughhousing with these thugs,” Wyrenna said weakly as she jiggled the latch open again.

Ilyas-Tei pushed Wyrenna aside, aiming her hand-crossbow in a swift motion. The light bolt flew into the archer’s unprotected shoulder and he collapsed, boneless as a slug.

“Thanks,” Wyrenna said.

“It looks like we need two rooms after all,” said Ilyas-Tei. “This one’s full.”

“M-hm,” Wyrenna agreed. “Not deadly poison?”

“Only paralyzing poison,” said Ilyas-Tei. “You?”

Wyrenna sighed.

“I… I thought about what you said. You’re right. I can’t let this these things drive me… drive me crazy. I’m just going to leave them. They shouldn’t have to die.”

“We have people shaking us down already, though?”

“I’m very popular in Skyrim nowadays,” Wyrenna said.

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“Excuse me,” said Wyrenna not long after she was released from court at Understone Keep. “You’re Thongvor Silver-Blood?”

Whether the man was waiting his turn, or simply lingered to pressure the Jarl, he turned his bald head around to Wyrenna’s words. He was dressed as she was, in armor befitting a martial Nord. But where hers was recently pitted, his steel was years-old under polish and the Imperial stamp upon his gauntlets long-worn

“Yes, girl? What do you need from me?” he said, with the sort of tone that implied he would not be obliging any sort of needs whatsoever.

“I’m Wyrenna,” said Wyrenna, and then gauged her audience. “A Thane of Morthal. I’d like to report an incident in your inn, last night.”

“Take it up with the Guard. I don’t have time for petty crime,” said Thongvor.

“Sir, do you think I’m stupid?”

Wyrenna looked up at him and saw a pang of fear, as if he already had a notion of who she was. She decided it was something she could work with, even if the implications of that bothered her.

“Do you think I don’t know that the guard is your guard, and the inn is your inn?” Wyrenna said. “The only reason there is blood spilled on your own floors is because you permit it to be.”

“Do you mean to threaten me? I won’t be talked to like—”

“What is the going rate for a healer in your city, Silver-Blood?” Wyrenna asked.
“— a common barkeep! Get out of my sight, and be thankful I don’t throw you out on the street!”

“I’m going to say it’s twenty gold,” said Wyrenna. Then she pulled out one of her full coinpurses.
“And Gods, man! Shut up. Take this.”

And, as Wyrenna predicted, Thongvor’s greed outweighed his indignity. He had thousands, probably, in his own vaults. But he still reached for her exchange of a hundred gold. “Why? What is this for?”

“It should cover any healing expenses for those raw-brace brutes, that I left in your inn,” Wyrenna said. “They were only doing their job, after all.”

She could not tell if Thongvor Silver-Blood was speechless with rage or shock. But she filled the space for him, not breaking domination of his eggshell eyes.

“Listen, Silver-Blood. I’m a very serious professional and I don’t have time to get sidetracked playing King-of-The-Castle with you and your toy soldiers. I expect you to spend that gold toward your employees’ health, and then to please stay out of my way.”

The look Wyrenna endured surely would have preceded another lengthy tirade, or even civil action, if not for that Thongvor snapped his mouth shut and shot a second, even more poisonous look somewhere a few inches over Wyrenna’s head. He clenched his fists, turned on his well-oiled heel, and thundered down the stairs. It left Wyrenna alone to face the person behind her, who’d caused such a show of petulance.

He was Altmer, Thalmor, though shorter than Valamand. Older, too. In that elfish way that did not show much in wrinkles or posture but in the weight of the air around him. He went dutifully hooded even indoors, fabric a smooth frame to his face. Where Valamand was perennially unable to grow a scrub, this mer sprouted a meticulous cropped beard. At either arm were two guardswomen in polished armor, and it was impossible to tell what either thought of Wyrenna before them.

“I dare not ask what profession you deem serious,” the mer said. “What leads you to dance on inn tables.”

“Actually, I learned a lot by dancing on tables, Sir,” Wyrenna said firmly. “I’m an intelligencer.”

The mer’s discrete huff of laughter did not slip past Wyrenna’s notice. “Or you so fancy yourself.” He paused. “A colleague of mine was quite insistent that you were of use to the Thalmor. I must demand that you follow me.”

With only the barest yes-of-course, Wyrenna was trotting to keep up with the Thalmor officer and his entourage. They turned off the Keep’s main halls and into the guts of the mountain, lit by weary candles.

“You’re Ondolemar, then?” Wyrenna said, bowing her head respectfully. There was no way to know if he would be like Elenwen, Silabaene, or any other Thalmor that Wyrenna had need to defer to before. She found herself in a bind. It would be no good to act out Altmeri etiquette, as she was an outsider to it. Yet to be utterly rude would be a disaster as well.

“I am. I command the Thalmor in Markarth,” he said. “You rouse my curiosity. What intelligence is there to be gathered making a fool of oneself to the lowborn?”

Wyrenna ignored the barbs of Thalmor charm as he spoke and then considered her answer. “Well, it’s a vantage point where you can survey everybody. Because every one of them’s already looking at you, you don’t need to worry if they catch you looking back. And I’m one of the common folk, so
“being among them doesn’t bother me.” she paused. “I can tell you that Ogmund, the player there, he definitely worships Talos.”

“Oh?”

“He knows the tune and lyrics to *Nine Maidens*. It’s a folk paean to Talos, about his mortal conquests.”

“And you knew to request this of him?”

Wyrenna knew not to make a mistake, now, at the risk of sticking her foot in a serpent's nest. “I grew up in Bruma where it was written. The player at the tavern there plays it almost every night. After the Temple of Talos was closed, people turned away from religion to replace it. But there’s no reason why anybody in Skyrim would need to know it. Everybody here worshiped normally, secretly, not so long ago.”

“You would be surprised at what ineptitude constitutes a Nord ‘secret,’” said Ondolemar.

“It’s my trade to never be surprised,” Wyrenna said. “But I surprise myself, sometimes.”

At last, they arrived before a wide, embossed door. Ondolemar released his escort, a subtle gesture that Wyrenna was envious of, if it was part of some sign-language. The Thalmor opened the latch, and let Wyrenna inside before shutting it behind her. Inside the office, Valamand was waiting. He replaced the thick binding he had been studying. “Ah, thank-you for finding her, Commander Ondolemar, but it was not necessary. I could have——”

“A dog, too, can fetch,” said Ondolemar. “I decided to evaluate her myself.”

Wyrenna did not care for how a Thalmor might ‘evaluate’ her. “So, I’m guessing that this is about Silabaene’s mess?”

“Crassly said, but yes,” Ondolemar said. “Sit.”

She took her place at the stone table, Ondolemar across from her and Valamand to her right. “I’m surprised that Il— that your Argonian is not by your side,” said Valamand.

“Ilyas-Tei really wanted to see the Dwemer museum,” Wyrenna said. “I’ll go get her later.”

Ondolemar pushed back his own hood, as Wyrenna remembered it was impolite to sit wearing a hat among company. His white hair was shaved down to a neat military style. “Your arrangements are inconsequential next to the matters at hand. I ask you to leave them,” he said. “Apparently, I remain as the sole ranking member of the Thalmor in Skyrim, apart from the High Kinlord himself.”

“It’s possible that the First Emissary may have fled to another location,” Valamand said. “But to me, that seems doubtful. And Agent Sanyon, who once was my own superior, perished months ago. The enforcer Ilse as well, beside him.”

“What of Lorcalin and Ancano?” asked Ondolemar, worry weighting his voice only in the most subtle way.

“Ancano’s, uh, occupied. And his wardog Estormo, too,” Wyrenna said. “That was me. Sorry.”

And when Ondolemar and Valamand both expected her to continue, piercing her with silent judgement, Wyrenna decided she had to explain.
“Look, after Justiciar… Lord… whatever, after Valamand got dragged off, I didn’t have that many options. I was laid up for a long time. Ilyas-Tei and I managed to smuggle off to Winterhold to wait it out. When I got there, Ancano was there first. I had to find out where Thalmor prisoners were taken, where Northwatch Keep actually was. So let’s just say that Ancano and Estormo won’t be able to help you here.” And, she added thoughtfully, “Besides, Ancano had some kind of falling-out with Elenwen and they weren’t speaking. I don’t think she even knew he was there, he was doing some shady things behind her back. You probably wouldn’t have wanted his help.”

“I sincerely hope your endeavor was worth Ancano’s absence, whatever it is,” Ondolemar said, and ignored Wyrenna’s breach of proper address for practically everybody she had mentioned.

“I am here now,” said Valamand. “If not for Wyrenna, I would remain in High Kinlord Silbaene’s torture chamber. Being unmade, I expect.”

“I have known of the High Kinlord’s presence in Skyrim. But what have you done to provoke his wrath?”

“I’m shocked that you don’t assume us to be traitors to the Dominion,” Valamand said. The words dropped from his mouth.

“Are you?” Ondolemar asked.

“No! No, of course not,” Valamand said.

“Then I will withhold my judgement. For now.” Ondolemar folded his hands neatly on the table. “I have played this game long enough to know a Thalmor jail may hold as many political rivals as it may hold heretics or rebels. But the genre of your threat to such a high and powerful mer interests me.”

“That’s also sort of my fault,” said Wyrenna. “Elenwen made me Valamand’s assistant and front-face in investigating something in Windhelm. As I caught on, I didn’t know what I’d found was Silabaene’s contributions to the Stormcloaks. In trying to figure it out, I ended up leading Ulfric Stormcloak himself right into the middle of Silabaene’s operations in Eastmarch. It was ugly to get out of it. I almost didn’t survive. Valamand was captured.”

Ondolemar’s lips set into a tight frown. “It doesn’t surprise me that High Kinlord Silabaene would interfere with this petty war. It has been something of Elenwen’s project itself, and there are many who do not agree with her methods. Or see them as a means to an end, that might be expedited.”

“What I don’t get was what he was doing in Eastmarch,” Wyrenna said. “In an ancient Nordic tomb.”

“Research,” Valamand said. “I had the chance to study his materials, briefly. And I was made to continue them in captivity. Inappropriate magics, beyond any call for pragmatism I can imagine. Applying barbaric methods of the ancient Nords and their Draugr to texts of the necromancer Mannimarco. Silabaene’s base of power has perfected a Soul Trap capable of ensnaring a dragon. Or even a whole soul, multiple whole souls in one gem. The precedent exists.”

“Such a black soul gem would surely be enormous,” Ondolemar said, incredulous. “Have any existed, so large?”

“If not, Silabaene surely has discovered how to produce them,” Valamand said.

“What’s so special about it?” Wyrenna said. Then when she felt she’d interrupted, “sorry. I know only certain things about magic. I didn’t get to study, um, whatever that is.”
“Souls of living beings come in a variety of sizes, with sapient races having black souls, and animals or sub-sapient entities having white souls,” Valamand explained. “Not all soul gems are capable of carrying a black soul, which also happen to be the largest souls yet discovered. But, an item of nuance in the soul trap is that commonly, a great deal of the soul is lost in transference. Only rarely, and with the very largest of soul gems is it possible to contain both a soul’s energy and the spirit of that person at once. Often a matrix of multiple gems is required, an animus geode. More common, the soul splits and the bound spirit passes to an intermediate plane such as the Soul Cairn, else might be claimed by some other force. The vital energy is then left behind. And that is what is commonly sealed within Soul Gems.”

“That will suffice as an explanation. Unfortunately, we do not have time to hold a session of Mysticism-sub-Conjuration for remedials,” Ondolemar said, though Wyrenna doubted that they were on any sort of time constraint at all beyond the mer’s patience. “If what you say is true, I cannot imagine what use the High Kinlord has for such magics. Alinor should be notified at the very least, though there is very little I could do against a High Kinlord’s word.”

Valamand stood very straight on his stone seat, indignant. Or uncomfortable on its hard surface. “While I was imprisoned, I saw several times Northwatch Guards trap the souls of prisoners. I think an official inquest is in order. Justice is not a vehicle to serve one mer’s ambitions.”

“Your opinion has been noted,” Ondolemar said. “But the purpose remains a mystery. One that I am not content to leave be, when it might interfere with my own work.”

Wyrenna thought. And she decided that now was as good a time as any. She reached down, inched a thin, tightly-rolled note out from between the lining of her boots. At last, she placed it on the table, just barely out of Ondolemar’s reach. “I have no idea what Silabaene wants with big souls. But I do have this, and it might give us an idea of what he’s after in the long run.”

“What,” Ondolemar said, “is that?”

“It’s an Elder Scroll.” Wyrenna coughed. “Well, it’s a copy of an interpretation of an Elder Scroll. By a Moth Priest that Silabaene had locked up at Northwatch Keep. Ilyana’s Revelation.”

Valamand studied it, picked nervously at its plain seal. “You haven’t opened it, or read it?”

“No, that’s crazy! Don’t those things burn up your eyes?”

“If this is a copy of the Elder Scroll that Silabaene holds, then it’s essential,” Valamand said. “I saw dozens of sightless prisoners at Northwatch Keep. We must learn what they were made to decipher.”

Ondolemar stared Valamand right into silence. Then he moved to Wyrenna. “Open it,” he said.

Wyrenna nodded slowly. Then, pinching her eyes shut, she held out her hand. Valamand passed her the scroll, which she slit open with her metal finger. She unrolled it under her thumb, feeling the parchment curl almost to cracking.

“Read it,” Ondolemar commanded.

Wyrenna opened her eyes. At the top of the scroll was a single alien character, an unbroken circle radiating various lines, what made her sick to look at. But the rest was transcribed.

“If it is fit for the tongue, speak its message aloud.”

Wyrenna took a deep breath of the metallic air, and gave the text her voice.
“All that is written is truth
the mandate of heavens bridges motion and stillness
and ever shall the sides be even, each end births its own defiance
thus the dragon n’er swallows nor is swallowed by Death
So repeats myth
By the greatest of mortal works, the lord shall be as one named anew
unimprisoned,
ensuring the break of dawn, and so turn the Wheel.”

The unending churn of metal and steam below the mountain reigned in the space between the three of them. Below the table, one of the Thalmor tapped his foot. Ondolemar’s clasped hands looked like they were holding on for life.

“Yeah, that was a lot of cryptic rubbish,” Wyrenna said. “But Ilyana was sure that the High Kinlord thinks it’s about himself.”

“There will be time to analyze this. I will think on it here,” Ondolemar said. “But, as edifying as Elder wisdom might be, we may take a more tangible course of action in the meantime."
Ondolemar would go on to relate what we as readers already know, from the mer’s own letter to Elenwen. That Silabaene’s agents had passed through Markarth, demanded access to the scholar Calcemo’s materials, and finally into the deeper ruins beneath the city. They had not returned, leaving Ondolemar at somewhat of an impasse in what to do about them.

It was Wyrenna’s immediate wish to give chase. However unwilling he was to spare his own unit, Ondolemar did not dissuade her. Perhaps that she was separate from his command was key. In that spirit, we shall be the remainder now: Valamand in his indecision.

“Let her collect her— sister, was it? Quaint,” Ondolemar said. “Linger here awhile, Justiciar. We’re not through.”

Thus far, Valamand had difficulty forming opinion on Ondolemar. Only that he was unlike any other commander or field agent he had served under. He could see where rumors of softness might spring from: the mer’s uncommon forgiveness of etiquette, social graces, and even appropriate level of disclosure. Though Valamand bit his tongue where he’d wished to correct Ondolemar’s political indelicacy.

“As you say,” Valamand complied.

“You keep eclectic company, Justiciar Valamand,” Ondolemar said. Finally, he poured two glasses of wine from a bottle on the far side of the table. Valamand knew enough to accept his share, and also enough to know this changed the tone of the discussion.

“My company has kept me, rather than the other way around,” Valamand said. “The Nord’s decisions remain much a mystery. Beyond that, I do not think I hold any rank under you, Commander. It, along with much else, was taken from me.”

“Nonsense. The High Kinlord’s word is great, but his official authority is Auridon. Skyrim, for what it is, is now solely mine. And I do not revoke any rank of yours,” Ondolemar said. “You’re the boy heir of Luxurene, hm?”

Valamand tasted the wine. Like sunlight and island groves, home far away in the south and across the sea. “I am, Sir.”

“I admit that you are not what I expected, based on your file. But there are many hazards that may adapt Mer to new circumstance,” Ondolemar said. “Your early accomplishment is impressive. I did not see such accolade until I was more than twice your age.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Valamand said. “But, I beg of you: be direct. What do you want of me, here?”

It was well within Ondolemar’s rights to punish such a borderline-uncouth outburst. But Valamand was surprised to see him nod, sip his wine. “If you had asked me that question a month or more ago, I would have had a significantly different answer,” Ondolemar said. “You are right to be alarmed, that I am aware of your progress. Understand, Justiciar. It is no coincidence that you were assigned to Sanyon’s folly rather than someplace of use.”

“I don’t follow,” Valamand said. “I have always been assigned according to my talents.”

“Yes, you have,” Ondolemar said. “And obviously your raw talent startled some middling mage or drill-instructor along the way, for you were assigned far from where their masters might be
threatened by it. Or from where the Dominion might benefit from your potential. Casting intermediate-level illusions for some magistrate’s harvest of the Gold Coast. Chasing down folk shrines in the woods! Nowhere for the youngest to make battlemage in a century and a half.”

Valamand felt his mind whirl even before a second sip of wine. True, he had felt unfulfilled at times. And he had often told himself that he merely would prove worthy. The notion that… someone had cheated him, thrown him away… Valamand had to drown it. And he had been so proud! He had held himself so high to be refuse, rejected from greatness!

“You don’t know, or haven’t figured it out,” said Ondolemar. “Have you?”

“I dread to ask,” Valamand blurted, louder than he’d meant. He looked up to see the Commander not impassive, not strong as he’d expected. The Mer bowed his head, caught it in gloved palms. Rubbed his temples. Breathed with heavy, sighing force. Lips quivering, presumably, with how to explain.

“Skyrim is expendable,” Ondolemar said.

And this did not make any sense for him to say, for Valamand had already known that. “Of course it is. Skyrim must fall to prove the Empire cannot enforce the White-Gold Concordat. Then Thalmor control will become absolute.”

“Yes. And no,” Ondolemar said. “Everything within Skyrim is expendable. Not simply the Nords. Or their halls, or their petty governments. You, and I— we are here only because the Dominion sees us as worthy to lose.”

“The First Emissary?”

“Too entangled with Ulfric Stormcloak to keep. Revenge upon her is his ultimate lure, ensuring he shall serve his function.”

“Ancano?”

“Unstable. Too ambitious, threatening to certain leadership.”

“Ancarion?”

“Who? I’ve never heard of them.”

“I believe there’s someone in the Rift? What’s his name?”

“Valmir? I know few less competent.”

“Sanyon?”

“An idiot, paranoid.”

“Ilse? An enforcer assigned alongside me.”

“I would not know. Personality flaws, as a catch-all.”

“Lorcalin?”

“Perhaps socially withdrawn. I have never seen a mer so content to sit on a log in the forest.”

“And you sit atop Ulfric’s worst military loss. A taunt?” Valamand said.
“Alas. Bait in the bear trap,” Ondolemar said. “But it is my role. I command what soldiers and agents of value I have picked from the scraps. I will see them through to the best of my ability. It is unfortunate that I was not permitted to snatch you, as well. Forgive me for watching your records. It is rare that true skill or talent passes before my nose.”

“Why are you in this midden, then?”

Ondolemar, despite what weight sat on his shoulders, smiled. Bitterly ungenerous. “I will say only that certain political choices of mine have in the past called my loyalties into question. And once, I have had my views adjusted where they proved unsatisfactory.”

And Valamand swore to himself never to think again on the piercing eyes of the older mer before him. Or the perfection of his political verses. For in these, he recognized another who vanity had attempted to scourge blank.

“I do not think much of our High Kinlord, if he would inflict such advanced methods on one so young as you,” Ondolemar said.

“I don’t think we should be using them at all,” Valamand said.

Ondolemar even managed to laugh, at that. Valamand did not understand what the joke was, for the subject matter. “Spoken like a true lord of Luxurene, if there is a model,” Ondolemar said. “I’ll be plain, as you wished. My interest is not purely professional. At one point in my own youth, I met your grandmother, then-Kinlady Estivel.”

“When?” Valamand said.

“Oh, before the fall of the Crystal Tower. I had not yet joined the Thalmor, being only a child. The venerable lady would speak all across Alinor and beyond. A womer as distinguished as her is rare. There are not many, if any now, who can say they remember life under the First Aldmeri Dominion. Battled alongside ancient heroes of mer, gave precedent to the greatness of a second, and third Aldmeri Dominion thereafter.”

“You’re a classicist,” Valamand said.

“In her time of glory, the Thalmor were the diplomatic hand of a Summerset throne, in true alliance with the Camoran dynasty. It was dreamlike, to imagine belonging to their illustrious number in this modern era,” Ondolemar said. “The saviors of mer.”

“My Grandmother is a traitor,” Valamand said. “I’m all that’s left, after her disloyalty.”

Ondolemar finished his glass of wine, which must have gone warm between his hands. “Oh, you have a cousin, at least. Branch family, non-inheritable.” he paused. “I never did understand why the lady Estivel chose to expatriate. My younger self was quite the admirer of her adventures. It’s a pity my own have led me here, where I shan’t escape.”

“That is what you intend for me, then? That I ought to escape?”

“No, Stars no,” Ondolemar said. “You’ll never escape. But you’ll find that is different from being trapped.”

“Oh my! You’re the Calcelmo? Author of Dwarves?” Ilyas-Tei squealed, each pinion nearly standing on-end. “I’m so excited to meet you!”
Calcelmo himself looked up from where he was studying a small gyroscope with a pair of equally delicate calipers. “I don’t have time for—” then he must have processed what was being said, the bouncing Argonian before him, and Valamand’s appearance as a Thalmor beside Wyrenna. “Aha, hm... Well-met, then. I don’t believe we’ve—”

“I’m Ilyas-Tei, sir, I have a copy of all of your books! It is such an honor to meet such a famous expert on the Dwemer. Reading about them inspired me to become an engineer! I love your museum.”

“That is an excellent goal for an, er, Argonian,” said Calcelmo who Wyrenna felt sorry for.

“If it is not too much trouble? I have a few questions actually,” said Ilyas-Tei. “Are you planning on releasing the actual data that you have gathered on the Dwemer? Dwarves was fascinating, but not very specific on the statistical analysis of your individual studies. You describe the angular design of Dwemer crafts as a mathematical advantage in terms of strength, and describe curves as riskier, is that in reference to the irrationality of the Payem ratio? And how does that relate to the architectural advantage of the arch, or are you describing single-point load stress?”

“Oh, well, you see—”

“And also, I have experimented with Dwemer alloys— and they have to be alloys— melting them down changes the amount of carbon in the mix, making it useless. And I’ve only ever been able to melt a tiny sample, with gas-fire! The only way to reform dwemer metal I have found is to heat it and re-hammer it, and cool it only in oil. I would need a furnace much hotter than a conventional finery if I wanted to burn off the ash. It turns all pig-iron-like.”

Wyrenna, at this moment, decided to take mercy on both Calcelmo and her sister. She approached, laid one hand on the vibrating Argonian. “Ilyas-Tei? Breathe.”

“I am breathing,” said Ilyas-Tei. Her nostrils were flared.

“Go breathe over there for a minute,” Wyrenna said. “Let it out.”

Because this was something that had happened to Ilyas-Tei many times before, it wasn’t unreasonable to ask and Ilyas-Tei herself nodded, closed her mouth, and sat over by Calcelmo’s astonished nephew. Wyrenna could hear her release the excitement in the form of screaming with jaw shut, rocking back and forth slightly.

“I’m sure she’ll be more composed later,” Wyrenna said hopefully, approaching Calcelmo. “Anyway, excuse us. I’m Wyrenna, and this Justiciar is Valamand. Ondolemar sent us to—”

“Of course he did! The Thalmor cannot possibly mind their own business for even a week, can they?” Calcelmo spat. “What can they expect to muscle over me, this time?”

Valamand came forward now, something that surprised Wyrenna. In her experience, he had ever detested civilians and dealing with them. But, she thought, he had spent some time out of uniform robes and Calcelmo was Altmer. “Relatively little,” he assured the scholar. “Merely your cooperation. I have been told that other Thalmor have been here, recently. No affiliation with Commander Ondolemar. Only what they wanted, where they went, is what is needed from you.”

“So long as you leave me and my research out of it,” Calcelmo said. “Their number came here and bypassed my authority to enter Nchuand-Zel. On one hand, they took care of the dreadful giant spiders. Nimhe, queen among them.”

“On the other hand?” asked Wyrenna.
“I cannot imagine the mess they are making in there!” Calcelmo said. “Disturbing valuable artifacts, most likely. That is, if they haven’t found a creative method to get themselves killed.”

Valamand did not seem impressed by that possibility, or the grim set of his jaw may have indicated he very much doubted it. “I don’t suppose you were able to get a name, or extract any information at all of exactly who entered by these doors?”

“No. Most rude, truly! But they were able to bypass the lock with ease.”

“How about we go inside and take a look for you?” Wyrenna offered. “I feel like you were going to ask, anyway.”

And, to nobody’s surprise, that was what Calcelmo found to be an agreeable course of action. By now, Wyrenna had come to recognize this as a common point in the world. A vast many people had problems which needed solving, impossible for that particular person, and such an interloper who did so might seem to be a god-hand reaching down to resolve the matter. But while she considered it a good deed, Wyrenna’s thoughts were firmly focused on how finding these other Thalmor might answer her own questions.

It was only a few more minutes to gather more definite supplies for an extended tour below-ground, from Understone Keep. Ilyas-Tei occupied herself with the task. Between skipping up and down the halls and shaking with pure elation.

“I can’t believe it. This is the greatest adventure of my life, Wyrenna. I’ve always wanted to see real Dwemer ruins, you know that,” she said, croaking near-sobs into her sister’s shoulder as the vast doors opened before them. “The idea… you know I wouldn’t ever have decided to be an adventuress without it!”

“Adventuress? You said you were an engineer,” Valamand said skeptically.

“You start out doing one thing only, then the next thing you know, you have dipped your tail into another thing. And then another, and it never really stops until you’re doing all of the things. You go out hunting, and you stumble upon ruins and you explore the ruins. Then you study and sell the findings or have to learn how to open the locks in ancient chests. And then by the Hist, you’ve broken your equipment so you must find your way around fixing it. Then people expect you to hunt or explore more ruins, and soon you’re swimming at unknown depths, meaning to become a hunter but then becoming an adventuress-alchemist-engineer-craftsworker-archer-scout-locksmith-thing.”

Entering the Dwemer ruins themselves came with a strange warm fog. Even in the collapsed passages, what clamminess ought to have lurked underground was exchanged instead for balmy humidity, punctuated by cold draft where cracks in the stone sucked the stale air away like a tepid breath. Motes of dust hazed the view under unyielding lamps and firelight. Calcelmo’s long-burning torch sconces gave way soon to the miserable spider-holes at the bottom of the excavation.

“I know the way,” Valamand said. “If you would follow, we might proceed with minimal cobwebs ingested.”

“You’ve never been here before,” said Ilyas-Tei, admiring the flat angles and dull bronzed metal that stuck through the scuttled walls every few yards.

Valamand, as he passed them to take the lead, seemed to be focusing somewhere before his feet despite the poor visibility. “Correct! But with simple magic, I can easily trace others that have passed through.”
“Handy,” Wyrenna said, passing by the corpse of a hulking spider. It had only been dead somewhat over a week. Each limb curled in, flesh stiffening within the dusty carapace. “Useful for chasing down your prisoners, I guess.”

“I would rather not say,” Valamand said, voice dying in his throat. He began feeling around in the grand door before him for a latch. It had been recently been wiped of webs and grime, more evidence of passage. It was Ilyas-Tei that found the actual catch, a winch-crank that moved what felt (from vibrations in the floor) like a deadbolt as wide as a tree trunk. Wyrenna glanced back at the tumbled stone and sticky egg sacs of once-Nimhe’s lair. When Valamand and Ilyas-Tei had strode forth into the ruins, Wyrenna let Nchuand-Zel swallow her, too.

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“Gods’ breath! I think they’re elves!” Wyrenna turned the translucently veined body over with the tip of her boot. The creatures hunch-backed as they walked, but stretched upon the ground their bodies were much taller. Save for the sharp-filed teeth and collapsed nose, their faces were not so alien. Gaunt and twisted maybe, but the face of a ruined person. Not something that teetered on the edge of higher thought.

“Impossible, I know a goblin when I see one,” Valamand said. But as Ilyas-Tei leaned over it with her lantern his contoured brow rose and he appended, “and that is certainly not a goblin.”

Ilyas-Tei yanked an arrow out of it, inspected its head for damage, and after a quick wipe placed it back in her quiver. Nearby, other less-fresh bodies lay. Scavengers of their own kind had begun to pick them apart. “I’m not totally sure, but I think they might be Falmer? They’re supposed to live down in the deeps.”

“I always thought that part of the old story was a metaphor?” Wyrenna said. “Ysgramor driving the snow elves into darkness? As in, he killed them all?”

Valamand was repulsed, in a way that no vampire or shambling undead had yet spooked the mer. “The truth may be even more dreadful,” he said. “If it’s all the same, I would prefer to keep moving.”

As they passed deeper into the ruin, Wyrenna caught Valamand muttering to himself. That mer could fall so far, could manifest in such a crude and warped form. Wyrenna pitied him, for the shock to his sensibilities. But then again, she had met many men and mer so far that had been debased. Even if not in physical shape.

Wyrenna shuddered under the remorseless gaze in her mind, High Kinlord Silabaene, and the weighty hand of Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak.

The sound of an arrow glancing off her armor sharply filled the wide chamber, though the ceiling retreated above into darkness and the tiny dancing pinpoints of glow-worms and fungus. Slapping feet padded across the upper gallery, harsh cries to follow. “Why now?” Wyrenna groaned. “I don’t want to fight an army of cave elves!”

“Ssh!” Ilyas-Tei hissed. “Neither of you move!”

Wyrenna held her breath. Both feet planted on the ground, she felt her armor sigh, involuntary twitches too-obvious. The rustle of Valamand’s robes and creak of hard leather. Yet, the Falmer froze above in the dark. Wyrenna could see their shadows against the dull illumination of dwemer lamps, flickering. The massive cavern and its causeways were vulnerably open. It was sensible to think that if she was sitting right out in plain sight, and could see them, that they might see her. Wyrenna waved her gauntlet. Nothing.
But when Wyrenna was sure the cave-dwellers had lost their position, they did not retreat. They whistled deeper into the caverns, beckoning. Dogs? Not dogs that skittered?

The black, chitinous mandibles that advanced out of the dark certainly made her wish for dogs!

“Aaah!” Wyrenna held up her shield before their spray of acid goo could take her face off. It splattered her plate and pocked tiny holes in the linen padding under her chain. The sound, though, spurred the Falmer to action. The huge insects recoiled and retreated before Wyrenna peeked over her shield. Valamand with some force of spell was repelling the noxious spray, pushing it back midair until it rebounded on the creatures. While their tough carapaces protected them, their eyes and soft mouthparts hissed and bubbled.

Ilyas-Tei ran forth ahead, seized one of the horrors by the chomping jaw and kicked it over. In her other hand, she gripped her knife and plunged it into the gap between the armor plates. She sawed with the serrated blade, wrestling. It was only the right thing to help. Wyrenna dove for the beast’s other side and pinned it with her weight. She crushed its sensitive feelers under her boots.

The Falmer were advancing, crawling down from above and onto their causeway.

“No, no, not today,” Valamand muttered. Wyrenna couldn’t see the point; he’d never much spoken in combat before, that she could have noticed. But the blank eyes and still-elven features of these fallen beings disturbed him. He grasped the other long, chitinous body (which he had well-roasted) and with arcane force flung it at the encroaching Falmer. They literally did not see it coming. A shower of bodies in the water, and some ugly falls upon stone echoed below.

Their sprint down the twisting platforms had to be metered many times by caution, where stone slabs had eroded enough to make passage perilous. It would be too easy to misjudge a step and sail right over the sheer drop. As advanced as the Dwemer had been, they didn’t seem to have invented handrails before succumbing to plague, vanishing to Oblivion, or however they’d managed to completely disappear themselves. Ilyas-Tei lingered on all the tight curves, running her thin gloves up the stone and over ancient rivets. As serious as the situation was, Wyrenna thought, at least someone was delighted.

What awaited them at the bottom of Nchuand-Zel was less delightful, though. A dozen bodies, Falmer and Altmer, littered the flooded embankments. Some of the architecture was recently-sunken and some recently-unsunken in return. Even to Wyrenna, who had little experience with works of magic grander than a very large explosion, it was clear that someone had been excavating there with spells. Worse, someone had collapsed what tunnel they had broken into the ruin. It smelled like a finery, the most noxious of pickle and slag.

“I can understand why they might shut the door after them, so to speak,” Valamand said. “If these creatures would harry deeper into the ruins.”

“Who knows? They may have marched right into the nest,” Ilyas-Tei said. “But look at this! What a waste!”

“We can take rubbings of it later,” Wyrenna said. “Valamand, can you un-collapse it?”

“Of course I can,” the mer said. “But not with the, er, reserves of magicka I possess. Even as considerably vast as they are.”

“So you can’t.”

“I know how! Given enough time, or an external focus of power, it would even be simple,” said
Valamand. “But neither of these things are available.”

“What was all of that at Northwatch Keep, then?”

Valamand coughed. It wasn’t a cough to clear the throat. More like an excuse to pause and consider his words. “Unless you wish to replicate the conditions, I don’t think... It was a... highly-charged moment.”

“Okay, okay. I guess you were on like, three different kinds of potions,” Wyrenna conceded.

“Wyrenna! Those were my strongest potions!”

“He was hurt!”

“You could have killed him!”

Valamand coughed again. This time, more of a ‘pay attention to me’ cough. “My catastrophic overdose aside, I think there is another way to rejoin our mystery interlopers.”

Wyrenna sank. Two and a half stone of beaten steel and mail on her ensured it, even. Diving into the sump wasn’t such of a terrible thing, Wyrenna had taken dips in mountain ponds in the summers many times. But there was an animal panic that she could not surface, wild waving of her arms in water to desperately seize the air retreating above her. She was growing short of breath, voice muffled under the bath-warm water.

Her heels hit the flat stone surface of Nchuand-Zel’s flooded district just as her lungs could not take anymore. Horror screamed in her mind as she reflexively sucked in water.

Or not water?

The constant urging of her own brains that she ought to be drowning, was drowning belied the film stuck in her nose, down her throat. She took a deep breath, and the water before her was transformed into fresh air. She exhaled. Bubbles shimmered brass and silver in the hazy light.

Valamand had assured her that his magic would allow her to survive underwater. And, after a fashion, she did trust him. But there was a primal circuit in her, perhaps in the consciousness of all creatures, that did not believe more than sensation and reflex. Magic, to it, did not exist. Water that became air was impossible.

Still, light with no sun or stars or fire was also impossible. Wyrenna focused her own magic abilities, throttling the flow to a bright, consistent white torch. It penetrated the stagnant water and threw the abyss into crisp detail.

Valamand was swimming down in front of her, reaching for stones on the floodbed. He filled his pockets with them, flipped himself over-heels, and soon was only slightly buoyant a few meters in front of her. His golden hair haloed around him, shimmering like the fins of a far-southern fish.

“Glub blub blgh,” Wyrenna said, in an eruption of bubbles. Ilyas-Tei slid around her, her entire body stroking in time with her tail. She was laughing. Or, what Argonians often did instead of laughing. Wyrenna saw the feather pinions on head move in a particular time, indicating humor. At least half of Jel language was not spoken with the tongue but instead with posture and movement of spines, suited to life underwater where no words carried. Only Saxhleel could be fully fluent. Wyrenna replied with her own body-language, a gesture that isn’t fit to print.
Seeing this inconvenience perhaps, Valamand held up one soggy glove. ‘Wait?’ In the time that Wyrenna took to try and decipher, he wove something magic between his hands, grimaced at the effort, and with a note of triumph released it into the water around them.

Now, that was strange. Like a static on the rind of her mind, a sudden awareness of presence.

“It’s working? Isn’t it?”

At first, Wyrenna mistook this voice for the one she sometimes heard in her head as she read to herself. But it wasn’t hers.

“Glub,” Wyrenna said.

“Verbalizing isn’t necessary,” said the voice, what Wyrenna recognized as Valamand before her. “I am speaking directly to you, I should hope. Try projecting at me. It ought to work in multiple directions.”

If that was the voice inside his head, it was quieter than Wyrenna expected.

“Like this?” she thought, or said— and I will hereafter simply refer to as “saying” for ease of transcription.

Valamand nodded.

Ilyas-Tei doubled back and swam by again. Wyrenna felt her pressure now, too. But the voice was not as distinct, or else was a foreign composition of thought. “Why? -

-? Stillness?”

“Ilyas-Tei must not think in the same language as I do,” Wyrenna said. Then, when she realized her mistake of thinking such a thing out loud, “Oops!”

“Silly,” Ilyas-Tei said.

With that, they proceeded on their way. Walking was amalgam of heavy and light. Her entire body weighed less underwater, but the resistance on her armor and slight upward tug of buoyancy slowed her to an awkward skip. Valamand’s robes hung straight up in the water as their soggy drag hindered him, but he managed along quicker than Wyrenna. Ilyas-Tei swam circles around them, coordinated as a crocodile. Wyrenna had seen her sister’s Argonian talents before, but never in such a shared context.
“That’s really impressive,” she said, again somewhat less candid than she intended. “This magic isn’t so bad. Is this what it’s like for you all the time, Ilyas-Tei?”

Valamand looked back briefly at Wyrenna. She did not hear his voice, but the pressure on her mind felt strangely anticipative, as if he struggled to blank whatever he might have ‘said.’ She spoke instead, guessing the pause was awkward. “Is it hard? To cast a breathing-underwater spell and a speaking-underwater spell at the same time?”

“I could use the exercise,” Valamand admitted. “Many mages reach a plateau, beyond which it is difficult to expend enough magicka to push one’s limits. Or one’s imagination runs dry, once all simple effects are easily achievable.”

“I guess if you can blow something up perfectly well, then why bother with anything more creative?”

“Many reasons, but yes. Very perceptive. That is exactly my point,” Valamand said. His mental voice increased in volume, but turned away before he could think anything more at her. It was a little too late, though, for another concept had leaked through that had not been words exactly, but riding them. A strong and heady subtext of, ‘you are intelligent.’

Wyrenna had to pause at that, startled. She could not bid herself stop running backwards through her mind, recalling dozens of instances of this same mer sneering at her, insulting her intellect, how small she had felt before it. Wyrenna had no idea if these thoughts were ‘said’ over the magic’s link, but Valamand did not look at her. He merely forged on, back stiff as a glass rod.

If Ilyas-Tei had little in the way of comment but, “

They were in some sort of disused duct, enormous rusted fan-blades jutting out of slits in stone around her. The water itself was stagnant, but weakly-circulating. Every now and again, a jet of cold current would buffet her, an underground stream cutting through the doldrums. A pattering shower of droplets often plucked overhead. Not rain, not indoors. Condensation, from steam and broken pipes. Once, Wyrenna had seen an ugly brown slick that hung by her feet. Oil?

Tiny, blind salmon scattered at her light, pure white and ghostly. Every few dozen yards, the remains of some Dwemer creation littered the metal-and-stone floor. Ilyas-Tei caught where their fine parts were pushed by the honey-slow flow, salvaged what little remained that interested her. They passed before a winking light encased entirely in yellow glass. A melancholy beckoning. The ground began
to rise up.

“I’m not that smart,” Wyrenna said. “I mostly am a trick.”

“No!”

The uneloquence of that statement, or thought, shocked Wyrenna. It was less a word and more of an unbidden self-attack. An utter disgust and rejection, slowly digesting the one who issued it. It did not sound like anything Valamand normally would have said, or even anything to be ‘said’ at all.

“Nothing you have done has been superficial,” he appended, as if to follow in his outburst’s wake, “And I am not immune to error.”

A dimpled dome arched over them. Here was where Valamand stopped, put his hand on the metal. Boiling water and bubbles of steam circled his hand where he heated it, ripped into the softened and rusted surface. It was merely tin skin stretched over ribs of stronger dwemer metal. He unloaded the rocks in his pockets and began to ascend through that opening. All Wyrenna could do was jump and climb, until Ilyas-Tei took her by the arm and with sheer strength of stroke pulled her topside.

The magic shattered with a semi-audible *pop* the moment she hit the surface and breathed real, non-altered air. Her mind was alone again, left to stare in unfortunate pity at Valamand wringing out his hair. Wyrenna’s own armor sloshed. Ilyas-Tei, though, seemed unbothered. All her gear was of her own design and sealed with oilskin and wax. Wyrenna envied the foresight, though an Argonian probably had far more reason to be casually waterproof than she did.

The open pools on either side of the room were not flooded and ruined, but purposefully engineered. They framed a large hall, smooth floor engraved with grooves and metal-clad recessed tracks. The vaulted ceiling was square, a cubical space cut away deep under the mountains. On the far side, the bronzed walls were studded with unknown machinery. There were cranes bare of tow-lines amidst a gallery of devices. Some, copies of the relics displayed in Understone Keep.

“Animunculi!” Ilyas-Tei said with delight. “Real dwemer animunculi!”

Unlike their fused-fast kind mounted as art, these woke. And moved. And, clattering, advanced with sparkling conduits and honed chopping blades.

“Well,” Wyrenna muttered, drawing her sword. She quickly juggled it between two hands while pushing her sopping hair aside. “Okay.”
Rain's Hand

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Unfortunately, it was not *that* wall that happened to be terribly important. The *opposite* wall was dominated by an enormous vault door, and Valamand’s trail ended at its stoop. Its mechanisms were wider than tree trunks, and its span cleared the room, as if entire houses might have to be moved inside. On closer inspection, the original wall was also mostly door: many gates through which goods and people might pass, between the equipment. But approaching the solid Dwemer framework in their way, Wyrenna could not imagine how anyone had breached inside. But Valamand couldn’t have been wrong. There were footprints in the dust.

Ilyas-Tei took out her ring of lock-picks, sighing.

With all the tunnels and ports that they could find stuffed up by rocks and scrap, no more animunculi emerged from the ruined depths. Fresh but hot air vented through thin-grated ducts, circulating a balmy draft. It was by one of these that they stripped their equipment and laid it all out flat to dry. This was the basis of their camp, a tiny isolated plane of Oblivion under the dark Druadach Mountains. Valamand had meant to sketch some of this massive and dour scene, only to find Wyrenna’s folio soggy.

“I don’t understand it,” he said, waving one of the small pile of soul gems and shards that they’d been able to pull out of the animated constructs. “The Dwemer did not care for magic or gods. And yet, their work has many magical elements. Can one power anything with soul gems, yet not trap souls? The mechanics of their creations rely heavily on conduction of electricity, foundations studied extensively for shock magic.”

Ilyas-Tei sounded like she wanted to reply, but her focus on surmounting the elaborate security was absolute. Her space was filled by the slow, echoing drips off the roof of the hewn cave.

“They probably did do magic?” Wyrenna said. “And lied about it, or called it not magic.”

“An ambitious lie. The commands etched into these soul gems are more sophisticated than most glyphic installations,” he said. “Do you still have that enchanted ring?”

Wyrenna tossed it to him, then returned to combing through her sodden possessions. Valamand may have dried like a duck, but the chill lingered on her bare shoulders, made her trousers stiff where the damp still clung. The greasy water had done unmentionable things to her hair.

“It should work again now, for at least two uses,” Valamand said. Wyrenna didn’t see how he recharged it, but the soul gem crumbled into a chalky, grey dust afterward.

“Why does it only work outside? I’d love to vanish right out of this ruin.”

“I’ve read it’s a standard feature of most preset teleporation spells. Or those with a longer range than a few meters,” said Valamand. “A skilled mage, in the past when such arts were common, might have fewer restrictions. But for an unthinking scroll or ring? The sky must be unobstructed at both the entry and exit point. It might not work under heavy tree canopy, either. And this ring cannot be used underwater or while the subject is partially immersed in water. Or in the rain.”

“But why?”
“To prevent one from teleporting from or materializing into foreign material,” he said. “Thus fusing oneself inadvertently with another substance.”

Wyrenna considered that. A rock or a wall with somebody’s poor arm sticking out of it. Appearing within seawater and dissolving like a lump of salt. Or worst of all, vanishing out of being buried alive and emerging elsewhere as half-person, half-dirt. “That makes sense. But how do your clothes stay on? Can you accidentally appear naked? What pushes the air out of the way when you arrive so you don’t get it all mixed-up inside you? What happens to the breath in your lungs, does that come with you or is it left behind?” she asked, wondering about each item in turn. Valamand looked constipated, like he didn’t have a good answer to any of those things. “There’s got to be a better way,” she said.

“A portal, of course, would be a much more stable solution. But they must be opened, and they can be closed— and apparently they are restricted material. For all the Thalmor professed to foster my magical abilities, I was never allowed access to such an art.” Valamand only was more aggrieved. “And yet, Silabaene’s menials fling it about with abandon.”

Wyrenna changed the subject. “I’m still not looking forward to walking all the way back out through the water and the Falmer again.”

For quite a while, the only sounds were their breathing, the pin-scratches of Ilyas-Tei’s work behind them, and the hazy buzzing of the yellow lighting. Then Valamand stood. Wyrenna couldn’t imagine where he might be going until he faced her and folded his hands neatly before him.

“Suffice it to say, this is a strange request,” he began. “But I would like to be taught how to fight as a Nord. As you do.”

Wyrenna sat for a second, trying to understand what he was asking of her. “You’re joking,” she said, then remembered his vestigial sense of humor. “You’re a battlemage.”

“That is not the same as fighting,” Valamand said, somewhat queasy. “I can destroy. And I have done so many times before. But without magic… I’m nothing. I cannot defend myself. But you! You started with nothing, and in only months dominate the fray.”

“She didn’t start with nothing!” Ilyas-Tei said from where she worked. “Wyrenna has been gob-socking since she was hatched.”

“Ilyas-Tei! That doesn’t count!” said Wyrenna. She stood up, appraised Valamand across from her. Minus robe, tunic, gloves, he stripped down to much the same sorry state she was in. “How long do elves train for battle? Decades?”

“Tedium doesn’t matter.” Valamand’s conviction was firm in his voice, so marked next to haughty apathy and disdain it seemed foreign. “I am a novice here. Approach me as one.”

Wyrenna appraised him, suspending her disbelief. “Fine. Get set up like you meant to put me down.”

“You won’t demonstrate?”

Wyrenna frowned, recognizing a familiar dilemma. “It’d be silly,” she said. “You’re not a Nord, for one. And two, Nords are terrible at fighting.”

Valamand didn’t quite know what to do with his arms and legs for a second. But he did arrive at a stance. It was a flawed version of one Wyrenna had trained herself to recognize. Bent legs, forward favoring, taking full advantage of his reach. He balled his fists so tightly his nails dug into his palms. “There’s no shortage of threatworthy Nord warriors,” he said.
“Some Nords are good at fighting. Nords in general are terrible,” Wyrenna said, settling into her own balanced posture. “Actually, they’re a lot like elves, and like you.”

When he didn’t move, Wyrenna decided to break the ice, so to speak. “So, from where you are, what do you think your advantages are?”

“My potential threat is greater,” Valamand said. “I am taller than you.”

“That’s the very first thing that Nords think, too. But come at me and test it.”

Wyrenna hadn’t much experience in what empty-handed brawling among Altmer was like. But she was unsurprised to see the common tight-drilled footwork from Valamand as other soldiers swore by with swords. Wyrenna neatly slid out from under it and ducked into range, and pushed him with the heel of her right hand.

“If being tall gives you such power, how was I able to do that?” she said.

“I…” Valamand was shocked. He rubbed his breastbone where Wyrenna had struck him. “That’s over a thousand hours of training, to answer your question. Proven useless.”

Wyrenna waved at him again. “Nah.” Wyrenna said. “Get ready again.”

Valamand did, a little more shakily this time. Wyrenna walked over, tapped his elbows and nudged his feet a little. “You’re tall, you got that right. You can control the space around you. But control yourself, first.”

“Excuse me, you’re looking at the combat standard of the Aldmeri Dominion, victors over the Empire of Cyrodiil. I think one could do worse for lack of control.”

Wyrenna wished she’d plucked her eyebrows recently, because she just was not as good at that skeptical that-is-absurd look as Valamand and that made things very trying. “Being able to repeat perfectly what you’ve been told isn’t the same as understanding what you’re doing,” Wyrenna said. “Are you deciding, or are the Thalmor still choosing how to move you?”

“How else would I be? What even should I do, then?”

“We can figure it out,” Wyrenna admitted, “Come on. Haven’t you thought of punching me at least once?”

Valamand advanced hard from the start, trying with all his speed to level Wyrenna. He had a good eye at least. He saw where she was going and sought her weaker side. But she turned away his glancing blows, pushed him backwards with her open palms only. “And try and pay attention to where all your parts are,” she reminded.

“Keep… track?” Valamand puffed. “How are you… talking? I can’t…”

She shoved him backwards again. Valamand grumbled loudly, then sighed. He rushed back in, determined. This time improving his form, whipping around behind to dump her on the hard stone.

Wyrenna clenched her fists and was up like a mad dog. She felt the resistance of Valamand’s ribs under her knuckles, heard him cry out. He attempted to deflect her next ruthless blow— Wyrenna caught his wrist, flipped it, and his entire limb followed. He yelled as he bent over and slammed to the floor. Wyrenna pounced upon him, teeth bared. She pinned his arm, then went for the throat.

“Do you want to know why Nords lose, and why you lose, Valamand?” Wyrenna asked, dirty hair
Valamand’s expression had not been seen since he had faced a dragon.

“You fight like you’re prepared to die,” she said. “I fight like I am prepared to kill you.”

He gasped for long moments after she released her grip. Not merely physical breathlessness. He looked shaken to his bones.

“Nords, they fight to win and die well. You fight to win and die for your Dominion. But no one who’s fought to die has ever lived.”

“And you live,” Valamand croaked, propped up on his arms.

Wyrenna nodded. “Valamand, I have seen you kill many times. But only when your victory was almost assured. Civilians. Bandits. Beasts. But what do you risk?”

"Nothing," he said.

"I asked you this a long time ago,” Wyrenna said. “But do you have a life?”

The mer thought. He sat on the floor for a long time, perfectly still. He avoided her eyes. “For much of my time, I have been convinced to fancy so,” he said slowly. “But I could not tell you a name of anyone I value that is not present.”

He swallowed something. Tears?

“The world at large would not mourn or even mark my passing. Nor are there any who might lack for my company. So, no.”

Wyrenna hauled him up. Not by his scalp, but by his neck. “Then you’re going to die!” She was yelling. She had to let go of him. No. Try again. She was trying to teach him something, not… not be upset about this. “If you’re taught to treat yourself like you’re something to throw away, you’ll throw yourself away. You’re not… not garbage, Valamand. I’d miss you at least. If you died.”

“I’m sort of on the bank about it,” Ilyas-Tei said, from where she was working.

In the high-vaulted hall, Wyrenna’s sigh of exasperation echoed back and forth until it sounded like five Wyrennas. Valamand was frozen still, as Wyrenna did her best to straighten him out. She didn’t have a handkerchief for him. With luck he wouldn’t start actually crying at any moment. “I’ve hard time believing that there’s nothing left for your life. It’s not like I had much in mine.”

Valamand wiped his eyes a little with the back of his arm. It was smooth (he was remarkably hairless on much of his body) so there wasn’t much of anywhere for any tears to go. He sniffed loudly and composed himself.

“I didn’t exactly ask for a catharsis,” Valamand said.

“You asked to learn how to fight,” Wyrenna replied. “Fighting is only the trick of not dying. But we've got to learn how to live.”

--

The exercise did keep them busy until their equipment was quite dry. And then the aftermath formed the basis of a more in-depth Restoration exercise. It was shocking to her, but while Valamand was highly learned in magical dynamics and the meta-forces underlying spells his experience in
Restoration as a school was limited.

“What do you mean? Shields and wards via Alteration are unmatched in durability. It's been well-established for centuries,” Valamand said. If Wyrenna had not known him, she might guess him to be cross. But if anything, his argumentativeness seemed delighted.

She thought back to the lectures she sat through, listening to Colette Marence and dreading that she’d find the elf next to her close to death. “Well, wards with Restoration’s how it’s taught in Skyrim,” she said.

“Preposterous. Only Alteration can alter the air before oneself to be insulated. At least within economical magicka constraints.”

Wyrenna thought of how it had been explained to her. “The way to cheat with Restoration is… you can restore the place right in front of you to how it would be without any magic there at all. That way you don’t have to know what’s coming at you. It could be a surprise but the ward will still be good until it breaks.”

“That’s not a cheat,” Valamand said. “That’s actually a fascinating possibility. Exploiting native dynamics of magicka and re-instating them to your advantage. Theoretically effective against non-elemental forces as well. Tell me, how does it do against physical assault?”

“It does all right? Not as well. You can’t restore the resting state of something hitting you in the face,” Wyrenna said. “You can take away its oomph though. I don’t know why. The strikes go mushy somehow.”

Valamand considered this.

“Certainly the physics are quite different from a skin spell, or a conventional Alteration-based ward or shield. I cannot say for certain until I test it out, but all wards I am adept with might resist energy or blows. What you describe would be negating said forces. An arrow might shatter on Alteration-based solutions. Your approach might null its momentum and drop it to the floor. The arrow’s energy could be restored to what it manifested at rest. In defiance of most known principles of nature, I add.”

Wyrenna blinked. “Magic changes the way things ought to work all the time, why is that special?”

“The more in defiance of natural laws a piece of magic is, or the more elements of Mundus it must circumvent, the more magicka is required to sustain it. Yet by exploiting said natural laws, one might stop an arrow with a fraction of the magicka required to lift it.”

“I’ve got it! I’ve got the door!”

Wyrenna leaped up, mail clattering around her. Ilyas-Tei pulled a series of very heavy levers into place, finally unbolting the latches one by one. They had a specific order, even with the lock disengaged, and even Valamand loomed over her shoulder to watch her claws click over the mechanism.

The door slowly swung open on silent, long-oiled pivots.

A circle of bronzed bars shot up out of the floor to cage all three of them.

“Xuth! I cut the switch to everything!”

The cage self-incinerated. Wyrenna ducked, cried in horror until she realized that nothing was
happening. Valamand spread before her. Ilyas-Tei had curled into a ball. The elf dispelled the fire with both his hands. “I could have waited on a demonstration, to be honest,” he said.

Despite herself, Wyrenna laughed. Valamand was using Restoration, just like she’d suggested.

“I’m glad you didn’t,” Wyrenna admitted. “You know, certain death is a lot less stressful with a wizard around.”

“Nerves aside, while I’d love to do this forever I’d really rather not,” Valamand said. “I don’t suppose there’s any way to release this cage?”

Ilyas-Tei still was whimpering where she hid. “I disarmed the release!”

Wyrenna thought. With Valamand able to handle the fire, the problem was the metal bars. That was the most important thing. “Valamand, I know this is a bad time. But tell me the magic trick to make fire hot.”

“What? It’s not hot enough already?”

“It’s not,” Wyrenna said honestly. “Look, just trust me?”

Valamand grumbled. Then redoubled on his warding spells and took a deep breath. “You already know how to apply magicka to a simple alteration effect: light. And you do know how to channel magicka into the native patterns in the world around you. With that foundation, increasing fire’s energy ought to be simple. Not even Destruction, really.”

“Valamand! Please, in only a few words!”

“Oh! Combustion is the rapid collapse of fuel such as air, wood, oil, et cetera, into composite substances. But it requires energy. You possess such energies.”

Which was true. She did. Wyrenna, face full of sweat, reached out with what magical skill she had and found the fire. She fed it. Hotter, hotter, until the flames brightened from orange, to yellow, to bright and oppressive white. Wyrenna felt the ends of her hair crackle. Her tears vanished into vapor before rolling down her face.

“Wyrenna, that’s no help!” Valamand cried out, a little too close to her ear. He struggled against these new, enhanced flames.

“Switch! Switch back to Alteration! Repel the fire outward!” Wyrenna yelled back.

Ilyas-Tei was yelling, too, but she didn’t have anything to say.

Just as the fire turned a dangerous and alarming shade of bright blue, it stopped entirely. The bars, the hidden ducts, all of it had been reduced to a mess of quickly-cooling slag. Wyrenna took a deep breath, though she knew what fatigue she felt wasn’t actually about her physical body.

“There you go, Ilyas-Tei,” Wyrenna said, trying to disguise her exhaustion. “That’s how hot it has to be to melt dwemer beams.”

“Hallo!”

The voice echoing down the hall, through pipes, was tinny and distorted. Wyrenna’s first thought was that a man was trapped inside the walls, one she vaguely had known before. She gathered Ilyas-Tei up and escorted her over the still-smoking wreckage and into the next great chamber.
“Hallo!” she yelled back up at the voice, which sat in a sort of loft hanging from the ceiling. “Friend, or foe?”

The answer was inevitably foe, but should even a scion of Silabaene be trapped within such awful ruins Wyrenna did not discount that they might beg for rescue.

“I did not anticipate such a question! But the answer has not much changed, now it’s revealed you are not sub-intelligents on my front doorstep,” said the voice. “My role here is a bit more nuanced than your own, I am afraid.”

“I’m sure,” Valamand said dryly. “But one does not entertain shouting down from upon a balcony.”

“Too true, young master Valamand! But I hardly take such a bore as a standard of a good host.”

Wyrenna placed the voice, as well as its tone and the memories of meeting the mer in person. “Athelcar! Come down from there and face us on equal terms!”

“Schoolgirl’s taunts? I suppose you did say you could blend in with the Nords flawlessly,” the Sapiarch said, “Renalia.”

He laughed, snickering in his throat.

“Who is this guar-licker?” Ilyas-Tei asked.

Wyrenna craned her neck up at the pod in the ceiling, where Athelcar was still laughing at his own joke. “Oh! I met him at a party. He was a rake and stared down my dress.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Ilyas-Tei nocked an arrow to her sturdy bow. “So he’s a foe,” she said, and shot up into his crow’s nest. It was a very good mark, considering none of them could see the mer from the ground. It arced up and over into what seemed like a clear window. But, the clatter and fallen arrowhead a moment later suggested glass or a fine screen.

“So it goes that while I am in no mood to host, you are an even worse guest,” said Athelcar. “But what more can be expected from traitors and riffraff?”

He punctuated that with an ominous, loud click. Not with his mouth, that would just be strange. But obviously he switched something on up in his perch. The dimmed edges of the wide hall came into clearer focus, flame-less torches flickering bright. Devices and metal constructions in various stages of disassembly were not only strewn but displayed, dissected, as if part of a life-sized diorama.

Two of those pieces were fully operational. They stepped off of their charging stations, hands made of hammers and siege weapons. Their cold faces echoed the beings once to fashion them.

The three of them looked at each other for a plan. Wyrenna looked at Ilyas-Tei, who had studied Dwemer technology. Ilyas-Tei looked at Valamand, who was military and likely tactical. Valamand looked at Wyrenna, and Wyrenna was not sure why he would look to her for guidance. Soon, Ilyas-Tei was looking at her, too.

Okay, she thought. Let my much-smarter sister and this trained military mer just throw up their arms and let me solve the problems. This is fine.

The farthest one armed its hand-mounted ballista.
This is all just fine.

“Scatter!”

It only had one shot. Ilyas-Tei went left, springing up all-clawed onto the smooth stone walls. She slid down, scrambling to find a handhold until she caught a jutting piece of ancient machinery and began to climb out of sight. Valamand staggered right, almost tripping over his long robes while he tried to select a reasonable spell. The metal soldiers saw his hesitation, turned to heavily march to his destruction.

Wyrenna ran straight forward to intercept. She could feel her better self cry she had no idea what she was doing. Trying to come to terms with a metal giant that had no one inside. It was twice her size, many times her weight. It had no known soft spots. As horrifying as it was to have a mind that now searched for such a murderous concept. It would be madness to stand and fight.

The thing hissed, an internal boiler coming to bear. Wyrenna dropped, shield under her and slid between its pillar legs. But there was no weak spot in the crook of its knees. Only metal here, no flesh, and trying to cut Dwemer plate with steel was foolishness. She thrust her shield instead into the oiled seam, heard it crunch.

Wyrenna was eight feet away on the ground before she even knew to feel pain, tossed like wheatchaff with a hammer-bruise impact. Her sword clattered somewhere even farther away. When she tried to get up again, broken bones splintered black and white patterns behind her eyes. She could feel the construct’s pounding footsteps closer. Her cracked ribs ached in time with the stride.

Her available magicka was still weak, but there was nothing to help it. It wasn’t a painless healing, it took every scrap she had left and into pushing terrible limits to set her body marginally right. She rolled in a panic just as a well-whetted blade plunged down into the stone floor. It cracked like antimony glass.

“Wyrenna!”

A grimy hook clattered to the floor beside her, the chain arcing up into the dark.

“Snag the thing!” Ilyas-Tei yelled from above.

Wyrenna wearily rolled to her feet. She gripped the line’s weighty end and ducked into the creation’s blind spot, securing it onto the open metal framework. “Done!” More like a sob than she’d wanted.

Whatever it had been above, ten tons of broken Dwemer machinery crashed to the floor. Bits scattered everywhere. Nails and nuts showered down, dust stirred in great plumes. The line tugged up, the great-but-hapless construct swinging in the air helpless and without vantage. Ilyas-Tei stood triumphantly having rode the wreckage down, the power of a basic pulley.

Valamand! Wyrenna made herself dizzy to turn around. Instantly sorry she’d forgotten about him. But he was doing somewhat well for himself in her absence. As well as any elf fleeing backward from a walking armory could manage. The debris of Wyrenna’s shield lamed one of its legs, and it could not run. Valamand managed to stay out of reach, yet never able to open the distance enough for it to decide to shoot him.

Its boiler had built pressure enough to let off another scalding blast. There was little Wyrenna could do but to watch as the white cloud of steam engulfed Valamand. As she found herself running to pull him out, the vapors cleared. Valamand fought back with a spray of bright crystal powder, the first frost magic she’d ever seen him use. The boiling droplets froze on contact, pelting the dwemer
construct with diamond dust. But between them, Valamand’s magic was the stronger and soon iced
the nozzle.

Wyrenna grabbed Valamand’s wrist and pushed his aim downward.

“What—?”

The metal being promptly slipped on the black ice, toppling like an oxcart to the side and thrashing
on the ground.

“It’s just a machine!” Wyrenna said. “It can’t know its legs!”

Valamand’s expression was unreadable as he looked down at her like a spooked bird. Then as he
understood, an involuntary smile tugged on his mouth. But only for an instant. He surged forward
where the creation was scissoring on the ground and placed two gloved palms on its core. A terrible
boom of discharge shook the cavern as he shot lightning directly into it. It spasmed, not as a living
being but as a puppet with all its strings yanked, and when the bright flare subsided a sickly smoke
wafted out from under its motionless helm.

“Is that done? What about—”

The other metal construct fell unceremoniously from up high, the chain too weak to have held it any
longer. It smashed into the other lump of rubble and was too battered to continue working.

The sound blanked Wyrenna’s whole mind. Athelcar was speaking up above, or had he been
speaking the entire time? There was just no paying attention. But as the ringing subsided, he was still
carrying on up there.

“What fools you are! Do you think that accomplished anything? By being here, even? Truth be told,
I was doing you a favor. You’re very much going to want to be in Aetherius before long!”

“I’m not going to stand here yelling insults up at him,” Wyrenna said to Valamand, who was
adjusting his now-singed gloves. “Do you think he can escape?”

“If he could, he had plenty of chances,” Valamand said. “His contingency is dead. Whatever his
purpose here is, I do not think he intends to leave.”

Ilyas-Tei dragged the discarded chain and hook from over the floor and pushed Valamand aside.
“We could wallow around what he intends or doesn’t intend all day,” she said, and secured it to the
end of the great construct’s arm-mounted ballista bolt. “But better we find out than guess. Wyrenna,
help me lift this?”

The metal arm was excruciatingly heavy, as dense as cast iron. Something about the weight seemed
familiar. When she could not raise it more than a few feet off the ground, Valamand rushed to her
side to assist unbidden. Together, they pivoted the limb to point to the ceiling. Ilyas-Tei aimed
straight at the metal viewing platform’s lofty floor.

“My liege knows all I have learned here, and I have learned now all there is to know… the apex of
my craft! All is in place already. So, simpletons, you have lost! You may as well bide your time!”

She hadn’t had more than a few moments to study, but Ilyas-Tei found the manual mechanism to
release. The backlash was considerable, and pushed Valamand a good few degrees in recoil. But the
metal bolt streaked in an unnerving shot and punctured straight up into the platform. The chain trailed
up to it, rattling until taut.
When Ilyas-Tei made to climb up the chain, Valamand held out his hand. The metal arm was suddenly quite light to Wyrenna, when she realized he was holding it with magic. He set it down, straightened himself up, and grasped forth. The chain. But not with his hands.

With one swift tug, he ripped the tall observatory’s floor asunder and everything within tumbled down two black stories. Metal framework, stacks of books, the flutter of loose papers. The fleshy thud of Athelcar’s body.

When Wyrenna made it over to the scene, the Sapiarch had already pierced himself through with his own dagger. “You’re not slipping away,” she said, and though weary mustered enough of her own recovering magicka to close the wound. The blade remained embedded. Up close he seemed weak and thin. No food or waste had showered down with the debris. Wyrenna realized that Athelcar, for whatever reason, had chosen to waste himself in study of whatever there was to learn.

He was proud to do so, in serving the Dominion.

“You cannot keep me alive. I will be among my ancestors soon enough,” Athelcar spat, bones shattered. “I will have good news for them.”

“Tell them of Silabaene’s disgrace,” Valamand said in disgust. “That he dabbles with dark arts, as corrupt as the King of Worms.”

“You do not even know where you are,” said Athelcar.

“This is Nchuand-Zel,” Ilyas-Tei corrected, though now she did not seem so sure.

“A name! But the purpose...”

Wyrenna felt her knees creak as she knelt down. She metered what healing powers she still had and took away some of the mer’s pain. She lifted his head with her gauntleted hand. “Your master left you here to die. He doesn’t care about you. You don’t have to end your life here, so far from your homeland.”

He spat in her face. “Charity from swine! I don’t need your filthy pity. I choose this fate.”

“Wyrenna.”

Valamand looked down at her.

“His silence is a weapon. He may kill many with it, now,” he said solemnly. “But I can break it.”

It was not a mystery what he was referring to. In any other situation, Wyrenna had resolved to never accept such methods. But with a heavy heart she nodded and propped the mer’s body up, her knees under him.

“My will is strong even now, boy. I’ve heard of your weakness at the Keep, your utter failure. I have honed my wit half an era before you were born, and you shall never—”

“Silence.”

Athelcar’s sudden fear was not a panicked one, or a blubbery wreck of remorse. It was an entrancing horror, as if he was facing his Gods and had come undone. Athelcar bit his lip, dry mouthed and shallow of breath. “My lord, I,” he hesitated, whoever he now believed Valamand was. “I have shamed you.”
“You haven’t yet,” Valamand said. “If you speak plainly of your business here, the High Kinlord’s designs you carry out.”

“It is over. I have sent forth what I came here to find. All the materials, the relics, the original blueprints I have assembled. My task is done. My life’s work is complete.”

“What is Nchuand-Zel?”

“It is where Kagrenac first drafted the Anumidium’s design. Before its final construction, before it moved to war in the east. This I have learned, from what scraps remained in the ruin of Tel Vos.”

“Truly?”

Athelcar coughed. His wounds were beginning to overtake him. Wyrenna did her best to extend his time awake, though the mer was right. He was too weak for magic to sustain. “Nchuand-Zel was once… the capital of a great house of Dwemer. After the Aetherium wars… united with the east, they devised their clockwork God, the Walk-Brass Tower. To cast them free of servitude to the Wheel.”

Wyrenna had no idea what any of this was. “What does Silabaene want with such a thing?”

“How dare you, human! To speak in the presence of… of the magnificent…”

“She is ten times your better, and you shall regard Wyrenna with the same respect as I deign to tolerate from you,” Valamand said sharply. “Answer her question.”

“Freedom! To do as he sees fit, what ought to have been done long ago. To take his rightful place! And, in ascent, join the battle against Man!”

“He wants to kill all humans?” Ilyas-Tei asked.

“You lack ambition! Vision…!” Athelcar was truly fading, his lungs beginning to give out. Wyrenna held them fast, but she was too depleted. “There will be a new name in the heavens, and he will cut loose Auri-El… and the fetters of this world shall hold us no more.”

“Let him die,” Ilyas-Tei said. “I do not think his reason will ever surface again.”

Wyrenna did not weep for this mer. But she could feel the weight of his mortality crash down when she released her healing grasp. Valamand’s face was cold as Athelcar turned hateful again, too wasted to sneer.

“Your treachery is repaid. While you fought, the doors I have sealed. Starve here with me.”

And that was how he died. A curse on his lips, his final nourishment. Wyrenna laid him down, arranged his limbs, and dusted herself off. Exhausted, relieved of the burden. She looked behind her. Indeed, the door was closed again. And from this side, there was no lock to be seen. Only the red-light torches, a gallery of ruined machines, and the scattered papers of a Sapiarch’s notes.

Ilyas-Tei was chewing something. She had unwrapped the waxed cloth of dried beef and oats, and was gnawing a piece. She noticed that Valamand and Wyrenna were both looking at her. “What?” She blinked. “He’s right, I don’t want to go hungry. Here, you both have some.”

Wyrenna wasn’t sure she could eat right after killing someone. Valamand refused his share. “It must last,” he said.

“Aren’t you planning to get out of here?”
“Of course I am!” Valamand said. He rubbed his arms. Wyrenna hadn’t realized how claustrophobic he suddenly seemed. “Merely… I… We may be down here a considerable amount of time. I don’t see any other exit.”

“Well, I don’t want to talk about it on an empty stomach,” Ilyas-Tei said.

“Please!” Wyrenna groaned. “I can’t believe this! We figure out that the line of prophecy about ‘the greatest of mortal works’ ascending or breaking free, is about somehow breaking everything in the world! And you both are fretting about getting out of a hole!”

Valamand blinked. He paused for a considerable amount of time, seemingly struck. “That’s not bad, as an interpretation. I admit I completely forgot about that,” he said. “But, how can you not be worried about getting out?”

“Are you serious?” Wyrenna hadn’t expected herself to feel so offended, with two of the most smart people she knew goggling at her. Maybe, after so long around the mer Valamand had influenced her personality. Or she had become more elf-like herself. “Standing right here in front of me, I have the most brilliant wizard to come up from the Summerset Isles, and the smartest amateur engineer in northern Cyrodiil… and you’re telling me that together, you can’t think of anything?”

Her voice echoed off of the high ceilings back at her. Anything-thing-thing-thing… As each syllable grew fainter, the two pairs of startled eyes before her brightened. Then, just as she’d hoped they looked around. Then looked at each other.

Valamand and Ilyas-Tei shared a wicked grin and Wyrenna had to admit she suddenly was a little afraid of what was about to happen here.

Chapter End Notes

While initially counter-intuitive, this is where I will end this third share of Wyrenna's story. In the depths, not only of the earth but of understanding. For until this critical junction, we have been questing without an objective. Seeking without knowing what we seek, only that another sought and that other was a terrible threat. So far, we have seen Wyrenna strive to survive. We have seen Wyrenna strive to serve. And now we have seen Wyrenna strive to seek the nature of her subjugation. Off-the-page, for some part, as her time at the College at Winterhold is vague to track and relies heavily on diaries of Brelyna Maryon: a student at Winterhold at that time and Wyrenna's brief lover.

And, without time spent with Valamand his future actions become inexplicable. For carelessness about elves and the suffering of elves omits how the Mer might have been changed before catastrophe at Northwatch Keep (which is well-known, having been seen for leagues around) picks up our documented history.

But now, with Wyrenna we have discovered concrete evidence of her foe's true objectives. She remains the crux of this story. And common narratives transform hereafter as most heroic tales do. Once answers illuminate what terrors threaten life and hope, the next step inevitably is to stand in the light and slay them. Such things make a good story.

The flawed simplicity of that will be addressed as we follow what happened next.
There were a few moments where Ilyas-Tei asked her to lift *this*, move *that*, but for many hours Wyrenna couldn’t say what her two friends were trying to do. But, after some time sorting through scrap, Ilyas-Tei and Valamand began to explore the downed Dwemer constructs.

One of them was still largely operational. The water in its boilers had run dry and its copper-steel coils had been overloaded and discharged. But it was serviceable after replacing the fluids from the other construct’s reservoirs. Wyrenna helped exhume the remains of her shield from its knee. Its sword-limb was ruined, though, and there were no more replacement bolts for its mounted ballista. Wyrenna hauled a spare, claw-like arm out of the displayed pieces on the wall. Ilyas-Tei matched wires, squealed about how wonderful and logical the current of lightning was and prayed to the Hist that it would work re-attached after she re-tuned its tonal mechanism. Wyrenna didn’t know if this was something Ilyas-Tei actually knew how to do, or something she was making up as she discovered it.

From the wreck of Athelcar’s study, Valamand produced an etched control rod. It had a soul gem at one end, inscribed with the same profound runes that Wyrenna recognized months ago in a completely different ancient ruin. He gave it to Ilyas-Tei. “You of us have the best chance of operating it,” he said. “I may be able to alter its crude perceptions to see us as master rather than foe, but I suspect without command…”

“It has no root of thought,” Ilyas-Tei said. “Only directions of how to behave. But I don’t know how to change those…”

“To an extent, I do,” Valamand said. “Or, at the very least, I have a good guess. Principles exist that mandate a fireball be shaped rather than free flames, or a cipher of runes to release energy under specific conditions. These particular rules one may also impart to enchantments to define their parameters… the Dwemer merely externalized them as a music-box reads and plays a tune. But, I believe with proper application of Illusion…”

It would be easy to let Valamand go on forever. Wyrenna interrupted him. “I thought that manipulates the mind? Do things have a mind, if they aren’t alive?”

Valamand grinned. “That’s an excellent question. One may mislead a spirit or a daedra with Illusion. They have minds, but are they alive? One may manipulate a plant to face away from the sun. It is alive, but does it have a mind? Such dilemmas have been debated for hundreds of years.”

“You know, if you explain the trick, magic loses its mystique.”

“On the contrary, Ilyas-Tei. I believe everyone ought to learn magic,” Valamand said. “Otherwise, no one would understand how fantastic it is, what I’m about to do.”

The lightning that poured out from his gloved fingers was more controlled than bolts intended to kill, yellow rather than bright blue-white. The construct began to rise from where it lay on the ground. Then he ensorcelled it with magic that hung so heavily in the air Wyrenna could feel it drop into place.

Wyrenna waved her steel hand at it, the mail below jingling. No reaction more than an obedient idle.

“Now, walk!” Ilyas-Tei commanded it. And the construction did walk. “Leave this room!” The construction dutifully blundered toward the shut door, which miraculously opened as it approached.
Wyrenna heard her own ‘oh’ in chorus with two others. None of them had guessed that would happen. But, it made sense perhaps. The constructs had to pass through the halls but did not have the faculties to open locks or push doors. Wyrenna found she could appreciate the Dwemer’s approach to practical problems.

Wyrenna had to chase the construct to catch up. It entered the entrance foyer, crunched the now-cooled slag at the doorstep, and the opposite wall opened in turn. Laughing, Ilyas-Tei took a flying leap and scrambled onto one of the strut-frame pauldrons. She waved the control rod again. “Faster!”

The construct encountered the collapsed tunnel into greater Nchuand-Zel and veered directly into a wall. The wall lost, so to speak. A large hole in the vague shape of a metal mer remained the proof of contest. Wyrenna stopped to catch her breath, made sure her sword was still there. She leaned heavily on the rim of the tunnel, gasping. Valamand followed not far behind, with his enduring magelights.

Wyrenna pulled her gauntlet back from the stone. Then replaced it. “Valamand, the walls are shaking.”

“Presumably from the ruckus down the hall.”

“It’s fainter than that,” Wyrenna said. “Something’s passing overhead?”

“This far below ground? Impossible.”

“Maybe it’s a lot of somethings.”

In any case, it didn’t bode well. Wyrenna regretted the spareness of sleep she’d snagged and followed Valamand up the tunnel. She half-expecting more Falmer or other Dwemer contraptions to be drawn to the commotion. But, it seemed all within the halls of Nchuand-Zel stood back when such a metal soldier walked forth. Up, up the vaulted causeways and the only reason Wyrenna and Valamand rejoined the construct’s march was that the final exit door slowed the parade. It had not been designed to open at the Centurion’s call.

But soon they thundered on: past Nimhe, past ruins, past the heaped dirt of the ages and up into Markarth Keep. Two Stormcloak soldiers looked up from their work: hastily tying up an irate, gagged Calcelmo and his terrified nephew. If they expected to see anything a massive work of Dwemer metal wasn’t it.

Wyrenna looked at the soldiers. The soldiers looked at her and her own, across the bridge. The world sucked into the blackness of her eyes and she was caught into the realizing, exactly, exactly what had happened.

“Fuck and damnation,” she exclaimed, as if in a momentary trance. “This is my fault.”

“What?” Valamand suddenly was above her right ear. “Them?”

Unfortunately, by that time, the Stormcloaks had noticed him and his Thalmor clothes and were crossing the bridge to meet them. The day extended yet again twofold, and as she drew her sword she felt she had drawn it a weeks’ worth of times. She had no shield to block the first man’s blow, and instead parried quickly with her blade gripped in two hands, gauntlet along its length. Her arm rattled. She slid his weapon down, pushed him with her bulk and as he stumbled hooked his foot. He tumbled off the bridge into the water below in only two movements.

The other was promptly whacked away like a chestnut. Ilyas-Tei whooped with glee, marched the great Steam Centurion down the causeway. The Stormcloaks in the door hastened heels in terror, a
Wyrenna turned first to freeing Calcelmo. Aicantar struggled unhappy to wait his turn. Valamand began with the younger mer as Wyrenna ungagged the other. “No time for politeness. What’s happened? Quickly!”

“Well, you saw them!” Calcelmo was incensed. “Stormcloaks! Tromping all over the city! It’s madness, simply madness! You know, I had quite enough of this decades ago, barging in and ruining everything, you cannot imagine—”

“Quit telling me things I already know,” Wyrenna said. “How long have they been here? What happened?”

Calcelmo went red as a giant’s arse before his nephew mercifully cut in. “Only just now,” Aicantar wheezed. “We were… in the middle of some delicate experiments and they caught us off-guard, I’m afraid. But if they’ve gotten as far as the keep, I can’t imagine how they got past the Empire and the hold guard—”

“The hold guard are in their pocket. I wouldn’t be surprised if some just switched uniforms,” Wyrenna said. “The Silver-Bloods, the lot of what they own. And it’s my fault the Legion’s away.”

“And I repeat: why?” Valamand demanded, standing in Wyrenna’s path of escape. She almost crashed into him when she got up and turned around. Instead of stalling, she pulled him aside and began to walk.

“You should probably evacuate!” Ilyas-Tei called back at Calcelmo, from atop her giant dwemer construction, what Calcelmo and Aicantar were now staring ardently at. “But please, release that data! Don’t forget. I’ll write!” And like that, the three of them were walking, jogging, plodding towards Understone Keep’s main hall.

“Valamand, do you remember that I made a deal with the Forsworn?”

“Yes,” the mer said. “Wait. No…”

“I didn’t actually tell you what it was. I didn’t want you to interfere,” Wyrenna said. “The Forsworn mean the Reach to become an independent kingdom again. So long as the Empire holds Markarth, that can’t ever happen. I was sent here to… announce that intention. To deliver Madanach’s message to the Imperial Jarl here, taunt him to recognize the Forsworn’s strength.”

“A diversion.”

Wyrenna was pleased that Valamand had at least picked up a knack for sensible thinking along the way. “Igmund’s father was killed by Forsworn. Letting slip that they still keep his shield was irresistible to him. He sent the army garrison after it. It was framed as an act of war against Imperial rule.”

Wyrenna paused for breath.

“Thongvor must have snitched,” she said. “It’s the only way Ulfric could know Igmund’s home alone.”

“So what do we do?” Ilyas-Tei said.

“Why are you asking me?”
Valamand stood aside. They were nearly at the main hall. Sounds of a battle were common at all ends, but the middle was for the moment clear. “As much as I wish to take command of this hopeless mess, you have the dragon’s share of the details. So long as you know the specifics, I must ask you to take that responsibility.”

“I’m going to finish my contract,” Wyrenna said. “Hopefully it will do more good than hurt. You should go prevent anything from happening that would be…”

“What?”

“Bad,” Wyrenna finished. “I’ll meet you outside, beneath the keep. Go!”

Wyrenna felt the Dwemer construct stomp heavily up to the jarl’s throne room through her own tired strides. She turned over Calcelmo’s key she’d pocketed. He hadn’t noticed as she’d cut his bindings. She fit it into the lock on the Dwemer Museum and passed inside.

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It is rare that we get to be Ondolemar. And in many ways, it was rare that Ondolemar was permitted to be himself. Which is a Thalmor dilemma that we have become familiar with. But, at this end Ondolemar had done all he could as himself. His contingent was evacuated and away. His assets were appropriately embedded, and would work under their own power. His affairs were settled. There was little more that even the most perfect officer under the Thalmor could have done to ensure that those beneath him would persist. For command did not fall with the commander, and his life was not linchpin of a dozen lives below.

“On your knees!”

Ondolemar did his best after over three hundred years on Nirn to savor his breath. But the dogs barked. And this was filthy Markarth, so far from the sun of the south.

“I said, on your knees, Elf!”

All this, to be the vessel of the Thalmor’s inevitable victory. All this, only to be the incarnation of Aldmeri grace in sacrifice!

“Enjoy this while you can,” Ondolemar said. He drew his own mace, wicked work of swan curves and fine glass. And he played his part, he played it so unerringly well as he had done for centuries. “For soon, you shall all be slaves!”

And where the Stormcloak general heard a threat, Ondolemar could only say he’d warned him. His very presence was a warning unheeded, a trap too sweet to comprehend. The battle ensued, his message lost in the blots of blood before it could ever have been destined to be ink. Something approached from below, a heavy step and anticipation. A war machine, of some sort? A giant, or a trained troll? Ondolemar fought and fought bitterly and found his off-arm broken by Galmar’s battleax. And as he appealed to the gods, that this might be a fate fit for one who once had such lofty hopes, a great hand seized him around the middle.

It was made of something smoother than iron but just as unyielding. It rose, finished climbing the stairs and he was lifted from the ground. A cast-molded face, grim and tight-lipped? A working Dwemer soldier?

“I had hoped never to meet you again, Stone-Fist,” said the voice of the young mer he’d spoken with only the day previous. “I had more than enough of you.”
The Justiciar Valamand crested over the stairs as well now, magic at-hand. Ondolemar winced as his own left arm dangled uselessly. If he wanted to contribute a spell of his own, he’d have to drop his weapon. “Acceptable timing,” he admitted, not quite up to his usual bluster.

“You! You sit comfortable in your true colors,” said the Stormcloak known as Stone-Fist. “If only you had perished in Yngol’s tomb.”

Valamand laughed, and it was not a humorous laugh, but bore the nuances of some irony that Ondolemar was not familiar with. “Is that what Ulfric Stormcloak told you? Why, did he omit that I bore you out of those ruins on my own back? You live only on my account, and on the account of Ilyas-Tei. Or is your master’s trust not one for fine detail?”

The boy did not know how much he was the mirror of his Grandmother at that time. Ondolemar could hear another voice. While he could not pretend to know that ancient womer’s mind he liked to think she would have had just as much scorn for the Stormcloaks and their denial of truth.

“Is this true?” Thongvor had previously been shocked into speechlessness at Galmar’s side. Granted, an enormous walking machine tended to achieve that effect.

“The elf lies,” Galmar barked. “He lies through his teeth. Where is your mistress? Where is Wyrenna Foe-Tongue?”

And, Ondolemar had noticed that the great metal mer had been steadily moving between the Jarl’s throne and the keep doors. Blocking Galmar and Thongvor and whatever Stormcloaks we now massing again at the bottom of the stairs, too afraid to approach. And, brave as the man was, Galmar too did not strike forth against the construct either.

Valamand merely shrugged. “Wyrenna is her own woman. She does what she wills,” he said. “She must be busy routing the rest of your army, I expect.”

“Ha!”

“Why so funny?” said another voice, one that Ondolemar did not much know and could not crane his neck up behind to see. “Your Ulfric Stormcloak turned the tide here years ago. Why could it not happen again?”

“It is your decision, Stone-Fist,” Ondolemar said, taking control of this circus. “Remain here and fight for the throne of Markarth. Or join the battle outside and attend your underlings. Pray they do not remember you as the commander who abandoned his men for a plutocrat’s glory.”

Stone-Fist hesitated. He hated and hesitated, snarling a mask beneath his bear-helm. Growled and champed at the bit, gauntlets tightening on his axe. A mighty construct, some Argonian atop it, Luxerene’s young lord, himself in indignity, the Jarl Igmund and his housecarl Faleen, the orc Ghorza and her brother... No foes to take lightly, even with the arms of soldiers cowering below.

“Galmar! Ulfric gave his word! I would be Jarl!” Thongvor was a pest even now.

And yet, Galmar took a step backward.

“How dare you? Galmar, to call yourself Stormblade!”

“This war does not end with you on a throne,” Galmar said to Thongvor. “If the day is won, you’ll get to sit on one. Not before.”

“Then get yourself gone!” Igmund roared, behind and clenching his sword furiously.
Galmar opened his mouth for some kind of jab before he left. Most satisfyingly, the great construct stepped forward and batted him down the stairs. The Stormcloak soldiers in his host rallied around him, retreated back down into the city.

But this was no victory. Ondolemar was at a loss of information, and only watched as the Justiciar Valamand insisted Igmund and his court, and all noncombatant staff join Calcelmo down below and flee the city. That he would demand this, yet know so little of what exactly his woman’s game was… it was not heartening.

“Should we put you down?” the Argonian asked of him. Ondolemar declined, as humiliating as it was to be baggage. His worthless arm would slow things down more. At least until his magicka returned.

“This cannot be happening.” Thongvor babbled by the stairs. He seemed to be in some degree of shock, a tantrum that an improperly dispositioned child might be so wretched to throw. “I don’t understand, I—”

“Maybe this is more aligned to your understanding,” said Valamand, and Ondolemar watched as the young Altmer whalloped the Silver-Blood right across the jaw and dropped him like a bale of hay. The dogs whiningly approached to lick his face as he lay there, groaning and disgraceful.

The Justiciar climbed at last upon the construct, awkwardly balling his robes out of the way to grasp the other struts on the right pauldron. Finally, their bizarre parade was somewhat balanced as it ambled down the length of Understone Keep after the Stormcloak retreat, unrushed. The battlemage cast an impressive fireball and blew both doors off heavy hinges.

Ondolemar’s lips, despite the length and inimicality of this unfortunate day, quivered a faint smile. Even if not by his own five knuckles, that face had been crying to be broken for years. And how satisfying, at last, to leave this pit of a city. Not simply leave. See it pay for what it had inflicted and perhaps leave it leveled behind him in spite.

And to leave alive! Ondolemar’s mind, more so than Valamand’s, more so than Wyrenna’s or Ilyastei’s, or any person we have been so far, was elated with promise.

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There were some interesting paradoxes to being where one wasn’t supposed to be. Wyrenna had known a few of them at least since she was a little girl running about town on her own and without reproach. But, growing up and growing older meant thinking about these things. About why what works, works. Why what doesn't work does not. Perfecting the best of it. Discarding the rest. Making it one’s own.

Wyrenna crossed the Dwemer museum with confidence.

First, if at all possible: contrive others to not be there, when you are there. There was no skill to prove in trespassing, no reason to tempt misfortune if it could be helped. Better no one be around to see than to have to worry about being seen.

With the siege of Markarth everyone had more important places to be than guarding ancient cogs and gears. Which suited Wyrenna fine. She had little interest in them herself. She inserted the key again into the door at the back of the room and entered Calcelmo’s laboratory.

Another challenge: upon arriving in that place you’re not supposed to be, the goal is to then belong there. A skill useful for more than burglars. Whether passing seen or unseen, to be out-of-place was
disaster. Wyrenna settled herself into the mindset of belonging to this place. And, with that she chose the most likely way to her goal. Calcelmo was an elf but he was a person just as she was and would arrange his space to suit an ordinary person’s needs. His quarters were not difficult to find.

Calcelmo’s tower was not a tower in the sense it stood alone, but that it towered out of the mountainside. Its balcony was among the highest points in Markarth Keep. Wyrenna felt the ascent, stairs and narrow hewn passages ill-used and dusty. Calcelmo did not keep much of anything for regular use here. He was a reasonable mer. But it was from here that Wyrenna had to work. At this rare full-plate window. Wyrenna leaned forward and cupped hands over its clear surface down below.

The Stormcloaks, Wyrenna thought, were a damn quick army. It couldn’t have been more two days to get the word out, yet now a great host assaulted the walls. She could see the fights in the street. What remaining Imperial loyalists struggled down below, the native peoples of Markarth as well. Siege weapons constructed outside Markarth’s gates for the war effort were turned against the city, sledges of loose earth and boulders hurled at the ancient stone walls. And while little burned, Wyrenna could hear drums in the distance. Even though mica-glass.

She picked up from Calcelmo’s main quarters and lit its half-stub candle. She set it down in the window, as she had been instructed to do. And with bitter satisfaction, she saw a twin flicker in the guard tower window across the city. A mirror reflector, flashing up and over the peak.

Reachfolk poured over the mountain, into the city from all sides. Fortified from the gates, Markarth was a bastion to daunt traditional standing armies. But Wyrenna paled as the witch-men had no such formality, scaling the cliffs and swarming unto their prey like spiders.

Below, they swept over the Stormcloaks and all was rendered to chaos. Wyrenna pushed her hair back off her forehead and turned on her heel away from the plate-glass window. There was a coldness to her breath, of too little sleep but the haze after it no longer matters. Down the stairs, up the stairs, winding through straight-hewn tunnels, and out unto the wide balcony above the avenue. The night air was thick with sorcery, the streets deep in blood and daedra and flashing blades. Mage-fire threw her long shadow upon the mountain.

Before the arrows could seek to chase her, Wyrenna peered over the unterraced edge. Her brain recoiled, legs weak and stumbling backward. Only force of will helped her cast off the rocky edge, and cast again one of the first spells she had found practical at Winterhold.

It wasn’t even one in ordinary lessons. Or the old books from Cyrodiil. She’d had to suss it out herself. Skyrim, maybe, thought it was best if a mage killed themself tumbling from a great height. But, flashes of a terrible descent into darkness and crumbling stone were more than enough to compel her to learn a little feather fall. Wyrenna’s screaming mind denied this though, that she could be plummeting and not be in danger. Still, she managed to aim herself properly. Only when she caught her grip and footing atop the Dwemer construct’s great helmet as it ambled below, that was when her stomach flipped right-side-up again.

Even if her impact was cushioned, the metal mer stumbled. But it did not seem to mind.

“Xuth! Where did you come from?”

“Above,” Wyrenna said, feeling her joints and aching back.

“That wasn’t the kind of question I meant to have answered!” replied Ilyas-Tei. “When you said to meet you, I thought in the normal way!”
“Your Nord is not merely an intelligencer, if this is the extent of her work,” said an unexpected voice. Wyrenna had to inch herself up higher onto the solid-molded helm to see that another Thalmor was gripped in the construct’s crude hand. His legs dangled awkwardly above the ground, and as the whole spectacle proceeded he kicked a Stormcloak unwise enough to be underfoot.

“The Reach hired me to create an opportunity,” Wyrenna said to Ondolemar firmly. “The Stormcloaks stole it. And now they can fight over it, as they both deserve.”

“I never liked this city anyway,” Ondolemar admitted.
Second Seed

Whether this disdain was justified or not the relentless march of their mount continued. The combined spellwork, artifice, and rallying presence between them was a three-headed lion. Wyrenna projected with all her lungs for civilians to take shelter worriedly before Valamand cast walls of flame to clear the way. And, from time to time, Ilyas-Tei indulged herself to clear a straggler with the construct’s great force. Perhaps excessive force. But it was too much to pass up punching a violent nationalist via giant animunculi fist holding an elf who also wielded a mace.

They did not see Galmar Stone-Fist again, but past the gates of Markarth the Stormcloak ranks scattered at their approach. And step by weighty step, the warbrands were left in the city of silver. Night in the Reach engulfed: new crickets and thin mountain air, bruised juniper and sedge.

The construct’s walk was that of a giant, able to keep stride with a pacing horse. It was all Wyrenna could do but cling to the speeding contraption step-over-step, head swimming. In many ways she already felt half asleep. And, far from Markarth at last each footfall came slower and more laborious than the last. Unable to function so apart from its city of note, the animunculus collapsed to its knees and then sank lifeless to the thin soil. Its soul gem within was dark and spent.

Wyrenna had to move her legs. Oh, no, no.

And yet, with the last of her strength, she took the Thalmor Commander over-shoulder and pressed on. Though he was perfectly able to walk, despite his broken arm. Wyrenna wondered if he truly needed help, or if he had contrived things to work the other-way around. With this mutual support, Valamand close at her back, and Ilyas-Tei leading them through the wilderness, the lot of them arrived at a waystop off the road.

Inside, a child was awake and sweeping up after patrons despite the shockingly late hour. The boy was chipper enough. “Welcome to the Old Hroldan Inn, we’ve got warm beds and strong drink,” he said. Then he saw the rest of the company after Ilyas-Tei. “And no trouble allowed.”

“What rooms do you have?” Wyrenna asked, feeling the ice on her fighting eyelids.

“Well, you’ll want the best one, wouldn’t you? You can rent Tiber Septim’s room.”

Valamand wrung his hands and looked at Ondolemar, who was busy doing that Altmeri habit of pretending not to mind and being above minding, but actually intensely minding an awful lot.

Wyrenna felt sick in her throat and her back throbbed terribly and she opened her mouth before she could judge otherwise. “Listen to me, kid. I would rather shag a bear backwards down a mountain, I would rather glaze myself in honey and roll naked in a pit of skeevers, I would die and break Ysgramor’s nose in Sovngarde before sleeping in the same bed as godsbedamned Tiber Septim.”

The boy stood blinking in the wake of this statement. Then, nervously, “So will you rent the room or not?”

Wyrenna paid the boy 10 Septims and walked the longest eight meters in her life, unlocked the door, and sat on one of the well-worked spruce chairs. She closed her eyes, but could not sleep.

“Justiciar Valamand. Report to me your findings from Nchuand-Zel.”

“Respectfully, Commander, I must ask if you want the long or the short of it.”
“However you see it fit to relate. There may be much now to do, and before any further action I insist on a complete picture of known events.”

Wyrenna could hear Ondolemar pause, grumble. Someone across the room was mending his arm, most likely either himself or Valamand.

“Sleep, too, counts as further action,” he added.

Ilyas-Tei sat on the bed. Wyrenna could hear her tail scrape the wooden frame. Then she spoke, as even as if she had been rehearsing to herself this entire time. “The Thalmor inside were dead, we followed them. Only their leader of lackeys remained, and he had chosen to starve rather than swim.”

“The Sapiarch of Architechtonics is not a lackey,” Valamand corrected.

“He couldn’t think for himself. Was so.”

“To an extent, single-mindedness is a much-prized virtue in the Aldmeri Dominion,” Ondolemar interrupted.

“Well, he’d learned and sent ahead the plans for some world-ending "walk-brass” so,” Wyrenna said. But there was not much after her ‘so.’ Even halfway to sleep she could feel the pressure of Ondolemar’s silence, sustained for nearly a whole minute afterward.

"It figures that he would not pursue something original, but re-enact other mer he could only fantasize of,” said the mer at last. "I cannot presume to know his mind. But his politics are no mystery. To his creed, all greatness is merethic, to be resurrected. That there is no future for mer, but a return to the past. Ancient absolutions.”

And Wyrenna thought so little of this sort of greatness that it all seemed like balderdash to her.

“Do you even know,” Ondolemar said, “What the Numidium is?”

Wyrenna opened her tired eyes. Valamand was about to say something, but seemed to think better of it and closed his mouth. Ilyas-Tei wrung her tail.

“You know better than I do,” Wyrenna admitted tiredly.

Ondolemar had stripped away his coat, and he was painfully stretching his arm that had been injured only minutes ago. It hadn’t been obvious to her before, but he was actually rather intimidating for an Altmer and clearly remained in active conditioning even in Markarth. But for all of his hardened and refined demeanor, he did not restrain the wobegone note in his voice.

“Over six-hundred years ago, Tiber Septim used the Numidium —the Dwemer Brass God— to seize the entirety of the Summerset Isles,” Ondolemar said. “A gift or plea from the Dunmer. The effects of this machine… they were unthinkable. The imprint it made upon the Isles, through time, still lingers in some places. There was little the throne of Alinor could do but surrender.”

Wyrenna looked at the bed that Ilyas-Tei sat on, looked at Ondolemar, and sighed.

“That’s the entire reason, isn’t it?” she asked. “That he did something so terrible… then made you worship him as a God?”

“The reasons behind the Thalmor are significantly more complex than that,” Ondolemar said. “But, in at least one aspect, yes. Imperial history is written by the victors among Man. And to them, the subjugator of our lands is an uncriticized idol.”
“What happened to Numidium?”

Ondolemar made a noncommittal shrug. “Reports are mixed. Some say it scattered into the Illiac Bay. Others, that it returned to Morrowind and is buried in magma and ruin. In all cases though, it and its touch of pseudo-divinity are lost.”

“Unless, sir, one attained the means to attempt constructing another one,” said Valamand. “Which, as Wyr— the Nord says, Silabaene now has.”

“It was curious that he would pick the Sapiarch of Architechtonics for a travel companion,” Ondolemar said. “But no more.”

Wyrenna thought. Her mind floated beyond sleep and into fancy. Her armor chafed, and she began tiredly unbuckling her gauntlets and pauldrons. “That settles it, then. All the Dwemer constructs, they needed soul gems. The bigger ones needed bigger gems. And now we know what in Oblivion the mer wants with a giant soul gem,” Wyrenna said, half-mumbling to herself but far too loud for it to be private. “He wants to do to the Empire what Tiber Septim did to him.”

“Misjudging his course of action is fatal,” Ondolemar warned. “I would refrain from undue speculation. But in the case of soul gems that seems an apt extrapolation.”

“You sound like you’re going to fight him.” Ilyas-Tei said, which obviously was what Valamand was thinking for the mer reacted in face with both horror and joy. Ilyas-Tei ignored his expression, though, and kept looking at Ondolemar with her unflinching reptile gaze. “Is that… allowed?”

Ondolemar pondered this. Then, the meanest of smiles, an uttered curse. He ran a weathered hand over his close-shaved head and let out the breath he had been keeping back. “I don’t see how that’s much of a question,” he said. “I am sworn to reject false gods, apprehend heretics, and above all enforce the mission of the Thalmor in Skyrim. That my assigned post is now impossible makes little difference. The Numidium is a mockery of the Aedra, an engine of suffering unto Alinor and all Altmer who remember the atrocities committed by its power. The very heart of its construction beats only of doom for Mer.”

Wyrenna finished with her armor, down to her greaves. Then, with her pack under her head, she laid down on the floor to sleep.

“What, you’re serious?” Valamand said.

Wyrenna yawned, clutched her sword close as a comfort and closed her eyes. “After all that’s been said, I don’t even want to think about touching anything that’s ever come in contact with Tiber Septim’s yeasty ballsack, ever.”

Ilyas-Tei sprang off the bed as if it had caught on fire, from the sound of it. Yet, only Valamand could be heard to laugh above. He restrained it, so quietly that it might have been hidden from Ondolemar across the room though Wyrenna was certain Valamand did a poor job of it. It was both bitter and honest. Wyrenna was too tired to distinguish which parts of what she said were a joke. Ilyas-Tei settled down next to her, having stolen a stuffed-woolen pillow. Only Valamand could have thrown the fur blanket from the bed over them both, for Ondolemar would never have done such a thing. Wyrenna cracked an eye to see the younger mer settle in a chair quite apart from her, cross his arms and pull his hood down. No one slept in Tiber Septim’s bed that night.

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Despite the cold and uncomfortable accommodations, the sleep among them at the Old Hroldan Inn
was the sleep of the dead, or the sleep of those who had shaken hands with death. By the time Wyrenna, Valamand, and Ilyas-Tei had risen Ondolemar had long departed on his own. The note he left behind was in coal-pencil on the back of a re-scraped sheet of parchment. But his orders were clearly given and stated. No double-speak or coded layer of meaning to them, as Elenwen had employed. Or at least none that Valamand found notable.

Ondolemar had long-prepared for the possibility of Stormcloak siege. His followers evacuated from Markarth as soon as even the faintest whisper of his spies reported movement. These assets were to grimly outlive him and would not know of his survival or change in directive. While Ondolemar collected them, Whiterun was designated as an appropriate centralized location to regroup. All eyes would be on the siege. Any movement made through the Hold would be easy to conceal, and with a wizard's skill sneaking into the city would be simple.

But, only after the uproar quieted somewhat and the search for Thalmor and Dwemer war machines outlived what the Stormcloaks were willing to invest in it. In that light, Ondolemar advised to travel at a leisurely pace off of main causeways where possible.

Straight west, they passed beneath Serpent’s Bluff and moved on from the Druadach mountains without any love lost. Not daring to supply in Rorikstead, the three of them cut into the plains of Whiterun. Spring was beginning to refresh spent tundra and eat at the grey patches of snow. Skewbald hares abounded, but were lean and stringy to eat. In the distance, mammoth herders cautiously skirted military presence.

The quiet between the three of them was not one of comfort, but a weight of mounting pressure on more than one throat.

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Valamand opened his eyes blearily. It was not yet dawn. He was here, he did his best to convince himself. Right here, leaning on a rock by the embers of their camp on the tundra. Here, where the stiff brown grass poked him.

How curious, yet terrible that these reminiscences of an interrogation chamber did not include pain. How much worse it was to feel the restraints in clarity, and know that whatever was said and done to him he could not resist it. And if he could not resist it, it had the power to be true. Valamand with his analytical mind struggled to set straight what was perception and reason, and what was the evil of Vaermina.

He shivered. All the world’s failures were the substance of another’s success.

A small sound, hardly heard, entered one of his pointed ears. A faint shape crumpled on the dark ground far from the fire. Crying. Ilyas-Tei slept around the camp like a crocodile, but the last bedroll was empty and Valamand at once knew and understood.

And he remembered. Of course, he hardly forgot anything. He knew the time, nearly always. When he cared to keep it. Six months, one week, and if he had not been shaking so hard he could divine the hours and the minutes and the gradations of eternity.

But time peeled back. Valamand split himself: experience and spectator. He felt his emotions as they had been, preserved for him in the mind’s amber. On that night, half a year ago, he had felt such satisfaction to hear the Nord cry, to see her shrink in the dark, finally subdued. How simple the Nord was, that she could not ascertain an illusion from a potent spell. The Nord feared magic, she feared what she could not and had no right to understand. As a rat feared fire. His knuckles stung, studded gloves surely bruising where he’d struck the Nord quiet at last.
It was like being possessed. Valamand begged the past to stop, but it would not. This was, the better half of his mind insisted, only an illusion. There was nothing real to this vision, beyond that what he could see could resemble it. He was not even in the same place. This was certainly not the same fire, Ilyas-Tei had not been here then, and he had done nothing more this night than be troubled by a procession of dark visions.

These assurances did nothing more but displace him further, with one hand into memory and another desperately grabbing around for a hold. Break the illusion, he commanded himself, act outside its bounds. But some force kept him silent where he was. It was not a real force! Guilt now, in that he could not escape. But useless guilt! Self-congratulatory! Only another distraction, another excuse so he would stay here and not help himself.

He rose anyway, when the phantasm had begun to fade and the present had begun to assert its weight. Away from the banked embers, the night was still wintery. Valamand sat by Wyrenna, and for some time could not think of what to do.

“I think we ought to talk,” he said at last. “Though you are much better at it.”

“How?”

Her answer was almost offensive, that she would dismiss her abilities that way. “See here, Wyrenna. I may know a great many words: large, small, and any length or complexity in-between. But they are a masterwork blade in the hands of an idiot.”

Wyrenna only sniffed. Her hair was tangled with loose grass. Even upright, she balled up with her knees against her chest. “Talk about?” she said quietly, and Valamand worried if he was pointing out her weakness.

“Anything you wish,” he said. “If you cannot muster much about your troubles.”

Wyrenna, though he did not look at her directly, was stoic as stone as her sobbing ended. Thunder cracked in the distance, faraway over the mountains. But in the spaces between faraway clouds, the stars and aetheric lights cast shifting patches over the tundra. The same cold wind that kept the storm away, chilled over this exile.

“Would I… that is, would you allow—” Valamand bit his lip. “Is it acceptable to touch you?”

“You hate touching other people.”

“I hate other people touching me,” Valamand corrected. "That I do not permit."

“Fine. You don’t have to ask, you know.”

Valamand didn’t bother arguing with her, that of course he had to ask, that it was highly improper to just mash oneself against another person unbid. As uncouth as trespassing into another’s house. But after a moment’s hesitation he willed his trembling arm around her shoulder. She leaned into him.

“Now, will you talk?” he asked.

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“You wouldn’t be lying around on the ground like that without a very good reason.”

“I don’t understand it, myself.”
“All things within this Aurbis can be understood. One merely must learn how to analyze.”

“You’re the worst.”

“Mm.”

After many minutes sitting there, hearing her breathe and feeling her head on his shoulder, Wyrenna began what Valamand hoped was sincere. “This isn’t…. why I’m upset. I was reminded about it, just now. It happened years ago. Before Da couldn’t work anymore.”

“And?”

“I was close to this boy, once. Not Siegfried, someone else. I don’t know why I thought it was important. But… a boy, having a home, that was a future that you don’t have to worry about for it to be ordinary life. He was a Nord and for a long time I had a hard time feeling like a real Nord myself. He sort of put that to rest. And for a while, everything was okay.”

“But after that while?”

“Less okay,” Wyrenna said. “He was very jealous, he didn’t like me spending time with other men or women. He didn’t like that I had eyes for women, even if I promised I’d look only at him. He didn’t have a trade either, but thought he could just ride along with my father. Even when I told him that my father wouldn’t live forever. Every time I did something he didn’t like, he would make sure everyone in Bruma knew it.”

“You feared to leave him.”

“Back then, yeah. I pretended I didn’t, though. That I could win over him and change things to be right. I learned to go behind his back, keep secrets. I thought that I had some… some kind of control over what he did, and that was the same as the control he liked to keep over me.”

But, Valamand knew it wasn’t.

“But it wasn’t. No matter what I did, no matter how good I got at talking, I could never talk him down. I could never make him admit he was wrong, I could never make him understand me. And when I realized that, it was better to be angry than afraid.”

“What did you do?”

“I ran him out of town. The city guard didn’t even stop me. Right out of the gates, I took back everything he stole from me and he never returned. I don’t know what happened to him, and I don’t care.”

“And that’s when you swore off men?”

“I don’t remember telling you that,” Wyrenna grumbled. “You can swear off drink, or a pipe, or sweets, or sex. But your eyes aren't something you can swear off of or wipe clean. But I hated them for some time, I had some relationships I came to regret, and some I still remember fondly.”

Valamand brushed his hair back with his glove, debating the wisdom of what was on his mind. But there was no delicate way to ask, “this boy, you didn’t mention… you felt love for him?”

“No. Not once.”

“Then why…?”
“I don’t know!” Wyrenna said, huffing. Then, centered, she did her obvious best to restrain herself. “I don’t know what that means. I went through all that, but I couldn’t say what we had was... What’s love?”

Valamand, truly, in all of his understanding of the mind and nuance of its illusions, could not answer her.

“You did love your family. And you do love Ilyas-Tei.”

“Do I? Or do I just think I do, and have convinced myself it’s true?” Wyrenna snapped. She began to cry again, quieter. Not sobs as before, but a low sighing rattle of breath that sounded like she was dying. She buried her eyes in Valamand’s robes. “I couldn’t tell you what it’s like to be happy. Or to be sad, or in love, or to want or un-want.”

“Surely you must want something.”

“Nothing. I only know how to be afraid or angry. And no matter how hard I fake otherwise, I…”

“You ‘fake’ nothing.”

“I do! All the time. Everything I am, I learned to fake it to pretend I’m in control but…”

“Enough! You are no empty vase, defined only by what flowers are arranged inside,” Valamand said. “If whatever force drives you cannot be contained in mere concept such as love or happiness, so be it! It is doubtlessly greater than those weak words.”

Valamand could stand it no longer, hearing this friend tear herself down and make of the pieces a wretched monster, a creature cheating the Mundus or else stealing undeserved worth. Her mind and words were far more terrifying a weapon when turned against the wielder and Valamand felt devastated merely listening. “I have studied fear more closely than any mage short of an inquisitor and it is impossible, sheerly impossible to fear if you do not first want, or value, or love.”

Though it was dark he could still see the redness to her eyes and the blotches on freckled cheeks. She looked as if she did not fully believe him. And so he continued, and resolved he would continue until she did.

“Even these shallow rebels are stoked by what the Nords love and dread to lose. Windhelm’s Jarl breeds fear and thus outrage, unknowing that he too is the product of emotional husbandry. The machine of war turns upon this crux, that the heart of Men desires deeply. Nor would you have fought for so long to live, to be bereft.”

“You’re better with talking than you think,” Wyrenna said quietly.

“You, one good friend, are the limit of my ability. But, if you would only judge yourself so generously,” Valamand said, “you might understand the greatness of your words and deeds. That have taken my life, and given me life. Sustained me where my own self was poison. Laid the highest of mer as the lowest of fools. Their power, beyond the ambition of any knife, you have seen shake a nation.”
Ilyas-Tei held onto Valamand’s shoulder. Wyrenna took his arm. This had worked before, of course — but there wasn’t much wrong in extra care. Only Valamand had actually been close to Whiterun’s city itself, and so he was the only one that could direct any kind of teleportation there. Ring or otherwise.

“This is blasted inconvenient,” he grumbled as the two on either side of him adjusted, carried, or otherwise made contact with every scrap of pack or supplies they still had. “You know, there’s records not even five-hundred years old depicting nearly every guild mage and their mother being able to open a portal. And yet, only theory is now studied.”

“If it would be easier, you couldn’t just figure it out?” Wyrenna said, balancing a spare bedroll and a squashed pack of dinner leftovers on her off side.

“Oh, you can trust me to try,” Valamand said. “But as for testing now? We can’t take the risk of appearing without our skin. Or possibly fusing into one being. Or anything significantly less pleasant.”

Valamand slipped the loose silver ring over his glove. Vanishing was a strange sensation, like being shot from a cannon. The world rotated under their shoes. Wyrenna decided this was definitely the worst form of transportation. At least, all of them had been standing still. Physics was preserved. And so they came to a rest at the destination rather than flying off ten feet into a hillock as had happened before.

The intent was, ideally, to bypass the blockade of the city and appear safe on the other side. And to wait in a nice, heated inn for Ondolemar’s next word. Even from afar, Stormcloak tents and siege weapons crowded the city gates and Ulfric’s banners flew at every surrounding farm. It wouldn’t be more than a few weeks before the Empire would come again and supplies might pass into the city, but never a sure thing.

Around them, though, the empty Stormcloak tents did remind Wyrenna. Never a sure thing.

“Valamand! Inside the city!”

“This is the closest safe place it put us down,” Valamand said.

On a second glance after panic, the tents weren’t actually deserted. The Stormcloaks had broken ranks. They weren’t camping or fighting anything, or even noting all that much the three interlopers appearing out of the air. Some were in full rout. Others stood, struck and yelling. Pointing into the sky. A few were stringing their bows, but the arrows were halfhearted.

Dragons flocked over Whiterun.

A roar shook the clouds above. The greatest shape of all rose from where it gripped Dragonsreach with whole-horse talons. And his fellows followed, the sound of their wings a storm over the tundra. They passed overhead, Wyrenna feeling as tiny as a mite below them. She stared up, up at the great belly of Alduin and she could feel his hunger move on into the western sky. The glare of fire shone on the scales of two huge beasts that remained, diving and swooping in coils around their prize.

In her bones, Wyrenna knew that a God would see even a city’s fall as a small thing. Wyrenna let go of Valamand’s arm she had been clinging to, set down her extra baggage. It was only a quick glance around to find the biggest of the Nords. With his hands thrown up, yelling curses and spouting
horror, no less. “You!” she yelled in his ear, dragging his cuirass down by the straps to meet her in the eye. “You, what’s your name?”

“H-Hjornskar Head—”

“I don’t give a skeever crap about the rest!” Wyrenna said, in the thickest northern accent she could do on a whim. “There are people trapped in there. Get your little arse moving and start a bucket train! What’s the best way over the walls?”

The man stammered for a moment, worthless. Wyrenna turned her head. “Valamand! Destroy the gate!”

Those nearby who had noticed Valamand wore Thalmor robes instantly backed away. The mer cast a barrage of virulent, golden spells at the thick doors. They had stood fast for lagging months, now their iron hinges warped. Then crushed inward like cheap copper. A fury of shivers sprayed into the street. Wyrenna turned back to the Nord, who had taken off his helm and was staring at her like he was already one foot into Sovngarde.

“Hjornskar, you listen to me! You get these men into the city, you put out the fires. This army stuff right now is cancelled! You got Dragons to worry about!”

Wyrenna did not expect people to cheer. She looked up, from what she thought had been one man’s harsh-talking. Other Stormcloaks had gathered around, watching. And, maybe in absence of any other leadership at the moment or poor military structure, they were looking to her. They believed she was someone, something else.

She let go of the Stormcloak commander, sighed to herself, and became who ought to have been there. “We’re going into the city! Save civilians first!”

The conspicuous lack of a shield bothered Wyrenna, but at least she could run faster without it. On either side of her, Valamand and Ilyas-Tei matched her steps. Stormcloaks were only a few strides behind her, she struggled to think in the stench of smoke. “Valamand, you figure out a way to deal with the fires for good. They don’t look too bad yet, but if they spread…”

“The city’s made of wood, straw, and dung,” Valamand said.

“Dragons will just burn it again,” Ilyas-Tei pointed out.

“Then climb up top and try and keep them off the city. Get the Nord archers to help you.”

“You?”

Wyrenna drew her scratched sword. “I’ve still got a lot to do,” she said. “Go!”

Ilyas-Tei turned back into the crowd behind her and peeled off with about five bowmen. Valamand ran with his long legs up to the temple district, each stride clearing two stone steps. Their tasks set, Wyrenna was left in the market where Imperial soldiers and the hold guards were making a poor stand. They saw the Stormcloaks and Wyrenna had to leap between them, yelling with all her lungs for the soldiers behind to “Stop!” The Imperials didn’t make a move either, perhaps startled by the chaos of the scenario.

The Imperial leader, or so Wyrenna guessed at a glance from their decorated armor, was a mousy Cyrod with an unfortunate mustache. “Rank? Name?” Wyrenna demanded of him.

“Legate Quintin Ciphus, and you— the Stormcloaks—”
“Wyrenna. The Stormcloaks are just men, right now,” Wyrenna said. “What do you have here, Legate?”

“Fifteen men still. By the Eight, it’s not enough,” he said. “Not against those… monsters!”

“Look, I know this is sudden, but this is what’s going to happen,” Wyrenna said. “You send all the archers you have, meet up with the Argonian on the wall. There’s no point waving swords until—”

A booming dragon voice overhead drew uncomfortably near. Wyrenna’s attempt at a ward came almost too late. She was spread too thin trying to guard all the soldiers and stumbled under the force, felt the ash billow around her and singe her eyebrows. Luckily, the flaming breath wasn’t sustained or she’d never have been able to shield anyone. If only all dragonfire was a moment’s flash.

“—until these beasts are on the ground within reach,” she finished as if nothing had happened. “Until then, set the men to finding survivors if you haven’t already.”

“Survivors! In all this fire?”

Wyrenna wanted to strike him across the jaw with the pommel of her sword for standing here arguing in the street. “I have a mer on—”

It began to snow. Which was impossible for once in Skyrim, with the aura of heat. But the winds around the city picked up and with what could have only been a wizard’s touch somehow dumped grey, sooty flakes back down onto the snuffing fire before melting again. The dragons were none too pleased by the sudden change in air currents and buffeted around, roaring.

“I have a mer on it,” Wyrenna said. “Get moving!”

Men around her obeyed without further question, turning foundations, filling buckets, and extracting villagers from their homes. Wyrenna joined them, and soon noticed a curious thing. After a few moments, the faint huddled forms of people shone through rock and behind closed doors. There was no doubt that this was some kind of magical effect. If Valamand could follow the footsteps of people who had passed, he certainly could use a spell to reveal anyone hidden.

Wyrenna uttered thanks for this good trick under her breath and heaved a fallen beam from over a dirt cellar. Within, two children hid.

“Don’t touch me!” one of them screamed, brandishing a paring knife. “I’ll kill you!”

She pushed the other, a boy who had passed out, behind her with her foot. Wyrenna threw her hands up and backed away. “I’m Wyrenna,” she said. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Yeah? Yeah right!” the girl said, and she was also crying. “How do I know that?”

“There’s no time for this. He’s hurt isn’t he? I can help.”

The girl stood her ground for a good few seconds, conflicted. Behind her, Wyrenna could hear dragons’ screams and the yells of archers in the distance. But they would not be occupied forever. Thankfully, the girl relinquished the other kid and he was only short of breath, maybe took a bump on the head. As Wyrenna Restored him to health, she noticed that he had some kind of problem with his lungs, but couldn’t do anything about it. He came-to wearily, shaking.

“He’ll be all right,” said Wyrenna. “You get to someplace with a stone basement. The keep, or the Hall of the Dead.”
A shadow passed overhead and landed heavily behind her, the noise then met with an echo of Men’s battle-cries. “Go! You have to protect him!” Wyrenna ordered the girl, and turned to face the dragon. Stormcloaks, Imperial soldiers, and city guards alike were rushing to hold the beast, but it beat its wings with fury, and gnashed its hungry mouth.

“Kriid do Kahforax!”

“What?” Wyrenna yelled back at it, her ears already ringing.

“Ful rinik sahlo,” it said. “Ful rinik zofaas.”

Wyrenna had more sense than to sit there in the street and argue with a dragon. Before it could say anything deadlier, spout more smoke and fire, Wyrenna was running at it. No shield, but she hoped to lash it across the snout again, or even better skewer one of its soft eyes. One had already been put out by an arrow, so they couldn’t have been as armored as the rest. Such plans came undone as the dragon swept Wyrenna aside with its thrashing neck, horns mightier than a bull’s.

Wyrenna was getting very tired of the view while huge foes threw her around. She went skidding up on top of a roof, smoldering straw chafing her until she got to broken shingles. Wyrenna managed to catch the wooden keel of the house before she fell down the other side. Her knuckles ached. Grip too tight on her sword.

She pulled herself and her armor up with one screaming arm, unsteady on the wide beam. Below, the soldiers fought with all military zeal to pin the dragon to the ground, bless them. But they were only mice to the dragon’s strength. Wyrenna could even swear the other circling above laughed at them. It rose again, beating its foes down with the gale of its wings. The amount of force in each flap to lift such a creature couldn’t have been real, Wyrenna thought, now that she saw it up close.

A rock came from the south and hit the dragon.

Rather, it was a boulder slung from a trebuchet set up for war outside the city. Intended for slingng just such boulders. The dragon’s flight was cut short in an instant, it crashed down upon the temple district and now could not escape its foes. Wyrenna hadn’t thought a dragon could sound afraid, but it did as it shrieked and bellowed in pain, and Wyrenna hoped it would soon be dead.

What that creature screamed in suffering, the other above answered in rage. Wyrenna began running after it. More boulders followed, though the creature knew now to beware. There was no proof it had been Ilyas-Tei that had contrived that shot. (And did she even know how to work a trebuchet?) All the more, Wyrenna dreaded that dragon’s wrath. She stumbled over the rooftops, leaping where possible, and somehow made it upon the narrow stone wall by the creaking Gildergleam.

Valamand was there and had grown wise to the new tactic. Wyrenna saw him below, picking up fallen stone and launching it in the air at the dragon. Off the edge of her mind, she worried that he might hit something important. But that was ridiculous, what worse could happen to Whiterun? He missed regardless. Faintly, she could hear his cursing below that such a great flapping thing might be so deft.

He tried something else. But Wyrenna didn’t know what it was. He climbed atop the opposite wall from her, held out his hands and… pulled?

Wyrenna saw nothing until she realized the dragon was not banking left, but being dragged left. It fought to escape, as if a line had made a kite of it. But Valamand’s grip was relentless as the dragon spiralled in irresistibly. Though she had few senses for it, Wyrenna could feel the massive effort in such magic. Anyone could have.
Wyrenna ran along the wall as the dragon passed nearer and nearer, feeling a pressure in the air and her heart in her throat. Every step the dragon grew larger, her sword seemed so small…

Voice rung in her chest as she leaped into the air. Onto the dragon’s neck.

I cannot say, and Wyrenna could not describe, what exactly happened next. The dragon rolled. Somehow she hung on. The sudden weight flew off the flight. The dragon crashed down upon the market square, a streak of destruction ruining flagstones.

But when it was over, Wyrenna stood over her mark with sword buried up to the haft in dragon throat, two-fisted grip between armor plates. It choked, could not speak in its awful voice, and soon grew still. Wyrenna placed one boot on dark hide and yanked her blade out, stepped over its horns and over the crushed remains that had been a stone statue.

And like before, they were staring at her. Not only elves, but men and she could not avoid the fear in their eyes. She said nothing, this time. But all parted before her as she marched up to Dragonsreach and she could see some sign for the gods as she passed.

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The Jarl’s court and much of the upper city had taken shelter in the great hall’s stone basement. Surprisingly, damage to Dragonsreach itself had been minimal. Wyrenna couldn’t speculate the minds of dragons. But she fancied if she was so great and cruel she might leave simple mortal buildings intact on a whim. The fear and domination would be enough, if she carried the threat of a drawn sword a dozen feet tall.

Balgruuf seemed to be a man of clear head and fortitude. While he had misgivings hiding from the dragons, his housecarl had been quick to reason with him. It wasn’t a glorious fate, she said, to face a fool’s demise. That warriors win wars. And that they do not crash against futility without cunning. Wyrenna found this Irileth, who was a dark elf, supremely sensible and felt no need to contribute input.

Tired and aching, Wyrenna spent the evening in Dragonsreach. After all settled, the refugees bundled into the hall as temporary shelter. Whiterun assessed its damage and drew the work up quickly. The bodies were counted. And yet, her reputation as dragon-slayer led the Jarl to insist Wyrenna and her party take fine accommodation. Wyrenna accepted only under condition that all forced from their homes be seen-to first. Bold, Balgruuf said, but a respectable request.

At secondary importance was the war. Which now seemed impossible with both Stormcloak and Imperial military commanders crowding into Dragonsreach and arguing at all-hours of the night. They badgered each other over how to separate their troops again. or what word to send to Tullius or Jarl Stormcloak, if a siege could even persist anymore. Who ought to claim the city in the aftermath. Balgruuf put an end to this and threatened to lock them both in the dungeons. He would not tolerate this treatment of his Hold: like damaged goods at the market. There was no more discussion, he said, over the question of who should pay for or keep Whiterun. For it was his and his it would stay.

And of course there was no restraining Farengar, who had been given the task of what to do with the dragon bodies, from gushing about dragonish properties and magical context. Valamand took this to task himself and long-distracted that other wizard with theoretical meta-magickal dynamics and sympathetic panresonance of soulbound materials, and over whether dragonbone was animal product or a fossil and the implications thereof. Wyrenna secretly suspected that the two wizards mutually baffled each other yet neither was willing to admit that the other had them at an intellectual loss.
(the frustration, though, she endured that one night as the three of them settled in the large guest bed upstairs in the keep. Valamand whispered into her ear the flaws of Farengar’s theories, she whispered back the pains of hand-wringing in court, and he may or may not have noticed his arm migrate around her middle before they slept. It was a good sleep.)

It wasn’t until the next morning while breakfast was being cleared from Dragonsreach’s great hall that the incursion of the dragons was given context. At first though, it came with an alarming crunch off the back of the citadel. Wyrenna put down the last of her cheese-and-toast and listened as the hall itself grew silent. Irileth peeled quietly off the Jarl’s side and saw up the stairs to the back. And the guards waited, and the refugees waited, and the steward waited, and even Jarl Balgruuf waited for her to return.

When she did, it was with the palest squire-girl that Wyrenna had ever seen. Not merely Nord-pale, but Nord-having-seen-something-shocking-pale. Irileth whispered to the Jarl. The Jarl said something discreetly back, made some rousing encouragement of the bard in the hall to distract the common folk. The squire-girl approached Wyrenna and meekly informed, “Dragon-slayer, there’s a dragon on the Porch that wants to speak with you.”

Valamand and Ilyas-Tei on either side of her were close enough to hear, and to look up at the squire with entirely different judgements. Below, Wyrenna pushed her plate forward, politely finished her cup, and said, “Thank you, I’ll be along just now.”

No more serious than if it had been a letter, Wyrenna rose from the long table, patted both her confidantes to follow her, and walked calmly to exit the hall. With an exception. One hand gripped her sword to check if it was secure on her belt.

“Valamand,” she whispered, “do you have a comb?”

He said, “Yes, of course,” and gave it to her. She used it to tidy up where she still was bed-frazzled, tied her hair neatly as she walked up the stairs.

“I don’t think dragons care how you look,” Ilyas-Tei said.

“I care how I look,” Wyrenna said. “You don’t even have hair.”

“Neither does the dragon,” Ilyas-Tei pointed out.

Valamand took his comb back gingerly and tucked it into the pocket of his robes. “Wyrenna’s point still stands. We have little idea what this dragon thinks or intends for us. With the example of the past few, its opinion may be very poor.”

“I don’t know anything about dragon manners,” Wyrenna said. “But if a man called to me, ‘manslayer!’ I’d worry.”

She took two hands on the Great Porch’s doors and pushed them open to the air and the northeast. She crossed the great under-eaves and approached the great dragon awash in morning light.

It was old. All dragons were old, Wyrenna corrected herself, but this dragon was ancient and weathered the way a ruin of a long-lost era ought to have been. Broken horns and countless spines studded its bleached hide. Its piercing eyes were long paled. It folded its ragged wings, though it couldn’t possibly have arrived other than by flight. But it was old not in the way of common mortals, which grew feeble. No, it was old in the way a river, or a mountain, or even a Tower of the world was old. The power in its weight of years did not crush it. It embodied such a force of time.

“I approach in peace,” Wyrenna said. “I am Wyrenna. I’m humbled by you, great one. How may I
“Drem yol lok, Wyrenna. I see and mark your power as dovah-krüid, bane of bitter Kahforax, and now of Alduin’s trusted commander Loknahmaar. I am Paarthurnax. In this time, I am Grandmaster of High Hrothgar atop Monahven.”

“Then if we are both peaceful I wish you warm welcome to Dragonsreach, honored Grandmaster,” said Wyrenna. “Is, er, there anything you might need or want, after your journey?”

“I am dovah. I want for everything, I lack for nothing,” said Paarthurnax. “But it is orin brit ro, an irony, to be offered hospitality in these imprisoning halls. That alone will sustain me for the time being.”

And Paarthurnax spoke of his presence before them.

“One known as Dovahkiin passed through these lands, and was summoned before the Greybeards over a season ago,” said Paarthurnax. “This Dragonborn, they have not arrived.”

“So that’s what that was, then,” Valamand muttered. “I can’t imagine, whoever they are, that they could have missed it.”

“It was very loud,” Wyrenna agreed. The memory of that word felt a lifetime in the past. “I’m not anything like, uh, a Dragonborn. Is there some way I could help you with this problem?”

“You are not Dovahkiin, this is true. But there are few mortals that have been instrumental in slaying dovah in these times. You, and this Dovahkiin, are alone in these feats. It was my hope that you had met, or would know of their fate.”

“I’m sorry, but I’ve never met them, or I’ve never known to have met them,” Wyrenna said. “But if this is as good a time as any, did you know that someone’s been soul-trapping Dragons?”

Paarthurnax reared his great head, and Wyrenna worried greatly that she had said something wrong. But he only rumbled as if in deliberation or thought.

“So you are already aware,” he said at last. “I expected to have to explain to you this news, for I had not anticipated a precedent in understanding it. That the Dovahkiin may kill a dragon and devour their immortal soul. But to trap it, and keep it, and use it… it is not done.”

Wyrenna considered her next words carefully, for it was equally not-done to patronize a dragon. “These two by my side, together we been caught in the wake of this dragon-soul-trapper,” Wyrenna began. “This is Valamand of Luxurene to the far south. Everything he has, has been taken by the one in your concern—a lord of the Altmer. If he is too humble to speak, then I will tell his story.”

“No, I will be brief,” said Valamand. He straightened himself up to his full height, and Wyrenna had not noticed he had cowered before the mighty creature.

“Speak, fahliil, of what you know.”

Valamand composed himself. And he did. “Your mer is the High Kinlord Silabaene, of Firsthold. Among the highest in station among the Thalmor. Though I do not know what such titles mean to you,” he said. “He is, though, a dangerous mage and sorcerer. While at his mercy I was forced to further his research… the means to trap even the mightiest of souls. And after further investigation, invoke some aspect of the Walk-Brass Tower in their use.”
“And of your other companion?”

“Ilyas-Tei is my sister,” Wyrenna said. “Together, we saw one night a dragon plucked from the sky.”

“And the big black dragon would have been too, if he had been slower to fly,” Ilyas-Tei said simply.

“You refer to Alduin?”

“Wyrenna called him that, yes,” said Ilyas-Tei.

“Your account is disturbing, then,” said Paarthurnax. “For Alduin has taken his army to war west of here. And I know, for I was alive at the time of its happening, that your metal Tower may only walk with the soul of a God to drive it.”

“And Alduin is a god,” Wyrenna said.

“So he was worshiped.”

“And Silabaene wants to be,” Wyrenna also said.
They had to leave immediately. Unfortunately, this meant that all else was left on hold. Any promises they made at Dragonsreach had to be postponed. Ondolemar couldn’t be notified. And the original inquiry into the Dragonborn’s whereabouts was left a moot question.

Wyrenna was annoyed to leave every task undone even if she had to charge off into the wilderness.

It was a little difficult, though, to cling to a dragon’s claw and turn a page at the same time. “I know I copied about the Dragonborn in here,” Wyrenna said over the whip of the wind. The paper flattened stubbornly. Wyrenna regretted printing everything from the Embassy in such tiny letters.

“Wyrenna! Do you have to do this now?” Ilyas-Tei scolded. The flight of dragons neared, such a swarm with no need to be anything but leisurely. Paarthurnax hurried though, over winds and into the cold air to catch them from above. The air thinned and chilled. Ilyas-Tei took visible gulps of it.

“I’m not doing anything else right now,” Wyrenna said. “I could have sworn Elenwen wrote… I found it!”

Valamand couldn’t much read over her shoulder but he leaned as close as he could with the claw gripping his middle. “Elenwen, to my knowledge never detained any Dragonborn. Such a person would be… a symbol.”

“That’s just what it says,” Wyrenna reported. “But listen! She interrogated some Blade named Esbern… and he broke, told her about the Dragonborn. This was around the time we met, after my mother died and after the Dragons began coming back and Helgen…”

“And around when the Dragonborn disappeared,” Ilyas-Tei said. “But you said she didn’t have them?”

“She didn’t. She sent out orders to capture the Dragonborn… and even got word of suspects!” Wyrenna turned the page. “But if they were arrested, they never arrived. News anywhere east of the Karth cut off last Hearthfire.”

Valamand didn’t notice how loud his voice was in her ear when he yelled, “Including spies out of Windhelm.”

Wyrenna felt the heavy pressure of a terrible thought in the front of her mind. Simmering on the edge of a boil.

“Valamand,” she asked. “What would Thalmor escorting the Dragonborn to the Embassy would have looked like, on the road?”

“One or two Justiciars, with or without a military compliment. The level of restraint on the subject would depend on their willingness to comply,” Valamand said. Each word grew more and more bleak until his last statement was blank horror. “Their orders would have been overturned only at the highest authorization, with full redundancies in written and code passphrase.”

And, Wyrenna remembered as she put away her folio, she had been almost led east. East to Eastmarch, where Silabaene worked deep in a barrow. Dragonborn, in Nordic barrows, the draugr, the dissection, corpses on tables, dragon souls ripped forth. Wyrenna approached through a tunnel of thought very quickly, running backward through darkness and what she could recall of that day.
“I saw the Dragonborn, Paarthurnax,” said Wyrenna. “They’re very, very dead.”

“Truly?”

“How else could a person learn to tear out a dragon’s soul,” Wyrenna said, “even if they had to invent somewhere else to put it?”

The thunder came before the lightning and swept across the plains below. The grass shimmered ripples from an epicenter of ruins just ahead. “Hurry, great one!” Ilyas Tei greyed around the scales from the sound. “It begins!”

And it began, and lasted only an instant of air and chewing light. Paarthurnax buffeted around, righted himself but dragon bones fell in a shower. A halo of ash in the morning sun. Only Alduin could have understood the curse that Paarthurnax let loose to the sky. Wyrenna felt it in her Nord marrow, the malevolence of a time long ago.

Alduin’s maw lunged up, for he knew Paarthurnax better than the ant far below that had undone his great works.

It lunged up, snapped short of Paarthurnax, and fell backwards to earth vacant.

Wyrenna jumped free without a word. Her eyes watered, her panic screeched, her sword was in her hand and all that mattered was the shortest distance between her and the problem. Solving it, and ending it. Propelled for her purpose: a meteor or silver hailstone.

Down.

Alduin’s husk smote the ruin below.

Down.

How touching, for Valamand to edge her sword with flames.

Down.

Unto a grey-stone forge, a black crystal long as a man, and the soft hand of the High Kinlord Silabaene. He was as a pillar. Wyrenna cracked her sword over a breath’s skin, a ward so thin yet so fast that she could feel her blade-edge dull. She screamed into his face, but to him she was not even there.

Before her was the apex of her strife, it’s heart of knots and nothing, not anything in this world did Wyrenna hate more. In that moment she was not afraid, and she was not herself. A more tactical Wyrenna would have relented, prioritized. This one was made out of hot mist, clenched fists and the raw wetness behind anger. Of why you do not sleep at night.

She took her sword in both hands and forced it. She forced it and if she thought of magic it was nonsensical, to pit ward against ward and feel the backshock of them both. Wyrenna’s right arm shivered, one rib cracked.

Some resistance gave way, she felt flesh under her shattered steel. She was thrown.

Her vision browned, wicked-bright from the pain but there was red washing the shadowsilk of the elf-lord’s robes. Dark blood streamed down bare wrists, from one hand sliced to the bone. A chip in him. Dimly, Wyrenna feared what would happen next, if this was so unforgivable to expose his bodily form. Or if it was inconsequential to leave a mark on his mere vehicle.
Silabaene grasped the great soul gem with his unstained hand and lifted it as if it was not even weight to bear.

“You style yourself a threat to me, that these sides we inhabit are drawn evenly,” said Silabaene. “But you sacrifice your blood loyalties to shame me for one evening. You spend your very body to strike a mere cut. All to defy me. You do not even know how.”

Wyrenna had a great many things she fancied to say to Silabaene then. But they all came out at once, and the result was not any words or language spoken by man, mer, beast, or dov. Yet it was one that all understood. Wyrenna could do little more, with her broken arms and battered bones.

“Let your opposition come, and fall—if you would find me. My dawn approaches, and when it does no Man-craft or mockery of false Gods will remain.”

“FUS ROH DAH!”

Wyrenna dug into the stone. The forge itself bent under the mighty roar’s will, crumbling inward. But as Paarthurnax landed on the ruin’s crumbled lip the effect was only temporary. Silabaene already had one foot into a portal (a real, working portal!) and thus only was half-there for the assault to knock flat.

The portal’s edges began to close. “Oh, no, no,” Valamand was heard to say, and with a painful roll over her shoulder Wyrenna could see him seize the magic himself and hold it open. “You are not taking that soul anywhere!”

Silabaene actually yelled, indignant as mote by mote he was drawn out of the vortex. In the air around him, Wyrenna saw an underland of dark stone and cavernous space. Ilyas-Tei grabbed Valamand’s middle when he began to slide forward, and hooked one of Paarthurnax’s horns. Wyrenna would have helped, ached that she could not help.

“Traitor to your breed,” Silabaene spat, pulling out in bloody fingers a smaller soul gem for his own use. “You would see the celestial battle unjoined. For Lorkhan and his lieutenant-guise in Talos to dominate Aetherius. How have you been so debased? To find nothing in casting free the Serpent? To see Auri-El relieved after Eras of weathering such abuse?”

“You’re no relief to Auri-El,” Valamand replied to this nonsense. It was esoterism that only another Thalmor could understand. But he refused. “The serpent present is the one before me.”

Silabaene cast that terrible gem at Wyrenna, his lance of infinite length. Valamand met it with a bright missile of flame. The two collided in a prism, a dazzling explosion. And when the swimming haze cleared, there was a Nord, one elf, an Argonian, and a dragon left to witness the sudden midmorning peace. If Wyrenna counted as a proper witness, up against the dead-gaping mouth of Alduin. Agony bit into frustration. She had studied hard to confront conventional wounds but tiny fractures and magical fissures were beyond her ability to heal. Someone turned her proper-face-up, Valamand spoke in her ear.

“Ilyas-Tei, you have medicine.”

“None left,” her sister bemoaned.

“Wyrenna, focus. Enough,” Valamand said, placing his hands over where she tried to repair the wounds. “Save your magicka. You’ll only mis-set your bones.”

“We need a real healer,” Wyrenna groaned, leaning forward into Valamand’s arms. But he did not respond for a few granite moments. Then, he spoke in the firmest, bravest voice she had ever heard.
him use. She could believe that somewhere in a clear blue sea there was an island kingdom he ought to have ruled.

“Great Paarthurnax. I understand that you do not use your Voice for profit, and that is your way. But, I implore you now. Please, if Wyrenna could be healed by its might.”

The dragon, who had been watching as still as a gargoyle, arched his wide neck down into the ruin. But he remained silent. His pale eyes did not blink, and only the faint steam from his wide nose betrayed he was a creature of breath.

“I am sorry,” Valamand said. “It was improper to presume, that—”

“Silence.”

Paarthurnax turned his ancient head only a fraction, like a bird that could not stare straight-on at close distance.

“I speak only in True Need. So I have lived through all of your mortal eras. I have assumed to know all I might wield upon this world. But it has never come to my mind, I would find mastery of Thu’um challenged,” said the Dragon. “There are no common words of healing in Dovahzhul. Dovah do not spare notice for the weak, or the dying.”

“I understand,” said Wyrenna.

“That is what Dovah such as Alduin believe,” said Paarthurnax. “And what mortal imitators, your Silabaene, would emulate.”

Paarthurnax was so close, the crags of his jaws so slightly open to reveal long teeth. Wyrenna sat broken between the maws of two dragons. One awful and dead. One awesome and alive. Still before this power and humbled by it, his Voice was not a great yell but somber in thoughtfulness, composed as a poem. The words he spoke were,

“Sos haas nahl.”

And whatever they meant, their command became the truth of things. Wyrenna, known as dragon-slayer rose and embraced that scaly nose, once slayer-of-men. She was too shaken by his Voice to speak.

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The flight back was slate grey despite the high noon sun. Everything quaked under Paarthurnax’s tattered wings. There was much discussion of what was to be done now. If anything could be done. Far below, their shadow was a vague dot over the bright tundra.

Alduin’s physical form was slain, Paarthurnax informed, but Alduin himself was unhurt. His flesh would rot, but while his essence still existed he would one day return. Trapped in a gem, banished to the aether, or orphaned and bodiless, these were immaterial, temporary conditions. Even if it took a thousand years to escape and a thousand more to reconstitute, Alduin’s will was absolute.

The risk was that the incredible power of his immortal soul could be used before that time.

When they returned and delivered this news to Jarl Balgruuf, Ondolemar awaited them.

He did not approach overtly, but merely was there. In the guest room chair. He was not as he had
been in Markarth. He’d swapped his robes for plain grey linen-and-leathers. Like a burglar, he lamented. His protests, Wyrenna thought, were the only reason that he was not immediately mistaken for one.

Around the end-table, there commenced a new meeting.

“There’s no letting this go,” Wyrenna said. “Not while Silabaene has something so horrible in his grasp. We’ll just have to go after him.”

“Do not mistake my meaning,” Ondolemar warned. “But if what you say is true, the damage is surely inevitable. Only the length of a ritual now separates the mer from his goal. And that may be a month, or ten minutes’ time.”

Wyrenna did not soften her gaze, did not relent. “Failure’s only inevitable if you decide to do nothing to forestall it.”

“Wyrenna’s right,” Ilyas-Tei said, equally stubborn. “What does acting as if we’ll all die by tonight get us? Nothing!”

Valamand shook his head. “Respectfully, Commander, you come outfitted for survival. Those in your care would not benefit from assuming defeat.”

“I warn you not to mistake my meaning, and that is precisely what happens,” replied Ondolemar, whose gaze was even more piercing without his hood. “The model of the worst circumstance is also a model of the enemy’s fortune. However calmly we proceed, these are desperate grounds that we do not control.”

“How, then, can we surmount one who has every advantage?” Valamand said. “His scheme is finished. Ours is not even begun.”

“We begin it!” Wyrenna said. “All he has is a head start. He was planning before we even knew to plan, or knew each other to plan with.”

“There is no trick,” Ondolemar insisted, “that may succeed with two mer, one human, and one lizard and no tangible resources.”

“And maybe one dragon who can’t fit into this room,” Ilyas-Tei corrected.

“You elves are always so negative,” Wyrenna said. “We have plenty more than just those things. Even just your followers, Commander Ondolemar. But they’re not even the best we have, I don’t think.”

Wyrenna didn’t consider the others dense for staring at her. What was growing in her mind was not a conventional sort of advantage, but one unspoken that only she was privy to. She did her best to explain, “You’re thinking like Silabaene is. That what we need is money and nobility, wealth and everything it can seize. That what we need is money and nobility, wealth and everything it can seize. That so long as we aren’t a High Kinlord, having worked with a High Kinlord’s influence and purpose from the start, we can’t match him,” she said. “But where is he a High Kinlord?”

“Auridon,” Valamand answered immediately.

“Skryim isn’t his place, and he cannot gain much of anything from here,” Wyrenna said. “He can only expend what he has, in hopes to achieve his goals.”

Ilyas-Tei tapped her nails on the table with nerves. “You’re saying that he’s a big fish, but this isn’t
his pond.”

“Yes! At home, his power is everything. But he’s in another’s home now. So he goes cloak-and- dagger, relying on his actions being secret to succeed.”

“He has, thus far,” Valamand said.

“But that doesn’t mean he holds advantage in these lands,” Wyrenna said. “Ulfric Stormcloak, Balgruuf, Jarl Elisif, the Silver-Bloods… they dominate. The Thalmor, no matter what happened south in the war, skirt around in the edges.”

Ondolemar took a good, long drink of his wine. That was enough answer for Wyrenna’s truth.

“And how will we turn this illusory advantage into anything real?” Valamand asked, not in a tone of criticism but one of worry and despair. Even to her who could feel its strength, Wyrenna admitted, it was difficult to bet on an approach that had nothing concrete.

“There’s a lot of benefit, to being a Nord in Skyrim,” Wyrenna said.

There was more to it than that. There were benefits to being a certain kind of Nord in Skyrim, with a certain image that meant certain things to certain people. But beyond that, there were other advantages in not being fully Nord, not being fully an icon of the regional warrior-worship. It was not easy to whittle a figure out of nothing, but Wyrenna was well-formed. Her self, reputation and persona was built out of hard study and now again she resolved to transform into the identity to get away with what she planned.

Else, who would believe only her word? There had to be a sweet, congratulatory pride in following her. Or no one would. This time as before, she resolved not to lie at all, or to lie minimally. For there was no power in lies, not in Skyrim, when so many would clamor to believe a truth said plainly.

Still, Wyrenna spent hours into the night composing her performance. She held the brittle paper leaves in her hands, and faced Paarthurnax on the great porch the next morning with her plan.

“In eras past, I taught Men to use the Voice, and they used it as they pleased: for war,” said the dragon. “And in this young year, it is an Elf that urges me to use my Voice in peace. Now it is your mortal words that will be weapons?”

“Words have always been weapons,” Wyrenna said. “Whatever the language.”

“Spoken wisely,” said Paarthurnax. “In another time, you could have been a mighty Tongue.”

“No offense, but that sounds just terrible,” said Wyrenna. “If I can do what I think I’m going to do, with just my own speech.”

Paarthurnax rumbled in agreement. He poised himself, great mouth behind her as she faced the mountains. Wyrenna could feel his hot breath on her back, as his Voice consumed the air around her,

“Meyz zuul loot!”

The sky opened up and made a space for her.

“I first apologize, for interrupting your lives in this time of war,” Wyrenna said, shuffling her papers. Then, in frustration she tossed them away and they fluttered down unto the bailey. “But I speak to
you now in emergency, and I hope that you will listen.”

Wyrenna’s voice boomed in Riften and in Markarth. In the northern holds and the southern forest.

“My name is Wyrenna, and my news is simple and grim. An enemy of Skyrim and those who dwell within has appeared, beyond all threat of civil war. A foreign lord, Silabaene, mobilizes magic rituals deep underground. And while he is of elvenkind, not even Altmer are safe— he thinks nothing of who he sees as traitors, as lesser. He thinks nothing of to steal Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak. He thinks nothing of the Empire, or civil accords of treaty and war. All are toys to him, this enemy from the south.”

Even as far as the Velothi mountains, Wyrenna was heard.

“I cannot expect you to trust only my word. If I must, I will try to stop him alone. But if even only one brave soul might come to Whiterun and hear more about this threat, they would be my friend. If they were to pledge to fight with me, they would be my boon companion. And, if I were to assemble an army of the brave, their victory would become legend.”

People listened, even on ships at the Solitude docks and unto the Sea of Ghosts.

“And it’s difficult to justify, to ask of your help in these times. But consider that there will be no courage of kings, or borders, politics or simple life should Silabaene’s ascend to his ambitions. This is not a war, and farms will not farm on under a new banner. This is an interruption, an attempt to knock us off the Wheel and turn it to his own ends. To become a new God, and subdue those who would not worship him.”

The stones rang, over the Jeralls and to Bruma.

“Come to Whiterun and seek me, Wyrenna. All questions will be answered, and all are welcome. With, or without you by my side I will march against Silabaene. But it will be your courage that assures victory, your unity that may bring the North’s true hammer to bear, and my thankful heart that may see your families safe and your lives someday peaceful again.”

Echoes of herself replied. And as this sounding-chamber faded, Wyrenna took a deep breath and almost sank to the plank floor. Her doughy knees trembled. “It’s done,” she croaked, too softly for anybody now to hear. Then, swallowing the lump, “It’s done, and can’t be taken back.”

“As all things of importance are known to be,” said the dragon.

Ilyas-Tei approached first. Then Valamand. They both had been quite silent, fearful that the projection of Voice might catch theirs and amplify it as Wyrenna’s had been. “I liked it,” said the Argonian. “And what’s the worst that could happen? That no one shows up?”

“They could laugh,” Valamand said, unhelpfully. He seemed aware of it too, and made a remorseful face. Surely he was imagining being mocked on such a mortifying scale, so Wyrenna forgave him.

But, neither of them could know what she accepted at that moment. That, finally, this is what she was going to do with her life. That no matter what came after, this was for real. This was as binding as marriage, a coupling to an idea. To summon herself as this figure who could shout from the sky, gather warriors to fight at her side. As other great Nords had done in the past, for good or to evil ends.

So far, her very greatest trick.

The Wyrenna that projected from the sky— Wyrenna the dragon-slayer, Wyrenna Foe-Tongue,
Wyrenna the spy and Wyrenna the enemy of Thalmor—she would either live forever or none would remain to remember her.
Outside of emotional stress, Wyrenna actually considered this a sound plan. And, it had not taken much persuasion before the Jarl for it to proceed with full approval. Whiterun may not have seemed to be in a state to take visitors, but all the same it could not recover quickly on its own. If no one answered this call, then nothing would be lost. But to move caravans, travel, goods, and money to Whiterun after a disaster, Balgruuf found this a cunning strategy. (for as practical as some Nords may be said to be, asking for aid is not something these northern folk excel at. Even if one lowered their pride to seem weak, there was little hope for charity in peacetime, let alone amidst war. Winterhold still anguished in this reality. And many would say Riften had sold its better self trying to escape it.)

And so, Wyrenna set up spare planks over two benches in the Bannered Mare, fetched pen and ink, laid out her folio, and waited for Skyrim to believe her. Really, she should not have worried so much for the Companions were close at hand to begin with. (And what a time to be out adventuring when dragons were landing on their own roof!?) They leaped at her invitation. Wyrenna supposed it was traditional for the Companions to do that sort of thing. To be an elf-hunting posse, and all that.

Wyrenna made very clear that before she would accept their company, they would aid in some cleanup of Whiterun’s damaged buildings. The sourest of them barked about it, but their leader agreed. Such a disaster was apolitical. And it was ill fellowship to do nothing while your neighbors were left amongst soot and ashes. Balgruuf himself stood amazed that Wyrenna had coaxed them at all. Each of their number was the equal of three backs, and it led to much admiration and gossip inside. A large proportion of which regarded the aesthetic dimensions of Farkas’ biceps, or Aela the Huntress and the tone of her shoulders.

Ondolemar, and his followers did not have to appear. They melted out of the air, as if they had been present all along. They were an eclectic collection. Justiciars unabiding, sullen even in plain-clothes. Altmeri thieves, spies from Summerset both aligned and opposed to Thalmor activities. Bosmer, quick to whet teeth on rebellion. Smiling Khajiit. Wyrenna wondered if Ondolemar had not been as loyal as his public image portrayed. Regardless, they brought with them great casks from the Honningbrew meadery, freely donated. Ondolemar remarked on the benefits of contacts twice-removed.

The first true stranger to show, against all odds was an old elf. He said he was merely a priest of Arkay, from Falkreath. But while he declined to share his interest, he pledged to fight for Wyrenna with what was left in his old bones. And, knowing elves, those bones could have been ancient.

The doubt that one meager reply sowed was undone the very next morning when a fresh battalion from Windhelm arrived. The Imperials still lingering in Whiterun clustered closer in discomfort. Behind the Stormcloaks strode a surly row of dark elves. And then again Argonians, whom Wyrenna had met in Windhelm’s assemblage. At the head of this parade marched Brunwulf Free-Winter, right through the Bannered Mare’s doors.

And it would be just silly not to embrace him warmly, a traditional full-chest hug. His beard itched. And he smelled like he’d just ran from Windhelm. “You’re looking well for yourself!”

“And you, my girl! For all the trouble you’ve stuck yourself in,” said the old Nord. “Well-done speech, too. Short, the way I like them.”
“Probably not something you get to enjoy often, in the court of Ulfric Stormcloak,” Wyrenna said.

“Ha!” And how did the mead appear in his hand, where did he get it from, and when had he paid for it, and how full now was the inn? “He sends his regards. And his soldiers, what few he was willing to spare. I’ve never seen the man in such fury, but you know how these things are. Can’t be caught with cold feet.”

Wyrenna smiled, a mean sort of smile. “He’s not coming?” She didn’t spit on the floor, but in the fire. “Coward! I had something to say to him.”

“I’m supposed to deliver some cowpats of official well-wishing, endorsement, that milk-toothed talk,” said Brunwulf. “But I’m a soldier, not a herald. Better to round up the rest of Windhelm and fill out a company than yowl over something half-done. Who’re they?”

Brunwulf gestured to Ilyas-Tei and Valamand, who were sitting off the side of the desk, watching the whole thing. Neither of them seemed to want to interject. To be fair to them, Nords reuniting with one another tended to involve a lot of slapping on the back, hard liquor, and loud, bad storytelling about everything that had happened since the parting.

“That’s Ilyas-Tei, my gods-sister,” began Wyrenna.

“I met you!” Ilyas-Tei interrupted. “I remember you. From the Palace in Windhelm. What a mess!”

“Ah! It’s you! So no harm came to you,” said Brunwulf. Then he turned to the remaining party, who was well-hiding under his hood. “And the Thalmor?”

He said that with confusion. No betrayal, but some difficulty to grasp the presence of the supposed enemy.

“That’s Valamand, who is just as dear to me,” Wyrenna said simply.

Free-Winter was no fool, and it did not take him more than one gulp of his drink and a thoughtful pause to put things together. “Not Vilmundr, then.”

“No,” said Valamand, who pulled his cowl back down. He set his face, as he had done many times before when he could not afford to make a scene. “I suppose I wouldn’t care to know what you think of me now.”

“Ha! Don’t get ahead of yourself, boy,” said Free-Winter. “You don’t think I didn’t change words with the Dominion during the war? I knew you were one of them soon as you opened your mouth.”

Valamand all at the same time went pale, went red. Wyrenna had never imagined such a contradiction. The effect was an off-color sickness, a dry mouth and clenched fists.

“As for what I think of you? Well, think of yourself and where you are now!” said Brunwulf Free-Winter. He took another long drink of his mead, finished it, and set the pewter flagon down to cross his arms. “You’re here ’cause I let you be.”

And when the mer did not reply, Free-Winter finished the conversation himself. “Lucky I liked the look of you,” he said. “Rolff would have snapped your neck in the alley ’stead of bringing you to the cornerclub.”

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For quite a while now, we’ve seen things from Wyrenna’s perspective. And in that time, she has
reached this place in her story where she has manifested traits common to many Nordic heroes. Whether in of herself, or deliberately invoked for her own advantage. Right now, beating around that point would waste only more time, fodder for so many more bards. While we will return to Wyrenna’s eyes soon, it’s wise for us now to become Valamand.

Who, in turn, has become Valamand. Which is why that no mentions of how difficult it might be to inhabit this mer have crept across the page in such a long time. And, as you may have suspected from the very beginning, it was not only a challenge for you to place yourself as Valamand, but for Valamand to exist as himself at all.

Wyrenna is adept at becoming. But to pull someone out of nothing, harder. And from nothing if not Thalmor, harder still.

The end result, though. Valamand is Valamand, and we are Valamand now, and these thoughts reign at the front of that elf's mind. As intellectual as he is, such over-thinking was unpleasant for him as it might be for anybody. When not by Wyrenna’s side, there was distraction in Whiterun’s rebuilding. And while he would have delighted to use magic, Valamand found instead a shameful relief in manual labor. To bring himself down from the complex figures and strain of sorcery to the simple of lifting, shoveling, hammering. Like a peasant, amidst the peasants.

He wasn’t good at it, especially next to the Nord warriors. But being terrible at something was better than considering how very good he was at being someone he no longer wanted to be.

And to stop would be to let that Justiciar catch him. They shared the same conditioning drills that Valamand now pressed into service. For it was movement. And resulting exhaustion punishment, which the elf sorely desired to transmit back into the past.

Valamand filled his lungs with the night air, exhaled steam. He leaned over the side of the great porch. First looking down, then out to the horizon, and was too weary to retire back to lodgings. That would mean walking through the town. Down to the Bannered Mare. Washing up. And to rest. Wyrenna would ask after his behavior. She thought him distant and strange, most likely. The opposite, of course, of what ought to have been the case. That she would be glad to be liberated from the trouble. And yet how he savored sharing that same bed! (though, Ilyas-Tei was on the other side of her. He did not resent this but it was certainly less pleasing to his senses.)

“Drem yol lok, krofahlil Valamand,” said Paarthurnax, from above and behind. He’d assumed the dragon had left or else was away, for the porch was bare. No. Paarthurnax was so still atop Dragonsreach’ roof that not a shingle cracked, not a beam creaked to betray his bulk.

“I do not mean to offend,” Valamand said. “If my being here disrupts you, I will leave.”

“You are as nothing to me,” said Paarthurnax.

“It’s nice, then, to know where I stand with someone at least,” Valamand grumbled, though he soon realized a dragon’s hearing was much keener than a mortal’s.

“Explain.”

Valamand looked up, into the dragon’s form cast pale under the moons. “Forgive me, but I cannot imagine how this might capture your interest.”

“That is correct. You cannot imagine, for you are not dovah,” said Paarthurnax. “Instead consider the frodhadrin— the meditations— I complete, that I speak to you now. And refrain
from rending you between my claws.”

The elf swallowed clammy fear and air. It traveled down his neck slowly.

“To you, speaking to me is equal to my meaningless slaughter?” he asked.

Paarthurnax considered this while Valamand worried that he had asked an impudent question. “No,” the dragon said at last. Then, after more contemplation, “But there is no reason to this truth.”

“No,” the dragon said at last. Then, after more contemplation, “But there is no reason to this truth.”

“Then I think you deny yourself full credit, for your merit,” said Valamand. “For though you call it inexplicable, something stays your jaws, and that something exists with or without your active decision to make peace.”

“A young wisdom, on the nature of temptation. But I shall digest it. Your boldness or ineptitude, to advise dov,” Paarthurnax said. “Enough. Explain, doubts regarding your place in this world.”

Valamand was glad that there was so much of Paarthurnax that his presence enveloped the entire scene, an oldness into the air and he did not have to look at the dragon directly. Instead, the stars behind. “I am not much different than I was, not even a year ago. And yet, that self… repulses me. I cannot shed him, or kill him, or else forget and in forgetting leave his destruction behind.”

“You contradict yourself. You are the same. It is your perception that has changed.”

“How elegant it must be, to view all from such a broad sight, a dragon’s eyes,” Valamand sighed. “Too many of my words tangle and become nothing. Navel-gazing only.”

“I am Paarthurnax. I am destroyer of mortal armies. Once unmatched in suleyksmoliiin, power-lust, by all save Alduin. My regret does not define me as reborn, different from myself,” said the dragon. “For what is Valamand known, fahliilkulaan do koorkahjunaar?”

“Nothing. Nothing but failure, and cruelty, and cowardice,” said Valamand, answering the half of the question he understood. “Once, I would have approached you very differently. I would have called myself a great mage, of exceptional bloodline and promise. I would count esteem from high office not yet won, and from the praise of my ability. My eccentricity forgotten, and overwritten.”

He knew, though, that such a nature could not be undone.

“But none know of those things but me. They never became true, and they never could become true. In their stead, my reality: evil. I cannot call it anything but that, now. Or deny what it made of my gullibility.”

A dragon, of course, could not care for petty mortal guilts and follies. Why one asked after them, perhaps had some esoteric reason. Who could know an entity immortal, grander than his own limited existence? Marred only by that it could not inhabit Aetherius, perhaps.

“What is better,” asked Paarthurnax, after a great while, “to be born good, or to overcome your evil nature through great effort?”

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Time was short, but the army mustered. With each day, the anxiety that all had delayed too late grew, though so did suspicion. That this ritual somehow was too long, or that Silabaene’s plans were incomplete. Or at least, less complete than the mer might have let on. Wyrenna kept books, as party
after party came in through the Bannere Mare’s door to pledge what they could. And restlessly, spies and scrying sought out Silabaene’s hiding-place.

The speed with which Brunwulf and the Windhelm company had arrived was remarkable. It was days afterward that Wyrenna was approached by the well-traveled Khajiit Ri’saad. Negotiations concerning his caravans were dizzying and so subtle that Wyrenna felt her tongue dented by the end of it. But, a mutually-beneficial agreement was reached. In return for support and goods for her swelling army, Ri’saad would be permitted to trade within Whiterun’s limits. A difficult sell to the Jarl, but in the end he caved to her reasoning. And Wyrenna was not wrong. There was iron for nails, gold for wages, wax and thatch, and medicine for the wounded to go around within days.

Wyrenna, though, was suspicious of the old Khajiit’s generosity. Even the new privilege to sell in the market seemed spare in return for all the Khajiit might offer. But that night over apricot-wine Ri’saad let slip to her the confidence of one ja’khajiit Tszanzi, and the praises of true mercy.

Mages from Winterhold arrived, by carriage. Not by horse-and-carriage. Surely the highwaymen along the way had stepped aside in terror of a cart animated to move by itself, at speeds unbecoming of any decent land transportation. Valamand redoubled his study to reverse-engineer a reasonable portaling spell. But the Temple didn’t complain for the efforts of the Restoration master Colette Marence, even if the ceiling echoed with her chattiness. And several of the students, the bravest among them, had considered it an essential hiatus in their study.

(Marence, though, had been enthusiastically taken to the call. The simplest kindness to the lonely wizard had dubbed her a little darling, and won the belief that she could do no wrong.)

Even orcs, oft isolated in their strongholds showed up. Wyrenna hadn’t expected it, but it was they who asked the most questions. They demanded after Silabaene’s character, of her own, of her adventures and her deeds. Thankfully, Wyrenna only had to fight twice, to prove her strength to different bands. The rest mostly believed she had slain two dragons, and after seeing her against proven warriors gave her the benefit of the doubt. And her sword-arm a wide berth.

“And your name is…?”

The giggling fool before her laughed, and with a flourish that nearly took off a nearby ear, made an overdone stage bow. “Why, I am the marvelous, meticulous, ridiculous Cicero! Very pleased to be here, yes, so very pleased indeed!”

“Ah, I… see,” Wyrenna said, writing the name down, abbreviating ‘marvls., mtculs., rdiculs.’ just to be safe. “So… why do you want to, uh, join up with me, Mr. Cicero?”

“It’s like this,” said Cicero, leaning over her desk in an exaggerated act of disclosure. “I come to Skyrim. It’ll be nice, they said. So safe, they said! No! No, no! My poor mother and I, all alone on the road for months at a time in the cold, cold snow… but nothing to be done! Mother doesn’t mind though. She’s dead, you see.”

Wyrenna stared at him, nodding her head.

“But now! We’ll never! Get Mother to a new crypt! With some elfy nasty making a mess of things! It’s quite terrible.” He paused. Mostly to laugh. “Good trick from the sky though. Booming doom-voice, all very traditional. Good touch.”

“Uh, thanks, I try,” Wyrenna said. “But… what a coincidence? I also, um, came to Skyrim because of my own mother. And I definitely buried her, too.”
“Ooh!” Cicero clapped, a bit too loudly. “We have something in common! Upstanding, young lady. Mother would like you, yes! Dirt on her hands and a shiny, shiny blade.”

“This one kind of creeps me out,” said Ilyas-Tei.

“Oh, be nice,” Wyrenna said, though she’d definitely agree once the man had left. “He’s doing his best.”

"This isn't any time or place to do my worst, you know," said Cicero.

Wyrenna shrugged and hoped, dearly hoped she wasn't making some sort of terrible mistake, "Ok, Mr. Cicero. You can stay. How about this? For the time being, put your mother's remains in the Hall of the Dead. I know you probably want to take them to a family crypt, but just for now... Uh, a hostel for the dead."

"A hostel! For the dead, a ghostel? Where one could be," and he laughed at his own joke, "interred? Oh! So kind! I'll go and tell Mother straight away!"

The man jumped for joy and nearly collided with two other patrons and some entering the door, as he left. Wyrenna saw Valamand sit down with a fresh bottle of wine. "And what was that ambulatory disaster?" he asked.

"Creepy clown, dead mom," Wyrenna said. "You didn't miss much. Where were you?"

"Nowhere important." Valamand said. "The amateur bard here, he likely will sulk for a few days. But I cannot imagine his behavior what would drive a fruit seller to ask a Thalmor to peel the boy off of her."

"He leers and I can't stand more Ragnar the Red anyway," Wyrenna admitted. "Good on you. Also his book is bad."

Valamand nodded, but his eyebrows rose at the flippancy of such insult. In Alinor, to snub another’s book was devastating.

But that was the end of such a break, and doubtless the stream of volunteers would proceed, and Wyrenna turned her attention to the doors once again. The next to enter were two Argonians. One tall and broad, the other gracile. One horned, the other crowned in red feathers. Both familiar to Wyrenna. Both impossible, that sensation yet again of seeing a vision displaced in time. Pasted from old world into new, with the edges trimmed away.

"Mother!" Ilyas-Tei yelled, nearly leaping over the desk and overturning all the glasses upon it. As she rushed forward to embrace them, “Father!”

Their scales all together pressed close like a fist, shining in the firelight. Wyrenna did not feel homesickness, exactly. But a relief and trepidation until Venava raised her head and gestured slightly, speaking, “Well? Get over here. It’s for you we’ve come so far.”

It wasn’t until their claws had been wrapped around her for good minutes that Wyrenna felt safe, that they were really real, and that the world below the Jeralls had not ceased to exist. She’d forgotten how much taller Venava was, the tributaries that cut through Zaas-Tei’s brown scales. Like Ilyas-Tei, they smelt of silt and wax and good memories that she’d thought to leave behind. They smelled like the south and they smelled like the real, original Wyrenna remembered. Not home, but company. Which in some ways was just as good.

She had to surface for air. Valamand sat there still with his wine. He smiled, faintly. But in his eyes,
such longing. But there was no sweetness. Absence. Maybe.

So, fending off an “it’s so good to see you!” and a “tell us everything,” Wyrenna took her gods-
father at armslength and opened him and his wife to the table in the corner.

“Long stories, and I can only tell half,” Wyrenna said, doubtlessly recounting to herself the very 
same story you may soon conclude. “First among characters: Valamand.”

“Charmed,” said Valamand, who was at a loss of protocol. He juggled his wine for a moment, 
placed it on the table. But neither of the two he faced made to shake hands, bow, or else move at all. 
They did set down, their tails curling over the benches. Ilyas-Tei sat cross-legged in the middle for 
lack of a seat.

Wyrenna commenced introductions, beginning with the slender, feathered Argonian who looked 
much like Ilyas-Tei. “This is Zaas-tei, once my father’s apprentice.” She gestured to the much larger 
one, whose gleaming horns were draped with spring green ribbon. “And, married to Venava. She 
sews fine leathers. They’re my gods-parents, Ilyas-Tei’s family.”

“Good tides and tidings,” said Zaas-Tei, who finally set down his bags between his feet. Venava, 
who carried twice as much did the same, somewhat cluttering the floor. “One of the Thalmor? A 
very long story.”

“It’ll take all night,” Wyrenna admitted. “Maybe less, if I get help telling it. But you! How did you 
get here? Isn’t the border closed?”

“It was closed when I got through,” Ilyas-Tei said.

“Closed to those who walk on the ground,” corrected Venava, who spoke with a deep voice full of 
comfort. “But to those who swim? There are many rivers that flow under the mountains. They’re 
farther than a causeway by far.”

Zaas-tei helped himself to a glass of Valamand’s wine simply because that was the type of person he 
was. Valamand didn’t mind, watched as the Argonian took a sip. Nevertheless, whether it was liked 
or disliked remained a mystery. “Dear egg, you were heard halfway down the Silver Road. The 
Thalmor on the border are in chaos. We’re lucky the way is shut to them,” he said. “I worry if your 
enemies have heard, as well.”

“My enemies think I don’t know where they are,” Wyrenna said, and that was a bit dizzying. “But 
I’m finding out as fast as I can.”

She paused.

came all this way, and aren’t going to ask me why?”

“I thought that was part of your story to tell,” Venava said. “My skin-daughter doesn’t play such 
powerful tricks without good reason. That your tide comes in and washes you ashore a warrior is 
much better explanation for you, and you not writing. You could have been dead.”

“Ilyas-Tei saved my life,” Wyrenna said.

“That’s why she left,” Venava replied.

“And in this way, why we left,” added Zaas-Tei. “Ilyas-Tei’s your kind. This world’s your world. 
My war’s done, I just live in it. But as you asked for aid, I knew. It was time to go to you.”
“We are not warriors,” said Venava. “You know we cannot fight by your side. But when you go into battle, our armor will protect you. No, do not argue. We have already discussed it and agreed.”

Wyrenna felt the breath go out of her lungs. Not suddenly. In that subtle vanishing that made the fire leap up and dizzied her. Zaas-Tei had vowed, once, to make no more weapons or armor. To make only things of beauty. His silver wrought over the ugliness of steel. That he and Venava would break that word, for her, was a solemn feat. Oaths Saxhleel-made were as rooted as the Hist and long-remembered.

She cried a little. Zaas-Tei offered her a glass of Valamand’s wine, and Valamand did not protest that time either because he was too busy taking it from him and giving it to her.

“Dear egg, I know what you sought when you set up the river, to your mother,” said Zaas-Tei. “And now that I’m here I don’t see her, if you found that. But don’t think anything of this. It’s what we came here to do. You’ll face your enemies and it will be as if you were in our arms. They will have to go through us, to get to you.”

He handed her a sealed vellum envelope from within an oilskin wrapping. It had not been touched by water, but was bent. The corners were ragged. Wyrenna turned it over. It was stamped by Imperial Customs, marked by the post-master with the name and sign of the courier that had brought it to Bruma. Over the months it had been in transit, it had gone a marrow yellow.

It was from her mother.

“This arrived not long after Ilyas-Tei left. I’m so sorry it has taken this long,” said Zaas-Tei. “Do not open it now. Open it when you are ready.”

“Tell us the story,” suggested Venava, in her bellows of deep comfort.

Wyrenna smoothed the letter under her fingers. Then slipped it carefully between the pages of her folio. She poured two more glasses of wine, and finished the bottle. She began, of course, with the dirt under her fingernails and the dread of striking forth with steel.
The final timetable emerged at last, with Ondolemar’s network of spies and their speedy work. Their target in particular: Calcelmo and his nephew. Not so long-ago parted. But there was any number of places a mage could disappear to in the northern world. Their interception and arrival was prompt, though. Even if they did resemble rumpled baggage by the end of it.

But, with the scholar’s help and a robust scrying, there was little question as to where Silabaene could possibly be working. Supposedly, the Halls of Colossus far away in Anequina had housed Numidium in the past. Their massive space was beyond the capacity of most caverns or underground ruins in Skyrim.

All but Fal Zhardum Din. Blackreach, Calcelmo called it. A place he had not yet visited, for such an expedition would be beyond all reasonable scope. But he knew of its existence, its renown in Dwemeris. And, he said, once probed its dimensions with magic. The only ruin he knew of that was a sure link to the massive space was the Tower of Mzark, which remained locked tight.

Of course, he added that an outside interloper might have cared nothing for preserving the integrity of the ruins and simply dig their way in. Likely after surveying themselves any suitable space underground of such incredible size.

(and wasn’t that just a more sensible way of things? Wyrenna considered the possibility of dozens of unopened doors just waiting in the wilderness. How unlikely for any of them to lead anywhere important!)

The timetable was set. Only until so long as it took for Zaas-Tei to finish her armor. With access to the great variety of smithing in Whiterun, not so long. The Argonian was possessed of a passion Wyrenna had hardly known from him. He worked long, laughed hard, and hammered steel by the light of the moons. And Wyrenna kept her book, with the letter folded between page thirty and thirty-one.

How many people appeared. Many worried that they had come too late. People with cousins returned, seeking the fateful savior from Northwatch. A few from Morthal, who still were telling tales of the Master Vampire’s demise. Even a Reachman or two, who stayed away from the Stormcloaks and sneered as harsh as anything but spat only scorn for Madanach. He’d ran their kind into a warzone and wept not for the dead. They had no love for the Nords, or for Skyrim. But they seethed over Wyrenna’s ploy instead. It was a harsh lesson, they said. Taught only by trickery, to unearth the truth of things.

A wicked way, Wyrenna thought. But she signed them on and pledged to show them only kindness.

Wyrenna had only just worked out an arrangement that suited both the Grey-Manes and the Battle-Borns when horns cleared the streets of Whiterun outside. The dull march of feet up cobbles and gravel rattled the Bannered Mare’s cloudy glasses. A crisp halt. Wyrenna blotted the ink she’d dripped, tapped her pen on the well, and waited for what would happen. The sound of the fire presided over all but the squeak squeak of Hulda wiping dishes clean.

Imperial legionnaires filed in. Eight, ten, twenty— they of course did not all fit, this was the representative company only. They formed two rows with their bodies, from the door to Wyrenna’s desk. At their head, an officer commanded, ”Company one, left face!”

Exactly half of the double row turned outward.
“Company two, right face!”

The other half turned the other direction. Together, both lines formed a sort of barrier with their armored bodies, a living tunnel. A herald advanced through this walkway, wearing an elaborate Colovian-style hat, trimmed in fur. Presumably this was to mark him as the herald. He unrolled a peculiarly small scroll, and read from it, “Presenting, Elisif the Fair, Jarl of Solitude. Accompanied by Legate Rikke, Chief Lieutenant of the Imperial Legion under General Tullius. You need not rise, but honor their presence.”

“I am honored,” Wyrenna said.

The Herald turned aside and through the man-guarded tunnel approached one who could one day be the High Queen of Skyrim and one of the chief military officers in the land. Both older women than she, though Elisif not by so many years. As for her actual fairness, her hair was less golden than pale-snowberry, though her skin was ivory and unblemished before Wyrenna’s freckles. Rikke was eldest-aunt age and tanned in all the places one who wears armor might expect to tan and not tan. Wyrenna at once knew Rikke judged her strictly.

“This is where one might sign on, is it not?” said the Jarl Elisif. “For your army of the brave.”

“Yes, it is, my Jarl,” Wyrenna said, despite her residence in Solitude being strange and limited. “Though I’m flattered that you visit me before Jarl Balgruuf up on the hill.”

“Oh yes. Balgruuf knows me, as he knew my husband. I’m sure he won’t mind my settling business before calling on pleasantries,” said Elisif. “You know, I remember you. You delivered news, once. It was about the Thalmor, too. That Elenwen had fled.”

“From Silabaene, no doubt,” Wyrenna said. “I’ve been on his trail for months now, but that’s a long story. How would you like me to sign you on, my lady? Or would you like to do it yourself?”

“I’ll enter myself, thank you,” Elisif said, and Wyrenna about-faced her folio. The Jarl bent down, and in immaculate script signed and dated for herself, and then passed to the herald. Rikke snatched it away and corrected her entry.

“Two Ks,” the older woman muttered, as if she was reviewing horrors of past paperwork.

“I have to spell mine with a W, and a Y, and two Ns,” Wyrenna said. “It’s safer for me to ask others to sign. Fewer mistakes.”

Rikke did not look exactly piteous but nodded all the same. “That’s an old name,” she said. “Haven’t heard much like that, a grandmother’s name. Sort of thing meant for runes they don’t even have in Cyrodil.”

“My mother wanted something traditional,” Wyrenna said. “If it’s all the same, and we’re not pressed for time, can I offer you a drink? It isn’t really right that I’m sitting and you’re not. And if I stood up, we’d all be standing up, wouldn’t we?”

“That sounds lovely, actually,” said Elisif. And then, of course, the pulling-aside, and the arguing with the herald over royal tasters and Rikke in the middle of all of it with her mouth set like granite, waiting for the ink to dry. By the end though, the herald was dismissed, the Legion filed out (after being told to compile a list of names), and Wyrenna was left in the perturbed Bannered Mare with the Jarl of Solitude, her military accompaniment, a full cask of Honningbrew Mead, and a handful of nervous patrons. And Hulda.

“I admit, you’re not what I expected,” said Elisif, who thought the mead was actually quite excellent.
“I was prepared for more of a… how to say it? A "Skyrim for the Nords" sort of figure. That’s the kind that’s so keen to be Ysgramor.”

Wyrenna had no idea the kind of manners she should be using, and mostly just pretended she knew what she was going for. “Well, Ysgramor’s famous for doing sort of a normal thing. By Nord standards. Rounding up your good friends and neighbors and setting off to go take care of business. Something both good and bad people have done.”

“It works to your advantage that it’s an elf that you’ve mobilized others against,” said Rikke.

“It does,” said Wyrenna, “but to be honest, I feel a little bad about it, if that’s why some are willing to listen. But if Silabaene was a Nord, or an Imperial or a five-legged troll I’d do just the same as I’m doing now.”

“I’m surprised I don’t see more Stormcloak tents out there,” said Elisif worriedly.

Wyrenna made a guess as to her fears, but didn’t dare move forward until she knew for certain. “The ones who came from Windhelm signed on with full knowledge that this isn’t about a throne. Fighting with me doesn’t mean I endorse their leader. It means that some among them were brave enough to come fight with me,” she said. “You won’t have to deal with Ulfric Stormcloak. He didn’t show.”

“Really?”

“Well, he basically hates me, my guts, and everything else about me,” said Wyrenna. “He sent some soldiers so it didn’t look like he skeevered out.”

Rikke actually laughed. It was a strange laugh, both sad and happy, cutting and relieved. “Sounds like some tale.”

“No so much,” said Wyrenna. “I sort of spied on him, spying on Silabaene. He found me out, but tried to pass me off as his own agent to the Thalmor. It didn’t work. We ended up in Yngol’s tomb. The oaf blew the floor open with his big mouth, got himself totally frozen by magic, and I carried him out on my back and kind of saved his life. So he was wrong about what kind of spy I was. He hates that.”

Elisif laughed for a moment, then hesitated, when she realized it was the kind of joke that was tragically true instead of ridiculously false.

But it was Rikke who cut in. “Shor’s bones. You’re only half again older than a child.”

“Thank you,” Wyrenna said, earnestly. And she was tempted to leave it there. But there was too much confusion. “This time last year, I had no idea I would be here, would be doing this, and I had no idea who Silabaene even was, or what to do at all. I’ve heard so many talk about me, ‘dragon-slayer,’” as if I was from a storybook. I’m twenty.”

“I married when I was twenty, to the son of a King,” said Elisif, “but many think my political presence was born with my widowing, and not that union or even before. That my life begins at the end of my husband’s. I could be thirty-five, sixty, six hundred… it doesn’t matter. They will see me as a girl.”

She paused, and it was a perfect pause-of-state and Wyrenna envied her politicians’ technique.

“But at twenty I chose my husband, where my husband did not choose his father. Or for the Moot to choose him to be High King,” she continued. “I loved Torygg, and our duties to Skyrim were a part of us and a part of that love. But the world respects domination by force of arms more than a
woman’s choice to guide her fate.”

It was tempting to clap. The Jarl Elisif was much better here, than she was in court. Without her steward and her magician there to hush and correct her. She spoke just as the tale suggested: one who had listened to the statements and reason of debate much of her life. She’d probably begun her study as a young woman. Wyrenna had not known how much of her own opinion before had been based on caricature, her eager demeanor, or even unknowingly influenced by sneers in Windhelm. Even after briefly visiting the Blue Palace once herself.

“Don’t get me wrong. I didn’t mean it as a bad thing,” said Rikke. “I enlisted when I was a girl, myself. And I’ve seen many like me enlist, and seen them through victory and defeat. More is accomplished by young women and not spoken of than there are tales of all great men combined. If only I was able to be commander of my past self, then maybe everything could have gone differently.”

“In the Great War?” Wyrenna asked.

“Even in this war,” Rikke said. “Ulfric Stormcloak was young once too, alongside me.”

Wyrenna didn’t judge either of them anymore, or feel sheepish of what duties they had put on hold to come to her. Or worry of her irresponsibility, or theirs, or see anything other than different women further down their paths beckoning to her.

“You already were among an army of the brave,” Wyrenna said quietly. “Before I opened my mouth.”

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Hulda’s inn never truly recovered after such a lofty patron. No greater fame could be reached, than to serve one who could be Queen. Ysolda was making offers for the Bannered Mare, between Wyrenna’s slowing stream of volunteers. Her list of names had become quite long. Nearly the whole book’s-worth, with extra leaves shoved in for the names of the Legion.

Wyrenna read them now in the nights before she would go to bed. There was no hope to remember them all. But they were real, and real people. This folio she’d give over for preservation. Once everything was done.

She read them and might whisper, “Sorry, sorry, so sorry.”

For she was sending them to war.

She went to bed with lighter thoughts and they were on her pillow as guard-dog. They snapped at all guilty alternatives drawing near. Her dreams were about the seas, and the moons, and the silver banners below. The clatter of horseshoes. On bright cobbles, steed-voices like ringing glass.

Wyrenna opened her eyes. There were no horses permitted within the gates of Whiterun, without serious cause. The clap-clap on the stone outside had not vanished into eyedust.

It was warm, here in bed. And the sun had not yet risen. Ilyas-Tei, at times nocturnal in her hours, was absent. Doubtless hard at work. Valamand did not snore. But for all he was touch-shy waking, he clung in sleep. Wyrenna spit his hair out of her mouth. It got in everything. His arms, though, were comfortable. She began rolling off the bed.

Valamand had light eyelids. Half-awake, “S’where off to?”
“Visitor, I think,” Wyrenna said. “Go back to sleep.”

He was pleased to comply. His long lashes fluttered down, and he clutched the warmth left on her pillow. Wyrenna yawned and dressed herself as well as time permitted, brushed her hair down. She belted the scabbard once-belonging to her broken sword over her plain dress and apron. Wyrenna took her inkpot, her pen and folio and carefully descended the creaking stairs. The inn itself was barren of patrons. She extracted a bottle of good wine, left a few septims for Hulda about it, gathered some cups, and set everything down at her boothdesk. She made ready for whomever was to pass through those doors.

A man, and his entourage entered. Their tabards in jasper linen and bold lapis stripes cut the low-ember gloom. Cuiraisses of bright mail jingled and each to pass the inn door bore a western scimitar. Each wore helms and weathered linen headscarves, though the few that removed these things revealed black hair of curls beneath. Their skin was dark brown and sun-sweet.

“Excuse me, honorable proprietor,” said the man, who was obviously a Redguard from beyond the Dragontail Mountains. “If this is the Inn, is there the least space for us to rest? For on the morn, we meet with the army of the brave.”

“Well met. I’m no proprietor. I’m Wyrenna,” said Wyrenna.

“Oh!” said the man in his full voice. “Fortuitously met indeed. I am An’faraad, third prince of Sentinel. I ride with my good cousin Milika at-Massif of the Royal Army, and her esteemed swordfighters.”

He offered his hand, as was his custom. Wyrenna shook it, felt the wear upon his fine-cloth gloves. Then another pair of hands, his lovely cousin. Wyrenna ran down a line of a dozen firm handshakes and felt her elbow go numb by the end of it.

“I’m sorry for my looks. I’m not in much state to receive royalty,” Wyrenna confessed. “I heard you approach and ran down to meet you.”

“Nonsense! I did not expect to find anyone alert at this hour. Much less the one I had heard so much about,” said An’faraad. “Might we sign your charter?”

Wyrenna hastily opened her folio and thumbed to a dwindling blank page. As the prince signed it, and then passed it along his line Wyrenna asked, “Isn’t it an awful long way from Hammerfell, your Highness? Or Sir?”

“Less long upon the backs of swift horses,” said Milika at-Massif who answered for her cousin as he set his name down with bold calligraphy. Her accent was thick. “Heirs of Yokuda may pass over desert sands at great speed, when we have cause to.”

Wyrenna was worried that after all that, these folk could be so hale and chipper. Maybe it was just their way, and she was used to Skyrim’s grimness of character too much. “I didn’t think my call was heard so widely abroad as Sentinel,” she said. “Was it really that loud?”

“I cannot say, for I was not one to hear it,” said An’faraad. He then said, bold-faced and plain, “It was my mother’s spies that brought news of you, and of your claims.”

“Why come from so far, sir? If it’s appropriate,” and Wyenna restrained the urge to yawn, “appropriate for me to ask. I spoke mostly on Skyrim’s trouble.”

An’faraad was not insulted in the least. He and his company merely fetched chairs and benches from around the room and kindled the fire. The warriors chatted amongst themselves, but thanked
Wyrenna graciously for the wine. Soon Wyrenna found herself not only pouring the wine but telling another where to fetch more wine. Hulda would be furious.

“I am not surprised you know so little of my interests. This comes from the time of my great-great-grandfather Iransei. He was King of Sentinel in ‘42, and during the Night of Green Fire. I mean to do good upon his name. My cousin, too—all these here are descended from those that failed that night.”

Milika at-Massif drank her wine, nudged her cousin as if she meant to explain. And she did. “I can tell that event isn’t known to you. You seem young, Wyrenna. But you must understand, in that past century very little was heard out of Summerset to the south. For 70 years, it lay as an unopened tomb. And yet out of that silence, refugees appeared on our front step. The things they related about the Thalmor, the new power in the Islands... it was our foolishness that did not heed that warning. Still, our ancestors swore to keep safe their guests.”

Wyrenna could feel the ‘but.’

“But Sentinel’s vigilance could not stop the Aldmeri Dominion’s descent upon the given city quarter,” continued An’faraad. “What men stationed there were killed. The refugees burned even as they fought to their last body. Magic fire, green fire. Evil to the pith. And as quickly as a sandstorm may pass, their vengeance fled their lands and only the desecrated dead were left for the Empire to discover.”

“Good gods! That’s before the war!”

“And before our wise caution,” An’faraad growled. “But after such shameful actions, the cowards fled to their own lands and refused all demand for justice. My great-great-grandfather even attempted retribution by sea, only to be turned away by sorcery. Never has the throne at Sentinel been so taunted. The Isles emerged from isolation in ‘99, after Iransei’s death.”

Wyrenna listened. “You believe that Silabaene was behind that slaughter?”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not,” said Milika at-Massif. “But it is known that the detestable buzzard is responsible for Thalmor military all over the seas. Be he truant or otherwise! If he was not present signing the Second Treaty of Stros M’Kai, then his second attended.”

“Well, it sounds like him,” Wyrenna said. “I’ve been chasing him for a little while now, spying of my own. I can tell you that he’s horrible. He imprisoned and tortured my dear friend Valamand. He completely sacked the Thalmor’s own offices here to get rid of contention. He left his second-in-command to die in a pit. And he’s been manipulating the civil war here for months to his own purposes.”

“What do you mean?” asked An’faraad.

“I discovered he was giving a great amount of money and support to the Stormcloaks,” said Wyrenna. “They’re rebels, they mean to secede from the Empire. But I can say right now that Ulfric Stormcloak cares much more about that throne than any freedoms.”

“This is known to us. The white-gold insult was always good to Skyrim,” said An’faraad. “But your account is worrisome.”

He poured the wine now, for her. Wyrenna was a little shocked. To be served by a prince, and all. She would have to study custom of these people, too.

An’faraad continued, “It sounds to me that the snake wishes to force the Empire to sever ties with
Skyrim, much as the Empire was coward to cut loose Hammerfell. But the context is different now. Once? We fought the Aldmeri to their knees. Twice? No. It would be proof of the Empire’s inability to enforce its White-Gold Concordat. Its weakness.”

“If Ulfric gets on the throne, then the Empire doesn’t want to be stuck holding that hot potato.”

“She gets it! Yes, exactly,” said Milika at-Massif. “Which is why we have sent no endorsement to Ulfric’s cause. Our victory came with bitter consequences. And, some would say, this wisdom.”

Wyrenna drank her wine. It was a different wine. They were on the third bottle, somehow. “Silabaene, from what I have been following, he is building something like the giant war-machine that Tiber Septim used long ago. I guess he wants to use it on the Empire, the way the Empire used it on the elves. But he’d need a reason to invade. Also something about becoming a god. I don’t know about that kind of thing.”

“Tall Papa preserve us.” Milika-at-Massif was more disturbed than Wyrenna expected. “To stride into such power… I can’t imagine.”

“That’s why I’m here. So nobody has to,” Wyrenna said. The sun was coming up, filtering through the hole in the roof for the firepit, and the narrow wooden-slat window shutters. “Honestly, we’re going to win now that you’re here. Everyone knows Redguards just don’t quit.”

Wyrenna intended this as assuring, but An’faraad and his company just found it hilarious. They laughed, and laughed so loudly that Hulda staggered downstairs half-in-bedclothes and had no idea how to go about shushing a foreign Prince.

The next evening, Wyrenna had heard Hulda had sold the Bannered Mare to Ysolda for good.

Wyrenna began final fittings. Paarthurnax surveyed the roads for any straggling reinforcements, and then vowed to depart. He would not participate in battle, nor could he venture underground. But, perhaps as the result of a new meditation his seclusion lessened and he offered his help in these last peaceful tasks. But soon again, he said, to Monahven and to contemplate what he had learned.

Few now came to the inn. She had moved her things back to Dragonsreach and spent her time in war counsel. She conceded right away that there were veterans and military folk more experienced than her. But that was no reason to leave it all to their judgement. It was reason to learn, and paint her new mask in those battle colors.

Wyrenna folded the letter, placed it quietly back into the envelope it had traveled so far inside. She shut it in the pages of her folio. Tomorrow, she thought, she would talk to Ilyas-Tei about it. But the Argonian was so busy now, her newest incarnation of kit and bow so close to completion. She worked all day and all night with her father, and slept near the forge with her pliers in hand. Now that she knew how to rework Dwemer metal.

Still, Wyrenna wondered if she’d known.

She had shed her old armor and almost moved to begin snuffing candles when Valamand arrived to their room. She wondered if he had been avoiding her. She had retired alone and only felt the warmth where he’d rested when she woke, and if she saw him about the town it was on his own business. And if she saw him abed, it was if she rose in the middle of the night. She understood, if he had not wanted to engage with her as she gathered an army to march against elves. Or even if he resented it.
But Wyrenna did miss him, and lacked for his voice.

“I, ah… I’ve brought you… this,” he stammered.

Well, for what his voice was, she supposed. Nestled in his arms was a long canvas-wrapped parcel, tied neatly with twine. He held it like an overbearing relative’s firstborn.

“And, good evening,” he added, in agony.

He didn’t look so humiliated that she laughed a bit at him. More like he expected this, and had been prepared to relent to it. “Hello, Valamand,” she said. “Is that a present?”

“Yes,” he said.

“For me?”

“It is.”

Wyrenna sighed. She’d have to teach him how to give presents, too. It was ridiculous to her that his barricaded lips had been mistaken for a wall of superiority! What would she have thought, had he spoken freely and poorly from the beginning? She took the package from him, felt its weight. She already had a guess as to what it was.

She took the twine between two fingers and slipped the floppy little bow, undid its knots. And slowly she unbundled the canvas until a sturdy hilt and crossguard emerged, followed by a shining lacquered scabbard.

“I didn’t know your particular arrangements, to replace your weapon. In the past you have not taken much care in quality or make, merely that it was yours,” said Valamand. “But I hope you will accept this gift. I am sorry that it is an object that you doubtlessly resent.”

Wyrenna took it and drew it and the ring upon the air was a beautiful note. The blade was a luminous white, set into crystal. Her hand gripped pale sharkskin that was as old as it was pristine. She stood, marveling at its lightness. A swing or two in the air betrayed a lovely balance, paired with a keen voice. It was not adorned with gold or jewels, embossed or ornamented. But Wyrenna knew it as a treasure from mere touch.

“Where did you get this?” Wyrenna asked.

“I summoned it. It’s mine,” Valamand said. “Or, it belonged to one of my ancestors. Luxurene may be in ruins, or under Thalmor custody. But I am still its rightful lord, and what little remains in the family vaults is mine to give until someone figures out how to rob them.”

Wyrenna placed it back into its scabbard, that she now realized was frosted glass, crackled with age. “This is a royal gift,” she said.

“I respect your ability to choose the finest between options before you,” said Valamand. “But I sincerely am not about to let you charge off into battle with a Nord-beaten blade. Which, crafted in ignorance of magic, will shatter, warp, melt, or turn against you in the presence of a talented sorcerer. This, to my knowledge, has clashed with Maormer wizards and Imperial spellswords alike and proven its worth.”

“Is it right for me to keep this?” Wyrenna said, worriedly. “If it belonged to your ancestors?”

“They are dead and you are alive. I don’t see how this blade does any good sitting in their care
versus yours,” he said. “Besides, they’d despise me anyway.”

He said this without an ounce of hurt, even on the tongue. Smoothed as a paper angrily crumpled. Crisp.

“Sometimes it’s good to rebel. You’re your own mer,” she said, and placed the fine blade down on the table. She hugged him thank-you, with due warning. She wondered how many times she might get to do this now, before she died.

“I have lost time to make up, on that account,” he said, and she could hear it through his chest. “I cannot hope to return all I took from you.”

“Don’t worry about that now,” said Wyrenna. And oh, she had to pull away. “Actually, I have something for you, too. I missed you, and almost forgot…”

Really, she hadn’t forgotten, and had been worried about it. But the lie was a white lie, and now was as good a time as any to unlatch the chest they’d been borrowing, pull out a similar wrapped bundle. This one, tightly rolled. She gave it to Valamand, who immediately ran his hands over its thick linen. He was not wearing gloves.

“I asked Ondolemar about it, he seemed to know a lot. But if there’s anything that needs fixing, Venava can still alter it. She made it for you.”

Valamand unrolled the cloth banner. It was bleach-white, stitched double-thick. As he got halfway, yellow petals appeared. A geometric of spiraled seeds, in the middle. It was a sunflower, golden in the firelight: the crest of Luxurene. Valamand felt the linen, rolling the fine seams between his fingers and his thumb.

“My army has no banner. Everyone brought their own, or something better. Save me and you. But, you really do have a flag that you ought to bear. All the more if Silabaene meant to take it away from you,” Wyrenna said. “I know, it’s not as fine as an ancient heirloom.”

“It’s perfect,” said Valamand.

“I’ll tell,” Wyrenna stammered, overcome by a nerve or relief. “I’ll tell Venava you said that,” she tried again. Then she sat on the bed and thought very hard.

It was incredible that he stuck to her this way. The stuffed-wool mattress sunk under his weight, too. He laid the banner out over their laps, as if he was still transfixed and could not bear to put it away.

“You know, you don’t have to be here,” she said. “You don’t have to fight anymore. You could just leave and take this with you. This here… It’s something you have, that I don’t. I don’t have anything like this to risk. But you can go home.”

“I could,” said Valamand. “But it would not be right.”

“You’ve already paid for treason once. Why twice?”

“I… I understand what evil nature drives Silabaene, and his kind— it’s my kind. I cannot ask you to solve a problem that I am responsible for.”

Wyrenna frowned. “But you aren’t responsible for him. He’s not you.”

“I could have been more like him than you can imagine. Had circumstances been different in the past.” Valamand sighed. Clenched his elven eyes. “Had I been all I hoped to be."
He looked at her and Wyrenna knew he meant it because he hardly ever looked straight on at anybody. "I feel I must do all I can. It's.. It's justice. Against what has gone wrong, with Alinor. With him, and Ondolemar, and Elenwen. And me."

"You'd solve more in your homeland."

"Silabaene is the more pressing matter, his atrocities," Valamand said. “And I would rather stay here, with you.”

“Why? Honestly, why? It’s not… your job, anymore. If it ever was.”

“I want to,” Valamand said.

“I don’t understand.”

Valamand was not like her. It took him a long time to consider his words, all the while as if he’d have liked to spit them all out at once. But he answered her, “We once had a similar discussion. The first time you asked me if I had ‘a life,’” he said. “The second time, I admit I was given to despair. But the true answer is more complex than ‘yes’ or ‘no’ would make it out to be. I may have some legacy to contribute to, some calling for me beyond the here and now. But what little I feel most proud of now, it’s here. Not in the south. Nor in my books.”

He could not restrain a laugh.

“Besides, what Luxurene would I return to? An abandoned island, covered in fallow orchards and bindweed? Annexed by those I resent? I may be able to whisk some trinkets from an arcane vault—and that ritual took the better part of three days—but I harbor few delusions now. Luxurene is lost. I, and this standard, are all that remain.”

“You can’t just give up,” Wyrenna said. “It’s your home!”

“I may have had claim to it, but it was never mine,” Valamand said. “For if it was mine, I never had care of it. And I have more happy memories abroad now, than I can recall as a boy.”

“Is that all?” Wyrenna said. “That doesn’t make much sense to me. What happened in the past doesn’t mean that’s all the same in the future.”

“Wyrenna, please. It’s only a few hours’ ferry from the big island. It’s teeming with Thalmor, most likely.”

“Then we take it back!” Wyrenna felt the cloth on her lap, balled in one fist. “And that solves that!”

In reality, Wyrenna knew that it would likely be a much more significant ordeal. But she wasn’t really going for the ‘doom and complications’ approach. Instead, a little of the opposite. Valamand was taken aback by her outburst, amber eyes wide and dark. Delighted, mortified. His ears grew quite red.

“We,” he said.

“If you’d like,” Wyrenna said.

He repeated, “we.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Wyrenna said.

And a third time, precious-scarce. “We.”
“Of course.”

Valamand reached over her, disturbing linens. To take her into his arms, to twine his fingers through her dark hair. “Become great with me, under my glorious banner,” he whispered in her ear. “Yours now, as well.”

They fell backwards together onto the bedsheets.
Little bird,

I’m always so happy to get your letters, that you think of me even after all of this time. But, I wish I could keep that happiness when I read that dear Earnwald finally passed. I could have been nearer. It wouldn’t have helped. You said he’d lost his sense, before the end. Wherever he is now, I think he would have been proud of you and your bravery. The Gods know I am.

But your father was my friend and close partner for more years than you know. Between us, he was the sensible one! Could you believe that?

I hope this letter reaches you before you set to leave Bruma. The roads are bad and war brews. The nature of my work brings me to the border and back many times a season. Be prepared for a storm. But you are always welcome to join me and learn my trade.

Now that’s said, I must tell you what that is. What it truly is.

I carry goods from Cyrodiil to Skyrim. From Skyrim’s villages to Skyrim’s cities. But my goods, they are not goods. They are people. They are people, loyal to the Empire, fleeing Aldmeri swords. Have you noticed? The Nords are gone from Bruma, all but a few.

It was not the Thalmor. I took them. Where they live now in the north, I cannot say.

Even in Skyrim now the Dominion prowls. Even in my homeland I’ve lifted men from their homes and spirited them away to safety in the back of my cart. And you may think, what a life to be a hero!

It is not like that, my little bird.

I must promise freedom, wear it like a jewel on my lips and they follow me unaware of my perils. Not compared to staying put. But even safe in Windhelm, their fear makes them easy marks! They are coerced into an army by the Jarl. A selfish man, whose vanity will not permit his subjects peace or refuge. I have thought to save lives, only to find them dead in mail a month later!

Jarl Stormcloak points to the empty homes left behind, cries out about the Thalmor threat. He profits from the evil I’ve prevented! But I must keep on my work.

This is my life and these are my hardships. Is this the life that you would want, Wyrenna? To be trickster with no home, in a world of fear and danger? You could do better for yourself, much better.

But I have sworn to see this through. It will be hard, that Earnwald has passed and is no longer partner in this scheme. Though I guess he hasn’t been much help in the past year, has he?

Take the Talos sigil from his workshop. It will not sell. That sign is common between us. If you join me, wear it. Find me between Dragon Claw Pass and Windhelm. You will know me. I wear its’ twin.

If you make your own life, melt it and sell the silver.

Whatever you do, send a reply to tell me if you can. Make no direct mention of this matter. I can only pray this letter won’t be read at the border. Just know that I love you, despite that it was too dangerous to remain with you in my line of work. Earnwald at least always had a cover and a safe trade. I don’t.
You now have the power to choose what you will do. Whatever choice you make, I am so proud of you. I hope to hear from you or see you soon.

Arnbjör
Wyrenna spread herself as the squire-girls fit on her armor. Over her boots, arming-belt, up to greaves. Breastplate. Fauld. Lace after lace, buckle after buckle. It smelled new, even the black fox fur trimming. She herself had washed clean. The steel settled, she tested the grip of her gauntlets. They belted her sword on, armed her with new shield. One round and polished mirror-bright, etched and painted freshly with a golden sunflower.

She thanked the girls with everything she had. For she likely would not see them again. She thanked Jarl Balgruuf, who remained to preside over Whiterun, for his hospitality. And he in turn thanked her, for bringing more prosperity to his city than a decade after war.

She walked down the long hall, mail jingling. And she stepped out into the morning sun to greet her army. The red skies warned of rain, but her armor still caught the light and glittered a mosaic of reflections. Tiny mirror-glass scales were secured into her steel armor by strong wire, a merging of Argonian and Cyrod styles that had no equal in five hundred leagues around. Wyrenna descended the long stairs, her red woolen mantle pulled up over her nose against the chill.

Ilyas-Tei, who already had been hard at work, trotted up to her and fell in step. “I just was teleported back. We’ve got the surveying done,” she said proudly. “And Mzark’s open. Tricky, but nothing compared to the vault at Nchuand-zel.”

Wyrenna believed her, considering she had composed a set of picks entirely based on circumventing Dwemer locks. Which was the least of her new innovations next to her new bow of sprung Dwemer slats, her rock-scaling line, the clip system for her hand-crossbow, and the alterations to her leather kit. The pockets! Wyrenna hadn’t considered so many pockets were possible. She didn’t want to suggest to her sister that she was a potential accident of broken glass, with a potion in every pouch. Her sister was much better than her at not being hit anyways.

“Good, we’re ahead,” said Wyrenna. “Tell the Companions they’re on first once we get entry sorted out. We’re moving as quickly as possible, before the Kinlord wakes up.”

“I don’t know,” said Ilyas-Tei. “Calcelmo said that nothing’s happening. He could be too busy with magic to notice us.”

“Even better,” said Wyrenna. “Tell me about the survey.”

“It’s murky,” Ilyas-Tei replied. “Magic’s only so good at seeing underground, and we haven’t got anybody in there. But it’s better than diving with our eyes closed. They’ve converted some big structure to a ritual ground. It’s swarming with Thalmor.”

“You think he heard me when I called him out?”

“If he did, he’s got everything his money can pay for as a bodyguard,” replied Ilyas-Tei. “But what’s the alternative? Army, lots of enemies. No army, still too many enemies just for us alone.”

“Good point,” Wyrenna said. “I’ll meet you soon. I’ve got to… you know.”

“Do the thing,” Ilyas-Tei said.

“The thing I do,” Wyrenna agreed, as her gods-sister peeled off.

Wyrenna passed the Gildergreen and the temple district, and Valamand slipped in stride as smoothly
as a shark in clear waters. He did not dress in Thalmor robes—too much risk of confusion, friendly fire. Instead, in padded silks and stiff ebonthread. The arms and colors were long snipped off, seams resewn and handled by a dozen fences since the war. Ondolemar did not give many gifts, much less any so questionable. “What have you got?” Wyrenna asked. “And is it going to work?”

“Of course it will. I devised the method myself,” said Valamand. “With the ring as a conduit, teleporting the entire army should be simple.”

“And when we get to Mzark?”

“Therein lies the difficulty,” said Valamand. “The gatehouse elevator is a narrow bottleneck. Only a few of our force could descend at a time, unacceptable if we wish to overwhelm the enemy. But I have taken such matters into account.”

“Oh?”

“We need only use the elevator once,” said Valamand. “A small team may descend, and from there open a portal through which the rest of our force will emerge unhindered, to be sustained indefinitely.”

“You figured it out? Already?”

“I have seen Silabaene demonstrate once before, and the battlemages along the White River. From there, it was merely toil to suss out the principles at work,” Valamand said. “Besides, if he could manage it I’m sure I could, and twice as well.”

“Three times, and you’d lap him again halfway,” Wyrenna said. “Get the mages ready. I’ve got to bring this to the ones in charge.”

His gloved hand ran over her shoulder, down the black fall of her hair. He was gone, then. Wyrenna marched down the market square alone. The townsfolk looked after her. At first she had a mind to ignore their eyes. Then, she passed Hulda in the street. Thank-you. Carlotta at her stand. Thank-you. Adrianne and her husband by their forge. Thank-you, and goodbye.

Zaas-Tei and Venava stood at the threshold, the start of the road. Their eyes glittered, running over the figure she made now. “Water on my scales, what a sight you are,” Venava said. “How extraordinary you’ll be.”

She embraced them there, and tried not to cry so soon in the day. “Thank you, for everything you’ve done,” she said in her cracking voice. “Every day I can remember.”

“We’ve done all we can to ensure many more,” said Zaas-Tei. “Fight well for the times yet to come.”


The plan was simple, in the end. Forces would be brought through in order: Warriors first, to clear the path. Archers second, to prevent enemy advance. Mages third to reinforce the portal and to tend the wounded. Rear guard and reserve scouts last, to flank the enemy and pierce the encampment from behind. If all went well.
And in the midst of that: find Silabaene. Interrupt his ritual. Such a powerful wizard was formidable, but after reviewing the accounts of him they all decided the heat of battle had a chance of disrupting his threat. Or that distraction was a mage’s worst enemy.

And then the men demanded, Speech! Speech! Speech!

(Wyrenna did not at all want to give a speech. She wanted to get on with all of this at last, but she supposed there were people who would put off work until the end of times if given half the chance. But it was her army. She gave a speech. It was short. The men didn't care.)

And soon, there was no more army in Whiterun. They were in the Pale. Grey snow still banked up against trees, formed a slushy carpet under the freezing rain. They’d joined the clouds in the distance. Wyrenna placed a few of the Winterhold mages on this task, using the ring’s focal enchantment to teleport wave after wave of her army, all carrying as many supplies as they could manage. Among them, Brelyna Maryon, whom Wyrenna had lain with before. The Dunmer girl still clamored for a place by Wyrenna’s side. But, out of thanks for what they’d shared, Wyrenna placed the novice mage here, outside of direct combat. It was ridiculous, really. She was probably the younger between them, that she might think to spare an elf the risk of death was backwards.

Still, it was a way to thank her, for her intimacy and her patience for grief.

“I should go instead,” the Winterhold apprentice said. “I could replicate his work, I could open the portal, with help. You’re so important. You shouldn’t have to go in first.”

“No one in this army is more important than any other,” Wyrenna told her. “We only get one shot at this, you know. Whether it’s me or you, it doesn’t matter. Who knows what's down Mzark before we even get to the battlefield? If that first team fails, we lose everything we have. And that’s the end of it.”

She kissed that brief cheek. A goodbye, a good luck. Wyrenna at last put her hair up, and slipped on her helm. White-glass wings shielded her face, the hawk’s protection. And, kynesbird as she’d made herself, she faced her army.

They saw her, and the cold rain splattered on her head.

With her sister by her side and Valamand at her back Wyrenna descended into darkness.

--

The stone lift dropped into the deep, from crisp to murky and somehow warm. Ozone to must. The darkness was absolute, so lightless that it was not even black. Merely the miasma under an eyelid.

“It’s like an egg,” said Ilyas-Tei. But, where this commonly meant comfort to Saxhleel there was a waver of her keen voice. Not a mother’s egg, not a nest. Trapped within a shell, Wyrenna imagined. With no way to chip out.

“A coffin,” Wyrenna muttered.

“It is what it is: transference,” said Valamand. “One not so grand as either birth or death.”

“You’re not afraid?”

“Oh, I am,” said Valamand. “Terrified. But there is a comment in that Silabaene would descend in aspirations to divinity, rather than ascend. At the bottom of the world, rather than at the mount of Adamant.”
It was the sort of thing he said that was circular. Too many nervous words in a pile of esoterism. Wyrenna could hear his breath, his fumble of tongue. Frustration, maybe, at inexpressibility.

“On some level I believe he hides from the heavens as much as he aspires to them,” he tried again. “But these things will not protect him.”

Valamand suddenly cried out as the lift ground to a halt. Before them was an enormous deep-brass platform, inset with discs of prism glass. Valamand staggered his way to the center of the mechanism, stooped down and planted his hands on the dusty floor. His keen face pinched in nerves or discomfort.

Wyrenna felt a humming through her gauntlets when she copied him, hoping for some answers.

"Excuse me, this is... it should pass," said Valamand. "I can't quite describe it."

"Is it this huge machine?"


Ilyas-Tei was delighted with the contraption more than she was concerned about Valamand. Upon reaching the top she scrambled over the surface, examined the lenses, noted the buttons. "Is this some wizard thing?"

"Silabaene's ritual is overwhelming," Valamand said. "Something... something here, the Dwemer have is incompatible with it."

"Can you feel how much time we have?"

Valamand paused.

"No," he said. "But I can feel Silabaene's process."

He went pale.

"What is it?"

"He's... stuck," Valamand said. "He's made a mistake, and entered a ritual he cannot complete."

Wyrenna had a vague sense of what this could mean, though Ilyas-Tei did not seem to. She listened though, halfway through studying the great focusing mechanisms.

"I told you quite some time ago, that there are no halfways in magic," said Valamand. "That one either does magic properly, or pays a great consequence. He has reagents of terrible value, an elder-wyrm's soul... the workings of Mannimacro, and some attempt at Brass-Tower facsimile. But these aren't enough. What he intends will demand a greater price than I think he is willing to pay."

Wyrenna felt her face contort in horror as she realized she was not marching her army to exact justice, but to put an elven hubris out of its misery.

"We have to keep moving," she said, helping Valamand upright. "Ilyas-Tei, we can study this later. We're going."

The next hall opened to a dimly-lit stone room. The atmosphere was so stale that Wyrenna wheezed slightly. Ilyas-Tei flared her nostrils. How could there be evidence of habitation here? It smelled like ash, a fire that had burned itself out unattended long ago and no air ever replaced what it had consumed.
"Did they come up from the bottom?" Wyrenna muttered, passing a few scattered bones. The flesh had rotted to nothing in the dead, muggy air. "Is there an easier entrance on the other side of Blackreach?"

"They could have got in the same way we did," said Ilyas-Tei. "These Dwemer locks are all built to reset, like that elf did to us under Markarth. So they could have got it open long ago, and it sealed itself up again."

"The Dwemer sound like they were very private people."

Ilyas-Tei sneezed. They moved on from the wide foyer, down an unlit corridor. "The door we used isn't even supposed to open from the outside. Dwemer probably had a different, nicer kind of door they actually used themselves. More like we climbed in through a service shaft."

"If he excavated Tel Vos, it's likely Silabaene found more dignified means into this place," said Valamand, finally steady on his feet again. "I can't imagine any Telvanni forcing a hatch like a burglar."

Sure as anything, there was another lift before them. One that creaked as they boarded, whined as it departed this floor and slowly winched into the abyss.

"Ha," Valamand said. "What funny chatter we make. Stalling before the inevitable."

"I remember things father said to me, about when he made armor for soldiers," said Ilyas-Tei. "They would talk, and talk, and talk. They didn't know how much longer they'd be able to, after all."

Wyrenna choked on a sudden sob.

"I'm sorry I brought you here," she said. "I love you both."

And while she did not know what that meant, she did not feel like she was lying at all.

"Thank all the Gods that I am not alone."

Tiny glints from below in the cracks were now just enough to see by. The grinding crank of the lift was an ear-blade. Ilyas-Tei flattened her crest in pain from the sound. Valamand put one silk hand on the Argonian’s shoulder, another onto Wyrenna’s left pauldron. Then all was silent.

They vanished before the lift opened. Wisely. Wyrenna had expected the cavern below to be as dismal as the lift. The opposite: the stark light was so brilliant that their shadows would have instantly drawn notice. There was no speaking to each other, no motioning in sign. Valamand led them forward over the lichen-crusted bridge. Wyrenna looked up.

Her invisible hand couldn’t block the glare. The walls of Blackreach were so far that there was an almost dark horizon beyond, a gape of empty space webbed with the dark outlines of mushrooms against ritual light. Bridges and causeways in cutting relief and in shadow. What signs of Falmer remained were picked-clean bodies, chaurus husks. They had long abandoned this place, Wyrenna guessed, to superior force of arms. Or something yet more terrible.

It loomed. Hard to make out. But much of the abandoned city was not stone, was shining and new. A hulk or maze of metal blocking what feeble gaslight not washed-out. In the pale gold of an artificial sun, a head with no face. Tall as a hundred men or more. It slumped, as if it could not stand on its own or lay incomplete.

Black ants paced the ramparts. Wyrenna did not try to count the soldiers, or how many more wizards
and warriors had been pulled back to man this incredible craft.

Valamand ran his fingers down her steel-plate arm, fumbling with her gauntlet. She could not see herself, but could feel him point her hand, and knew the direction by body-sense. Wyrenna squinted, wondered how hard the Altmer’s eyes could be to discern anything in the heart of a star. Up the steps, past the walls, at the crown of the creation though…

He was there. Wyrenna knew it too. The light poured through the facets of a smoked and violent gem.

This was the end of her specific control of events. The plan depended on others now. Wyrenna felt Valamand let go of her, saw the three of them exposed-naked to the great force. She stepped forward, guarded with shield against the instant arrows. Ilyas-Tei picked the earliest archers off the wall. But behind her, Valamand’s presence swelled like a wave, ebbed into itself, and the magic manifested. The smell of rain and mud bloomed as the sky was connected to the earth. The fresh air flooded the cavern, and fresh warriors in the wind’s wake. Fireballs pelted down from above as the two forces met, answered by a volley from sudden archers. The Thalmor mages warded on the defensive, or fell.

Two from Winterhold grasped hold of Valamand’s portal, what he was holding wide on his own in a tremendous expense. The army poured through like a river of steel past them, a rock in the flow.

Wyrenna helped Valamand catch his breath and she could see the pride on his face. He downed the first potion of the day, shuddered at the magicka transfusion, and the fray was joined.

--

It was an extremely good thing that the Companions had leapt at the opportunity to lead the charge. No one else wanted to. Even the bravest in the Legion, the stoutest Orcs, were wary marching on an unknown fortified position deep underground with little chance of retreat and unknown magepower to contend with.

The Companions just loved that sort of thing, though. The more fearsome the odds, the better.

The ancient structure had walls but few gates, exposed in open stone. Elf bodies and spread shields patched the gaps while the mages threw bolts from above.

Skyforge steel shattered the line. There was no contest. No question to be raised. Not against elven armies. Not for thousands of years.

--

“Crown strength! Forebear might!”

This war cry shuddered the Aldmeri, for many among them knew it and had heard it and yet feared it. The initial Thalmor struggle faltered as a Redguard spear thrust into the Dominion’s bloody defense.

“Sentinel unite!”

This was the rally of the Order of the Moon, formed to repel elven conquest and still for Alinor a poor-healed wound. The infantry and mercenaries that had broken upon glass blades gave pause as this wave of steel fell upon the Thalmor. For no other force had so much experience in bitter victory, how to foil the Altmer in war.
As a hive of insects, advised Prince An’Faraad. Each bee with its precision and willingness to fall for glory. But it was the leadership where all true direction originated. The prince’s warriors and their great haste cut through the line, threw asunder the barricades. They razored apart elven warriors on stone steps, made short work of archer and mage alike.

Milika at-Massif found captains herself and one at a time silenced their order.

There was a pause in the battle. Not of inactivity. But of confusion. Weariness.

Then uproar. Elves who thrived on stratagem were forced to resort to tactics. For the enemy it was disaster.

An’Faraad considered this the best way he could have lost two fingers. He carried his great-great-grandfather in his heart, could hear a voice he did not know. Calling from the Far Shores, Iransei’s insults poured through that Prince’s furious mouth.

“Kin-slayers! Sep take you!” he cried, descending on the Thalmor. “Oath-damned! Cowards! I punish you at last!”

Green fire raged over Fal Zhardum Din, but the Thalmor paid well for every guest in Sentinel once murdered.

And no one but the Orcs themselves were sure how the Strongholds had agreed to aid this assault. They left well enough alone and no Silabaene had done anything to them, so retribution in kind was not in their minds. And they alone had identified that Wyrenna must have been a figure of nectar-sweet tongue, to convince so many people to fight by her side. Without proof, without evidence, without the masses suffering even one hurt at this elf-lord’s hands.

So then they knew it was she and her own that must have suffered, for her to curse him so.

It was the threat of never again being left alone that brought them, agreed Mauhulakh and Burguk. Larak simply wanted to see who could be so haughty to yell from the sky, condescend about the fate of Orcs. And together they spat at the dirt, for the gutless Yamarz never showed.

And yet, all three of these chieftains rallied their spiteful warriors and stood firm before the mages. At the mouth of that portal, so that no Thalmor would close the cavern to reinforcements.

It was bitter work.

For every one of their kin to fall, they swore to double the toll in elves.

Mauhulakh took ten for Bugurk himself and then Umurn was chief of Dushnikh Yal.

Their being there was a mystery to all but these Orcs themselves, who had demanded the soft-skin girl prove her conviction. To show what this fight meant to her, and face them blade-to-blade as if she were to strike her Silabaene down instead.

They did not expect a ferocity in her. Something consuming and raw that leveled their warriors like they were rotten wood. She hated every moment of it. Every moment she had to be a warrior, she hated it and she hated the mer who she had risen to fight and with every movement she cursed not only him but his very essence. Every swing of fate and fortune that had led to his being, could lead to any being that would become him.
A misery, in having forsaken her original self. Burned it like chaff for this endeavor. To be the one who yelled from the sky and scourged her enemy with armies of strangers. She had traded everything to be this blooded incarnation.

Those the chieftains had sent against her felt it on their skin. And so they felt the blades of the enemy now as well. And returned them.

That foolish Nord did not understand how Malacath tested her. It was only just to bear her witness, for what they heard from the sky was not a call for help but the most damning of oaths.

--

An uneasy alliance persisted between the Argonians and the Dunmer of Windhelm. It was one full of vinegar, shared and otherwise. For when they looked at each other, they could see the agent of their suffering, in different ways.

And yet they clinked their flagons together and drank it as wine. Windhelm hated them both, and estranged brothers they became. There were days that they spat at each others boots should they pass in the street. There were days that they hid each other’s children from the guard.

They had made very clear to Brunwulf Free-Winter years ago that he was not their friend, or the Nords’ apologist, but would be welcome only in listening to their pleas. To be their boots in the Palace, where none but Nords were truly welcome.

This pact formed between them, and between them and Brunwulf the Nord was barbed and bitter with ash. They would not fight for Ulfric Stormcloak and his love for their ghettos. But they would march to war and shame him in his cowardice.

An uneasy alliance persisted between the Argonians and the Dunmer and it was strange circumstances that led them to fight together in this deep place of Nirn.

But the Dunmer had an ill-taste for young gods in these times.

And the Argonians bore nothing but hatred for slavers-to-be.

With an ebon heart between them, they stood forth. For now all of Morrowind were Ashlanders. And for the bleak hope of a new Hist in cold earth.

--

“You!”

“It’s you!”

Two young Nords met in the melee atop the stone steps. One wore blue colors. The other, red.

“I didn’t think you survived Helgen!” the one in blue yelled. His name was Ralof.

The other who wore red was named Hadvar. He yelled back. “You should have been eaten by that dragon!”

Ralof caught an elven ax on the haft of his warhammer and threw it back in the owner’s face. “The same to you!”

They switched places. “What have you been up to, you traitor?” Hadvar asked, sticking a nearby archer between the ribs.
“Beating down the likes of you!” answered Ralof. “Before the damn dragons showed up again!”

“If you didn’t wake them!”

“Ha!” Ralof walloped an encroaching mage, and their bound weapon vanished into daedric ash. “Dragons are nothing to the true sons of Skyrim!”

“And where was I born, eh? Some den in Corinthe?”

“About right!”

Another wave pressed in. Where they were coming from was beyond guessing, nor did any of the two companies remain but Ralof and Hadvar. Hadvar shoved, and one stumble led to a group fall. Ralof saw them broken on the stairs with a few mighty swings. Sawmill arms, he had.

Ralof asked, “Why’d you join the Stormcloaks?”

“Cousin went missing in the night. One of these Thalmor bastards,” and he accented that with avoiding a bash on the head, “they’re to blame!”

“They left a note?”

“I feel it in my gut!” Ralof shouted. “The Empire stands with them, you know! You’re fighting your own masters!”

Ralof let a blow through. Not much. But enough to worry Hadvar, if the man cared. “The Empire’s the only thing that stands between the Thalmor and Skyrim and you know it!” he shouted back, over the rising din. “We have to stand together!”

“With how it treats us?”

“What? The same way it’s forced to treat the rest of itself?” Hadvar gasped for breath. “The Thalmor are lazy up north from what I hear!”

“You’re still a blowhard,” said Ralof.

“You’re still a beef-head,” said Hadvar.

“All I know is I signed up to crack Thalmor skulls and for once yours’ isn’t in the way,” Ralof yelled. “And we’re not an Empire down here, to do it!”

“Aren’t we?”

The Nord in blue looked down to the battlefield and saw Nords, Bretons, and Elves. He saw Imperials, Argonians, Khajiit. Redguards strong. Even Orcs. Fighting the Aldmeri Dominion. And, ahead in the keep a general in a crimson mantle. He turned to his kinsman and clapped him on the back.

“We both survive, I buy you a drink,” said the Nord in blue. “We die, drinks on the house in Sovngarde!”

The Nord in red banged his arms together and welcomed the next tide of battle.

--

Pushing through with all magic, might, and cleverness, Wyrenna and her closest ascended the stone
walls and finally entered the carved stalagmite-tower.

Up they climbed.
There is a stage in every great battle known to manifest as chaos. A good strategist might direct it, interrupt it, or else take advantage of the formless death at hand. But it is a blood-madness where little matters but survival. Only clear colors prevent attack of fellow rather than foe. The coward may play dead and wait it out. Both the strong and the weak pay back the wages of chance.

In this plane of Oblivion known as war, Ondolemar and Brunwulf Free-Winter had somehow swapped companies. How, none could say. But for a good long slog, Ondolemar wasted his breath on a tiresome and furious squadron of Windhelm soldiers. Ondolemar’s covert operations unit hardly knew what to do with Brunwulf’s assault tactics.

The two military leaders were more than relieved to find one another again and sort things out. As sorted as anything got in the heat of such a whirlwind of blades. Brunwulf shouted at his company enough for them to get over cold feet, surrounded by elven allies as well as enemies. “Racists, the lot of you!” he accused. “Make it up in steel!”

Ondolemar had nothing to say to his own men. And they had nothing to say to him. They were too well-trained to need that sort of thing.

“A veteran of Red Ring, I presume?” Ondolemar inquired. He pressed his free hand to his side where lightning had passed close enough to send a finger his way. Not a bad budget for magicka. He returned the lightning soon after. The mer fell like a beetle from the wall.

“Years ago,” Brunwulf shouted over his own ear. He booted the Aldmeri enforcer closest to him with enough force to send him toppling back. The discarded weapon was free to claim and Brunwulf had no qualms mixing Windhelm steel with edged glass. “You?”

“My deployment did not much overlap with Cyrodiil,” Ondolemar said. “I was only there for the siege of Leyawiin.”

“A good thing, then! I’d hate to have chopped your head off,” said Free-Winter, who proceeded to do just such a thing to his enemies.

“A… charming sentiment,” Ondolemar replied. It was in such a tone that indicated he was anything but charmed. “As such I can expect a barbarian to give.”

“Barbarian! Aren’t we in the heart of civilization?”

They were forced together, back against back. Outward-facing their fury of lightning and blades.

“War?” scoffed Ondolemar. “Of course.”

And so quickly they reversed the pressure against them as sword and spell both turned away. The soldiers soldiered. Bruised and bloody, so far from finery of any court in the north or south. “You make a right mess, elf!” shouted Free-Winter. “You’ve got some work to do to catch me. I fought them half my life!”

“Oh, but I’ve been them,” said Ondolemar. And he laughed. “They will know their superior.”

“…”

“Yes! Yes! That’s the essence of the game! I run by! You follow! What fun!”
The very most infuriated Thalmor soldiers of all chased after an incredibly irritating dancing man in a
eridiculous hat. It was nothing acceptable in a war zone, not at all, and affront to more than one very
Aldmeri sense of task and duty. That this... thing was part of the invading army. That it looked so
terrible. That it sounded so completely ear-wracking. And, most of all! Said such rude things!

It was so infuriating in the nature of its distraction that it had not yet been caught. Its tactics were
impenetrable, and when each mer wised up they would return to the more fruitful fray. Only to be
replaced when another cut-off straggler would become confused by it and begin advancing: unsure
of the nature of this target.

Finally, though, they cornered the clown between two pipes and a stone wall. Rather than cowering
or doing anything even marginally appropriate, it just giggled and gave a foppish and absolutely ill-
formed curtsey. “Well done! I’ve captured an audience, haven’t I? No need to applaud! The show’s
only just begun.”

One elf looked at the other. Mouthed curses, questions.

“Oooh, Mother loves this one,” said the clown. “What is it called when one kills an elf?”

It was a tough crowd.

“Mer-der!” said the clown. He burst into tear-heaving laughter, leaning on one of the Dwemer pipes
he was in such convulsion. The insult took a good ten heartbeats to sink in. The Thalmor raised their
weapons, stepped over the dead body of a Stormcloak scout to close in.

“Oh! Hohoho! Ha! Hee hee hee!” And then, suddenly. “Why aren’t you laughing? Hm?”

One spell went off, and the Thalmor only hesitated when the clown slithered aside and turned it

A knife sprouted from the closest warrior so quickly that the clown could have been a magician
himself. “Why aren’t you laughing?”

More elf screams joined the cavern’s darkness. More blades flew than could be thought possible,
exotic cuts flaying flesh beyond any but an artist’s imagination.

“Laugh! Die and laugh, for poor Cicero!”

Critics.

--

There were already enough wounded to send healers around, too many to bring back through the
portal. The battle itself was going well, as far as anyone could tell. The Thalmor, as strong in
fortification as they were, had no reinforcements. It would come down to if this army would break
itself and waste its men to dethrone them.

This meant that Colette Marence, master wizard of Restoration at the College of Winterhold, was a
very busy woman. Knowledge of her art was one thing. A hectic battlefield triage was another. An
ordeal on the nerves! There was too much to do, all at once. There were Imperial healers to help, of
course—but to prioritize! To mark which subjects needed immediate treatment! Which ones could
be released directly to fight again, and which would require rest or hiatus, it was a storm of her
attentions. And not the sort that happens comfortably at night. The sort what howls in from the Sea
of Ghosts and does destructive things to cliff-faces and loose shingles.
Healing hands. “Send this one on his way.” A full-body skeletal re-adjustment. “Half-hour suspension.” Oh, there was no helping that one. “No, I told you, no decapitations!”

And so much blood! Blood was so much better in a controlled experimental environment!

(And she thought of that young dear, Wyrenna. Such a nice girl! A model student, so serious and dedicated. Asked such good questions about preventing scarification. How dreadful that she got herself into such a mess, what would she do without a proper magical expert like her around? What would this army do? Run itself into the ground, most likely.)

She could do without the occasional intruders, as well.

“Hostages on the ground!” ordered some armored Dominion forces that had managed to flank the field and hit the first-aid site from the side. “Or there will be no survivors!”

“Excuse me, I would appreciate it if you wouldn’t tell such lies. You obviously mean to kill us all,” scolded Colette. “Really, this is a sensitive medical operation and I must ask you to leave!”

An Altmeri voice laughed in her face. “Oh? What are you going to do, nursemaid? Heal me?”

“Restoration is a perfectly valid school of magic!” Colette screeched and in a vengeful burst of light restored that elf’s face right into its base aurbic elements: leaving only ash and gas behind.

--

Many Nords claimed to know the Season Unending but to Runil, priest of Arkay, it was foolish to so call the horrors of war. It was too accurate a mockery. For seasons changed, that was their nature and Arkay’s will upon the earth.

But for Runil, it would forever be Sun’s Height in 174.

--

Jarl Elisif of Solitude peered through her far-glasses, through the portal and into the depths beyond.

“The battle goes well,” she said faintly. “I think we’re winning.”

Rikke may have agreed, but she was occupied with giving extra orders to the next, fresh file of archers to concentrate fire on the upper ramparts. Elisif didn’t groan— that wasn’t what nobility did. But a tic in her eyes flitted to the sky and pleaed for guidance.

This was the way of things. Always. Why had she even come? Skyrim had little esteem for anyone not holding a sword. Beggar or queen.

She gave so little direction here. Everything flowed around her passivity and she shrank.

The cold wind blew on her face, shuddered up her back. Are you not noble, child?

Do you have no will?

Are you not a wolf daughter?

“Legate, if I could,” she began. No. “Legate. I’m requisitioning five soldiers. Give me artillery.”

“My Jarl, what could you... “ Rikke said, startled. “I don’t have any to spare.”
“Then give me whoever remains,” said Elisif. “Stormcloaks, if you have to.”

“Lady Elisif, with all respect, these are military matters and—”

“—and the Imperial military is sworn to serve Skyrim as a province of the Empire,” said Elisif, “Not the other way around.”

Rikke paused. She sent the archers on their way. “I understand, my Jarl,” she said. Then she motioned to her runner. “Scrounge up a crew! Someone who knows their way around heavy ordinance!”

Calmly, Elisif walked over to the remains of the Stormcloak encampments that had been teleported in. The bounds of the ritual had, of course, brought everything that someone had been purposefully touching and someone quick in thought had been holding on to these war machines when the magic had dropped. Some of them were lopsided or toppled, having unsettled in the sudden change of terrain. Elisif paced among the crooked row and rolled up her fine linen sleeves.

She ran her hands on the iron fittings of an undamaged balista. This one would have to do. She began removing the blocks in front of the wheels were they remained in-place, kicking them aside with her kidsleather shoes. As she requested, five soldiers appeared. A sorry bunch: two bandaged Auxiliaries (one, a khajiit), a Dunmer and an Argonian she leaned on for her limp, and a girl in Windhelm blue that looked like she hadn’t slept in three days.

Elisif picked up one of the leading ropes for the device. “We’re moving this,” she said. “Help me.”

The elf and Argonian took a place beside her at the rope, the two legionnaires took the other side, and the Stormcloak pushed from the back— she claimed to be a siege operator. Elisif ached by the end, muttering about the limits of her own body, the hard work it was to sit in court and nod yes or no. And be ignored even in that.

When humiliation was about to demand she take a break, and let the others complete the task, another pair of hands appeared beside her own. “I’m no Tullius,” said Rikke apologetically. “And I should remember that. Thank you.”

“I’ll have a word with him when we return,” Elisif said. Then, when the machine was in place. “There is a large structure somewhere off the ceiling in there. I think we are going to hit it.”

She offered her far-glasses to Rikke, pointed along the sights to the faint yellow orb amid the pulsing ritual light. “It’s hard to make out,” Elisif said. “But it certainly is some sort of heavy object, to bring down on the enemy. I thought it would save the trouble of having to climb all of that. It’s very defensible.”

“Oh, so it’s only now you’re willing to fight the elves and save Skyrim?” the Stormcloak soldier spat, and refused the spectacles.

“I am Skyrim,” Elisif said.

She accepted the spectacles. “Ten degrees up, six degrees right,” she directed, and the artillery crew set to work. Elisif watched them and folded her hands neatly.

Just as much or more than Ulfric Stormcloak, she was Skryim.

“Fire mark!”

The shudder of hard oak and pine sent droplets scattering, the recoil dragging deep ruts into the mud.
The bolt was engulfed by the portal, arched in the dark cave and struck the dim globe overhead the battle. Elisif could hear the anchor scream and gaslit explosion as it swung. The ancient chain snapped and a ships-worth of broken glass crashed upon the enemies of the North.

--

The shards still showered down, reflecting mage-light onto far walls and into crevasses undisturbed for dark and silent eras. So close to the locus of tone and radiance, a Dwemer door blew off its tracks. Wyrenna felt the stone causeway vibrate under her, felt her boots grip as she ran unbound.

This time. In time.

Ilyas-Tei threw fireflasks, those before her stumbled and ran, or fell.

Forward, invincible. Her grip on the blade.

Valamand followed at her back, repelling arrows from every sniper set to stop her.

A fireball raced to meet her and Wyrenna hid her face behind her shield. Her arm jolted, numb and she lost her hold. But she was whole. The smoking remains of that shield, not.

She cried to shake the cave, swallowed by the divine music. There was no obstacle beyond mere rocks, she as intangible and deadly as frost. Nothing slowed her, nothing could slow her, no threads of blood she spilt or resistance of mere metal.

So close. Only a few steps, just a few steps. The aurbic tone quieted, replaced by pure frustration.

“Why?” the elf-lord cried in fury at her nearness. “Now! Why won’t it complete? What more must I need? Is this offering not enough of a God?”

Wyrenna gripped her sword. She heard the armies below, the thud of her heart in her ears. The High Kinlord’s breast was guarded only by cloth. How the shades in her eyes cried out! To quench her fears in his blood.

Wyrenna stopped. She pointed at him, that crux of the worst of everything that had ever happened to her.

“We need to talk,” she said.

And before Valamand could consider aloud, or Ilyas-Tei could scold her, Silabaene laughed. It was not a laugh of joy, or of sadness, or of anger, or of any emotion that Wyrenna knew or could assign to a person that walked under the sun. “You bring armies here to execute me and all you want to do is talk?”

“I’m sorry,” Wyrenna said. “I don’t know any other way to have gotten close enough.”

Ilyas-Tei opened her mouth. Valamand grasped the Argonian’s shaking shoulder. “Let her speak,” he said. And when Wyrenna looked back, he smiled at her in confidence. The smile of a mer who knew no harsher weapons, no greater force of magic than this now. Wyrenna felt him behind her, carried the mer in her throat. And Ilyas-Tei in her nerve.

“You are trifling, human! You are no closer than you were before.” And Wyrenna could believe what Silabaene said, as he partook of his dark ritual. He was the center of an arcane sun, the depths of which Wyrenna could only imagine. “Approach if you dare!”
“I don’t want to keep killing,” Wyrenna said. “I want this to end.”

“Listen to the sounds of battle! The dead shriek below. You have led them here, this is your manipulation. You are their murderer, I am your means and your motive.”

“Mine are here because they are miserable,” Wyrenna said. “They’re so tired, of war and of secrets. They are here because they believe in a world without those things.”

“They believe in a world without elvenkind,” Silabaene snarled. “They believe in a world without me, because you told them that by ending me, they could end their own suffering! What selfish promises!”

“What would a High Kinlord know of suffering?” Wyrenna said. “There’s no suffering in your daedra heart.”

Silabaene roared. Or, something within his grasp did, mounting brighter. The mer struggled to keep it contained, keep on with his ritual that had no end. “Then get on with it, Nord hero! End the elven menace! Save your world. Fight me! Kill me!”

“If you die, you never have to be truly responsible,” Wyrenna said. “You’ll never understand.”

“My ritual will reshape the heavens, and I will kill your god!”

“Valamand can stop your ritual. I know he can.”

“My guards will punish your hesitance!”

“Ilyas-Tei can keep me safe. That’s why she’s here.”

“My armies will destroy you!”

“I have faith in mine.”

“You seek to dominate me!”

“No!”

“I am Umari! I am Mannimarco! I am the bane of Alessia! I am Dagoth Ur, and Mankar Camoran! You are Pelinal, Septim, Wulfharth! Strike me down, human!”

“No!”

“You are already a murderer! You have killed dozens of mer! Kill one more!”

“No!”

“You think you’re better than me!”

“No!” Wyrenna yelled, and dropped her sword.

“Enough!”

He yelled with the resonance of his ritual, the sunburst drawing into his skin, into the gem to be contained. The sword shot up into Wyrenna’s hand. Something clenched her fingers over it.

Valamand was by her side, magic racing to save her. Wyrenna’s arm lashed him against the stones,
dragging her with it. Her right leg moved forward. Her left. Her right, and Wyrenna struggled against them. Her voice would not budge, she could not breathe. Ilyas-Tei watched, trembling and silent.

Silabaene was gripping her soul, manually seizing her body and forcing it to walk.

“Is your pitiful life too short to have learned? Did you really think you had a choice of what to be?”

Wyrenna was made to lift her sword.

“There is only one way to achieve anything of consequence. The strong seek what they want, kill who holds it, and take it for themselves. They grow in power and ascend to greatness. And thanks to you, I now see what I must kill to take my prize. And yet you resist me!”

Wyrenna pled, in her mind’s sanctum for her friends to save her. But they would not. How could they? They loved her, and would not lay their arms even for a moment against her.

“My ritual is complete. But I have been reluctant to take that final step. But for the sake of my true and destined essence, what trifle is this curtain of flesh?”

Wyrenna felt something that was not sweat roll down her chin, splatter her armor that could not protect her.

“You think to make me understand? The ways of the lesser peoples are not worth understanding. You will understand, human. That you have a place. That you and I both must be what we are.”

The tip of Wyrenna’s sword pierced his breastbone. The blade traveled up through him until Wyrenna felt her fists impact his ribs. His was a royal scream, into laughter.

The thunder came before the lightning.

Silabaene, of as many titles as there were southern islands collapsed as did Wyrenna, who had but one true name to herself.

Above, the greatest of mortal craft moved and
We are Valamand and no, no, no, no
And we are Ilyas-Tei and
And where were you when the Dragon broke?
And two gods collided in the sky, one of cold light, and the other with every star in her hair. One fighting upwards into the sun. The other with fists of iron, pulling him down to Nirn. Each with the hunger to devour the other.
And two gods were one god, irreconcilably whole. They tore their heart out, beating to the tone of Creation
Merethic Era

And the scrolls have foretold! Of black wings in the cold!
We are the Dragonborn, and we are alive. We are the Dragonborn, and we are dead. We are the Dragonborn, an Imperial Loyalist. We are the Dragonborn, a Nord of the rebels. We are the Dragonborn, archmage of Winterhold. We are the Dragonborn, Listener of the Dark Brotherhood. We are the Dragonborn, Harbinger of the Companions. We are the Dragonborn, slain in a ditch. We are the Dragonborn, king amongst thieves. We are the Dragonborn, the Dragonborn and every Dragonborn that could be and could have been
We are Talos
We made Talos up
We are Wyrenna and screaming, screaming, “Get out of here! I'll take it all back, and I belong to me!” as he runs out the Bruma gate with nothing but his clothes and her scorn.
We are Silabaene and you cannot imagine how it feels to *understand*, to be one with your antithesis
Now

We are only reading a story.
In that story, we are with Valamand and Ilyas-Tei and everywhere and nowhere all at once. For without Time, there certainly cannot be much to space. Or for movement, or quickening thought.

Yet the Dragon lay broken, not dead. And the animunculus moved, but did not strike or act in any way save that it was ascending. And they all were, through unknowable paths. Valamand braced himself on Summerset soil, then suddenly to Vvardenfell and a nightmare of ash. Atop the White-Gold Tower. Ilyas-Tei fell through the chasm of the ocean and aimed her last arrow.

It was an impossible shot. In the literal sense, to aim at something that was everywhere, everywhen. She fired, an arrow in amber of time. Sealed in flight. Forever to approach, never to arrive.

This was the limit of Valamand’s patience.

The wizard seized that arrow and looked the Dragon in the eye. If it would not strike, he would extend its range, enhance its speed. He would take the fabric of dimensions in his fists and sew the bloody thing back together. For if he could think to keep time there was time that yet existed and he imparted that arrow with the speed of his own thought.

It was a mark of crystal and golden light, into the heart of the new Walk-Brass. And no matter how time did its best to vanish or warp around obstruction the aim was inescapable. The wound was pinned closed, shattered in a black gem.
And, thanks to these prompt events the Dragon was restored in either an eternity, 12 days, or a modest three minutes and twenty-five seconds. The shortest break in history yet on record, despite the questions it raises about the true events in Skyrim during 4e 201-202.
“Hello?”

Wyrenna heard her voice call back to her, over the distant landscape. Half the echo was swallowed by the sky, a vortex of aetheric color. She began to walk, despite that the dirt smelled too-fresh. The grass was too-real, and the snow was a perfect white. Yet she wasn’t cold, or warm, or in discomfort in any way. Her footsteps made no noise, and she left no footprints.

There were many people here, some who had only just arrived. They huddled on the ground, or moved in the same direction she was going. None of them called back to her. She realized that they all seemed solid and real, but she was see-through. Sometimes. She alternated between see-through and normal.

She had been trying not to think much on that. She had to be dead, after all. Which was a grim business to say the least.

Finally she mounted the hill, and Sovngarde lay out before her. She passed stars and bright galaxies before she made it to the arching bridge. Whalebones, from a creature older than Atmora itself. If it had ever truly lived.

An enormous Man stood at its mouth. “Get out of my way,” Wyrenna said tiredly. “I don’t have a mind for your nonsense.”

He spoke with an accent that Wyrenna had never heard before. “I part for the worthy.”

“Did I not die in battle?” asked Wyrenna.

“I part for the sons of Atmora,” said the Man, known as Tsun.

“I am a Nord,” said Wyrenna.

“By half,” said Tsun. “Your sire died southern, died abed.”

“Da lived half his life knowing he would weaken and die. Every day, with that knowledge,” Wyrenna said. “He used what little time he had to raise me, and give hope. To keep faith. Don’t tell me about his worth.”

She pushed him from the bridge. He surged forward to throw her down, but could not grasp her in his hands. He tumbled into the abyss below.

Wyrenna marched across, fists clenched. Those brave ones who perished under her leadership followed, unhindered. The Hall of Valor, impossibly large, loomed. She seized its great doors in hand and threw them wide. The festivities eternal within gave her pause as she flickered there: a mistress come home to disorder.

“Where is my mother?” Wyrenna demanded, voice shaking the eaves high overhead. “My mother, Arnbjor?”

No such person came forward, no such person feasted in the Hall of Valor.

“Talos! Or Tiber Septim!”

Again, not a soul stirred.
Then, she snarled, “Where is Ysgramor?”

At the right hand of Shor’s throne, a man stood. His shoulders were as broad as a bear, his ancient armor untarnished by time. Predictably, he was blond. And not nearly as handsome as any of his statues made him out to be. He carried a giant axe.

Wyrenna walked the breadth of the hall to meet him. She passed High King Torygg, Olaf One-Eye, Jurgen Windcaller. Both sons, Yngol and Ylgar watched from the table and drank.

“I am Ysgramor,” said the tall Man, in a voice of Atmora.

Wyrenna struck him in the kidney to double him to her level. “You have a lot to answer for!” she yelled directly in his ear. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done to the world?”

She punched him again and felt his jaw give way. The hall burst into uproar, warriors clamoring over tables to get at her and her army and at each other, every which way.

Before anyone could reach her, though, she went see-through and never returned.

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Slender fingers brushed through her hair. Long, delicate strokes. Over twining knots, smoothing them free. Cold ground below, warm body above. He still smelled of lavender.

Wyrenna smiled and felt her sister pull her upright, where she could take them both into her arms.
“So what are you going to do?”

The question came sometime later, on board a rocking ship. The ice had cleared enough on the Sea of Ghosts to make passage swift, and the night seasonable. But each blow the hull made upon the surf still scattered frigid diamonds to the wind.

“I was thinking to go to the Imperial City,” said Ilyas-Tei. “I need someplace better for experiments. Maybe write a book. Bruma’s only a small turtle, you know.”

“You just mind that the city’s not a big snapper, snaps down on you,” said Wyrenna. “But I know what you mean. Nobody from Bruma ever got famous.”

Her gods-sister snorted. “Yes! That Wyrenna, whoever heard of her?”

“Well, you know how these stories go,” Wyrenna said. “The big hero appears with the favor of the Gods, has a hand in everything and fixes it all right up. Goes off to parts unknown, just as sure as they came.”

She fiddled with the clasp on her mantle.

“A part I’m willing to play.”

The ship traveled on, over ocean stars. She took a gulp of the mulled pomegranate wine and passed the bottle. It was a good change, good Hammerfell stuff. A woman could stand only so much mead.

Ilyas-Tei poured for herself, drank happily. “You Nords can be glum. They’ll be singing about you, the army of the brave, Wyrenna the Dragon-slayer, the battle of Fal Zhardum Din. All the way down the river.”

“Ah, what would the world care of little me?” Wyrenna scoffed. “The details of how I went into battle on my monthlies! Very important.”

“You’re only mad you won’t write it down yourself.”

“I could.”

“If you wanted to, you’d be there and not here.”

“Mm. Hate you.” Wyrenna drank.

“Love you.” Ilyas-Tei drank. “So what are you going to do, hero?”

“Oh you know. Traditional Nord things,” Wyrenna said. “Sail south somewhere, invade it. It’ll be fun.”

“Sounds more exciting than traditional Argonian things. Which are mostly ‘sit in a swamp’ and ‘get taken advantage of,’” replied Ilyas-Tei. “But more problematic.”

“Tell me about it,” Wyrenna said. “I’ll be lucky if they let me off the boat or if I’ll have to swim.”

“So you’re really serious about this Thalmor stuff?”
“Dedicate my life to stopping them?” Wyrenna laughed. “Of all the lies I told in Windhelm, what a one to come true.”

“You know that if it’s true, it’s not a lie, right?”

“The very best lies are true,” said Wyrenna. “The very best tricks are real. That’s how the world is made, I think.”

They talked there sleepless the night through. Before the moons faded, Valamand came up from the hold and stood there awhile with them. Wyrenna linked hands with them both, felt their grasp in her own until the dawn broke over them and they beheld its beauty.

She put on her gloves and savored that touch the entire journey west and south from Skyrim and into the summer seas.

-END-
Afterword

The actual achievements often attributed to the Nord hero known as “Wyrenna Foe-Tongue,” “Wyrenna Elf-Foe,” “Wyrenna Elf-Friend,” “Wyrenna the Brave One,” “Wyrenna of One Name,” or “Wyrenna, last Dragon-slayer” are muddled. While this work of historical fiction attempts to be a middle-ground reconstructive account of events, it is difficult to track the actual impacts of the individual Wyrenna throughout the Skyrim Civil War beginning in 4e201.

Interference by the isolated Dragon Break incident in early-mid 4e202 concurrent with the Battle of Fal Zhardum Din make a unified narrative impossible. Key players necessary are said to have appeared in more than one place, when history is distinguishable. By proxy, the ambiguity of the Last Dragonborn and their possible identity is related.

Limited first-hand accounts, folkloric oral records, and concrete documentation of certain events illuminate that some version of Wyrenna did exist in Skyrim prior to 203. And events attributed to her long after then are well-known. Furthermore, despite the obvious informational barrier between mainland Tamriel and the Summerset Isles, her participation in current events is still ongoing. However, certain Imperial scholars are hesitant that this Wyrenna is the original woman. If so, she would be curiously old. Assertions that these events are by the hand of some daughter are met with controversy. Or among less sound theories: that Wyrenna surely must have been a lich.

(A defamation received frigidly by contemporary Summerset ambassadors and met with outright hostility from neo-Galerionists.)

It is known that Wyrenna and her union with the Lord of Luxurene would go on to spark civil unrest within Thalmor-controlled Alinor and raise rebellion among remaining critical parties. These politics detail some of our best records exposing atrocities committed at the hands of preeminent Thalmor and Altmeri Kinships, both against citizens of Imperial provinces and against Summerset domestic, Valenwood and Elsweyr parties. Admittedly, much of what we know comes through the gathered materials of Ilyas-Tei, Grand Mechanist to the White-Gold Tower and skin-sister to Wyrenna in her youth. As well as significant modern discourse on magical, mechanical, and social ethics.

Still, despite unquestionable presence in history, Wyrenna’s personal identity continues to be questioned. The re-emergent Mage’s Guild abstains from comment, suspected of a conflict of interest. It was theorized by the Synod that Wyrenna must have been possession of a powerful magical artifact to make much of her story possible. Another point of view, once popular among the College of Whispers, suggests that “Wyrenna” is more than one woman, or that Wyrenna did die at the hands of the Thalmor, or that whoever died in defense of Ulfric Stormcloak was not Wyrenna, but Wyrenna was the rescuer at Northwatch Keep. Or, most ludicrously, that Wyrenna was Dragonborn despite obvious separation from the Last Dragonborn’s influence of events. I shall not detail the other outlandish positions: that Wyrenna was a vampire, that Wyrenna was a daedra, that Wyrenna was a dragon, that Wyrenna was a secret Mede or even Septim heir, that Wyrenna was Atmoran, that Wyrenna was Akaviri, that Wyrenna was a sobriquet and that an Altmeri agent Renalia was her true identity, that Wyrenna has wandered the earth for centuries as a vigilante champion, et cetera.

Such has been the nature of these obfuscations that no definitive work on her early life and ascension to folk heroism has been compiled until now. The Army of the Brave, still the singular apolitical
peacekeeping agency in Skyrim, praises Wyrenna’s achievements, but in order for our cherished heroines to pass into history and not sainthood I penned this volume. It is my hope that with this first edition I might petition the still-as-of-yet-insular leadership of the Summerset Isles for an audience and resulting revision by Wyrenna’s remaining heirs. Or, as some sources would speculate, Wyrenna herself.

But above all, I wish to entertain and all readers have my warm thanks. For what is past time but a worthwhile story, and what is lore without the bright and the young to enjoy it? In a sea of grim and hardened Men, lopsided Alessianized accounts of elves and elven figures, Wyrenna stands as a refreshing piece of history and a character that I, at the zenith of my scrutiny have come to enjoy. She brings with her a certain joy in belonging and a break from the bittersweet that cruel fate so often leaves in between high and weighty events. To the point where, if I might provide my own analysis, such turns are no longer ironic on the stage of history.

And, in the grand schema of the Wheel Wyrenna persists as only one individual— whatever the truth of things may be. Countless others with as much importance remain scoured from history. By this work, may she not be forgotten. Nor her love for the small of Nirn, her sincere wish to right the wrongs of our oft-hollow world.

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-Thank You-

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